

“Two Jews, Three Opinions”

By Rabbi David Wolpe

In my first Talmud class, I was given an invaluable piece of advice. My teacher told us that if we were ever drifting off or not paying attention, and were asked a question, to answer: “there’s a *machloket*” — a disagreement. If you say that, he commented with a sparkle in his eye, you will always be right.

Jews do disagree. In the Bible Abraham argues with God and the people argue with Moses. The Talmud is one formidable catalogue of argumentation. As for us — well we all argue with one other.

But our arguments are not only with each other. The great Jewish argument goes on with God and also inside ourselves, trying to reconcile ourselves to the mystery of God’s world, trying to understand our place in it. You might think that arguing inside yourself creates only friction, but the poet Yeats had it right when he wrote that, “Out of our arguments with others we make rhetoric; out of our arguments with ourselves we make poetry.” Judaism is the contrapuntal poetry of points of view contending with each other, seeking always to find the more refined, more accurate, more crystalline view. Maurice Samuel said years ago that the Jewish people have survived so long because we refuse to die before we have figured this whole thing out. Well, we haven’t yet, but we’re still arguing about it.