

March 7, 2008

On Friday, February 29, I joined a class of third graders at Cohen Hillel Academy in Marblehead, Massachusetts and their teacher, Jocelyn Segal, in exploring a Talmud passage that still has great insight for how to speak with and listen to other people in a community. The section of the Talmud the students were studying noted that the great sages of 2000 years ago, Hillel and Shammai, each had their schools of students who would continue their teachers' traditions and styles of thinking and expression of their views. They would regularly debate their respective positions on how a ruling on a particular issue should be decided (for example, the school of Shammai said that we should light 8 lights on the first night of Chanukah and decrease to one by the last night, and the school of Hillel said we should start with one and increase to eight by the last night, because in matters of holiness, we should "count up"). The Talmud concluded, regarding these two schools, EILU V'EILU DIVREI ELOHIM CHAYIM - "These and those – both views – are the words of the living God," and therefore have validity, BUT the rulings most often followed the school of Hillel because:

- 1. The members of the school of Hillel were kindly and modest.*
- 2. They studied their own rulings and those of the school of Shammai.*
- 3. The school of Hillel was even so humble to mention the words of the school of Shammai before their own.*

These reasons for the school of Hillel prevailing in most ancient rabbinic debates offer us guidelines that can apply to our dealings with family members, friends, co-workers, colleagues as we engage them in discussions that necessarily lead to a decision. The Talmud was affirming that sometimes it may be that more than one opinion could be right, but that it is the way that opinions are communicated in the context of a community that should direct us in choosing which ideas, suggestions or proposals will lead us to the best result. This offers us food for thought not only in an election year, but every time we are part of a decision-making process. Recognizing the importance of listening and humility can guide us as we form our own viewpoints that we can express with confidence. Shabbat Shalom!

**-- L'shalom,
Rabbi Larry K.**