

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted December 20, 1998, by Mark Frydenberg. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

Tevet: These and Those are the Words of the Living God

This month we continue our study of passages about Hillel and Shammai with a text about compromise. It is referenced in a passage from Pirke Avot, the Teachings of our Sages:

Pirke Avot 5:19

A controversy for Heaven's sake will have lasting value, but a controversy not for Heaven's sake will not endure.

What is an example of a controversy for Heaven's sake? The debates of Hillel and Shammai.

What is an example of a controversy not for Heaven's sake? The rebellion of Korah and his associates.

See Numbers 16:1 for a discussion of Korach, who rebelled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness, attempting to overthrow them from power. He tried to ridicule God's Commandments, and in the end, God opened the earth and it swallowed up Korach and his followers. (Numbers 16:30).

We will study the proof-text for "an example of controversy for Heaven's sake," which comes from Talmud Eruvin 13b.

For three years there was a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, the former asserting, 'The law is in agreement with our views.' and the latter contending, 'The law is in agreement with our views.' Then a *bat kol* (a voice from heaven) announced, ' *Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chayim* 'these and those are the words of the living God, but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel.'

Since, however, 'both are the words of the living God', what was it that entitled Beit Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so humble as to mention the words of Beit Shammai before their own.(Eruvin, 13b)"

The passage then goes on to give an example of a ruling from Beit Hillel regarding the mitzvah of sitting in a sukkah. The argument mentions Shammai's rules before Hillel's, and then shows the modesty and kindness in Hillel's position.

For example, we have learned: If a man had his head and the greater part of his body within the *sukkah* but his table in the house, Beit Shammai ruled [that the *sukkah* was] invalid but Beit Hillel ruled that it was valid. Said Beth Hillel to Beth Shammai, 'Did it not so happen that the elders of Beth Shammai and the elders of Beth Hillel went on a visit to R. Johanan b. Hahoranith and found him sitting with his head and greater part of his body within the *sukkah* while his table was in the house?' [because his *sukkah* was so small that it could not contain more than the parts of the body mentioned.]

Beth Shammai replied: From there proof [may be deduced for our view for] they indeed told him,

'If you have always acted in this manner you have never fulfilled the commandment of [sitting in the] *sukkah*').

**[Beth Hillel says] This teaches you that
one who humbles himself, the Holy One, blessed be He, raises up,
and one who exalts himself, the Holy One, blessed be He, humbles;
from one who seeks greatness, greatness flees,
but one who flees from greatness, greatness follows;
one who forces time is forced back by time,
but one who yields to time finds time standing at his side.**

The passage concludes with another debate between Hillel and Shammai, on whether or not God should have created human beings. Shammai says no, Hillel says yes, but then agrees with Shammai saying he's right, but it's too late, because human beings have already been created. Given that, Hillel says we should live the best lives we possibly can.

Our Rabbis taught: For two and a half years were Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel in dispute, the former asserting that it were better for man not to have been created than to have been created, and the latter maintaining that it is better for man to have been created than not to have been created. They finally took a vote and decided that it were better for man not to have been created than to have been created, but now that he has been created, let him investigate his past deeds or, as others say, let him examine his future actions.

Background Information

Rabbi Judy Abrams provides background information for us on this passage.

This story is a wonderful paradigm for conflict resolution. God must settle this dispute, so what does God do? God listens to both sides, and acknowledges their validity. Then God makes a decision on whose law to follow, based on the process Beit Hillel used to come to their decisions; a process of consideration and humility. In other words, you can't separate what you think from who you are and how you behave; they are all interconnected.

However, one might ask, why did the rabbis bother including Beit Shammai's views since we know they're going to "lose"? Why not just transmit Hillel's view since that is what ultimately becomes law? The Tannaim and Amoraim transmitted the views of Beit Shammai along with Beit Hillel not only because they often make valid and important points; and not only because they represented an important group within the Jewish community; but because the very existence of the two houses and the debate they engendered are an important and valuable part of our tradition and one more pathway to God.

A modern analogy can be found in the political arena. In the 1988 race for the Democratic presidential nomination, Jesse Jackson and the "Rainbow Coalition" continued to campaign long after it became obvious that they would lose. They did so because, by doing so, they raised issues of importance to them and tried to influence the general direction of the Democratic party as a whole. Beit Shammai is like such a minority group within a larger party. They may never "win", but they express their views and try to influence the decisions that are made by others.

Jacob Neusner, in commenting on this chapter in *Invitation to the Talmud*, puts it beautifully, "The rabbis, unlike us, were able to conceive of practical and critical thinking as holy. They were able...to see as religiously significant, indeed as sanctified, what the modern intellectual perceives as the very instrument of secularity: the capacity to think

critically and to reason.(page xv)"

In an even more subtle way, this chapter conveys who has authority in our tradition and why they have it. The opinion that ultimately holds sway may not be the "correct" one. Opinions are proposed by people whose conduct can either enhance or detract from the acceptance of their rulings. As we have noted before, who we are and what we say are intimately connected in the Jewish system of thought. Beit Hillel's opinions are accepted not just because they may have been "correct", but also because they acted like *menschen*, as people who respect their fellow human beings. They were committed to the holy undertaking of argumentation and did not undermine it by haughtily dismissing their opponents' opinions as we saw above in the classic text from Eruvin, 13b.

Discussion Questions

1. Even though "these and those are the words of the living God", Hillel still wins. Why?
2. What does it mean to "argue for the sake of heaven"? How can you apply the principle of *eilu v'eilu* to your own life situation in order to argue for the sake of Heaven?
3. Hillel is teaching us a very important lesson about faith and belief in ourselves and in God. How can you integrate Hillel's teaching into your own life?

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