



Facing Deep Divisions in the Jewish Community

A 5786 Chanukah Text Study

Introduction

At its most basic, the Chanukah story is a narrative of two triumphs. First, the victory of the Maccabees in their revolt against the Seleucids, reestablishing Jewish political independence in the land of Israel. This military victory is compounded by the miraculous maintenance of the pure oil needed to light the Menorah for eight nights. Less often discussed is the painful dynamics that led directly to the conflict between Maccabees and Greeks — the intense social conflict between an increasingly Hellenistic portion of the population and those resistant to those religious and cultural shifts.

Even before the rise, corruption, and fall of the Hasmonean state, the warring factions of Jews in the Land of Israel suffered terrible violence at one another's hands. The Seleucids' violent imposition of a syncretic version of Hellenized Judaism that involved the worship of images, including Zeus, as well as the forced consumption of pig meat by their chosen Kohen Gadol, was facilitated by the many Jews who likely supported some version of Hellenistic Judaism, even if they did not wish to see that preference enacted with violence. Those who fought in the Maccabean revolt committed terrible acts as well, from forcibly circumcising the children of their Hellenized Jewish enemies to killing collaborators.

Today, Jews are once again experiencing deep divisions. Differing visions of what lies at the heart of Jewish meaning and ethics threaten to drive apart both local Jewish communities and our people more broadly. We offer the following texts and guiding questions to help you and your community build capacity for holding profound difference with respect and without enforcing uniformity.

1)

<p style="text-align: right;">שבת י"ז א:ו'</p> <p>נֶעֱצוּ חֶרֶב בְּבֵית הַמִּדְרָשׁ, אָמְרוּ: הִנֵּכֶם — יִכְנָס, וְהִיוּצֵא — אֵל יֵצֵא. וְאוֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם הָיָה הֵלֵל כֹּפּוֹף וְיוֹשֵׁב לִפְנֵי שַׁמַּי כְּאַחַד מִן הַתַּלְמִידִים. וְהָיָה קִשָּׁה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל כִּיּוֹם שֶׁנַּעֲשֶׂה בּוֹ הָעֶגְלָה. וְגִזְזוּר שַׁמַּי וְהֵלֵל וְלֹא קִבְּלוּ מִיִּנְיָהּ, וְאוֹתוֹ תַּלְמִידֵיהֶם גִּזְזוּר וְקִבְּלוּ מִיִּנְיָהּ.</p>
<p>Shabbat 17a:6</p> <p>...They related that since the dispute was so intense, they [Shammai] stuck a sword in the [entrance to the] beit midrash, and they said: One who wants to enter, let them come in, and one who wants to leave may not leave. That day Hillel was bowed and was sitting before Shammai like one of the students. The Gemara said: And that day was as difficult for Israel as the day the Golden Calf was made, as Hillel was forced to sit in submission before Shammai, and the opinion of Beit Shammai prevailed in the vote (on 18 new legal enactments) conducted that day. 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.</p>

How do you read Shammai's camp's decision to use the threat of violence to prevent people from leaving the beit midrash?

What do you think makes this day as difficult as the day the Golden Calf was made?

Why do you think the people did not accept the decrees voted on by their ostensible leaders, and only accepted it when a generation later their students reaffirmed them?

What could drive sages like those of Beit Shammai to act like this?

Are there modern Jewish institutions you see locked in conflict like this? What could Beit Hillel have done differently? What could Shammai have done?

2)

<p>תלמוד ירושלמי שבת א'ד:ג' תנא רבי יהושע אונגיא. תלמידי בית שמי עמדו להן מלמטה והיו הורגין בתלמידי בית הלל. תני. ששה מהן עלו והשאר עמדו עליהן בחרבות ובקמחים.</p>
<p>Jerusalem Talmud Shabbat 1:4:3 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.</p>

In this parallel version of the story, the sword is not struck into the ground but rather into their opponents, presumably to guarantee Beit Shammai the temporary voting majority they had never held before, while the rest forced the members of Beit Hillel to remain so as not to break a quorum. If violence is the only thing being used to enforce a victory in the vote, why would they call a vote at all? Why use the process while sully it with violence?

Read literarily, this is a text about a faction of the community taking power over its central institution and using it to enforce their vision of Jewish life through pushing others out of the decision-making process altogether. Are there times that feels like a legitimate choice? (Of course, without physically harming anyone?) What does keeping people from accessing decision-making power in a community do to that community?

When the dispute is about something as concrete as communal policy or law, are there ways the intense divide could have been bridged?

3)

<p>משנה יבמות א'ד'</p> <p>בית שמאי מתירין הצרות לאחים, ובית הלל אוסרים. חלצו, בית שמאי פוסלין מן הכהנה, ובית הלל מכשירים. נתיבמו, בית שמאי מכשירים, ובית הלל פוסלין. אף על פי שאילו אוסרין ואילו מתירין, אילו פוסלין ואילו מכשירין, לא נמנעו בית שמאי מלשא נשים מבית הלל, ולא בית הלל מבית שמאי. כל הטירות והטמאות שהיו אלו מטהרין ואילו מטמאין, לא נמנעו עושין טהרות אלו על גבי אלו:</p>
<p>Mishnah Yevamot 1:4</p> <p>Although Beit Hillel prohibit and Beit Shammai permit particulars of levirate marriage, and although these (Shamai) disqualify these women and those (Hillel) deem them fit, Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying women from Beit Shammai. Furthermore, with regard to all of the disputes concerning the laws of ritual purity and impurity, where these rule that an item is ritually pure and those rule it ritually impure, they did not refrain from handling ritually pure objects each with the other, as Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel frequently used each other's vessels.</p>

What makes the scholars of Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai able to marry into one another's families and eat off one another's dishes? What is lost in those compromises and what is gained?