

He's Right and He's Also Right

by
Michael Rudolph

At the UMJC dinner, those dining at each table were asked to share, with each other, the one person in their life that most contributed to their spiritual growth and understanding. When it came my turn I shared three (I just couldn't limit myself to one) but, had I more time to think about it, I would have included a fourth because of this exchange:

Townsperson: Why should I break my head about the outside world? Let the outside world break its own head....

Tevye: He is right...

Perchik: Nonsense. You can't close your eyes to what's happening in the world.

Tevye: He's right.

Rabbi's pupil: He's right, and he's right. They can't both be right!

Tevye: (Pause). You know, you are also right.

Yes, I would have included Reb Tevye the milkman.¹ I'm serious. Tevye's teaching in his dialogue with the Rabbi's *talmid* is so profound, that it has affected my tolerance for diverse opinions to this very day. It essentially says that two people, looking at the same thing, can derive from it seemingly inconsistent opinions, and they can both be right!

I am not saying that there is more than one truth (in the eternal sense) so that God's Word in Scripture cannot be trusted. No, I am referring to the application of God's Word as interpreted in context. Take, for example, when Moses and Aaron came into conflict because they discerned God's will differently. Presumably the same day that God slew Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu for making "profane fire," God gave Moses detailed instructions to pass on to Aaron and his surviving sons, for how they were to conduct an important sacrifice that Aaron was to eat after it had been roasted on the altar. We pick up on the story in Leviticus 10:16:

"Then Moses made careful inquiry about the goat of the sin offering, and there it was-- burned up. And he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, the sons of Aaron who were left, saying, "Why have you not eaten the sin offering in a holy place, since it is most holy, and God has given it to you to bear the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the LORD? See! Its blood was not brought inside the holy place; indeed you should have eaten it in a holy place, as I commanded." And Aaron said to Moses, "Look, this day they have offered their sin offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, and such things have befallen me! If I had eaten the sin offering today, would it have been accepted in the sight of the LORD?" So when Moses heard that, he was content."

We must assume that God was content as well, because we hear no more about it. Both Moses and Aaron knew the detailed instructions God gave as to how the sacrifice was to be conducted. Moses was right to chastise Aaron for not following God's instructions to the letter, but Aaron was also right to not eat the sin offering while he was heart-sick in distress about his two lost

¹ Sholem Aleichem, Tevye the Dairyman (later dramatized as "Fiddler on the Roof").

sons. Moses and Aaron initially disagreed because they were seeing things from different perspectives, but each of them was right from his own perspective.

Then there is the example of the dispute between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36-39:

"Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing." Now Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus;"

Both Paul and Barnabas knew that Mark had declined to go with them on a certain ministry mission, yet they gave it such different weight when it came to receiving him back among them, that Paul and Barnabas could not agree and had to separate. That notwithstanding, there is no doubt that each of them had good reasons for their respective opinions, and that the truths of what they saw in Mark were both right.

So yes, Tevye was correct that two people can disagree and both be right. I am grateful to Tevye because he taught me the principle before I saw it in Scripture. And, because of what he taught me, I have since been slow to judge opinions that disagree with my own as necessarily being wrong. Instead, I look for logic and redeeming truth in the other person's position, while remembering Tevye's words that, while I may be right, the other person may also be right.

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