

Dialogue in the Jewish Tradition: A Few Key Texts

A controversy for Heaven's sake will have lasting value, but a controversy not for heaven's sake will not endure. What is an example of a controversy for Heaven's sake? The debates of Hillel and Shammai.

Pirkei Avot 5:17

For three years there was a dispute between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel, the former asserting, "The law is in agreement with our views," and the latter contending, "The law is in agreement with our views." Then a voice from heaven announced, "these and those both are the words of the living God but the law is in agreement with the rulings of the School of Hillel."

Since, however, "both are the words of the living God," what was it that entitled the School of Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they taught their own rulings as well as those of the School of Shammai, and even more, they taught the rulings of the School of Shammai before their own. This should teach you that one who humbles oneself is exalted by the Holy One and one who exalts oneself is humbled by the Holy One.

Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin, 13b

The Eternal God has taught me how to speak, even to those tired of speech. Morning by morning God awakens me, awakens my ear: teaching me to listen.

Isaiah 50:4

Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone, as it is said: "From all who would teach me, I have gained understanding."

Pirkei Avot 4:1

In the course of a discussion about the origin of the afternoon prayer, the Talmud refers to Isaac who "went out to meditate in the field toward evening" and concludes that "meditate" must mean "to pray." However, the Talmudic statement, "*ein sichah ela tefillah*," can also mean "**conversation is a form of prayer.**" That is a startling and powerful idea. A genuine encounter with a human other can be a prelude to an encounter with the Divine Other. The disciplines required are the same: to be open, to listen as well as speak, to be capable of empathy and humility, to honour the other by an act of focused attention. Nor is this a minor matter. The greatest command of all, Shema Yisrael, literally means "Listen, O Israel."

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