

Everyone Take a Nice, Deep Breath: A Jewish Paradigm for the End of a Really Long Election Season

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I imagine that a great many of us had a primal response to waking up today without wondering about the election. I know mine was, "Thank God that is finally over!" It was a long, contentious campaign for all sorts of offices but that is now the past. So once some of us finish licking our wounds and others finish rejoicing, how do we settle down and learn to live with each other again? Your friends who didn't vote exactly the way you did are still your friends. How do we learn to let this whole thing go?

Luckily, the sages give us excellent advice on this front. You see, two factions within Judaism, the houses of Hillel and Shammai argued and argued with each other. Here's how it finally ended:

A voice from heaven/a heavenly echo/public opinion was heard and it said: Both these and those are the words of the living God but the reliable tradition is according to the House of Hillel. (Y. Berachot 1:4, 12a3//B. Berachot 11a//B. Eiruvim 13b)

So here's the Jewish paradigm for leaving the contentiousness behind: we affirm that both groups are hearing God's voice but if we are to get anywhere, we need to have a clear vision to follow.

Discussion Questions

1. One of the reasons that Hillel's house wins is not that their views are inherently better but because they were more respectful of their opponents. They would even cite Shammai's teachings before they would cite their own. How much of reconciliation depends on content and how much depends on process? Does good process reduce the need for unilateral decisions on content?
2. One of the most remarkable parts about this fight is that at no time did the sages of one house refuse to marry their children to members of the other house. How can this serve as a paradigm for us? How can we begin to remember that we're all citizens of this country and we're in this together?
3. The term bat kol could mean a voice from heaven but it could also mean public opinion. Can God's will be made manifest through the will of the people? Have you ever seen an example of this? If so, please tell us about it.
4. The house of Shammai doesn't lose altogether. In this world, we follow Hillel but in the world to come, we'll follow Shammai. This is likely because Hillel sides with those who don't have much money while Shammai sides with the richer parts of society. Judaism almost always sides with those who have less money. Why do you think that is? How has that shaped our faith?

As ever, looking forward to your answers!