

We Believe but God Knows

By Rabbi Or N. Rose

“Rabbi, what do you love about your religious tradition?” asked a young African American woman with gentle curiosity.

The question took me by surprise. I had come to this large urban public high school to participate in a panel discussion about religion and public life and was very concerned about interacting respectfully and modestly with the my fellow panelists—Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist—and with the diverse student body, teachers, and staff. While there is much about Judaism that I love, I did not want to stumble into a triumphalist discourse.

Further, as a progressive rabbi and academic I spend a great deal of time engaging in conversation about the thornier elements of my faith tradition—patriarchy, chauvinism, and the like—feeling that grappling with these difficult questions is crucial to fashioning an intellectually honest and ethically responsible Jewish life.

But the question from this gracious student served as an important corrective, as it reminded me of the importance of reflecting on the riches of my religious heritage and the value of sharing these insights with others who might also find them meaningful.

And so, after taking a deep breath and clearing my mind, I proceeded to share the following brief teaching from the Babylonian Talmud (composed between 200-500 CE) with the assembled group of teens and adults:

For three years there was a disagreement between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel... Then a Heavenly Voice announced, “The utterances of both are the words of the living God” (Eruvin 13b).

What I love about this ancient story is that it communicates in a matter of two sentences an appreciation for the central role of human interpretation in the creation of a vibrant religious community. The disciples of the great sages Hillel and Shammai (1st century BCE) attempted to reshape Jewish life after the Roman conquest of the land of Israel and the destruction of the holy Temple in Jerusalem (70 CE). They did so primarily by engaging in spirited conversations about the meaning of the Hebrew Bible in their lives.

As this text demonstrates, more often than not the rabbis held divergent opinions. But rather than shut down conversation, insisting that one scholar or school was

correct and the other incorrect, they participated in intense debate, opening themselves to the opinions of others. This respect for dialogue is captured in the seemingly paradoxical statement that the opinions of Hillel and Shammai, as carried forth in their academies, were both the “words of the living God.”

This does not mean that the rabbis did not take strong positions on a range of issues, but they did so with a combination of assertiveness and humility, knowing that human beings are finite creatures and that God’s truth is more complex than any one person or school can ever fathom.

It is my belief that the dialogical approach of the ancient rabbis can serve as a model for both intra- and inter-faith relations, even if the conversation originally took place within an exclusively Jewish context. Just as the sages participated in impassioned discussions about the nature and meaning of life, so too can people of different religious beliefs and practices. The goal of such conversation is not unanimity, but a respectful exchange in which individuals listen to one another, learn from one another, critique one another, and agree to disagree about matters of substance.

The importance of engaging respectfully in these sacred deliberations is spoken of powerfully in the continuation of our Talmudic text:

If both [the opinions of Hillel and Shammai] are “the words of the living God,” what was it that entitled the School of Hillel to have the law fixed according to them? Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of the School of Shammai, and they [were even so humble as to] mention the opinions of the School of Shammai before theirs.

Given the tragic record of religious disputation and violence throughout the ages, this insight is particularly important for contemporary interfaith dialogue. The Talmud presents us with both an inspiring model and a serious challenge (one that was surely not always fulfilled by the early rabbis themselves): can we participate actively in meaningful religious discourse, articulating our beliefs and opinions strongly while also maintaining respect for our interlocutors, even when they hold opposing views? Can we follow the path of Hillel, embodying his spirit of kindness and humility as we strive to create vibrant communities within and across faith lines?

This is exactly the challenge that we face here at the Center for Global Judaism at Hebrew College. Through various in-person and online forums, we seek to cultivate an open, pluralistic conversation on the most pressing issues of our time. This is just as essential in interfaith contexts as it is in Jewish ones, and so we also take full advantage of our proximity to Andover Newton Theological School, running a slew of programs under the umbrella of our Center for Inter-Religious & Communal Leadership Education (CIRCLE). We are blessed to be in the center of a vibrant space where the respectful dialogue that Hillel and Shammai envisioned bears fruit regularly.

May we continue to open ourselves to the Divine as manifest in the words of our discussion partners.

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