

Hillel and Shammai - these and these are the words of the Living God

Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 13b

אמר רבי אבא אמר שמואל: שלש שנים נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל, הללו אומרים: הלכה כמותנו, והללו אומרים: הלכה כמותנו. יצאה בת קול ואמרה: אלו ואלו דברי אלקים חיים הן, והלכה כבית הלל.

Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The law is in accordance with us, and these said: The law is in accordance with us. A Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: These and those are the words of the living God. However, the *law* is in accordance with Beit Hillel.

וכי מאחר שאלו ואלו דברי אלקים חיים, מפני מה זכו בית הלל לקבוע הלכה כמותן? מפני שנוחין ועלובין הוּן, ושונין דבריהן ודברי בית שמאי, ולא עוד אלא שמקדימין דברי בית שמאי לדבריהן.

Since both these and those are the words of the living God, why did Beit Hillel merit to have the law established in accordance with them? Because they were agreeable and forebearing, and would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, they put the statements of Beit Shammai prior to their own statements.

כאותה ששנינו: מי שהיה ראשו ורובו בסוכה ושלחנו בתוך הבית, בית שמאי פוסלין ובית הלל מכשירין. אמרו בית הלל לבית שמאי: לא כך היה מעשה, שהלכו זקני בית שמאי וזקני בית הלל לבקר את רבי יוחנן בן החורנית ומצאוהו יושב ראשו ורובו בסוכה ושלחנו בתוך הבית. אמרו להן בית שמאי: אי משם ראיה? אף הן אמרו לו: אם כך היית נוהג, לא קיימת מצות סוכה מימך.

As we learned: "One whose head and most of their body were in the *sukkah*, but their table was in the house, Beit Shammai deem this invalid; and Beit Hillel deem it valid. Beit Hillel said to Beit Shammai: Wasn't there an incident in which the Elders of Beit Shammai and the Elders of Beit Hillel went to visit Rabbi Yochanan ben HaChoranit, and they found him sitting with his head and most of his body in the *sukkah*, but his table was in the house? Beit Shammai said to them: From there a proof?! They too, said to him: If that's how you normally do this, you have never fulfilled the mitzva of *sukkah* in all your days."

ללמדך שכל המשפיל עצמו — הקדוש ברוך הוא מגביהו, וכל המגביהו עצמו — הקדוש ברוך הוא משפילו. כל המחזיר על הגדולה — גדולה בורחת ממנו, וכל הבורח מן הגדולה — גדולה מחזרת אחריו, וכל הדוחק את השעה — שעה דוחקתו, וכל הנדחה מפני שעה — שעה עומדת לו.

This is to teach you that anyone who humbles themselves, the Holy Blessed One exalts them, and anyone who exalts themselves, the Holy Blessed One humbles them. Anyone who seeks greatness, greatness flees from them, and anyone who flees from greatness, greatness seeks them. And anyone who forces the moment, the moment forces them. And anyone who yields to the moment, the moment stands for them.

תָּנוּ רַבָּנֵינוּ: שְׁתֵּי שָׁנִים וּמַחֲצָה נִחְלְקוּ בֵּית שְׁמַאי וּבֵית הִלֵּל. הִלְלוּ אוֹמְרִים: נוֹחַ לוֹ לֵאדָם
שֶׁלֹא נִבְרָא יוֹתֵר מִשְׁנִבְרָא, וְהִלְלוּ אוֹמְרִים: נוֹחַ לוֹ לֵאדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא יוֹתֵר מִשֶּׁלֹא נִבְרָא.
נִמְנוּ וְגִמְרוּ: נוֹחַ לוֹ לֵאדָם שֶׁלֹא נִבְרָא יוֹתֵר מִשְׁנִבְרָא, עַכְשָׁיו שֶׁנִּבְרָא – יִפְשֹׁשׁ בְּמַעֲשָׁיו.
וְאָמְרֵי לֵה: יִמְשֹׁמֶשׁ בְּמַעֲשָׁיו.

The Sages taught: For two and a half years, Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: It would have been preferable had humanity not been created than to have been created. And those said: It is preferable for humanity to have been created than to have not been created. They were counted and they concluded: It would have been preferable had humanity not been created than to have been created. But now that humanity has been created, they should examine (*yepashpesh*) their actions. And some say: They should scrutinise (*yemashmesh*) their actions.

Guiding Questions

- What was the argument between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel?
- What do you think the argument was like between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel? What do you think it felt like at the time to each side? What about to people who weren't on either side?
- What do you think it means that a divine voice called out? How do you understand that?
- What does it mean for both sides to be 'the word of the living God'?
- Who wins the argument, if anyone? Why does the divine voice declare who the law follows?
- According to the Talmud, why did Beit Hillel win?
- What do you think of those reasons? Does one seem more important than the others?
- Does this change your sense of what the argument was like?
- Do you think that Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel were able to be in community with each other? If so, what made that possible?
- Which kind of Sukkah does Beit Shammai forbid which Beit Hillel permits?
- How does the incident seem to prove Beit Hillel's point?
- What is Beit Shammai's retort?
- How does this paragraph connect to the one preceding it?
- How does the discussion of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel prove the point raised here?
- Do you think these statements are true all of the time, some of the time or none of the time?
- True or not, do you think they are good advice?
- How does this paragraph inform your view of the disputing schools?
- What argument are Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel having at the end?
- Who wins the argument?
- What conclusion are we supposed to draw from this?
- How does this inform our view of disagreement within community?

Extra Sources

1] Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 14b

תָּא שְׁמַע: אִף עַל פִּי שְׁנַחֲלָקוּ בֵּית שְׁמַאי וּבֵית הִלֵּל... לֹא נִמְנְעוּ בֵּית שְׁמַאי מִלְּשָׂא נָשִׁים מִבֵּית הִלֵּל, וְלֹא בֵּית הִלֵּל מִבֵּית שְׁמַאי. לְלַמֶּדְךָ שְׁחִיבָה וְרִיעוּת נוֹהֲגִים זֶה בָּזֶה, לְקַיֵּים מָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "הָאֱמֶת וְהַשְּׁלוֹם אֶהְיֶה". רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר: נִמְנְעוּ הֵן מִן הַיִּדְּאִי, וְלֹא נִמְנְעוּ מִן הַסָּפֵק

Come and hear: Even though Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed [on many cases about the status of marriages] Beit Shammai would not hold back from marrying women from Beit Hillel, nor Beit Hillel from Beit Shammai. This serves to teach you that they practiced affection and camaraderie between them, to fulfil that which is stated: "Love truth and peace" (Zechariah 8:19). Rabbi Shimon says: They did refrain in the certain cases, but they did not refrain in the uncertain cases.

2] Mishnah Berachot 1:3

בֵּית שְׁמַאי אוֹמְרִים, בַּעֲרַב כָּל אָדָם יֵטוּ וַיִּקְרְאוּ, וּבבֹקֶר יַעֲמִדוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וּבִשְׁכַּבְּךָ וּבִקְוֹמְךָ" (דְּבָרִים ו, ז). וּבֵית הִלֵּל אוֹמְרִים, כָּל אָדָם קוֹרֵא כְּדַרְכּוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "וּבִלְכַתְּךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ" (שָׁם). אִם כֵּן, לָמָּה נֶאֱמַר וּבִשְׁכַּבְּךָ וּבִקְוֹמְךָ, בִּשְׁעָה שֶׁבְּנֵי אָדָם שׁוֹכְבִּים, וּבִשְׁעָה שֶׁבְּנֵי אָדָם עוֹמְדִים. אָמַר רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן, אֲנִי הֵייתִי בֶּאֱדָרֶךְ, וְהִטְטִי לִקְרוֹת, כְּדִבְרֵי בֵּית שְׁמַאי, וְסִכַּנְתִּי בַּעֲצָמִי מִפְּנֵי הַלִּסְטִים. אָמְרוּ לוֹ, כְּדִי הֵייתָ לַחֹב בַּעֲצָמְךָ, שֶׁעֲבַרְתָּ עַל דְּבָרֵי בֵּית הִלֵּל

Beit Shammai says: In the evening all people should recline and recite [the Shema], and in the morning they should stand, since it says (Deut. 6:7), "When you lie down and when you arise." But the school of Hillel says: Each person may recite it in their usual way, since it says (ibid.), "When you walk on the road." If so, why does it say "when you lie down and when you arise"? —[It means:] at the time when people are lying down, and at the time when people are arising.

Said Rabbi Tarfon: "I was once traveling on the road, and I reclined to recite in accordance with the view of Beit Shammai, and I put myself in danger of bandits." They [the other Sages] said to him: "You would have deserved to be guilty for your own fate, since you went against the view of Beit Hillel!"

3] Mishnah Shabbat 1:4

וְאֵלּוּ מִן הַהֲלָכוֹת שֶׁאָמְרוּ בְּעֵלִית חֲנַנְיָה בֶּן חִזְקִיָּה בֶּן גָּרִיוֹן כְּשֶׁעָלוּ לְבִקְרוֹ. נִמְנוּ וְרַבּוּ בֵּית שְׁמַאי עַל בֵּית הִלֵּל, וְשָׁמְנָה עָשָׂר דְּבָרִים גָּזְרוּ בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם

And these are among the laws that the Sages said in the upper storey of Chananya ben Chizkiya ben Garon, when they went up to visit him. That day they counted and Beit Shammai outnumbered Beit Hillel, and they issued decrees about eighteen matters on that day.

4] Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 14a

אמר לו: אם תקניטני, גזרני טומאה אף על המסיקה. נעצו חרב בבית המדרש, אמרו: הנכנס – יכנס, והיוצא – אל יצא. ואותו היום היה הלל כפוף ויושב לפני שמאי כאחד מן התלמידים. והיה קשה לישראל ביום שנעשה בו העגל. וגזור שמאי והלל ולא קבלו מיניהו, ואתו תלמידיהו גזור וקבלו מיניהו

Shammai said to [Hillel]: If you provoke me and insist that there is no difference between gathering olives and grapes, then I will decree impurity on the gathering of olives as well! They stuck a sword in the study hall, and they said: One who seeks to enter the study hall, may enter, and one who seeks to leave may not leave. That day Hillel was bowed and was sitting before Shammai like one of the students.

And that day was as difficult for Israel as the day the Golden Calf was made. And Shammai and Hillel issued the decree, and the people did not accept it from them. And their students came and issued the decree, and the people accepted it from them.

5] Jerusalem Talmud Shabbat 1:4

אותו היום היה קשה לישראל ביום שנעשה בו העגל...

That day was hard for Israel like the day the Golden Calf was made...

תנא רבי יהושע אוןיא. תלמידי בית שמאי עמדו להן מלמטה והיו הורגין בתלמידי בית הלל. תני. ששה מהן עלו והשאר עמדו עליהן בחרבות וברמחין

Rebbi Joshua from Ono stated: The students of the House of Shammai were standing downstairs and killing the students of the House of Hillel. It was stated, six of them went up; the rest were standing around them with swords and lances.

6] Humble conviction by Rabbi Shuli Passow - Eruvin 13 on myjewishlearning.com

This well-known passage teaches the profoundly significant lesson that the manner in which one disagrees is as important as one's argument. Beit Shammai's legal rulings are just as valid as Beit Hillel's, but we follow the latter because of the civility and deference they demonstrated.

In our climate of ever-increasing polarization, this passage is often cited as a plea for intellectual and political discourse that is respectful and intellectually humble: Like Beit Hillel, we should seek to understand opposing arguments and relate to them with respectful disagreement. Yet earlier on today's daf, there is another passage that can be seen as cautioning against taking such a stance too far... [discussion of Rabbi Meir's views] ...the talmudic assessments of these towering intellectual figures suggest that respect and deference in debate need not mean abandoning our commitments. We need to seek both understanding of the other side and make our views clear. Today's daf is an argument for what we might call humble conviction — something our world could use more of right now.