

Hillel and Shammai:
The Jewish 'Culture of Debate' and the Return to Civil Discourse

Sermon YK Day 5780

Any visitor to Jerusalem is sure to visit the Western Wall, the world-renowned Israel Museum with its expanding art collection, and the shuk in Machane Yehuda – on a Friday if possible...

If you want to go off the beaten path to explore Israel through what I think is a particularly insightful lens: In Search of the Good Life, down through the ages and today, then you can join our MJCS trip to Israel this coming June. There's a flyer with details outside.

But certainly no trip to Jerusalem is complete - whether in Search of the Good Life, or even just in search of a great schwarma - without a visit to the famous pedestrian mall on Ben Yehudah St. For my teens growing up in Jerusalem, this is the place to be – it's like the 3rd St. Promenade of the entire Middle East.

Nearby, on Hillel St., both tourists and locals frequently visit the original café Aroma, known for really great coffee served with a square of chocolate and superbly satisfying sandwiches...(sorry to mention that today for those who are fasting!)

Or you might prefer to grab a burger at the world's first kosher McDonald's one block over on Shammai St.

These two streets, Hillel and Shammai, you may already know, are named after the two revered sages who lived towards the end of the 2nd Temple era 2,000 years ago. Hillel and Shammai are known for disagreeing about everything...from how many candles to light on the first night of Chanuka (1 candle then counting up each night, or 8 candles and counting down each night) to whether or not you can tell a white lie to preserve someone's dignity. It's no surprise then, that Hillel and Shammai streets were very purposefully built parallel to one another, next to each other sharing the same neighborhood, but never intersecting, never meeting together.

You see, these two scholars had very different personalities and different world-views. Hillel was exceptionally patient, Shammai impatient, Hillel gentle and

accepting, Shammai direct and strict. In their politics, Hillel tried to work around the Roman influence on the country, Shammai sided with those convinced we had to combat the Romans directly.

Hillel and Shammai each established their own renowned academy of learning and their many disciples became the leaders of the Jewish People for centuries. The truth is that Hillel and Shammai themselves successfully resolved most of their arguments to the point that only three issues between them were never decided – three. But their many disciples had over 300 recorded disputes that stayed unresolved.

The real-life Hillel and Shammai let their differences in outlook and approach inform their learning. They used their different perspectives to strengthen one another's arguments in a shared quest for the truth and wise governance of the Jewish nation.

Not so their disciples in the following years. The politics heated up as the two parties found themselves in more and more controversies, the stakes of which continued to escalate as the politics grew more intense.

For three years, the students of Hillel and the students of Shammai were at an impasse on these 300 or more issues. One morning, a few days before Purim, the Shammai students found that for the first time they had a quorum and they also outnumbered the Hillel students in the hall. They locked the doors. They posted guards, they decreed that no one could leave. And they started forcing a vote on all the issues that had been in dispute.

The tension and fury increased on both sides. When they got to the argument about kosher winemaking, the question was whether a grape that's been picked is considered to be a liquid...since it is in process on the way to becoming wine already...or still a solid food: because it is not yet crushed and is after all, still a dry grape... a fight broke out. Swords were drawn. There were murders in the study hall that day.

That's right: The anger and rhetoric were so high, the partisanship so divisive, the impossibility of compromise or even of civil debate so great that it led our ancestors to murder, prelude to a civil war, triggered by...a grape.

The Romans were easily able to exploit our disunity and the extremism it produced, we weakened ourselves and grew even more divided, and they conquered us. We were exiled and it took us 2,000 years to earn our independence once again.

The story of Hillel and Shammai sounds a little too familiar, doesn't it? What we hear around us today is:

- A level of discourse that goes from low to lower.
- Hate for the other side instead of a debate with other side
- An "us" vs. "them" mentality
- We hear others objectified and identified by insult
- We hear constant demonization of perceived rivals...
- We don't hear about political partnerships, We don't hear about the search for win-win solutions; Instead we hear search and destroy. We hear Partisanship, not partnership.
- We hear discussion mostly reduced to a contest of disrespect...
- The discourse in our ears seems to have become – (paraphrasing Hobbes) - "nasty, brutish, and short"
- We see the rules of the game are only rules when they self-serve one-side, otherwise they are simply obstacles to be removed.
- We see Truth being slaughtered, our intelligence abused.
- We hear that its somehow OK to incite against others to serve one's own self-interest

Frankly, it's terrifying that we are going into an election year when civil discourse seems so far from being civil or recognizable as discourse.

We can't much impact how they speak in Washington DC and around the whole country. But we cannot let that infect how we choose to speak to one another.

Now is the time to embrace what Jewish culture very consciously defines as a culture of inclusive debate. It is essential that we model this in how we talk about issues within our homes, in our community, and in the wider world.

- The integrity of how we discuss issues matters as much or more than what we say.
- We have to show that the rules for “winning” are to engage in the debate like the way our tradition says that Hillel would engage in discussions with Shammai. The Sages said that Hillel’s and Shammai’s views both represented the ‘word’s of the living God’ - that both their principled viewpoints had validity. Even though only God will maybe one day let us know how we should truly act, in the meantime the Sages sided with Hillel because of process and so likewise we need to argue our position:
 1. ...with a kind manner;
 2. ...with humility - acknowledging and really believing that our position might not be the right one and is certainly not the only legitimate one;
 3. ...by staying calm and preserving our dignity, and the dignity of our *chevruta* - our debate partner who is called *chevruta*, the Hebrew spelling of which derives from *Chaver*: friend.
 4. ...by showing respect for other viewpoints even if we disagree with them. We don’t win by force or working the system, but by persuasion, integrity, and our own personal example.

You see, we the Jewish People learned our lesson about what happened after Hillel and Shammai when their students’ causeless hatred led to such disunity and catastrophe. We had to rebuild Judaism. We turned our civil discourse into one of the highest Jewish values. We turned debate of different perspectives into the foundation of Jewish culture. We call this *tarbut machloket*, the culture of debate.

Ever see a set of the Talmud on the bookshelf? All those pages are the records of this culture of debate. The old joke about 2 Jews and three opinions? This is our heritage of debate and argumentation in action... The creation of our democratic culture of discourse has preserved the Jewish people for the last 2,000 years as much as any religious practice has. Jewish discussion has sharpened our minds, describes who’s a mensch, and unified us as a nation that prizes truth, demands justice, and pursues peace.

We have to model this for our kids and grandkids today, in contrast to the message they are getting outside. We have to model this for our own selves: A decency of language, a respectful style, and honesty in the content of what we discuss. It’s up to us to raise the debate to one of principle rather than

partisanship, a dignified debate rather than a drag through the mud of insult and anger.

We cannot bury our heads in the sand, no matter how much we love the beaches in Malibu, surrounded in a safe bubble only by people who vote like us and see the world as we do... the spirit of democracy is to engage with others, to learn from them, like Hillel and Shammai themselves to try to understand how they see the world and why they see it that way. We have to have respect for others, for their concerns and needs, even if they are not our concerns and needs and even if we disagree with their conclusions.

We have to admit that we might not be able to solve everything and that we do not have all the answers or the whole answer. Our love of truth is what guides our debates, and we must be responsible, honest and demanding in its pursuit. Then we might be able to admit that sometimes truth is broader and more multi-sided than we had imagined.

Lastly, keep in mind the last word the tradition has on the entire Hillel and Shammai episode: Despite all their unresolved disputes, the students of Hillel and the students of Shammai continued to marry brides and grooms “from across the aisle”...They did not let disagreement destroy family. [Yevamot 1:4]

Please don't let politics and disagreement destroy your family. Here within the MJCS family for this upcoming election year, we will keep this a safe space in which we can maintain *tarbut machloket*, a culture of inclusive debate: Debate that celebrates kindness of manner, discussion within a framework of humility, dignity, mutual respect, and principled discussion. No partisan dictates here.

I really believe that this coming election year is an opportunity for us to grow as individuals and as a community that prizes truth, demands justice, and pursues peace amongst ourselves and with others.

Cein Yehi Ratzon – May it be God's will.