

## “Eilu Va-Eilu”

It is the question one has to ask whenever one studies the Talmud: why is every single opinion written down and discussed? A question will be raised, an initial answer will be offered, and then the Talmud will add, “ But Rabbi So and So disagrees and says....”, followed by “ But Rabbi So and So says...” and finally, “ However, Rabbi So and So argues....” Every single opinion is recorded and argued for posterity.

In fact, there are two famous academies in the Talmud: Beit Hillel (The House of Hillel) and Beit Shammai (The House of Shammai). These institutions were home to the disciples of our two greatest scholars Hillel and Shammai. These two popular figures of the rabbinic world did not differ on a great many issues (their disagreements

were more on methodology and approach to Jewish law), but the Talmud records over **300** differences of opinion between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai.

Almost always, Jewish law follows the rulings of the House of Hillel. And yet, the Talmud never fails to mention the decisions of the House of Shammai. They are not left out, nor are the many rabbis that are never a part of the majority opinion.

So why are the minority opinions written, discussed, and as a result, analyzed for centuries? Why does our sacred texts deem it necessary to mention dissenting and minority opinions? Just from a practical matter, all this does is create confusion when studying the text and just makes it difficult to follow.

The Talmud gives us an answer. It says (Talmud Eruvin 13b) that there was once a dispute between the

House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, the former asserting, “the law is in agreement with our view” and the latter contending, “the law is in agreement with our view.” Then, a “Voice from Heaven” announces: “Eilu Va-Eilu Divrei Elohim Chayim... (“These **and** these are the words of the living G-d, but the law is in agreement with the ruling of the House of Hillel!”)

That is an amazing statement! The Talmud is teaching a profound thought: in a debate, **both** sides can often be right. The law may go with Hillel but the words of Shammai are divine as well. How can that be? Because while the House of Hillel may be correct in this case, change a variable in the case and the House of Shammai becomes correct. It is for this reason that the Talmud finds it necessary to always offer the dissenting voices; they are part of the “Divine Voice” and must be lovingly quoted and

mentioned with respect. All sides in a legitimate debate have merit and every opinion is worthy of respect.

If you ask me why we live in such a hostile and angry culture, it may be because this type of thinking is missing in our societal dialogue. There is simply no respect for the “opposing view”; differences of opinion are met with hostility and ad hominem attacks. Partisans on both sides of the political aisle, religion spectrum and social discourse have neither respect nor appreciation for the views of others. Few are willing to treat an opposition view as being morally equal, intellectually engaging and ***maybe even correct*** under the right circumstances.

The issue of Israel is a perfect example. There are two legitimate views on what should be done to create peace and stability in that region. One position is that Israel must remain ever vigilant, never negotiate with

those who seek her destruction and never give up land. In that part of the world, weakness will be met with aggression if given an opening. The other position is that Israel must seek out moderates and work with them, show conciliatory behavior and return land. In that part of the world, respect and understanding will be met with reconciliation if given a chance.

Both sides have merit and while, ultimately, one course of action has to be taken, that doesn't mean the other side is inherently wrong. Yet time and again, I have heard those who seek dialogue called "traitors to Israel" and those who support a diplomatic tract "haters of Israel". I have also listened as those who want to destroy terrorist networks described as "war mongers" and those who support Israeli military actions as "Muslim haters".

Why does one side have to be utterly discredited and her supporters demonized? Isn't it possible to say, "These and these are the words of the living G-d"? Are Democrats who don't support the Patriot Act because they have serious fears about the erosions of freedoms "terrorist sympathizers"? Give me a break! Are Republicans who take issues with universal health care because they cannot see how a government saddled with debt will be able to pay for it "heartless souls who hate the poor"? Be serious! Are those who are seriously concerned about the environment and global warming "haters of America"? Have we gone nuts? Are those who believe that this country would become a better society with more religion in the public arena "religious fanatics"? Stop this nonsense!

Why does the other side always have to be portrayed as evil? People can and should be passionate about their views but let it never be at the expense of tearing apart the opposition. Hillel and Shammai were two of the most different rabbis you could meet. Hillel came from Babylon and grew up in abject poverty; Shammai was a native of Israel and incredibly wealthy. Hillel was a soft-spoken liberal and Shammai was a quick-tempered conservative. And yet, despite their backgrounds and personalities, they were the closest of colleagues, friendly adversaries who realized “these and these are the words of the living G-d”.

Even when their “Houses” differed, they respected one another. The House of Hillel, which almost always won, would often begin by humbly acknowledging and quoting the words and opinion of their colleagues, the House of Shammai. In fact, the Talmud frequently tries to

create scenarios where the two academies found common ground. One Talmudic opinion even states that the views of the “House of Shammai” are preserved because in Messianic times, their decision will become the majority view and the “House of Hillel” will become the loyal opposition.

We are not a society of Hillel and Shammai, neither as individuals nor as a collective. We live in a terribly fractured world where people take positions and see others as not just wrong but the enemy. The Talmud teaches us to believe that the other side is not the enemy but part of the “living G-d”. Eilu Va-eilu.

That is why I recently ordered a book *just* for the title. Oh, I am sure I will want to open it up and read it but if all I ever do is see the title on my shelf, it will be worth it. The book is by Rabbi Brad Hirschfield. The title of the book is:



**“You Don’t Have To Be Wrong For Me To Be Right.”**

Well stated! Indeed, we have become so intolerant and unwilling to admit that maybe even when we are sure we are right, the other side is not necessarily wrong. That subtlety is, sadly, lost in our society. However, Rabbi Hirschfield is right: You don’t have to be wrong for me to be right. May we listen to the views of others, hear what they have to say and be willing to declare “Eilu Va-Eilu! These and these are the words of the living G-d.”

AMEN