



UNITY

SHAVUOT STUDY BOOKLET



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TOGETHER WE ARE BETTER



Not the same, but united.

When the Jewish people received the Torah at Mount Sinai they are described as being 'like one person with one heart'.

What does this vision look like today? How do we balance unity with diverse society?

At what point do we fight for our principles at the expense of our unity?

Over the last few months, we have had many challenges in this arena with vociferous opinions on Brexit, antisemitism in the Labour party, PPE for medical and social care professionals and family tensions from being together during lockdown, to name a few.

However, we have also seen some historic displays of unity: comradery, community initiatives to help the vulnerable, Captain Sir Tom Moore's remarkable fundraising campaign to mark his 100th birthday and a nation standing on doorsteps clapping for the NHS.

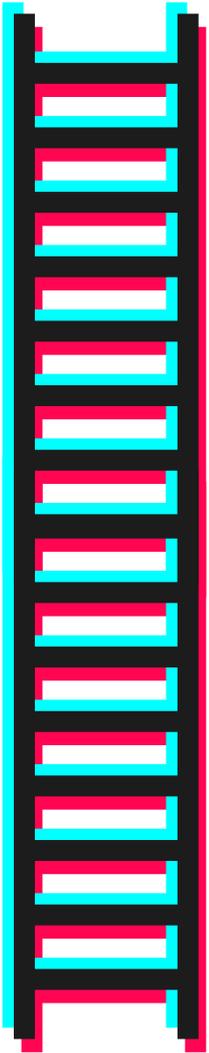
These dilemmas are with us today as they were in yesteryear.

Shavuot is a special time for Torah study, so let's explore some Biblical and Talmudic examples as well as a case study from modern Jewish history. Discuss, debate and have your voice heard. You do not have to agree, but remain united by studying together!

Chag Sameach

RABBI ELI LEVIN

JACOB AND STONES



Running for his life after a dramatic fall out with his brother Esau, Jacob stops to rest. With only the stones on the ground for a pillow, he lies down to sleep. This is where the iconic dream of Jacob's ladder occurs. He wakes up, flustered, and awestruck that he has experienced Divine revelation. He takes the 'stone' that he had used as a pillow and turns it into a monument for God.

The description is perplexing: it begins by saying he assembled various stones as a pillow, but later refers back to one single stone! The sages explained that the stones miraculously united:

Talmud Chullin 91b:

כְּתִיב "וַיִּקַּח מֵאֲבְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם", וְכִתְיִב "וַיִּקַּח אֶת הָאֶבֶן"! אָמַר רַבִּי יִצְחָק:
מְלִמֵּד שְׁנֵתִקְבְּצוּ כָּל אוֹתָן אֲבָנִים לְמָקוֹם אֶחָד, וְכָל אַחַת וְאַחַת אוֹמְרָת
"עָלַי יִנַּח צַדִּיק זֶה רֹאשׁוֹ". תַּנָּא: וְכוּלָּן נִבְלְעוּ בְּאֶחָד.

"It is written: "And he took of the stones of the place, and placed them under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep" (Genesis 28:11). And it is written: "And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had placed under his head, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it" (Genesis 28:18). The first verse indicates that Jacob took several stones, whereas the latter verse indicates that he took only one stone. Rabbi Yitzchak says: This teaches that all those stones gathered to one place and each one said: Let this righteous man place his head upon me. And it was taught: And all of them were absorbed into one large rock."

What messages about unity and peace are being conveyed through this teaching?



Jacob has fled his family home amidst strife and fighting. What will his future family look like? Will his children one day be able to unite despite their differences? These stones symbolise the twelve tribes that he will father and reflect the fact that despite some rough patches in their relationship such as the Joseph story, they will remain one nation. At this stage of his journey, as he is alone, Jacob is contemplating life choices:



Do values take precedence over unity or can the next generation be different?

HILLEL AND SHAMMAI

Hillel and Shammai, who lived in the first century, were two of the greatest scholars and leaders of the Mishnaic period. They had very diverse approaches and prioritised different values. This can be seen in the following excerpts:

Talmud Shabbat 31a:

שוב מעשה בגוי אחד שבא לפני שמאי. אמר לו: גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת! דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו. בא לפני הלל, גייריה. אמר לו: דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד - זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך פירושה הוא, זיל גמור

“There was another incident involving a non-Jew who came before Shammai and said to him: Convert me on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot. Shammai pushed him away with the builder’s cubit in his hand. This was a common measuring stick and Shammai was a builder by trade.

The same non-Jew came before Hillel. He converted him and said to him: That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.”



Shammai prioritised truth over diplomacy. Learning Torah is a lifelong process. It could not be cheapened by discussing mastery over it in such a ridiculous way. Hillel did not necessarily disagree with Shammai, but had a different approach.

Empathy and a desire to help people is what drove him forward, while maintaining values at the same time. Surely this way, once people are on board, they are more likely to cooperate and appreciate the principles he so passionately believed in.





As time went by, their students followed in their respective ways. This is particularly clear in the discussion that ensued regarding a wedding bride.

Talmud Ketubot 16b - 17a:

תָּנוּ רַבָּנָן: כִּי צָד מְרֻקָדִין לְפָנֵי הַכֶּלֶה? בֵּית שַׁמַּי אומרים כֹּלָה כְּמוֹת שֶׁהִיא, וּבֵית הֵלֵל אומרים: כֹּלָה נְאֻה וְחֻסְדָּה. אָמְרוּ לָהֶן בֵּית שַׁמַּי לְבֵית הֵלֵל: הֲרֵי שֶׁהִיְתָה חִיגָרֶת אוֹ סוּמָא, אומרים לָהּ "כֹּלָה נְאֻה וְחֻסְדָּה"? וְהַתּוֹרָה אָמְרָה "מִדְּבַר שֶׁקָּר תִּרְחַק"! אָמְרוּ לָהֶם בֵּית הֵלֵל לְבֵית שַׁמַּי: לְדַבְּרֵיכֶם, מִי שֶׁלָּקַח מִקַּח רַע מִן הַשּׁוּק - יִשְׁבַּחְנוּ בְּעֵינָיו אוֹ יִגְנְנוּ בְּעֵינָיו? הָיוּ אומרים - יִשְׁבַּחְנוּ בְּעֵינָיו. מִכָּאן אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים: לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיָ דַעְתּוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם מְעוֹרְבָת עִם הַבְּרִיּוֹת :

"The Sages taught: How does one dance before the bride, i.e., what does one recite while dancing at her wedding? Beit Shammai (the school of Shammai) say: One recites praise of the bride as she is, emphasising her good qualities. And Beit Hillel (the school of Hillel) say: One recites: A fair and attractive bride.

Beit Shammai said to Beit Hillel: In a case where the bride has an imperfection, does one say with regard to her: A fair and attractive bride? But the Torah states: "Keep you from a false matter" (Exodus 23:7).

Beit Hillel said to Beit Shammai: According to your statement, with regard to one who acquired an inferior acquisition from the market, should another praise it and enhance its value in his eyes or condemn it and diminish its value in his eyes? You must say that he should praise it and enhance its value in his eyes and refrain from causing him anguish. From here the Sages said: A person's disposition should always be empathetic with humankind."

Just as Hillel had prioritised harmony where Shammai had chosen uncompromising truth, so too their students clung to their schools of thought.



Would you have liked to be a student of Shammai or Hillel?

Which approach resonates with you more?



THE ALTALENA, JUNE 1948

In June 1948, just one month after the state of Israel was declared, there was a tragedy amongst the Jewish people. The Altalena, a ship bearing arms and recruits for Israel's military was shot at. The voyage had been arranged by Menachem Begin on behalf of the Irgun movement, a group that helped to fight for the Jewish people in Israel, prior to the country being declared a Jewish state.

Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion wanted to integrate the Irgun movement into the newly formed IDF. He was determined to ensure that the weaponry on board would be transferred to the IDF rather than remain in the hands of the Irgun, as this would have enabled it to continue as an independent military force. He therefore triggered a confrontation with the vessel. The Irgun was prepared to give close to half of the arms to the IDF, but the Israeli government met and ruled that in the interests of building a state and consolidating military strength, nothing could remain with the Irgun. When the ship anchored near Netanya, the IDF sent an ultimatum to Menachem Begin, giving him 10 minutes to surrender the ship or be fired upon.

When Begin didn't respond, shooting began. It isn't clear which side started it. Six Irgun soldiers and two from the IDF were killed before Begin ordered the Altalena to up anchor and sail for Tel Aviv, where he hoped to be able to negotiate directly with government officials. At midnight between June 21 and 22, the Altalena ran ashore opposite the Kaete Dan Hotel (today the Dan Tel Aviv). Ben-Gurion ordered it surrounded by ground troops and two naval gunboats. As Begin's crew unloaded the remainder of the Altalena's cargo, IDF forces on the beach, under the command of Yitzhak Rabin, fired on the ship and the naval vessels began shelling it.

Fearful that the ammunition still on board could be set off, the Altalena's captain, Monroe Fein, ordered everyone to evacuate. By the time a cease-fire was agreed that evening, nineteen people had been killed, most of them veteran Irgun members.

What does this demonstrate about the struggle of balancing values with unity?



What would you have done if you were at the scene?

David Ben Gurion, Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Rabin were all Prime Ministers of Israel. What does this illustrate about the process of building a country?



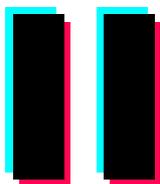
SIGNING OFF...

Unity is a crucial value but do other values sometimes supersede it or should everything else fade into insignificance?

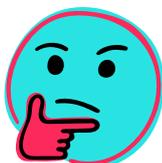


Shavuot during the Covid-19 crisis gives us a unique opportunity to

pause



reflect



study



& discuss



this theme through the lens of Jewish history and the events of our own lives.

We would love to hear your views on this topic.

Please drop me a line at rabieli@tribeuk.com