

COMPETITION IN JEWISH THOUGHT

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel January 14, 2019

This essay is from the book, “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values” published by Urim, or the upcoming books, “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to Man” or “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to G-d” to be published in the future.

In July of 2002, the final result of the annual baseball All-Star Game that went into extra innings was a 7-7 tie. Because almost all the pitchers had been already used as the game went beyond the nine-inning minimum, the Commissioner of Baseball, Bud Selig, declared the game a tie, rather than wait until a winner emerged and possibly risk injury to some of the players. The fans in the ballpark screamed “Refund!” and people all around the United States were outraged and frustrated. Later Mr. Selig apologized and regretted his decision. Why were the fans so upset? Apparently, the vast majority of people, generally speaking, demand to see a victor and a loser in any contest. They relish the idea of competition and cannot tolerate a tie in a competitive sport like baseball, and, as some believe, in all other areas of life as well. To many people, everything in life is a competition, and there must always be a winner and a loser. There can be no ties in sports or in life.

The verb “to compete” is defined as “to strive against another or others to attain a goal, such as an advantage or a victory.” Thomas Hobbes and other philosophers argue that it is basic to human nature to constantly race against everyone, on every level and in every activity, in order to attain anything in our world. Some people are very much in favor of this competitive spirit, pointing out that it is a strong motivator for people to do and to accomplish. But there are those who have the divergent view and are opposed to the idea of competition, as much as possible, in this world. They believe that whenever there is competition, the self-esteem of participants who fail to achieve the top score is often damaged, and the pressure to win is constant. Where does Judaism stand on the idea of competition as a way of determining outcomes in life, who is “better” or who attains a particular goal? Is competition an inherently good value, a proper perspective in which to perceive and behave in life, or is it an inherently bad concept? Can there be some contexts where competition is good and others when it is evil? Should Jews always attempt to avoid competition completely and arrive at a compromise in the situations that life presents? This chapter will examine these and other questions through the sources.

COMPETITION IN THE TORAH

Even before man was created, the Torah already alludes to competition in this world, as amplified by the rabbis. A verse in the Torah says that on the Fourth Day of Creation, two large luminaries were created, the sun and the moon, and then the verse states that the larger luminary, the sun, ruled during the day, while the moon ruled the night. Rashi asks¹: if the verse calls them both large, how could the moon later in that same verse be referred to as small? He answers that originally there was competition between the sun and the moon for dominance of the world. They contended about which would provide more light for the earth. Since there cannot be two equal rulers and “winners” in this competition, Rashi says that the moon was made smaller and “moved” to the night. G-d even “compensated” the moon for this and gave it the stars. The Midrash, the origin of Rashi’s commentary, further explains² that both the sun and moon, in competition mode, each said, “I am greater than you.” In order to maintain peace, G-d made the moon smaller. Yet another Midrash explains that after its “demotion” and losing the competition, the moon did not want to obey G-d and become smaller, claiming that “it is not fair.”³ G-d admitted to the moon that its claim was legitimate and, as “compensation” for its diminishment (and losing the “competition”), declared that a special sacrifice will be brought each month at the beginning of the lunar month (Rosh Chodesh) to honor the moon for its diminution. Thus, competition existed in the world even before the first human being was created on the Sixth Day.

¹ Genesis 1:16 with Rashi commentary

² Midrash, Pirkei DeRebbi Eliezer 5

³ Midrash, Pirkei DeRebbi Eliezer 3

The next competition alluded to in the Torah is that between the Serpent and Adam, the first man. Before its sin, the Serpent, according to the Midrash, was erect, tall and able to speak. It vied for the affection of Eve and, as part of its sin, competed with Adam for Eve's love, and even attempted to kill Adam in order to marry Eve.⁴ Thus, later authorities depict the Serpent as the symbol of the evil inclination within man, when he is filled with haughtiness, jealousy, competition, and speaking evil about others.⁵ Thus, competition was present from the very beginning of history, even when only one man and one woman lived on the earth.

This continued into the next generation between the very first two brothers in the world, Cain and Abel. One commentary describes the entire episode of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel (which led to Cain slaying Abel) as a competition between the two for the affection and approval of G-d.⁶ The Midrash also depicts the relationship of Cain and Abel as competitive, but gives three different underlying reasons for this rivalry.⁷ The first explanation is that they were arguing over possessions: Cain claimed all the land in the world for himself and Abel claimed all the objects in the world as his own. But then Cain told Abel to get off "his" land, and Abel told Cain to give him back "his" clothing that Cain was wearing. They argued and Cain killed Abel. Rabbi Joshua disagrees. He says that they split the land and possessions amicably, but they were actually competing and arguing about whose property would contain the Holy Temple. Each claimed the Temple site for himself, they argued and Cain killed Abel. Yehuda bar Ami says they were arguing about and competing with each other over Eve, or the twin sister of Cain and Abel that was also born to Eve, as both Cain and Abel wanted to take her for his wife, until Cain killed Abel. A modern commentary has explained this Midrash to exemplify all competitions in human history, the prototype of what leaders and nations have always fought over and competed for: land / possessions, religion, or sex.

The next story describing competition in the Torah occurred when the shepherds of Lot vied for ascendancy over Abraham's shepherds. Abraham saw that no compromise or resolution to this competition was possible, and he therefore sent away Lot and his shepherds, who then settled in Sodom.⁸ In the following generation, there was another sibling rivalry and competition between the children of Abraham – Isaac and Yishmael – a rivalry that continues today in their descendants, the Jewish people and the Arabs. When Sarah perceived that Hagar, Yishmael's mother, was vying for the inheritance of Abraham and that Yishmael was a bad influence upon Isaac, Sarah banned Hagar and Yishmael from their home, which G-d told Abraham to agree to.⁹ The Zohar and Midrash say that Yishmael, as the Arab nation, never abandoned his desire and claim for the Land of Israel, which that nation did receive later in history for a period of years, and this competition between the two brothers/nations will continue even into the times of Messiah, when the Jewish people will emerge triumphant.¹⁰ When Yishmael thought that Isaac would be sacrificed by Abraham, another Midrash states that Yishmael also competed with Abraham's servant, Eliezer, for the inheritance of Abraham.¹¹

In fact, the entire book of Genesis can be viewed as a competition between brothers. In each succeeding generation, the results of that competition became less harmful. In the first generation, the result of the competition was the death of Abel. In the generation of Abraham's sons, the result was banishment of Yishmael. In the competition between the sons of Isaac, Jacob and Esau fought for the inheritance through the blessings, but then Jacob had to leave his home in fear for his life. After twenty years the brothers then met and reconciled. In the next generation, the sons of Jacob competed for their view of the Jewish future with their brother Joseph, and, in jealousy due to this competition and Jacob favoring Joseph, they sold Joseph as a slave to Egypt. Many years later, the brothers not only reconciled, but were also remorseful about their actions, and the entire family lived together in harmony for many years. In the final "competition" between brothers in the book of Genesis, in blessing the sons of Joseph, Jacob chose one grandson, Ephraim, over his older brother Menashe, to receive the

⁴ Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 20:5

⁵ Yearot Devash 1:11

⁶ Abarbanel commentary on Genesis

⁷ Midrash Beraishit Rabbah 22:7

⁸ Genesis 13:5-11, Midrash Pesikta Rabbati 3

⁹ Genesis 21:8-12

¹⁰ Zohar, II, 32a, Midrash, Yalkut Shimoni 6:45

¹¹ Midrash, Pirkei DeRebbi Eliezer 30

first blessing. Unlike the previous generations, however, we never see any rivalry, discontentment or bitterness between these two brothers, and they continued to love each other despite this competition that Ephraim “won.” In addition to the fact that all the brothers competed in Genesis, a very interesting truth emerges. At that time, as well as in certain contexts even today (such as the monarchy in England), the older sibling was always presumed to be the “winner” and he inherited his father’s mantle. But in each story described in the Torah, Judaism is clearly teaching us that blood lines and predetermination do not decide the winner of the competition in advance. The competition is always fair and the more deserving competitor is victorious. In fact, in each of the stories, it is the younger brother who consistently is the winner and hero, and not the older brother, the presumed winner.

Despite the unity of Jacob’s family, the rivalry and competition between the tribes did not diminish later in the desert. When Moses wished to appoint seventy new Judges to be the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish court, he was fearful that if he appointed even one more judge from one tribe (six) while some of the other tribes have one judge fewer (five), those tribes would be angry at Moses and feel like losers of the competition. Since with exactly seventy judges not all of the twelve tribes could receive six judges (two tribes would necessarily have five), Moses was forced to conduct a lottery so that the competition would be minimized and the appointment of judges would seem equitable to all, and not a decision by Moses, which would anger the less enfranchised tribes.¹² Similarly, in deciding which tribe would permanently receive which part of the Land of Israel, there was great competition as well. G-d was aware of this competition and thus instructed Moses to conduct a lottery to determine not only which tribe would receive which section of Land, but also which family within each tribe would receive which parcel of property.¹³

Another competition took place in the Torah between the First Born sons in the desert. Originally, the first-born Jewish males were supposed to serve G-d in the Temple, but after they participated in the sin of the Golden Calf and the Levites did not, their holiness was to be “transferred” from the First Born sons to the Levites. In a public ceremony, the 22,000 Levites were to line up opposite all the First Born sons and this symbolic exchange would then take place. But there were 22,273 First Born. The “extra” 273 sons could be redeemed not by a Levite but, rather, through five silver coins.¹⁴ But the Talmud says that none of the First Born sons wanted to be redeemed by coins and all vied to be redeemed by a living Levite. Thus, once again, Moses was forced to conduct a lottery (with 22,273 pieces of paper, where on 22,000 it was written “Levite” and on 273 it was written “five coins”), in order to assure that this competition was fair.¹⁵

Even within the same tribe, we see that there was rivalry and competition in the Torah. The holy Levites, after they were chosen for service in the Tabernacle, competed for the most prestigious job with the greatest reward -- carrying the Holy Ark. By doing this, they ignored the holy task of carrying the other utensils.¹⁶ Therefore, G-d was forced to assign specific tasks for each of the Levite families, and the family of Kehat carried the Holy Ark,¹⁷ which did not sit well with the other Levites. Later on, a disgruntled member of the Levite tribe, Korach, led a rebellion against Moses and he was joined by members of the tribe of Reuven, the eldest tribe, who also felt they had lost in the competition for leadership when Moses was chosen to lead. As descendants of the oldest son of Jacob, this tribe felt that Jewish leadership was rightfully theirs. Korach claimed that he wanted equality for everyone with no leaders, but he actually wanted to be the High Priest and felt that he had lost the competition to become the *Nasi*-leader of the tribe of Levi that he thought was due him because of seniority.¹⁸

¹² Sanhedrin 17a

¹³ Numbers 26:55-56, Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit 22:98

¹⁴ Numbers 3:11-13, 44-51

¹⁵ Sanhedrin 17a

¹⁶ Midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah 5:1, 9

¹⁷ Numbers 4:15, 16-17

¹⁸ Numbers 16:1-3, with Rashi commentary

Later on in Jewish history, some viewed the entire story of Chanukah as a competition between the traditional Jews and the Hellenists, a competition for the hearts, minds and souls of the masses of Jewish people.¹⁹

NON-COMPETITION IN THE TORAH

After all the sibling rivalries and competitions between brothers in the book of Genesis, the very next story of siblings in the Torah shows the opposite situation. After the very peaceful resolution in Genesis between Menashe and Ephraim, the leadership of the Jewish people would come from one very prestigious family – the children of the leader Amram and his wife, Yocheved, the daughter of Levi. Rather than vie and compete, all three children helped each other out and demonstrated harmony in assuming their leadership roles. Miriam established her leadership credentials in her willingness to defy the King, Pharaoh, and risk her life by not killing Jewish babies as she was ordered (according to the view that Miriam was Puah the midwife in the Torah). Then, as a big sister, she again risked her life as her baby brother Moses was sent in a basket along the Nile to be found by Pharaoh's daughter, and Miriam then came forth to say that her mother would nurse the infant. After leaving Egypt when the Jewish people were saved by G-d from the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds, it was Miriam who led the women in song.²⁰ Despite being the oldest (and possibly the most worthy, based on past acts), we see that Miriam had no difficulty "losing" when the mantle of leadership of the Jewish people was given to the youngest sibling, Moses.

The middle child, Aaron, also demonstrated leadership ability. When Moses was hesitant to accept the leadership and was concerned about his ability to speak publicly, G-d assigned his bother Aaron as his spokesperson. Moses was concerned that Aaron might be jealous that Moses was selected for leadership over him, but G-d assured Moses that this was not the case, and the Torah records that Aaron was actually happy for Moses, and not jealous at all²¹. Since all three siblings did indeed lead the Jewish people in different ways, all were rewarded with significant legacies. Moses has the status of a king, Aaron was the Kohen Gadol-High Priest, as were his descendants, and Miriam was rewarded with both wisdom and the Kingship for the Davidic dynasty and therefore the Messiah himself (through her husband, who was from the tribe of Judah).²² Miriam was held in such high regard that the entire nation did not travel and waited for her until her seven-day punishment was completed.²³ That particular blemish on Miriam involved the one time that a sense of competition emerged between these three siblings – Miriam, Aaron and Moses. When Moses was forced to separate from his wife, Tziporah, because he was always with G-d, Miriam remarked to Aaron that they (Aaron and Miriam) were also prophets, and they did not have to separate from their spouses. For this one "competitive" and disparaging remark, Miriam, who was held to a higher standard than most, was punished with the plague of *Tzaraat*-leprosy-like symptoms for seven days, and she remained outside the camp.²⁴ Despite the negative remark about him by his sister, it was Moses that prayed for Miriam's recuperation, and this prayer apparently helped to limit Miriam's punishment to seven days.

Perhaps the greatest display of the negation of competition in the Torah is not obvious from the text itself and is only brought to light by piecing together the remarks of the commentaries. The competition to donate the materials needed for building the Tabernacle (especially after the sin of the Golden Calf) had been very spirited. The people all rushed to donate. Rashi explains that the *Nesiim*-Leaders of each tribe intentionally waited until the people would finish bringing their donations, thinking that they would "top" the people by donating whatever that was missing.²⁵ However, the masses brought so much and so quickly that Moses had to actually tell them to stop,²⁶ and the *Nesiim* were left with nothing to bring. Thus, Moses told them that each tribal leader would bring his own set of sacrifices during the twelve days of the dedication of the Tabernacle. The

¹⁹ Sefer HaTodah, chapter 11

²⁰ Exodus 1:15-20 with Rashi commentary, 2:1-7, 15: 20-21

²¹ Exodus 4:14, with commentaries of Rashi and Rebbeinu Bechaye

²² Midrash Tanchuma, Vayakhel 5, Shemot Rabbah 1:17

²³ Deuteronomy 24:9, Midrash Sifri, Ki Tetze 65

²⁴ Numbers 12:1-3, 9-13, 15

²⁵ Rashi commentary on Numbers 12:3

²⁶ Exodus 36:5-7

competition between the tribal leaders was on! The first *Nasi*-Prince to bring a sacrifice on the first day, the eminent Nachshon, was a proven leader within the leadership tribe of Judah, and he brought a silver dish and silver bowl, both filled with fine flour and oil, a spoon made of gold full of incense, a bull, ram and lamb as burnt offerings, a kid goat as a sin offering, and two oxen, five rams, five goats and five lambs – all as peace offerings.²⁷ This was quite a display and quite an offering.

Now everyone was waiting for the next day's offering to see what the next leader would bring in his natural effort to try to top what Nachshon had contributed. Who was to be second in line after Nachshon? The Midrash, after citing the initial story about how the *Nesiim*-Princes missed out in the original donations (the basis of Rashi's commentary), explains that there was great competition between the *Nesiim* to be second, and Netanel was chosen by G-d to bring his sacrifice on the second day because he was a great Torah scholar, as the entire tribe of Yissachar were known as Torah scholars.²⁸ Another Midrash affirms that Netanel was not only smart in Torah learning, but altogether very intelligent.²⁹ This is very important to know because of Netanel's decision of what to bring. In fact, one commentary states that Netanel gave advice to all the other tribes about what was the proper sacrifice to bring.³⁰ What precisely did Netanel do and what did he bring as his sacrifice?

Instead of joining the competition of what today has become known as the "Bar Mitzvah Syndrome" mentality, where Jews often try to outdo each other in how special, unique and expensive their simcha-celebration will be, Netanel, with his Torah and innate wisdom, decided to bring the identical sacrifices brought by Nachshon, down to the last detail.³¹ This way, he set the tone for the *Nesiim* who followed during the next ten days. After two identical sacrifices one day after the next, each *Nasi* then fell in line and also brought the exact same sacrifice as the leaders from the first two days. Thus, Netanel created a situation in which the potential competition between these leaders was eliminated. Netanel's special "sacrifice" and advice are alluded to in Rashi. Rashi he says that the verse says "he sacrificed" twice – only by his offering – in order to teach us that not only was he more deserving than the others because of his vast Torah scholarship, but also because he gave special advice to all the Princes of each tribe to bring the sacrifices specifically in this manner (the same as he did, imitating the first offering of Nachshon).³² These twelve sacrifices, brought in a non-competitive spirit, taught the entire Jewish people that there need not be the normal competition between tribes, and that everyone could work together without the need to be the "best" and outdo the other tribes. In fact, when these leaders brought all the sacrifices to the Tabernacle, the Torah records that the sacrifices were brought all together, not in twelve separate wagons, but together in six wagons with two sacrifices in each wagon.³³

WHAT, THEN, IS THE JEWISH ATTITUDE TOWARDS COMPETITION?

There is no direct discussion in the ancient sources about the concept of competition per se. And one must assume that the use of the modern Hebrew word for competition, "*tacharut*" when used often in early sources, had the same connotation then as it does today (although we cannot be certain). But there are numerous comments about this idea in both ancient and modern traditions. The Chazon Ish of the twentieth century states that every person naturally loves the idea of competition, especially as a mental test of wills, or what we would call "brain-teasers." He also says that any form of competition is desirable by human beings, which includes competitions between friends, competitions between one group versus another group in a society, and even the competition between generations, when the younger generation tries to outdo previous generation. This is a natural drive within each person.³⁴

In earlier traditional sources, however, the term for competition is usually associated with the negative traits of jealousy and hatred, and is depicted as a trait to be avoided. Thus, the Midrash says that *tacharut*-

²⁷ Numbers 7:12-17

²⁸ Midrash Tanchuma Naso 14

²⁹ Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 72:5

³⁰ Baal HaTurim commentary on Numbers 7:18

³¹ Numbers 7:18-19

³² Rashi commentary on Numbers 7:19

³³ Numbers 7:3

³⁴ Sefer Emunah Ubitachon of Chazon Ish 5:1

competition is not a good trait to possess as it stands in opposition to the desired trait of peace between people. Since competition between angels does not exist, when the angels above see people competing, the angels will accuse them of not fulfilling the Torah.³⁵ In fact, Rashi states that the natural outgrowth of jealousy is competition.³⁶ Rabbi Joseph Albo refers to the trait of competition as evil.³⁷ Rabbi Shimon stated that the reason G-d gave the Jewish people the laws about courts even before He gave them all the other Torah laws is that the laws of the court, if followed properly, would encourage peace and discourage competition.³⁸ In the fourteenth century, Sefer HaChinuch explained that the reason for the Torah's prohibition for the king to have too many wives (and presumably this explains the common Jewish practice of why every Jewish man should have only one wife) is that with more than one wife, the competition between these ladies for the husband's favor will be so great that it will cause great damage.³⁹

In order to avoid competition between Jews, the rabbis enacted several edicts as part of established Jewish practice. The Talmud records⁴⁰ that there used to be a competition regarding the fruit baskets that were brought to the homes of mourners. The wealthy people went out of their way to give the fruit in silver and gold baskets, which the poor could not afford, and they gave fruit in baskets of peeled willow wigs. Since poor people were embarrassed by this practice, the rabbis enacted that this competition had to be eliminated, and from that point on, only peeled willow twigs were allowed for all fruit baskets for mourners. In the same vein, the mourners themselves used to compete to serve their guests in their houses of mourning by offering drinks in the finest glasses, and the poor mourners could not compete with this and felt embarrassed. The rabbis then enacted an edict that all glasses served at a mourner's home had to be plain and cheap, regardless of the level of wealth of the mourner. In a similar manner, the Talmud goes on to record several more enactments that eliminated the competition between poor and rich Jews. The Jerusalem Talmud records that for a certain time period there was competition between mourners about how they would dress at a funeral, as the custom was for the mourners to pass between two rows of people after the burial. The wealthier mourners would "show off" their fine clothing. The rabbis then changed this practice so that the people would pass before the mourners (in order that there would be no "parade of the mourners") until, after a time, the competition between mourners ceased and the original custom was reinstated.⁴¹ Today, the custom is indeed for the mourners to pass between the two rows of people.

Maimonides calls the very desire for competition a sin that requires repentance, even without any specific action. And these sins involving emotions, continues Maimonides, are worse than sins of action, since the emotions take hold of the entire person.⁴² Another Medieval commentary states that competition originates from man's evil inclination, and since an angel does not have an evil inclination, but, rather, an inclination to please G-d, there can be no competition between angels.⁴³ The Midrash highlights this idea and states that if in the heavens there is peace between angels due to lack of competition, how much more so do human beings need to make peace between themselves and eliminate the concept of competition.⁴⁴ Rebbeinu Bechaya records this specific idea as well.⁴⁵ Rabbi Yonatan Eibshutz in the 1700's echoes this idea when he says that the rabbis chose to end the Shemoneh Esrei prayer with the final blessing about peace because Jews should pray to eliminate disagreements, hatred, jealousy and competition between themselves and rather strive to achieve peace. This is the very purpose of the commandment to "Love thy neighbor as thyself."⁴⁶

³⁵ Midrash, Shir HaShirim Rabbah 8:17

³⁶ Rashi commentary on Shabbat 152b

³⁷ Sefer HaIkaraim 2:28

³⁸ Exodus 15:25, Midrash Mechilta Mishpatim Nezikin 1

³⁹ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 501

⁴⁰ Moed Katan 27a

⁴¹ Jerusalem Talmud Berachot 25a

⁴² Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuva 7:3

⁴³ Rebbeinu Bechaye commentary on Exodus 4:24

⁴⁴ Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 9:9

⁴⁵ Rebbeinu Bechaye commentary on Deuteronomy 16:18

⁴⁶ Yearot Devash 1:1

Although we do not know or fully understand what the Next World will be or feel like, the Talmud states that it will be a spiritual world without eating or drinking, and also devoid of competition.⁴⁷ Maimonides states that in this world as well, during Messianic times, there will be no competition between people.⁴⁸

GOOD COMPETITION

From all of the above sources, it seems that from the Jewish perspective, all competition is something truly evil to be avoided. But is that true? Are Jews supposed to quash all of their natural feelings to compete, or are they supposed to channel these feelings to something positive? Is it possible to compete and still have feelings of compassion without jealousy towards others? If people can attain peace with others, should they still feel guilty about desiring to compete? We will see that even within Judaism, there are positive aspects of competition, where it is desirable to compete.

In certain aspects of Jewish life, competition is encouraged. Each day, as every *Kohen*-Priest in the Temple desired to be that *Kohen*-Priest who would do the first service of the Removal of the Ashes on the Altar, they conducted an actual running competition: Two *Kohanim*-Priests raced up the ramp to the Altar in order to see who would get to the Altar first. The winner would be given the coveted honor of the Removal of the Ashes.⁴⁹ Therefore, we see that when competition is for a positive purpose and goal, it is indeed not only allowed but encouraged in Judaism, even in the Temple itself. However, if the result will make the loser feel bad or will hurt or embarrass someone, it is not permitted. Thus, in the same Temple, one of the requirements of bringing the *Bikurim*-First Fruits by every Jew was to recite a few Torah verses as part of the ceremony. When all Jews could read Hebrew, this was no problem, and there was healthy competition over who could recite these Hebrew words “the best.” But once some Jews did not know how to read Hebrew properly, this competition turned into an embarrassment for them. Thus, the Mishnah records that the rabbis decided to appoint one permanent reader would read the verses for all, not only to eliminate the competition but also to eliminate embarrassment. (This is the same reasoning today for why a reader of the Torah reads for all men called up, even for those called up who know how to read.) Likewise, as noted above, unfair competition between the rich and poor had to be eliminated. Thus, when there was a competition to see who would bring the nicest baskets of *Bikurim*-First Fruits, the poor would be embarrassed by the rich Jews, and then the rabbis had to eliminate this form of competition.⁵⁰

Although he speaks specifically about jealousy, Rebbeinu Yonah actually writes about two kinds of competition – the good kind and the bad kind.⁵¹ If a person is jealous of the good accomplishments of a friend, and it causes the friend to become angry and frustrated, this prompts a bad type of competition. But if the jealousy causes this onlooker to compete in a way that imitates the success and accomplishments of the other individual, and it betters himself or herself as a result, this becomes good competition. The Midrash makes an astounding statement that can only be understood in this light. It says that without jealousy the world could not possibly survive because then no one would marry or build a home.⁵² What this Midrash is telling us is that it is the jealousy of another person (whether it is about another’s wife or his home) that provokes an individual to equal or better the other person’s accomplishments. If he consequently tries to find a better wife or build a better home, this form of jealousy and competition is very positive because it helps the world function better. In other words, if a person’s competitiveness is inner directed, bringing someone to hate an opponent, and the goal is to beat the other person at any cost, then no victory will be truly satisfying and morally legitimate. But if the other person’s attainment pushes a person’s competitive spirit outward – i.e., to do better and become better in order to maximize one’s abilities, then this competition is good. Orchot Tzadikim demonstrates this idea when he says that hatred based on a specific situation is tolerable, such as hatred for a person who stole from you, since if

⁴⁷ Berachot 17a

⁴⁸ Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 12:4-5

⁴⁹ Mishna Yoma 2:1

⁵⁰ Mishnah Bikurim 3:7-8

⁵¹ Rebbeinu Yonah commentary on Mishne Avot 4:21

⁵² Midrash Tehilim, Psalm 37

the situation changes (i.e., the stolen object is returned), the hatred dissipates. But hatred due to jealousy (i.e., the bad form of competition) can never be corrected.⁵³

In a sports competition, this idea could be summarized as the difference between hating one's opponent and not hating one's opponent but competing just as strongly. Bad competition involves hating the opponent in order to defeat him or her. Good competition recognizes that the opponent is doing his or her best, and there is no animosity as you try to do your best and defeat the opposition. One prime example of good competition is an event that took place in April 2008 in the Northwest United States at a women's college softball league. Sara Tucholsky played softball for Western Oregon University, and she had never hit a home run in high school or college. On April 26, 2008, her opponents were Central Washington University. After Sara hit her first home run over the fence, she began to run the bases, but a misstep resulted in a torn knee ligament and she couldn't continue. The umpire mistakenly ruled that a team member couldn't run in her place or assist her around the bases. A member of the opposing team, first baseman Mallory Holtman, the career home run leader in the Great Northwest Athletic Conference, asked the umpire if she and her teammates could help Sara run the bases. He said they could, and Mallory and shortstop Liz Wallace carried her around the field as she gently tapped her uninjured leg on each base. If they had not helped Sara, the home run would not have counted against their own team. This act of kindness shows the good kind of competition, where playing one's hardest to win does not signify hating the opponent.

One specific area where Judaism encourages competition is in Torah learning. Jealousy of someone's success in Torah learning is a positive reaction if it will encourage the jealous person to learn more Torah. The Midrash, for this reason, calls jealousy of Torah learning a good thing.⁵⁴ For the same reason, the Talmud says that it is a positive development to have a second teacher who is competing with the first in teaching Torah because this will improve each teacher's performance and more Torah will be learned as a result.⁵⁵ So it is with two Talmud scholars in the same neighborhood or city, who argue with each other. The Talmud compares these two men to two pieces of iron that, when rubbed together, each one becomes sharper⁵⁶, as the verse says that each piece of iron will be sharper as a result⁵⁷. For the same reason, it is forbidden to stop a second teacher from setting up a Torah class in the same alley or neighborhood as the first (where if they would be in different profession this would be forbidden – see chapter on Encroachment).⁵⁸ Two teachers competing against each other leads to a qualitative and quantitative advantage in the Torah that is being taught, which is the ultimate goal in teaching Torah. For this reason, a second Jewish school may be set up in any area, even it competes with the first. Similarly, two Torah study partners should argue with each other in learning, but not compete and hate each other.⁵⁹

The entire Talmud can be seen as a competition between various rabbis to “win” and have their viewpoint become normative Jewish law, based on how they convince others to accept their logic. On nearly every page of almost 2500 Talmudic (Babylonian) pages, arguments competing for the “truth” on many subjects abound. But if the spirit of this competition is right and proper, then all struggles and intellectual combat are left in the halls of the House of Study. This is most aptly demonstrated by the two main and most famous groups of competitors in their day, the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel, who argued vociferously on behalf of their viewpoints. Nonetheless, says the Talmud,⁶⁰ after all the arguments and disagreements, these two groups of Jews not only socialized but it was common for the men and women from the Houses of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel to marry one another. Even though they even disagreed about certain points of law regarding marriage itself, this did not prevent them for marrying one another since they left their rivalries in the Beit Midrash-House of Study.

⁵³ Orchot Tzadikim, “Jealousy”

⁵⁴ Tanna Debai Eliyahu 19:2

⁵⁵ Bava Batra 21a

⁵⁶ Taanit 7a

⁵⁷ Proverbs 27:17

⁵⁸ Bava Batra 22a

⁵⁹ Pele Yoetz on “*Chavrutah*”

⁶⁰ Yevamot 14a

Another area of natural competition in the world is the ongoing rivalry between the Jewish people and the nations of the world that takes place in each generation. The Midrash states that this competition is good because it keeps the Jews apart from the non-Jewish world so that Jews will not learn from them and their non-Jewish ways.⁶¹ The Talmud speaks of this eternal competition as an ongoing struggle, with one loser and one winner that changes from generation to generation.⁶² The competition between Jerusalem (the Jewish people) and Caesar (Rome, the non-Jewish powers) is so fierce, says the Talmud, that there must always be one winner and one loser in each generation. Sometimes Jerusalem will be on top and the Caesar will be down, while at other times Caesar will be victorious and Jerusalem the loser. But it will never happen that both Jerusalem and Caesar will both be up at the same time, or down at the same time.

Another area where competition is encouraged in Jewish thought is in the marketplace, as long as the competition is fair. (This is discussed at length in the chapter “Encroachment.”) Thus, a competitor can set up a rival shop, according to most Talmudic opinions, because the second seller can legitimately claim, “You sell in your store and I will sell in my store.”⁶³ Similarly, although there is a disagreement between various opinions if one seller can legally give away free samples in order to lure in new customers,⁶⁴ the Rabbis say that the person who does this is “remembered for good” because, as Rashi explains,⁶⁵ in the end the consumer will benefit – as long as the competition remains equitable. Thus, the Code of Jewish law rules that a seller can indeed give away free samples to gain an advantage, as long as this option is also open to the competition.⁶⁶

IMPROPER COMPETITION

Although there are certain contexts in which competition is encouraged in Judaism, there are also other situations where competition is utterly discouraged. One of these is within the family structure. The Mishnah makes a general statement that in the Jewish home there should be no competition at all, as the goal there is to create an atmosphere of peace rather than a competitive atmosphere.⁶⁷ Maimonides concretizes this general statement by saying that a parent should never favor or treat any child differently from the rest, since this will cause competition and jealousy between the children, as demonstrated in the Torah by how Jacob favored Joseph, with disastrous results.⁶⁸ Making children compete for the attention or affection of a parent is a sure-fire recipe for adversity.

A nineteenth century Jewish thinker, Rabbi Eliezer Papo, writes that competition in which the focus is exclusively on winning and defeating one’s opponent, whether in sports or in life, is not a Jewish trait, and it delays the coming of the Messiah.⁶⁹ He says that this form of competition between Jews – specifically Torah scholars – creates hatred because the lust for winning is so great that all other Jewish values fall by the wayside. The desire to win at all costs clouds a person’s judgment and values, even that of a Talmud scholar. This is the opposite of the view and behavior of the Houses of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel discussed above. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato agrees with this principle regarding the wrong way to compete. He states⁷⁰ that if a person is so focused on doing a mitzvah-commandment properly, better than anyone else, this could lead to battles, desecration of G-d’s name and a clouding of one’s judgment and values. He mentions the situation described above where the Levites all competed to carry the Holy Ark because of its greater reward and prestige, and in the process ignored all the other vessels of the Tabernacle, creating a desecration of G-d’s name. Rabbi Karelitz added another factor in describing proper and improper competition.⁷¹ He says that if a person has true faith in

⁶¹ Midrash, Batei Midrashot, section 2, Temura Hashalem 5

⁶² Megillah 6a

⁶³ Bava Batra 21b

⁶⁴ Bava Metzia 60a

⁶⁵ Rashi commentary on Bava Metzia 60a

⁶⁶ Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 228:18

⁶⁷ Mishnah, Avot DeRebbi Natan 28:3

⁶⁸ Maimonides, Hilchot Nachalat 6:13

⁶⁹ Pele Yoetz “Nitzuach”

⁷⁰ Mesilat Yesharim, chapter 20

⁷¹ Emunah Ubitachon LeChazon Ish 2:5

G-d, he will not be bothered by competition, even when the opponent (in business, life or sports) appears to be winning. Like the girls on that softball team, Rabbi Karelitz writes that if a person attempts to help one's opponent in a competition (while not necessarily giving up or letting the person win) rather than always trying to crush him or her, this will create a sanctification of G-d's name. G-d will help those who have trust in Him and do not try to defeat an opponent at all costs, neglecting interpersonal ethics and values.

COMPROMISE OR COMPETE?

Generally, most people think of compromise as a means of achieving peace between two competitors. But in Judaism, as demonstrated above, the goal is to achieve this peace even within competition. In that case, is it preferable in Judaism to compromise, with each side giving in somewhat in order to eliminate competition completely and arrive at a mutually agreeable solution? Or perhaps, the competition mode is preferred if peace between the opponents can be maintained? On this question, we find two "competing" opinions.

Rabbi Eliezer clearly prohibits compromise in a situation where there is natural competition, and he calls anyone who compromises in such a case a sinner.⁷² But then he says that there are two models in Judaism. The Moses model competes to the end and never gives in concerning matters of Jewish law, always attempting to demonstrate the correctness of his opinion. But the model of Aaron the High Priest is that of an individual seeking peace between two competing parties as the highest value, and this model would always prefer compromise over one winner and one loser. Rashi explains that before the competition would begin in a courtroom between the litigants, Aaron the High Priest would try to get the two parties to agree on a compromise solution.⁷³ Therefore, both approaches – those of Moses and that of Aaron – competing vs. compromising, are evident and valid in normative Judaism.

These two views can also be seen elsewhere in the Talmud. In one tractate, Rabbi Yochanan says we always follow the view of one who compromises.⁷⁴ But another statement in another tractate says that the third compromise opinion between two divergent views should never hold sway.⁷⁵ Maharal explains that the path of Aaron is to show a person that his or her view is not absolute and people must be willing to bend their view. Hillel, who was flexible in his views, follows the path of Aaron. But Hillel's rival, Shammai, followed the philosophy of "sticking to your guns" when a person feels that he or she is correct, and not compromising.⁷⁶ Maimonides rules regarding the importance of compromise thusly: Before the two litigants begin to compete in the courtroom, it is a mitzvah-commandment for the judge to try to get them to compromise, which is the ideal. This process can and should be conducted until the final judgment is pronounced. However, continues Maimonides, once there is a winner and loser in the case – i.e., after the final judgment is decided – then it is forbidden for the judge or anyone else to try to get the parties to compromise.⁷⁷ Therefore, we see from the words of Maimonides that he too believes compromise has its place and competition has its place, even in the courtroom. Shulchan Aruch rules according to Maimonides, quoting him almost word for word.⁷⁸

Finally, the classic case is cited where two boats or two camels coming from opposite directions enter a narrow area and compete for the same tight passageway. (This represents a situation in which there can be only one winner.) They are approaching from opposite directions and each wants to pass through first. If they try to enter at the same time, both boats will sink or both camels will fall. Who wins? Who gets the right of passage first? The Talmud says (and Maimonides and Shulchan Aruch rule this way as well)⁷⁹ that if one boat or camel is fully loaded with cargo and the other is not, the loaded boat or camel takes precedence. If, as they approach the narrow passageway, one boat or camel is clearly closer to the passage, then that one takes precedence. But if both of the boats or both camels were equidistant from the passageway and both are either loaded or not loaded

⁷² Sanhedrin 6b

⁷³ Rashi commentary on Sanhedrin 6b s.v. "Aval"

⁷⁴ Berachot 43a

⁷⁵ Chulin 137a

⁷⁶ Maharal, Derech Chaim 1:15

⁷⁷ Maimonides, Hilchot Sanhedrin 22:4

⁷⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 12:2

⁷⁹ Sanhedrin 32b, Maimonides, Hilchot Rotze-ach 13:12, Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat 272:14

with cargo, which takes precedence? Who “wins?” In that case, says the Talmud, they must make a compromise and the boat/camel that yields is paid by the other one for its extra waiting time. Here, once again, we see that both approaches – the “winner/loser” competition and the compromise – are suggested. But in this situation, unlike previously, first an attempt is made to find a winner, and only after no winner can be determined (to decide who will go first), only then is a compromise sought. Thus, both approaches when dealing with difficult situations between two parties – competition and compromise – are legitimate within traditional Judaism, depending on the context.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is “to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way.” Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and three grandchildren.