

GREAT DEBATES

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Course Rationale

There is no comfort in a colorless and bland peace. If all is quiet on the theological front and on the sociological front, it is a sign of stagnation. Friction births the spark of ingenuity that advances a nation and alters its destiny. The mettle of unity is tested in how we endure our disputes—how we come out on the other side.

So although we are told that “G-d found no better vessel to hold blessing for the Jewish people other than peace,”¹ it is a plain fact that dispute and argument are as old as the Jewish nation itself. Already in the nation’s infancy, during their desert odyssey, we find Korach and his clan challenging Moses, the archetypal leader of the Jewish people.² The sages of the Mishnah located Korach’s motivation in his selfish interests and bitter jealousy, but they conceded that other instances of debate, such as the classic disputes between Hillel and Shammai, were motivated by commendable intentions.³

The discordant groups and doctrinal disputes that pepper our history paradoxically made us who we are today.

Great Debates in Jewish History offers a glimpse at six pivotal debates that engulfed the Jewish people at different periods of their long history. On this journey, we examine the background, motives, ideologies, key events, and aftermath of these flare-ups. We will seek the underlying ideologies that led to each clash, explore why these debates occurred when they did, study how the two sides interacted with each other and lived through the tension, discuss the consequences of the debate, and learn by what means these disputes were resolved.

Participants will discover how these debates shaped the Jewish future in important ways and will gain a deeper understanding about important

1. Mishnah, Uktsin 3:12.
2. Numbers, ch. 16.
3. Mishnah, Avot 5:17.



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features and nuances of Jewish life today. In addition to enlightening the past, the course demonstrates how the past enlightens us, lending us valuable lessons for navigating today's wide-ranging diversity among different communities, advocacy groups, denominations, and philosophies.

LESSON ONE

The Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls are considered by many to be the single most important archaeological find of the twentieth century. A considerable number of these scrolls are evidently sectarian and they reveal an intense debate from the Second Temple Era, over aspects of Jewish ritual and philosophy. Who were these sectarians? Why did they settle at Qumran? What were their beliefs? Against whom were they polemicizing? We will learn the underpinnings of this dispute by examining key passages in the scrolls and by searching for counterparts and analogues in rabbinic literature.

LESSON TWO

Masada

The famous last stand of Masada's occupiers in the year 73 CE resonates strongly with many modern Jews. Yet, at the time, there were Jews who believed the revolt against Rome was imprudent; and even many who initially supported it reversed course when their defeat seemed inevitable. What lay behind the clamoring for revolt and the opposition to it? Why did the people at Masada continue fighting even after Jerusalem had fallen? By judicious use of Josephus' writings, as well as passages from the Midrash and Talmud, we hope to paint a non-caricatural picture



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of this great debate that had grave consequences for the rest of Jewish history.

LESSON THREE

Maimonides

In 1232, in the city of Montpellier, Dominican priests publicly burned two of Maimonides' works: *The Guide for the Perplexed* and the first volume of his legal code, the *Mishneh Torah*. This was the result of a controversy within the Jewish community, over the legitimacy of these works, and evidently, a Jew denounced these books as blasphemous to the church. What was the ideological nature of this controversy? How did one of the greatest rabbis of the Middle Ages become so controversial? Much of this story hinges on the tensions between faith and reason, a matter of great import to many today. We will gain clarity about this topic by examining the polemical writings of the prominent personalities who played key roles on both sides of this historical debate.

LESSON FOUR

Semichah

On a Shabbat morning in 1538, Rabbi Ya'akov Beirav made a stunning announcement to the Jews of Safed. He, along with other rabbis of the city, had decided to reinstitute the practice of ordination, which had fallen into disuse centuries earlier. But soon thereafter, word came that the rabbis in Jerusalem were against this initiative. Why did Rabbi Ya'akov Beirav want to reinstitute ordination, and why did the rabbis of Jerusalem oppose this? In what ways is this relevant to modern attempts to reinstitute the Sanhedrin? When we dissect the voluminous halachic po-



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lemics of the time, we will learn how this debate was very much a product of the unique historical circumstances of sixteenth-century Jewry.

LESSON FIVE

Chasidism

During the late seventeenth century, European Jewry was still reeling from the devastation wrought by the Khmelnitzky pogroms of 1648–1649. Around the same time, Shabetai Tsevi led thousands of despairing Jews to believe that he was destined to redeem them from exile, only to later convert to Islam. It was in the aftermath of all this turmoil that Rabbi Yisrael Ba'al Shem Tov initiated a new movement that would breathe new life into the hearts of the despondent masses. But his teachings were soon regarded with suspicion by other Jews, and this led to some bitter controversies. Our study of this topic will allow us to demonstrate that, while it was mostly radical opportunists who were responsible for the excesses of this dispute, there were real ideological differences that were at issue; and that these matters give shape to many facets of modern Judaism.

LESSON SIX

Public Menorah

When in the 1970s Chabad began erecting menorahs in public, including on government property, numerous Jewish organizations objected, and in one instance, the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court.⁴ These

4. County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union, Greater Pittsburgh Chapter, 492 U.S. 573 (1989).



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episodes threw into sharp relief different viewpoints about the optimal nature of the “wall of separation” between church and state. It also exposed differing approaches to preserving and expressing Jewish identity in the modern world. As we will discover, many of these differences are rooted in controversies that had emerged centuries earlier, when Jews of Eastern Europe encountered the Enlightenment.

