



Core Lesson/Group Activity

1. Pluralism Is Jewish:

The Houses of Hillel and Shammai

Description: In this activity, students examine a text about the differences between the rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai. This activity helps students understand the meaning of pluralism both in action and as a value in Judaism.

Time Needed: 40 minutes

Recommended Age Range: grades 7 – 12

Objectives:

- To expose students to Jewish sources about pluralism.

Materials Needed:

- “The Houses of Hillel and Shammai or Pluralism in the Talmud” handout (one per student)
- Board or easel paper
- Chalk or markers



Suggested Film Clips:

Title	Length
Change in Perspective	3:23

Instructions:

1. Distribute the “The Houses of Hillel and Shammai or Pluralism in the Talmud” handout and ask for a volunteer to read the text aloud.
2. Have students break into small groups for ten minutes and discuss the following questions:
 - a. What does this story teach us about the value of listening to different perspectives on an issue?
 - b. Can we apply the lessons of this story to how The New Jewish High school responded to Shulamit’s needs?
 - c. What can this story teach us about conflict in the Jewish community regarding gay rights and other issues?
3. Have each group create a short play to act out the scene described in the Talmud passage as they imagine it.
4. Bring the class back together and ask for some volunteers to share their thoughts. Now have each group perform its short play.
5. As a closing activity, post a large piece of paper with this quote from *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 2:5.

אל תפרוש מן הציבור.

Do not separate yourself from the community.

Ask students to write their own comments on the meaning of this quote in colorful markers. Display the paper or poster in the room and note that the students’ comments can be seen together as a page of Talmud from contemporary Jewish life.

The Houses of Hillel and Shammai or Pluralism in the Talmud

שלוש 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 שנוחין ועלובין היו, ושונין דבריהן ודברי בית שמאי. ולא עוד אלא שמקדימין דברי בית שמאי לדבריהן.
תלמוד בבלי, מסכת עירובין, דף יג, עמוד ב

For three years the academies of Shammai and Hillel argued, these saying, “The law is according to us,” and these saying, “The law is according to us.” A Heavenly Voice emerged and said: “These and these are the words of the Living God, and the law is according to the school of Hillel.” Now, since these and these are both the words of the Living God, why did the school of Hillel merit that the law was established according to them? Because they were unassuming and humble, and they would study their own opinions and also the opinions of the school of Shammai. Not only that, they would even give precedence to the opinions of the school of Shammai and teach them first.

—BABYLONIAN TALMUD, ERUVIN 13B

Assignment:

Discuss the following questions with your group:

- What does this story teach us about the value of listening to different perspectives on an issue?
- Can we apply the lessons of this story to how The New Jewish High School responded to Shulamit's needs?
- What does this story teach us about conflict in the Jewish community regarding gay rights and other issues?

Now, using the ideas that you have about how this story relates to the idea of pluralism, create a short play (two or three minutes) to act out the scene described in the Talmud quote. Everyone in your group must have a part in the play. Imagine that representatives from each house of study are present when the “heavenly voice” is heard. How might each group react? What lesson might they learn?