

# Making Peace between My Personal Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai By Rabbi Dr. Marc Gopin

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My entire life's trajectory of peace work was determined at an early age by Hillel's words and deeds, his compassion and love for all human beings, his commitment to patience with everyone, his passionate search for peace. When he responds to a particularly difficult potential convert who, mockingly or arrogantly, wants the whole Torah while standing on one foot, I watched every word and reaction. This stranger in fact directed his hurtful question at two men, Hillel and Shammai, who had studied and taught day and night their whole lives, examining and teaching thousands of years of tradition. What a hurtful and disrespectful gesture this stranger made! While Shammai violently chased the man away, Hillel responded with the famous dictum, "What is hateful to you, do not do to others," a searingly simple statement that should be on the walls of the United Nations.

It is Shammai, however, that haunts me in my life. He is my kin, he is in my soul, and he was my teacher. I had a rebbe much more like Shammai than Hillel and I had many men in my life much more like Shammai. How could I not, growing up in mid-twentieth century? Immigrants, survivors of so many wars and pogroms. Impatience was the least of their problems.

That was then, however, and this is now. I have come to see that my elders were great, amazing intellects, builders of broken civilizations, but they were not perfect. My take on the Talmud story is that this is a pro-Hillelite editor who records the worst moments of Shammai. But surely that is not the whole story. A man who chases people with a sharp object in anger is not the builder of schools and universities after his name. He was a man of genius, he had standards, he did not suffer fools, he did not suffer insults to tradition, but he must have loved students by the thousands, Jewish or not Jewish, but only those who came to him with respect and dignity.

There is another conflict here, a principled one. On the one side, Hillel can be accused of being so loving and so soft that he does not teach the world the self-control necessary for standards of decency, respect, honor of others. On the other side, Shammai cannot offer the world a model of impatience and violence when human beings behave badly.

Somewhere in between life we students of Hillel and Shammai who must see the virtues in all positions, virtues that lie beyond human emotional delivery and communication systems that are not always constructive. I will continue to be in conversation with my rebbe, Shammai, because I loved him, and I know that his genius will help guide the world to a better place, together with Hillel.

Practicing conflict resolution in dangerous places always involves a delicate balance of sticking by principles, on the one side, and great patience on the other side. When I worked in Syria for ten years, on the one hand I had to make many compromises, and express great patience for the realities of a police state, on what could be accomplished in interfaith relations, and what could not be spoken of in public, or what projects for the poor that could not be undertaken. On the other hand, even in a police state there were red lines, people who we would not work with or even meet, and things we would never say in a public forum even if it made it easier or more beneficial. In other words, we are our Shammai red lines, but we also had our Hillelite ways of compassion and patience. These two ways of being need each other as we struggle for the goal of being the ideal rodef shalom.