

The Fast of Hillel and Shammai

Source sheet

(1) Megillat Ta'anit Batra, ~9th century

These are the days on which we fast according to the Law; all those who fast will not eat or drink until evening ... On the Ninth of [Adar], they decreed a fast to mark the controversy between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel, for that day was as difficult as the construction of the Golden Calf.

אילו ימים שמתענין בהן מן התורה כל מי שמתענה בהן לא יאכל וישתה עד הערב ... בתשעה בו [באדר] גזרו תענית על שנחלקו ב"ש על ב"ה והיה קשה אותו היום כעשיית העגל

(2) Beit Yosef, ~16th century: Orach Chaim, 580:1

I have never heard of anyone, ever, who observes these fasts.

לא ראיתי מעולם ולא שמעתי מי שנהג להתענות בהם

(3) Genizah fragment, ~11th century

Because of the conflict that befell the descendants of the Wise Ones, our teachers decreed us a fast day on the Ninth of Adar. Truly, how great a disgrace to our Torah was that dispute between Hillel and Shammai?

על מחלקת נפלו לבני חכמים גזרו תענית בך מורינו בט' אדר וכמה בני שמאי והלל כי בריבם באמת שפלות לתורתנו

(4) Pirkei Avot, ~2nd century: 5:17

An argument for the sake of Heaven will, in the end, endure; one not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. What is an argument for the sake of Heaven? That between Hillel and Shammai.

כל מחלקת שהיא לשם שמים סופה להתקים ושאינה לשם שמים אין סופה להתקים איזו היא מחלקת שהיא לשם שמים זו מחלקת הלל ושמאי

(5) Mishnah, ~2nd century: mYevamot 1:4

Even though one would forbid and the other permit, one would rule impure and the other pure, the House of Shammai did not refrain from intermarrying with the House of Hillel, nor did the one refuse to use articles declared pure by the other.

אף על פי שאלו אוסרין ואלו מתירין אלו פוסלין ואלו מכשירין לא נמנעו בית שמאי מלשא נשים מבית הלל ולא בית הלל מבית שמאי ולא נמנעו עושין טהרות אלו על גבי אלו

(6) Mishnah, ~2nd century: mShabbat 1:4

The sages were in the attic of Chananiah ben Hezekiah ben Gurion. When they had ascended, they took a vote, and Beit Shammai outnumbered Beit Hillel. On that day they enacted eighteen measures.

ואלו מן ההלכות שאמרו
בעליית חנניה בן חזקיה בן
גוריון כשעלו לבקרו נמנו
ורבו ב"ש על ב"ה ו"ח
דברים גזרו בו ביום

(7) Babylonian Talmud, ~5th century: bShabbat 17a

They stuck a sword into the beit midrash, and they said, "Anyone who wants to enter may enter, but nobody can leave." And that day, Hillel was stooped and he sat before Shammai as if he was one of Shammai's students. And it was as difficult for Israel as the day that the Golden Calf was made.

נעצו חרב בבית המדרש
אמרו הנכנס יכנס והיוצא
אל יצא ואותו היום היה
הלל כפוף ויושב לפני
שמאי כאחד מן התלמידים
והיה קשה לישראל כיום
שנעשה בו העגל

(8) Jerusalem Talmud, ~4th century: yShabbat 1:4, 3c

Rabbi Yehoshua Oniya taught, "The students of Beit Shammai stood downstairs and began to slaughter the students of Beit Hillel."
It was further taught that six of them went upstairs, and the rest of them took positions with swords and spears. We are told that they decreed eighteen rules.

תנא רבי יהושע אונייא
תלמידי ב"ש עמדו להן
מלמטה והיו הורגין
בתלמידי בית הלל תני
ששה מהן עלו והשאר
עמדו עליהן בחרבות
וברמחי' תני שמונה עשר
דבר גזרו

(9) P'nei Moshe, 18th century: commentary on the above

Beit Shammai killed the students of Beit Hillel.

ב"ש הורגין בתלמידי ב"ה

(10) Korban ha-Eidah, 18th century: commentary on the above

"And they began to slaughter the students of Beit Hillel" – this refers to those who wanted to ascend [to the attic], but heaven forbid that they should actually kill anyone: this is how I read the text.

והיו הורגין בתלמידי
הלל – אילו היו רוצין
לעלות אבל ח"ו לא
הרגו אותן כ"ל

(11) A modern approach? (Gabriel Kanter-Webber)

Eternal God, God of wit and wisdom, God who speaks many words to many people: we stand before you shame-faced at our own arrogance. Each of us is created in Your image, with an inquiring mind and a creative soul, yet too often we have sought to suppress and muzzle our fellow human beings whose opinions and thoughts are different to our own.

On the Ninth of Adar, the voice of the House of Hillel was silenced, and 18 decrees were unjustly passed. True, not all of the Shammaiites acted with violence; some were in the attic passing the decrees. Yet all those who took part in the sham vote upstairs benefited from the butchery below. They preferred to see their colleagues stifled rather than tolerate a difference of opinion.

In memory of the 18 unjust decrees, now recall 18 unjust ways in which our own behaviour silences others and deters them from speaking their truth.

We have been ¹violent and ²abusive. We have ³defamed. We have ⁴lodged malicious complaints. We have ⁵distorted. We have ⁶misused the memory of the Holocaust. We have ⁷given a platform to inciters of hatred, and we have ⁸reaped the benefit of those who seek to silence others' voices. We have ⁹demanded absolute unity. We have ¹⁰patronised, and ¹¹labelled, and been ¹²sectarian. We have ¹³further marginalised those on the edges. We have ¹⁴mansplained. We have ¹⁵interrupted. We have ¹⁶harassed and ¹⁷stalked. We have ¹⁸sought to create an emotional cost for others.

הַתְּקַפְּנוּ, בְּדִינּוֹ,
הַשְּׁמַצְנוּ, הַתְּלוֹנְנוּ
בְּאוֹפֵן מְרֻגֵז, סְרִסְנוּ,
עֵוִינוּ אֶת-זִיכְרוֹן
הַשּׂוֹאָה, נִתְּנוּ דוֹכָן
לְמַחְרָרֵי שְׂנֵאת חַנּוּם,
הַרוֹחֲנוּ מִמִּשְׁתִּיקֵי קוֹל,
תְּבַעְנוּ אַחַדוֹת דְּעִים,
הַתְּנִישְׂאֵנוּ, סוֹגְנוּ, עֲשִׂינוּ
כְּתִיתוֹת, הוֹשַׁבְנוּ בְּסִפְרָה,
הַסְּגַבְרָנוּ, קִטְעַנוּ,
הַטְּרַדְנוּ, צִדְנוּ, יְצַרְנוּ
עֲלוֹת רִגְשִׁית: