



## Debate and Incitement

### Activity for Yitzhak Rabin Memorial Day

#### Aims:

- Understand the term *argument (mahloket)* and its Jewish origins.
- Understand the term *incitement*.
- Explain the dangers of incitement in light of Rabin's assassination.
- Connect the discussion to current incitement and its place in our life.

#### 1. Screen the clip of the incitement before the assassination.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhSZy\\_jfNRg&t=162s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhSZy_jfNRg&t=162s)

Ask the students to pay special attention to:

- Any statement or slogan that stuck out to you.
- How you felt watching the clip.

#### 2. Discussion

- What stood out to you in the clip?
- What phrases or slogans caught your attention?
- What feelings did these phrases raise for you?

#### 3. Explanation

The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin was preceded by strong and intense incitement. In the years prior to his assassination, Rabin conducted negotiations with the Palestinian Authority in order to reach the Oslo agreements. These agreements aimed to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Many within Israel society opposed the agreements, which would include an Israeli withdrawal from areas in Judea and Samaria (the West Bank). However, the propaganda used against the agreements crossed freedom of speech boundaries, explicitly calling for violence and the murder of the Prime Minister. This eventually led one person to assassinate the Prime Minister at the end of a pro-peace rally that took place in a central Tel Aviv square (today named Rabin Square).

Today we will discuss the concept of "argument" (mahloket) in Jewish sources, and the question of the limits of argument and debate.

#### 4. Text Reading: the Houses of Hillel and Shammai

Background: Hillel and Shammai were two leading sages of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and the early 1<sup>st</sup> century CE who founded opposing schools of Jewish thought, known as the House of Hillel and House of Shammai. The debates between these schools on matters of ritual practice, ethics, and theology played a critical role in shaping the practice of Judaism as we experience it today.



Text 1: Read and explain highlighted phrases:

*Although Beit Hillel disagreed with Beit Shammai ... Beit Shammai did not refrain from marrying women from Beit Hillel, nor did Beit Hillel refrain from marrying women from Beit Shammai. They acted with truth and peace between them, as it is said (Zechariah 8) "therefore love truth and peace".*

Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 14a

אף על פי שנחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל... לא נמנעו בית שמאי לשאת נשים מבית הלל, ולא נמנעו בית הלל לשאת נשים מבית שמאי. אלא נהגו האמת והשלום ביניהם, שנאמר (בזכריה ח') "האמת והשלום אהבו".  
- תלמוד בבלי, יבמות י"ד א

Text 2: Read and explain highlighted phrases

*For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: The halakha is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the halakha is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.*

*The Gemara asks: Since both these and those are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the halakha established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the halakha they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai.*

Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b

אמר רבי אבא אמר שמואל שלש שנים נחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל הללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו והללו אומרים הלכה כמותנו יצאה בת קול ואמרה אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים הן והלכה כבית הלל.

וכי מאחר שאלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים מפני מה זכו בית הלל לקבוע הלכה כמותן מפני שנרחין ועלובין היו ושונין דבריהן ודברי בית שמאי ולא עוד אלא שמקדימין דברי בית שמאי לדבריהן.  
- תלמוד בבלי, ערובין י"ג ב

- We read about a lengthy dispute between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. Who eventually decides between them? (God)
- Despite their disagreements, what is the nature of the relationship between both schools?
- What is the meaning of "Both these and those are the words of the living God?" (that both are right and both express the will of God)
- How can they both be right (God says so!), yet constantly be in dispute with each other? (apparently disagreement and dispute has a place in the world...)
- Why does the opinion of Hillel eventually become accepted for halakhah? There are 3 reasons listed - write them down.



### Text 3: Read together

*And these are among the halakhot that the Sages, who went up to visit him, said in the story of Hananya ben Hizkiya ben Garon. It turned out that the students of Beit Shammai outnumbered the students of Beit Hillel, and they issued decrees with regard to eighteen matters on that day and could not reach an agreement. And that day was as difficult for Israel as the day the golden calf was made.*

Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 9a

אלו מן ההלכות שאמרו בעליית חנניה בן חזקיהו בן [גרון] כשעלו לבקרו נמנו ורבו ב"ש על ב"ה ושמונה עשר דבר גזרו בו ביום והיה אותו היום קשה להם לישראל כיום שנעשה בו העגל.  
- תלמוד ירושלמי, שבת ט א'

- Why was that day so difficult? As difficult as the day the Golden Calf was made and the covenant tablets were broken? The next story explains:

*Rabbi Joshua Unaya told: "the students of Shammai would stand and kill the students of Hillel." And it was told: "six of them went up and the others stood on top of them with swords and spears."*

Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 9a

תנא ר' יהושע אונייא תלמידי ב"ש עמדו להן מלמטה והיו הורגין בתלמידי ב"ה. תני ששה מהן עלו והשאר עמדו עליהן בחרבות וברמחים.  
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- What happened in the story?
- Why did the people of the House of Shammai kill the students of Hillel? (to gain a majority in the vote on the halakhic issues)
- How does this story compare to the precious description of the positive relationship between the two schools? (it doesn't fit!)

### Summary

We see two opposing stories describing the nature of Hillel and Shammai's disputations. One story says they indeed disagreed, but nevertheless did not refrain from marrying their daughters to their sons, respected each other's opinions, and overall lived in peace. The other story tells how students of Shammai killed students of Hillel to gain an advantage in an important vote. In other words, they let a debate reach the level of violence and even murder.

### **5. What is incitement?**

- Ask the students/participants: Well, what constitutes incitement?

### **6. Definition**

Incite: to move to action : stir up : spur on : urge on

Implies responsibility for initiating another's action and often connotes underhandedness or evil intention, for example: "the demagogue's fiery rant incited the crowd to riot."



- Do you see forms of incitement today? Where?
- How do we differentiate between disagreement and incitement? When is that line crossed?
- Are leaders responsible for the actions of others?

### **Concluding remarks**

In Israel and in many other places around the world, we are living in an age of extreme political polarization with incendiary rhetoric between political camps. In Israel there are many examples of incitement in our current political discussion: against Arabs and Jews, against ultra-Orthodox and secular, against leftists and against anyone who does not think like us. The difference between expressing a legitimate opinion and incitement is that incitement tries to harm the victim, and is not intended only to change his mind. Those who practice incitement often view the other side not as someone with whom they disagree, but as an enemy who must be defeated. Incitement is dangerous in a democratic society because it removes the discussion from the boundaries of the free and open conversation, and presents a real danger to the physical and mental integrity of the person.



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#### Source Sheet

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