

Rabbi Google: Jewish Law, the Internet, and the Power of Online Torah

Dr. Liz Shayne

2) Tractate Eruvin, 6b

One who adopts the leniencies of Beit Shammai and of Beit Hillel, is wicked. One who adopts the stringencies of Beit Shammai and of Beit Hillel, about them is said: "The fool walks in darkness". Rather, either Beit Shammai for both or Beit Hillel for both.

3) R Joseph Karo, Introduction to the Beit Yosef

And I realized, after all these things, that I would decide matters of Jewish law and choose between (competing) approaches, because that is the purpose: that we have one Torah and one law. And I saw that if we come to say that we shall determine the right law between the decisors, arguments, and ideas in the Talmuds - behold we already have the Tosafists and Nachmanides and the Rashba and the Ran who have provided arguments and ideas for each one of the opinions. And who is it who can involve his heart to begin to add arguments and ideas?

And who is it who can fill his heart (with courage) to put his head between the mountains, Mountains of God, and choose between them based on their arguments and ideas, to contradict what they have clarified or to choose between positions which they have (deliberately) not chosen between? Because, in our many sins, our wisdom does not rise high enough to understand their words, much less to be smarter than them. And not only that, but even it were possible for us to take this way, it would not be possible for us to grasp hold of it for it is a way that far too long. This, I have decided in my mind that I should have three pillars of teaching that the house, the House of Israel, has made them their teachers and are they not the Rif (R. Isaac Alfasi), Maimonides, and the Rosh (Rabbeinu Asher). And so I have said in my heart that in any place where the two of them agree with a single position, I shall decide the law like them unless it is one of those rare cases where all - or most - of the sages of Israel disagree with that position...

(2) מסכת ערובין, ו':

עושה מקולי בית שמאי ומקולי בית הלל רשע מחומרי בית שמאי ומחומרי בית הלל עליו הכתוב אומר הכסיל בחשך הולך אלא אי כבית שמאי כקוליהון וכחומריהון אי כבית הלל כקוליהון וכחומריהון

(3) הקדמת מוהר"ר יוסף קארו לספר בית יוסף

ועלה בדעתי שאחר כל הדברים אפי' סוק הלכה ואכריע בין הסברות כי זהו התכלית, להיות לנו תורה אחת ומי שפט אחת. וראיתי שאם באנו לומר שנכריע דין בין הפוסקים בטענות וראיות תלמודיות הנה התוספות, וחידושי הרמב"ן והרשב"א והר"ן ז"ל מלאים טענות וראיות לכל אחת מהדיעות. ומי הוא זה אשר יערב ליבו לגשת להוסיף טענות וראיות? ואיזהו אשר ימלאהו ליבו להכניס ראשו בין ההרים, הררי אל, להכריע ביניהם על פי טענות וראיות, לסתור מה שביירו הם, או להכריע במה שלא הכריע הם? כי בעוונותינו הרבים קצר מצע שכלינו להבין דבריהם, כל שכן לה-תחכם עליהם. ולא עוד, אלא שאפילו היה אפשר לנו לדרוך דרך זה - לא

(1) משנה עדיות 1:5

וְלָמָּה מְזַכְּרִין דְּבָרֵי הַיְחִיד בֵּין הַמְּרַבִּין, הוֹאִיל וְאִין הַלְכָּה אֶלָּא כְּדְבָרֵי הַמְּרַבִּין. שְׂאֵם יִרְאֶה בֵּית דִּין אֶת דְּבָרֵי הַיְחִיד וְיִסְמַךְ עָלָיו, שְׂאִין בֵּית דִּין יָכוֹל לְבַטֵּל דְּבָרֵי בֵּית דִּין חֲבֵרוֹ עַד שְׂיִהְיֶה גְדוֹל מִמֶּנּוּ בְּחֻקָּה וּבְמִנְיָן. הִיָּה גְדוֹל מִמֶּנּוּ בְּחֻקָּה אֲבָל לֹא בְּמִנְיָן, בְּמִנְיָן אֲבָל לֹא בְּחֻקָּה, אִינוּ יָכוֹל לְבַטֵּל דְּבָרָיו, עַד שְׂיִהְיֶה גְדוֹל מִמֶּנּוּ בְּחֻקָּה וּבְמִנְיָן:

1) Tractate Eduyot, 1:5

And why do they record the opinion of a single person among the many, when the halakhah must be according to the opinion of the many? So that if a court prefers the opinion of the single person it may depend on him. For no court may set aside the decision of another court unless it is greater than it in wisdom and in number. If it was greater than it in wisdom but not in number, in number but not in wisdom, it may not set aside its decision, unless it is greater than it in wisdom and in number.

היה ראוי להחזיק בה לפי שהיא דרך ארוכה ביותר. ולכן הסכמתי בדעתי כי להיות שלושת עמודי ההוראה אשר הבית, בית ישראל, נשען עליהם בהוראותיהם, הלא המה הרי"ף והרמב"ם והרא"ש ז"ל אמרתי אל ליבי שבמקום ששנים מהם מסכימים לדעה אחת - נפסוק הלכה כמותם אם לא במקצת מקומות שכל חוכמי ישראל או רובם חולקין על דעת ההוא...

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4) From 'Kol Ha-Edah Kulam Kedoshim ' by Rabbi Hershel Schachter

[With the advent of online databases] Everyone can pretend to be a Torah scholar and decisor and issues rulings even on vital question as though he knows all of the sources and all of the opinions on his own.

5) From 'This Torah study tool is everywhere — but you may have never heard of it' by Andrew Silow Carrol

Holtz warns that if there is a downside to the source sheet, it's the temptation by a teacher to pick and choose from the wide and woolly corpus of Jewish text to prove a dubious point.

“Some would argue ... that you don't cherry-pick,” said Holtz, who wrote a popular beginner's guide to studying Jewish text, “Back to the Sources.” “And Jewish study according to this argument should not be about all the good parts or the cool parts or obviously meaningful parts, but you should work hard through all the parts as you encounter them.”

6) From 'Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age' by Ann M. Blair

“No doubt we have access to and must cope with a much greater quantity of information than earlier generations on almost every issue, and we use technologies that are subject to frequent change and hence often new. Nonetheless, the basic methods we deploy are largely similar to those devised centuries ago in early reference books. Early compilations involved various combinations of four crucial operations: storing, sorting, selecting, and summarizing, which I think of as the four S's of text management. We too store, sort, select, and summarize information, but now we rely not only on human memory, manuscript, and print, as in earlier centuries, but also on computer chips, search functions, data mining, and Wikipedia, along with other electronic techniques.”

Thoughts to Think About

- Who do you think has authority and who ought to have it?
- What's the difference between authority, consensus, and truth?
- Is this all that different from information overload in the secular world?
- Which side of the source sheet do you like better?