

A Conducting an Argument for the Sake of Heaven: A Lesson for Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day

[Source Sheet](#) by Rachel Buckman

Yitzhak Rabin was born in Israel in 1922, and as a young man growing up in the days of the British Mandate in Israel, he joined an underground army unit, the Palmach. After the establishment of the State of Israel, Rabin joined the Israel Defense Forces, serving for twenty-seven years before finally leading the army as chief of staff during the 1967 Six-Day War. Rabin served as prime minister from 1974 to 1977 and again from 1992 to 1995. Some of the major events in his career included ordering Operation Entebbe, signing the Oslo Accords, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize together with Yasser Arafat and Shimon Peres, and signing a peace treaty with Jordan. The Israeli public was very divided about the Oslo Accords and the concept of trading land for peace. This controversy culminated in the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995 while attending a peace rally in Tel Aviv.

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin shocked the Israeli public and Jews around the world, leading to questions such as: how could something like this have happened and how could it have been prevented?

In this lesson, we will analyze a photograph of the wall near Tel Aviv's Kikar Malchei Yisrael, later renamed Rabin Square, where Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in order to learn about the atmosphere in Israel before the assassination and the response after.

Assassination is the most extreme outcome of uncivil discourse and anti-democratic actions. While it is extremely rare, hateful speech and a lack of respect on an interpersonal or community level are not so rare. At the end of this lesson you will have the opportunity to reflect on relationships with your friends and family and within your own community and to consider how best to learn from the past in order to support healthy civil discourse.

The Graffiti Wall

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Study the photograph and answer the questions below.



[National Library of Israel Education website](#)

Observation

- Describe the photograph.
- What symbols do you see?
- Describe the photograph stuck on the wall.
- Copy three Hebrew phrases you can see on the wall and translate them.

Reading Between the Lines

- Who is the man in the photograph on the wall?
What were his achievements?
What happened to him?
- What was the political atmosphere in Israel in the years 1994–1995?
What were the main topics of disagreement at the time?
- What was the result of this heated atmosphere?
- What messages are written on the wall and why have they been written there?
- What do the symbols drawn on the wall represent?
- The main sticker reads: "Yitzhak Rabin, sorry that we were silent."
Who do you think designed the sticker?
What do you think this apology is referring to?
Why do you think people felt a need to ask Rabin for forgiveness?
- A common children's rhyme is: "sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me."
Is the message of this rhyme consistent with the result of the dialogue that was going on at this time?
- What does Rabin's assassination teach us about the power of words?
- Graffiti is often removed by municipalities.
Why do you think that the city of Tel Aviv allowed people to write graffiti here?
- Why would the National Library include a photograph of this graffiti in its collection?

How did it go? Let us know! learning@nli.org.il

What Do Jewish Sources Say about How to Disagree?

Disagreements are a healthy part of Jewish life.

The Talmud is composed of discussions, disagreements, and arguments about the proper interpretation of Jewish law and tradition. Some of the arguments are seen in a positive light, while others are not. What is the difference between a **constructive argument** (called an **argument for the sake of heaven**) and a **destructive argument** (called an **argument that is not for the sake of heaven**)?

The following texts and articles look for the key differences between the two types of arguments and provide guidelines for arguing for the sake of heaven.

Pirkei Avot 5:17

משנה אבות ה'י"ז

Every argument that is [for the sake of] heaven's name, it is destined to endure. But if it is not [for the sake of] heaven's name, it is not destined to endure. What [is an example of an argument for the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Hillel and Shammai. What [is an example of an argument not for the sake of] heaven's name? The argument of Korach and all of his followers.

כל מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, סופה להתקיים.
ושאינה לשם שמים, אין סופה להתקיים. איזו היא
מחלוקת שהיא לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת הלל ושמאי.
ושאינה לשם שמים, זו מחלוקת קרח וכל עדתו:

- Who were Hillel and Shammai?
- According to Pirkei Avot, what type of argument did they have?
Is this a good argument or a bad argument?
- Who was Korach?
- How is Korach's argument described in Pirkei Avot?
Is this a good argument or a bad argument?

The Rabbis characterize Korach and his followers as people who wanted power for themselves and weren't concerned about the community. Korach therefore epitomizes an argument that is not for the sake of heaven.

In the Talmud text below, the Rabbis explain why the disagreements between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai (the schools of Hillel and Shammai) were for the sake of heaven.

(The literal English translation is written in bold and Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz's explanations are written in regular print.)

Eruvin 13b:10-11

עירובין י"ג ב'י"א

Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The

אמר רבי אבא אמר שמואל שלש שנים נחלקו
בית שמאי ובית הלל הללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו
והללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו יצאה בת קול ואמרה

***halakha* is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: The *halakha* is in accordance with our opinion.** Ultimately, **a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed:** Both **these and those are the words of the living God. However, the *halakha* is in accordance with** the opinion of **Beit Hillel.** The Gemara asks: **Since both these and those are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the *halakha* established in accordance with their** opinion? The reason is **that they were agreeable and forbearing,** showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the *halakha* they would **teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover,** when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, **they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements,** in deference to Beit Shammai.

אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים הן והלכה כבית הלל
וכי מאחר שאלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים מפני מה
זכו בית הלל לקבוע הלכה כמותן מפני שנוחין
ועלובין היו ושונין דבריהן ודברי בית שמאי ולא
עוד אלא שמקדימין דברי בית שמאי לדבריהן

- List three reasons why Jewish law tends to follow the opinions of Beit Hillel.
- Do you think these are good reasons for choosing their opinions?

A Modern Voice

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks discusses the nature of disagreement in the excerpt below. He begins with the idea that no one person has the whole truth. Read the passage and answer the question below.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (p. 64-65) (emphasis added)

Truth on earth is not, nor can be, the whole truth. It is limited, not comprehensive; particular, not universal. When two propositions conflict it is not necessarily because one is true the other false. It may be, and often is, that each represents a different perspective on reality, an alternative way of structuring order, no more and no less commensurable than a Shakespeare sonnet, a Michelangelo painting or a Schubert sonata. In heaven there is **truth**; on earth there are **truths**. Therefore, each culture has something to contribute. Each person knows something no one else does. The sages said: 'Who is wise? One who learns from all men' - The wisest is not one who knows himself wiser than others: he is one who knows all men have some share of the truth, and is willing to learn from them, for none of us knows all the truth and each of us knows some of it.

- Summarize Rabbi Sack's main point in one sentence.

Some Examples

Arguments that are not for the sake of heaven can come from any side of an issue. We thus all have to make sure not to cross the line into hateful and destructive arguments.

Below are two examples from two different time periods and two different points of view.

Look at each example and answer the following questions:

- What aspects of the item meet the criteria of an argument that is not for the sake of heaven?
- How could the same point be made without crossing into uncivil discourse?

Example #1



Photograph taken in 1993 from the collection of the National Library of Israel
(The caption reads: "Partners to Murder.")

Example #2



[Youtube Video](#)

News report about a protest against the First Lebanon War. Protesters are chanting "Begin is a murderer," and a sign reads: "Thus far, 501 soldiers have been killed in Lebanon." The protesters changed the number with each new death of a soldier. The sign stood outside Prime Minister Menachem Begin's residence.

Putting It All Together

Political assassination is the most extreme outcome of an argument not for the sake of heaven.

Read the text written by journalist Yair Sheleg reflecting on what the events of the Rabin Memorial Day mean on a societal level and answer the ensuing

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questions.

Yair Sheleg, "Reflections on Rabin Memorial Day, 2012"

We must bear in mind that the terrible tragedy that befell Israeli society on November 4, 1995 was not just the death of a beloved leader....The terrible tragedy was that on that day there was a political assassination of an Israeli Prime Minister; on that day, an ideological fanatic with an opposing view thought it was legitimate to kill an elected prime minister and attempted to resolve a legitimate ideological debate by means of murder....Rather than commemorating the death of Rabin the individual or the blow to the peace process on this day each year, Israeli society should have been commemorating the terrible, unprecedented blow to democracy—the only means that we have for creating a shared society. The day should not have been observed as "Rabin Memorial Day," and not even as the "Memorial Day for the Assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin," but as "Israeli Democracy Day": a day in which generations of Israelis would discuss the nature and character of Israeli democracy, the dangers that confront it, and ways to deal with those threats.

- How did the assassination affect the discussion about the peace process?
- Based on Sheleg's text, why is an assassination anti-democratic?
- After studying the texts, what are your thoughts about the graffiti wall?
- Do you think that writing on the wall helped people reclaim the discussion? If so, how?

Connections

- How would you characterize discourse in your community?
How do people with differing opinions speak about each other?
- How does this issue relate to their relationships with friends and family?
- What do you think can be done to elevate the level of discourse?
- What have you learned about civil discourse from the texts and pictures?

Creative Assignments

- Design a poster or brochure explaining the rules of civil disagreement.
- Yair Sheleg believes that the anniversary of Rabin's death should be observed as " 'Israeli Democracy Day': a day in which generations of Israelis would discuss the nature and character of Israeli democracy, the dangers that confront it, and ways to deal with those threats."
Make a schedule of events that could take place on his imagined Israeli Democracy Day.
- Find an op-ed article in your local newspaper that, in your opinion, does not live up to the standards that the Rabbis set for an argument for the

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sake of heaven.

- Write a letter to the author explaining how the article could be written within the bounds of civil discourse while still maintaining a strong point of view.

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