

HOW TO WIN AN ARGUMENT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

How to Win an Argument - Torah Style

When I was a child, I had the honour of being one of the main subjects in a book. I doubt, though, that my name (as yet) appears in the "Who's Who of North American Jewry," nor will I any time soon be the subject of a bestseller biography, nor was I a child prodigy.

What's the story? A friend of the family was writing a book: How to Win an Argument. The book was made up of numerous fabricated arguments, with the authors commentary on whose arguments were more effective, and why. The premise of the book was that argumentative skills could be taught, and that through honing your skills, you too could learn how to win an argument. Of course, the fictitious argumentators needed fictitious names, and the author chose use the names of myself and my brothers, among others.

This week's sidrah, Shemini, contains an argument that had the potential of erupting into a very serious conflict, yet was ultimately resolved (and "won") peacefully, due to some high-scale argumentative adeptness, not to mention communication skills. Like the book (le'havdil), this argument also involved two brothers: Moshe and Aaron. The conflict centered around the interpretation of a ritual law.

It was the eighth and final day of the inauguration of the Mishkan (Tabernacle). On that day, Aaron lost his two sons, Nadav and Avihu, as a result of their offering a foreign fire upon the Altar, something they had not been told to do. In a display of superhuman strength, Aaron, as per Moshe's instructions, went on with his priestly duties as if nothing happened. Offerings were brought, fats were burned, and portions were given out just as they should have been.

With the exception of one offering: the he-goat sin offering, which should normally have been eaten by Aaron and his (remaining) sons, was burned instead. Aaron felt that the special dispensation to "go on with the service" despite his mourning only applied to the inauguration offerings, and not to standard sacrifices not related to the inauguration. The he-goat sin offering, which was brought every Rosh Chodesh (first day of the month - it was Rosh Chodesh Nissan at the time), was by this criteria not permitted to be offered by mourners.

Moshe saw things differently. Perhaps he thought that Aaron had acted on impulse; that due to the emotional stress of losing two sons, he had succumbed to melancholy and had refused to go on

with the services, completely burning the final offering. Moshe was incensed. "Why did you not eat the sin-offering in a holy place - for it is most holy! [Hashem] gave it to you to grant forgiveness for the sin of the congregation, and to atone for them before Hashem. Its blood was not brought into the inner-sanctuary; you should have eaten it in a holy place, as I commanded you!" Aaron responded: "Now that such a terrible tragedy occurred to me - were I to eat this day's sin-offering, would Hashem approve?" When Moshe heard this, he approved. (Vayikra/Leviticus 10:16-20)

When we examine Rashi's commentary, we find that Moshe's diatribe went on for quite some time. He explored all the possible reasons the sin-offering might have been burned, and proceeded to eliminate them one by one. The question is obvious: If Aaron knew all along that he had done correctly - that there was halachic precedent to differentiate between the sin-offering and the other offerings - why did he let Moshe go on for so long? Why didn't he interrupt him, and "win the argument" instantly?

Another question: How was it possible that Aaron was privy to this law, while Moshe, teacher of Israel and transmitter of the Torah, was not? The Midrash explains that Moshe also knew this law. His anger blurred his reasoning, and he was not able to view the situation objectively, causing him to err. What was it in Aaron's short speech that calmed him down? Perhaps it was not Aaron's words at all that calmed Moshe, but rather the silence preceding his words. Earlier on in the parsha, the Torah praises Aaron for his silence (10:4). Knowing how to speak is a skill; knowing how to keep still is mastery. Aaron allowed Moshe to express his anger. Instead of jumping in and indignantly proving that he was right (as he indeed was), he heard his brother out, and gave him the opportunity to say whatever he had to say. Once Moshe had been heard, he was willing to listen as Aaron calmly (but forcefully - Rashi) presented his argument, to which Moshe immediately conceded. The lesson implied is simple: If you want to be heard, learn to listen to what others have to say. [Rabbi N. Brawer]

It is interesting that even when Aaron rebutted Moshe's argument, he does so in a very roundabout way. Instead of coming straight out and trumping Moshe with his indisputable comeback, he asks Moshe simply, "Now that such a terrible tragedy occurred to me - were I to eat this day's sin-offering, would Hashem approve?" It seems that these words, uttered after Aaron listened intently to Moshe's discourse, were enough to remind Moshe of the halacha that had escaped him until now. Perhaps another fine point in the art of argumentation can be gleaned here: If at all possible, let the other side recognize their mistake on their own. Don't ram it down their throats - even if you're right, you'll leave them with a sore throat and a bitter taste in their mouths. When you guide them to understand things on their own, they're much more likely to accept what you have to say.

One last point that applies to the etiquette of arguing: When you see you're the one who's wrong, back down and admit it. "And Moshe heard, and it was good in his eyes." He didn't dig his heels in the ground and prepare for a fight to the end; he was immediately ready to admit he was wrong. That's *mentschlichkeit*.

"Two Jews - three opinions," the old cliché goes. Doesn't it seem like you've always got a point to make? I don't have the book *How to Win an Argument* in front of me, but perhaps by studying the Torah we have come up with our own version. Keep these three things in mind, and you might find people are more likely to listen up:

- 1) Learn to listen - and others will listen to you.
- 2) Make your point gently, and allow the sheer brilliance of your logic to make its own impression.
- 3) When you're wrong, say so.

Have a good Shabbos.

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