

**A Song of Light and Fire:
Hillel and Shammai, Chanukah and Us**

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As we returned the Sifrei Torah, the Torah scrolls, to their places after the great honor of being asked to carry them through the assembled congregation of 6000 Reform Jews this past Shabbat morning, one of the other participants gave voice to something that I had already been feeling. “Now that’s a type of honor I never want to earn again,” she said.

I was astonishingly touched to be asked. The Torah carriers this year at the Shabbat morning service of the Union for Reform Judaism Biennial convention were from the Virgin Islands, Houston, and Northern California. We were chosen to feel the symbolic support of a vast movement, blessed with the care and concern of continent of congregations. It lifted us up, it was a uniquely amazing experience, an inspired idea.

I am glad to have participated, and mostly worried that I did not follow the assigned route through the vast hallway in the right direction. Hey, sometimes you just have to go your own way.

But my co-carrier was also on to something. I felt famous... what, for being rained on? More to the point: if it took a trauma to earn that honor, yes, I don’t want another one like that...

By the time you read these words it will be, I believe, the miracle of Chanukah. In the aftermath of trauma, and witness now to new trials in other places as flames return once again to California, I have, I think, a new understanding of both sides of a very old argument.

The Talmud is, perhaps, unique amongst the sacred scriptures of the world, in that it is sometimes more focused on the discussion than the decision... and, even when it does eventually come to a conclusion, it usually preserves a record of the “losing” argument. In fact, in the search for truth, better to call it a “minority opinion” than a “losing” side. To us, after the fact, it seems like all sides were partners in a search for understanding.

Now, usually, as Chanukah arrives, I teach about the development of the holiday, the question of history and authenticity, the fact that the central story we share of the little jar of oil lasting for eight days does not appear for hundreds of years after the events themselves (and is, I strongly suspect, an artful invention taking parts of the past to solve a new problem, myth making using strands of truth to address a much more contemporary need. But that is a topic I have addressed many times before.

This year, what speaks to me is another part of the interpretive history of this holiday, the heated argument between the disciples of Hillel and the followers of Shammai over how to light the Chanukah menorah.

Now, many of us know, already, that almost always our tradition decided that Jewish practice follows the teaching of the house of Hillel. But in this case, well, that’s still true, but I think the followers of Shammai made their best case ever.

Here is the issue: what we are (supposedly) remembering is the story of a supply of oil that started out fully lit and then, although it lasted much longer than expected, dwindled down over time. Reproducing that, then, wouldn't you light all eight candles the first night, then light seven, then six... and on until, just as eventually happened (again, at least as the story says)? I mean, that's a logical move, for an act meant as a ritual reflection of an actual event.

And that, then, is the position of Beit Shammai, the followers of Shammai. Makes sense to me.

Hillel or his followers, however, had a creative response. I think it was more in touch with the psychology and symbolism, and a reflection of the season, the celebration, the Festival of Lights. The candles, the house of Hillel said, are reflections not of the event, but of the miracle. Not the light, but the wonder and the awe about it. And besides, they say: we add to holiness, we do not take away from it.

I live in the Virgin Islands. But I am also... watching the flames in California now. I know how to light a menorah, under usual and normal circumstances. And this Chanukah, I am glad our tradition preserved both opinions.

Chanukah: The Festival of Lights. As we are still, a hundred days after Irma and Maria, still without power on parts of our islands, but, slowly, watching it spread... as we long for light... it would be intolerable, it would be trauma all over again... to start out with a fully lit menorah, and then watch it dwindle. This year, for me, the concept of the spreading, the sharing, the growth of light speaks to me as never before.

So that... speaks to me, where I live.
But I wonder...

Obviously we are now so used to the candles as a metaphor, light as symbol for so many other things — enlightenment, hope, warmth, love — that the idea of growing light is deeply embedded within us.

But you know...

These lights we light. They are, actually... flame.

we preserve minority opinions, partly, perhaps, because there may come a day when they will be needed. And sometimes, we just have to go our own way.

To my friends and colleagues in Santa Rosa... and Los Angeles...

I have a question, and a novel proposal.

I wonder if, for you, this year... Shammai might hit closer to home.

Think about the idea that every night, the flames diminish, the fire is less.

Just one year, maybe, but if I were in California, I might want to go all rogue on my menorah this year.

We all carry the Torah.. .we all bear the tradition forward, dependent on and surrounded by the love and support of a caring community. We are given directions, but, ultimately, it is up to us to pick our path, and choose the direction we follow.

May it be a meaningful celebration for us all - filled with power and light, free from destruction and chaos. Happy Chanukah!

