

In the Talmud there were two rabbis, Hillel and Shammai, who argued about everything (how very Jewish!) and after them their schools continued to debate and disagree on almost every matter of Jewish law. They even disagreed about how to light the Chanukah lights! The school of Shammai argued that we should start with eight candles and decrease the number of candles as the days of Chanukah progress. The school of Hillel on the other hand said we should start with one candle on the first day and increase the number of candles each day. As most will realize the school of Hillel won out and it is that practice that we follow today.

But what was the argument really about? The Talmud explains that the followers of Shammai saw the Chanukah lights as representing the upcoming days of the festival -- the number of days still to come; thus, each night we would light one less candle to show that another day had passed. The view of Hillel, on the other hand, was that the lights represented Chanukah's outgoing days, so that each new light indicated another day of Chanukah achieved.

As is often the case Shammai's opinion reflects a strict sacred reality – each day of a festival that passes is one less day of holiness, one less day of light. It reflects the reality that each day that goes by, whether mundane or holy, cannot be reclaimed and is gone forever along with all its potential, all the things we could have done but didn't.

Hillel's views, on the other hand, represents the hope that we can always increase the light when the next day comes. It does not look back to what could have been done but wasn't – it looks forward to the light we can create the next day and the next.

For us as Jews today both views have important symbolic significance. Light is a powerful symbol of holiness, and all that is good. Our task in life is to bring more light – more holiness, compassion and justice – into the world. We should always recognize the reality of Shammai's view – we have a responsibility to do what is right and to do it now because once the chance to do a particular mitzvah, to do right in a particular situation, has passed, it cannot be reclaimed. It can be fixed and made better, but THAT opportunity is gone forever.

But, Hillel's view reminds us that no matter what we have done, or failed to do, there is always hope that we can do what is right and do better the next day. If we were to follow Shammai's view, in candle lighting and in life, we would always be looking back, kicking ourselves for what we have failed to do. But Hillel's view tells us that we must never give up hope – we must always look forward to the light we can bring into the world today and tomorrow.

Happy Chanukah,
Rabbi Emanuele