



**From
Rabbi Weber:**

I believe the greatest danger facing the United States right now

isn't the economy, or health care, or our foreign policy. To me, the biggest threat to our wellbeing is the current idea that those who disagree with us are not just wrong, but un-American. Democrats are Socialists, Republicans are Fascists, gun owners are crazy lunatics, those who support a woman's right to choose are baby killers, conservatives are heartless and liberals are nannies.

Worse than the name-calling, we've now stopped listening to each other. Today it is possible to listen only to news with which we agree, and to hear only commentary which makes us comfortable with the positions we already hold.

Judaism has something to teach us at a time like this, because we Jews are no strangers to disagreement. After all, we're the ones who claim – with pride – that "two Jews have three opinions." The Talmud itself is the record of disagreements, not agreements.

So, how did Jews get along when we are such strong-willed, opinionated people? The Talmud describes what happened:

For three years there was a dispute between Beit [the School of] Hillel and Beit [the School of] Shammai, the former asserting, "The law is in agreement with our views," and the

latter contending, "The law is in agreement with our views." Then a bat kol, a voice from heaven, announced, Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim Chayim, "These and those are the words of the Living God," adding, "but the law is in agreement with the rulings of Beit Hillel."

Since both "Eilu v'eilu are the words of the Living God," what entitled [the members of] Beit Hillel to have the law fixed according to their rulings? Because they were kindly and modest, they studied their own rulings and those of Beit Shammai, and were even so humble to mention the words of Beit Shammai before their own (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b).

These and those: two conflicting opinions can both be valid. And some conflicting views cannot exist without the other. The phrase eilu v'eilu emphasizes the incompleteness of any single opinion. The v', which means "and," is essential, uniting and complementing the two opinions without choosing one or compromising the integrity of either. Both "are the words of the Living God;" the debate between Hillel and Shammai is a machloket l'sheim shamayim, "an enduring dispute in the name of heaven." [Courtesy of the URJ Web Site]

Imagine that: saying that both positions can be valid, if they are held "in the name of heaven." Or, I would suggest, in the name of preserving and supporting the United States of America. The fact is, our country does contain Fascists, Socialists, lunatics, killers and an assortment of other fringe people, but most of us are decent people who want what is best for our country. We may disagree –

even disagree strongly – about what is best for our country, but until we acknowledge that those who have different ideas are just as intelligent, just as patriotic as we are, we will never be able to reach any form of compromise. And just as important, we will never be able to learn, because as long as we think "the other side" is crazy or un-American we will never give ourselves the opportunity to consider what they are saying.

What would it take for us to overcome our current political deadlock? I think a good start would be to hear politicians acknowledge the wisdom of at least one point made by the other side, because I have to wonder about any politician who believes they have nothing to learn from their opponent. Then I would like to see everyone cut down on the use of "stand our ground," and replace it with "compromise." Let's face facts: getting 300 million Americans to agree on just about anything is damn near impossible, so we either win the day with brute force or... we compromise. But to be willing to compromise, we have to accept that the people on the other side are not stupid, or uncaring, or traitors.

"Eilu v'eilu" – each side can learn from the other. Both sides can compromise with the other. Both sides can live together... if we accept the idea that we can disagree – even strongly – without demonizing those who disagree with us. Hillel and Shammai could do it; couldn't we?

Benjamin Franklin said, "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." In our day, too, his words are wise.