

**V. Fighting to Get Along**  
Yom Kippur  
Saturday, September 22, 2007

**High Holy Days 5768**  
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Ohr Shalom Synagogue

*Boker Tov. Shabbat shalom.* This is the Day of Atonement, the day when the Book of Life is sealed. Today is the climax of our hard work for the past 40 days, from Rosh Chodesh Elul, preparing for our final petitions to be sealed in the Book of Life for life in the coming year.

We have spent our time together talking about creation, but really talking about the blessing of life, and our responsibility to live well. We began with creation, and the river of blessing which God sends into this world to nourish us. We learned that our becoming in the Divine Image was not automatic, based on our design, but rather when we drink from the river, or when we share the blessings of life, we have the potential to care for each other, to bless each other and to create. That is, to become like God.

We looked as well, at our obligation to eat from the fruit of all the trees of the garden – the richness and diversity bringing to us life, health and blessing.

Finally last night, we discussed Yom HaKippurim as a yom, a day, Ke-Purim, like Purim, that to drink from the flow, to be in the Divine Image and to eat from all the fruit, we must remain connected to the community. It is only through living together, sharing our lives together, that we are able to fully receive and express the blessings of life.

So what remains? We've covered it. The Goodness/Godliness that is present at all times, our ability to receive that flow and resemble the goodness and power of our creator, the necessity of eating of the diversity of life's experiences, good and bad, and finally our need for the community as a context for all of these.

Any questions?

Seems to me that there is one large admission that we haven't yet made together. A challenge, or perhaps a struggle, that we face when we accept this image of the world and then come together to realize it in our lives.

The challenge? All the other people who make up the community.

Remember Shimon Bar Yochai, in the cave, buried up to the neck studying the Torah all day. Remember, his wrath poured out on the poor farmer? Well, Shimon Bar Yochai had renounced the community and the physical world.

The implication there, is that two people who both value the community will therefore get along together just fine. But we know the truth is otherwise.

Somehow, it happens that we come together with the best of intentions and we step on each other's toes. We offend inadvertently. We thoughtlessly take the other for granted rather than being grateful for their presence and contributions. We assume that I must be right, and therefore you must be wrong. We believe that I have the right to set the boundaries of the community, that I get to define who is in and who is out, what is good and what is bad.

But the world does not work that way. Community is much messier than that. In fact, in this context, I would extend the word community to include any group of people from a pair all the way up.

So what do we do, when we enter the collective looking to stand in the flow of this mystical river, to develop into the image of our creator, and to eat from the fruits of the trees, and find lots of other people who disagree with us? Who have a different vision? Who, based on the same tradition, same values, even very similar lives and lifestyles, arrive at very different conclusions?

Come on, we are gearing up for Presidential Elections, how can good people vote differently than I do?

I want to move out from our conversations about Cosmology and Cosmogony and look at an amazing pair from the Talmud. Two great sages, contemporaries of each other, each of whom founded a large, important learning academy, filled with students.

We know some of the stories of Hillel and Shammai. By the way, it is historically inaccurate to refer to them as rabbis, the Talmud never does. They lived in the first century Before the Common Era, they pre-date the institution and title of Rabbi.

So the stories of Hillel and Shammai. You know the non-Jew who comes to Shammai and asks to learn the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai chases him away with a stick – a pedagogic technique I find quite compelling, even if not all together so successful. The same fellow comes before Hillel with the same question, and Hillel says to him: “That which is hateful to you, do not do to another person. All the rest is commentary, now go and learn!” Very different teachers, styles, and outlooks.

A non-Jew comes before Shammai and says I will convert on the condition that I can be High Priest. (By the way, one can only be a Kohein, a priest, if one’s father is a Kohein.) So Shammai sticks to his tried and true pedagogy – same stick. Hillel accepts him as a student, not because this fellow will ever become High Priest, but Hillel reasons that once he begins to study and prepares to be Jewish he will learn that he can’t be High Priest.

Again very different teachers and thinkers. The Talmud is replete with stories of the enmity between these two and their competing Academies.

Now the texts. Number one on your handout. (Eruvin 13b)

For three years there was a dispute between Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel, the former asserting, ‘The halachah is in agreement with our views’ and the latter contending, ‘The halachah is in agreement with our views’. Then a Bat Kol issued

announcing, '[The utterances of] both are the words of the living God, but the halachah is in agreement with the rulings of Beth Hillel'.

So even though they are in disagreement, from God's perspective, that is the Bat Kol, they are both correct. Amazing, two great teachers, strong disagreement. Both right.

But there is a problem. If you have ever been in a car with another person, and disagreed on which way to turn . . . it is possible that you both know a correct way to get to where you are going, but in the end, the car can only turn one way. Back to the text:

Since, however, both are the words of the living God' what was it that entitled Beth Hillel to have the halachah fixed in agreement with their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beth Shammai, and were even so [humble] as to mention the actions of Beth Shammai before theirs.

Look at that. When God ultimately decides between the opinions of Hillel and of Shammai, with respect for the validity of both sides, God favors Hillel because of the respect they show to the other side. It is not that they are both right and Hillel is more right. They are both right, the community needs a single standard, and Hillel's behavior, not their reasoning, their behavior, finds favor, ultimately, in God's eyes.

Powerful, powerful text. But still it is an antagonistic model of one side "winning-the-day" over the other side. Though, the victory is scored through Derekh Eretz or Menschlichkeit, not by superior intellect or simply talking louder than one's opponents.

Another text, number two:

For two and a half years were Beth Shammai and Beth Hillel in dispute, the former asserting that it were better for man not to have been created than to have been created, and the latter maintaining that it is better for man to have been created than not to have been created. They finally took a vote and decided that it were better for man not to have been created than to have been created, but now that he has been created, let him investigate his past deeds or, as others say, let him examine his future actions.

Again, another long argument. This time the answer does not seemingly have any normative halakhic implication. But notice what is fundamentally different here, from the preceding case. In the former, the final outcome is: one is victorious, and one is defeated. Here, they have learned a different way to settle their disagreement, they compromised – or more specifically, they took a vote and agree to abide by the outcome.

It's beautiful. They resolve their differences and build a bridge between the communities.

And notice how long they fight – first, three years, and here two-and-a-half years. Long, long disagreements.

Have you ever been in a really long fight or disagreement? I don't mean have you ever been mad at somebody for a long time, I mean a long term disagreement.

How amazing is it, that they disagreed and continued to discuss and debate, discuss and debate these two issues for years – literally for years. And they weren't just yelling at each other. They actually engaged with each other, and ultimately reached a conclusion agreeable to both sides while sitting at the table together. (Want to know what will go a long way to bringing peace to the Middle East? Getting people to talk together, around a table, for a long time.)

In the first case, Divine Intervention was necessary. In the second it wasn't.

I love it that the second disagreement was resolved after only two-and-a-half years rather than three. It makes me wonder if somewhere around two years when fighting about the second issue, somebody looked up from the argument and said something like: "You know, if we don't resolve this soon, God is going to step into this. Why don't we see if we can figure this out without God's help. I haven't yet changed my mind, and you haven't yet changed yours. What would happen if we voted?"

Interesting. I can't prove that it happened, but it makes a lot of sense to me. And notice what option got the most votes: not the one proposed by Bet Hillel and not the one proposed by Bet Shammai, but the compromise position. In the end the compromise, the everybody wins position, is the most compelling. And notice, they connect again to individuals' conduct, a person's actions.

The third Hillel and Shammai text is by far the most amazing. Text number three.

Though these forbade what the others permitted, and these regarded as ineligible what the others declared eligible, Beit Shammai nevertheless, did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel from Beit Shammai.

They disagreed on so much, even on who should be permitted to marry whom. But in the end, they understood that they shared the same community. That they are part of the same people, even the same family, so of course they could marry each other.

Don't miss the magnitude of this statement. Choosing a partner for one's self, or one's child, is among the most highly discriminatory decisions a person makes in this world. Out of the whole world, you only pick one! And even though they fundamentally saw the world differently and disagreed with each other on seemingly everything, they still saw each other as inhabiting the same circle.

The last text, text number four. Amongst the most incredible texts I know in the entire rabbinic corpus. Traditionally the very first Mishnah a child learns, when one begins to study Mishnah.

שְׁנַיִם אוֹחְזִין בְּטֵלִית, - זֶה אוֹמֵר אֲנִי מְצֵאתִיהָ וְזֶה אוֹמֵר אֲנִי מְצֵאתִיהָ, זֶה אוֹמֵר כֹּלָּה  
שְׁלִי וְזֶה אוֹמֵר כֹּלָּה שְׁלִי, -זֶה יִשָּׁבַע שְׂאִין לוֹ בָּהּ פְּחוֹת מִחֲצִיהָ, וְזֶה יִשָּׁבַע שְׂאִין לוֹ בָּהּ  
פְּחוֹת מִחֲצִיהָ, - וַיִּחַלְקוּ.

Two hold a garment. / One of them says: 'I found it;' and the other says: 'I found it.' One of them says: 'It's all mine;' and the other says: 'It's all mine.' / Then the one shall swear that his share in it is not less than half, and the other shall swear that his share in it is not less than half, / it shall then be divided between them.

It seems to be straightforward and make sense. But not really. This is a law book, a sacred law book. Whose tallit was it before? Is somebody lying? If not, which one is confused? Who can bring proof of prior ownership? Who has witnesses? And so on, and so on, and so on.

This Mishnah is not about being right or proving you're right. It is not about the fair manner by which proper ownership can be determined.

This is a Mishnah about people who live together who need to get along with each other. Is not about proving 'I am right.' Proving 'I am right' is what kept Hillel and Shammai arguing for many years. Can you image saying 'I am right, you are wrong' for years, only to have God say, 'you are both right.'

Often, who is right is far less significant than to recognize we both have a claim on this garment, or we both have a claim on the truth, ultimately we both have a claim on each other. So long as we are mutually committed that only one can be right, we will need to fight it out.

But if the issue is no longer about who is right and instead is about how can we get along, how can we share, or where do we go from here together, then we are in a very different place.

There is that famous, obnoxious joke about the most important thing a husband needs to know for a happy marriage is that his wife is always correct. That is not this. But the most important thing for a couple to know, for two partners to know, for friends to know, is that the relationship is more important, more sacred than being right.

To be in a relationship with another person, is to be שְׁנַיִם אוֹחְזִין בְּטֵלִית, two clutching the garment. To stand in the flow of God's blessing, is to look at your partner, your friend, and to be attached to her or him. Remember, see that your chuppah is still over their head, or the umbilical cord is still attached.

We call it shalom bayit – peace in the home, but shalom really means wholeness not peace. A sense that we are together, that we are one.

This is true of us in pairs, and in families, and it is equally true of us as a community.

As a synagogue we share this building, like it were a garment, with people who are quite different from ourselves—different languages, different backgrounds, different attitudes and outlooks. Very different. And we both lay claim to this building and our community claiming, it is mine. And we are all correct. The challenge isn't to prove I am right, the challenge is to create the identification of belonging together and then figuring out how we can share this garment.

It is true in our family, it is true in our community, and it is true in our nation. There is a lot at stake in this upcoming election year, a lot. But there is even more at stake if we allow others to convince us that it is 'we who think a like,' against 'those who think differently.' We are one nation. What unites us far outweighs what divides us. It is not about who has the correct vision of our country. Rather, it is about how can we create a joint, inclusive vision.

Finally, it is not just our country, but it is true for the whole globe. How wonderful would it be, if this New Year, beginning in the Middle East, if the different parties and people who lay claim to the garment of the Middle East would be committed to recognizing the legitimacy of the claims of others, and that the solution is not about who is right, the solution is about how can we share peacefully and safely.

Dear God, we pray on this Yom Kippur you seal our names in the Book of Life, so we may have the opportunities in the coming year to learn to resolve our conflicts, through mutual dialogue and respect, and that as we are each holding on to a corner of our community, a corner of our world, and claiming it is all mine, may all of us, all of us here and all of us around the world, learn the wisdom of choosing getting a long and sharing, over proving we are right. May we be so blessed with wisdom in the coming year.

Ken yehi ratzon.