

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

Kislev: Two Jews, Two Opinions

In honor of Chanukah, this month we study the famous passage about Hillel and Shammai that discusses what each says is the proper method for lighting Chanukah candles. We follow this passage with some others showing more differences in thought between Hillel and Shammai.

The terms *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai* literally refer to the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai, i.e., the followers of their schools of thought.

On Lighting Chanukah Candles

Beit Shammai ruled: On the first day of Hanukkah, we light eight candles; each day thereafter, we diminish the lights by one. Beit Hillel ruled: On the first day of Hanukkah, we light one candle; each day thereafter, we increase the lights by one.

Rabbi Yossi bar Abin and Rabbi Yossi bar Zvida differed on the motivations behind these rulings. One said Beit Shammai decided their rule according to the days that are yet to come; and Beit Hillel decided their rule according to the days that have passed.

The other said Beit Shammai decided their rule according to the decreasing number of sacrifices offered at the Temple each day of Sukkot (Sukkot is the biblical model for the post-biblical holiday of Hanukkah) and Beit Hillel decided their rule according to the dictum, one increases things of holiness, and does not decrease them. [Shabbat 21a]

On Saying the Shema

Beit Shammai says: In the evening one should recline and recite the Shema, and in the morning, one should stand, as it says, 'and when you lie down and when you rise up.' Beit Hillel, however, says that one should recite the Shema each in his own way, as it says, 'and when you walk by the way.'

Then why is it said, 'and when you lie down and when you rise up'? This means at the time when people lie down and at the time when people rise up. Rabbi Tarfon said, "I was once walking by the way and I reclined to recite the Shema, in the manner prescribed by Beit Shammai, and I was robbed." They said to him, 'You deserved to come to harm, because you acted against the opinion of Beit Hillel.' [Berachot 10b]

On Making Kiddush

Beit Shammai says that [when making Kiddush on a festival or on Shabbat] the benediction is first said over the day [m'kadesh haShabbat], and then over the wine [boray p'ri hagafen], while Beit Hillel says that the benediction is first said over the wine and then over the day.

Our rabbis taught: Beit Shammai says that the blessing is first said over the sanctity of the day and then over the wine, because it is on account of the day that the wine is used, and moreover, the day has already become holy before the wine has been brought. Beit Hillel says that a blessing is said on the wine first and then over the day, because the wine provides the occasion for saying the blessing. Another explanation is that the blessing over wine is said regularly while the blessing over the day is said at infrequent intervals. .. That which is regular has precedence over that which is

infrequent.

But Beit Shammai holds that the blessing over the day is more important, seeing that it has been taught: At the end of Shabbat, blessings are recited on wine, light, spices, and separation." Beit Hillel says the order is wine, spices, light, then separation. [Berachot 52a]

Beit Shammai holds that the entrance of a holy day is different from its outgoing. At its entrance the earlier we can make it, the better, but at its exit, the longer we can defer it, the better, so that it should not seem to be a burden on us. [Berachot 52a]

Commentary:

Hillel and Shammai differ on the proper way to perform many Jewish rituals. For Shammai, the observance seems to follow what was done back in the days of the Temple: just as the oil burned out after eight days, so do the candles diminish. Just as the extra offering was brought on Shabbat, the Shabbat day was blessed before the wine because the day symbolizes the extra offering that let us bless the wine in the first place. For Hillel, the observance seems to be just the reverse.

Rabbi Nina Beit Cardin (in Sh'ma magazine) wrote: "This choice of counting up or down encapsulates two approaches to life: Are the blessings of life so finite – so that with each one bestowed our cup is diminished? Or are they as infinite as the Source from which they come? And even if they are finite; do we imagine a growing darkness as each is used up, or do we gather all the revealed ones together, basking in the light that grows with each new blessing? How we answer these questions colors the way we receive each new day and each new blessing. ... So, while practicality forces any one of us to choose only one way to act, our recounting of the ways of Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel keep the possibility of both ways alive. And lest practice divide us, our stories unite us."

Questions for Discussion

1. Hillel bases his opinion in the Chanukah story on the principle that "on matters of holiness, we should only increase." Regarding making Kiddush, he bases his opinion on the ruling that "That which is regular has precedence over that which is infrequent." How are these two statements relevant to your life? How can we increase the level of holiness in our lives?
2. While they are based on similar rituals performed during Temple times, lighting candles, blessing the wine, and saying the Shema are rituals that we may perform to help us experience the closeness that our ancestors felt with God. How else might we experience that closeness today?
3. Why do you think Hillel's opinion has become the accepted one on each of these issues? Are his arguments always the more convincing?
4. The stories of Hillel and Shammai show throughout the ages Jews differed in their practice and interpretation of Torah and ritual. For example, today at services at many Reform congregations, the Shema is recited while standing. At most Conservative or Orthodox synagogues, the Shema is recited while sitting. Make up a "Hillel vs Shammai argument" that argues the validity of both positions. For which position would you have Hillel argue?

Two More Passages

Here are two more of my favorite passages that tell us more about the personalities of Hillel and Shammai. Are their behaviors in these stories consistent with the earlier passages we studied?

Standing on One Foot

It happened that a heathen came before Shammai and said to him, "Convert me on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot." Shammai drove him away with the builder's measuring stick that was in

his hand.

The heathen then came before Hillel who converted him. Hillel said to him, "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary – go and learn it." [Shabbat 31a]

Gentle Like Hillel

Our Rabbis taught: One should always be gentle like Hillel, and not impatient like Shammai. It once happened that two men made a wager with each other, saying, 'The one who goes and makes Hillel angry shall receive four hundred zuz.' One said, "I will go and aggravate him."

That day was the Sabbath eve, and Hillel was washing his head. He went, passed by Hillel's house, and [without addressing him by title] called out, "Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?" Hillel robed and went out to him, and said, "My son, what do you require?" "I have a question to ask," he said. "Ask, my son", Hillel prompted. He asked, "Why are the heads of the Babylonians round?" "My son, you have asked a great question." Hillel replied, "It is because they have no skillful midwives."

The man left, waited a while, returned, and again called out, "Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?" Hillel robed and went out to him, and said, "My son, what do you require?" "I have a question to ask," he said. "Ask, my son", Hillel prompted. He asked, "Why are the eyes of the Palmyreans watery?" "My son, you have asked a great question", Hillel replied, "It is because they live in sandy places."

The man left, waited a while, returned, and again called out, "Is Hillel here? Is Hillel here?" Hillel robed and went out to him, and said, "My son, what do you require?" "I have a question to ask," he said. "Ask, my son", Hillel prompted. He asked, "Why are the feet of the Africans wide?" "My son, you have asked a great question," Hillel replied, "It is because they live in watery marshes."

"I have many questions to ask, but fear that you may become angry." Then Hillel robed, sat before him, and said, "Ask all the questions you have to ask." "Are you the Hillel who is called the Patriarch of Israel?" "Yes," he replied. "If that is you," he retorted, "may there not be many like you in Israel." "Why, my son?" queried Hillel. "Because I have lost four hundred zuz by [coming to see] you," he complained. "Be careful of your moods, Hillel answered. "I am worth it that you should lose four hundred zuz. And even if you lose another four hundred zuz, still I will not lose my temper." [Shabbat, 31a]