



Talmud Tales – Session 3 - Hillel

Rabbi Hillel has a prominent place in the Passover seder with the institution of the so-called “Hillel sandwich,” known in Hebrew as korech. The last ritual prior to the eating of the festive meal, korech involves the joining together of matzah, bitter herbs and the sweet paste known as haroset into a kind of sandwich, which is done in commemoration of Hillel’s practice of eating those three together.

BT Yoma 35b

They said about Hillel the Elder that each and every day he would work and earn a half-dinar, half of which he would give to the guard of the study hall and half of which he spent for his sustenance and the sustenance of the members of his family.

One time he did not find employment to earn a wage, and the guard of the study hall did not allow him to enter. He ascended to the roof, suspended himself, and sat at the edge of the skylight in order to hear the words of the Torah of the living God from the mouths of Shemaya and Avtalyon, the spiritual leaders of that generation. The Sages continued and said: That day was Shabbat eve and it was the winter season of Tevet, and snow fell upon him from the sky.

When it was dawn, Shemaya said to Avtalyon: Avtalyon, my brother, every day at this hour the study hall is already bright from the sunlight streaming through the skylight, and today it is dark; is it perhaps a cloudy day? They focused their eyes and saw the image of a man in the skylight. They ascended and found him covered with snow three cubits high. They extricated him from the snow, and they washed him and smeared oil on him, and they sat him opposite the bonfire to warm him.

They said: This man is worthy for us to desecrate Shabbat for him. Saving a life overrides Shabbat in any case; however, this great man is especially deserving. Clearly, poverty is no excuse for the failure to attempt to study Torah.

BT Shabbat 21b

The Sages taught in a *baraita*: The basic mitzva of Hanukkah is each day to have a light kindled by a person, the head of the household, for himself and his household. And the *mehadrin*, i.e., those who are meticulous in the performance of mitzvot, kindle a light for each and every one in the household. And the *mehadrin min hamehadrin*, who are even more meticulous, adjust the number of lights daily. Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagree as to the nature of that adjustment. Beit Shammai say: On the first day one kindles eight lights and, from there on, gradually decreases the number of lights until, on the last day of Hanukkah, he kindles one light. And Beit Hillel say: On the first day one kindles one light, and from there on, gradually increases the number of lights until, on the last day, he kindles eight lights.

BT Eruvin 13b

Rabbi Abba said that Shmuel said: For three years Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel disagreed. These said: The *halakha* is in accordance with our opinion, and these said: The *halakha* is in accordance with our opinion. Ultimately, a Divine Voice emerged and proclaimed: Both these and those are the words of the living God. However, the *halakha* is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel.

The Gemara asks: Since both these and those are the words of the living God, why were Beit Hillel privileged to have the *halakha* established in accordance with their opinion? The reason is that they were agreeable and forbearing, showing restraint when affronted, and when they taught the *halakha* they would teach both their own statements and the statements of Beit Shammai. Moreover, when they formulated their teachings and cited a dispute, they prioritized the statements of Beit Shammai to their own statements, in deference to Beit Shammai.

BT Shabbat 31a

The Sages taught: There was an incident involving one gentile who came before Shammai. The gentile said to Shammai: How many Torahs do you have? He said to him: Two, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The gentile said to him: With regard to the Written Torah, I believe you, but with regard to the Oral Torah, I do not believe you. Convert me on condition that you will teach me only the Written Torah. Shammai scolded him and cast him out with reprimand. The same gentile came before Hillel, who converted him and began teaching him Torah. On the first day, he showed him the letters of the alphabet and said to him: *Alef, bet, gimmel, dalet*. The next day he reversed the order of the letters and told him that an *alef* is a *tav* and so on. The convert said to him:

But yesterday you did not tell me that. Hillel said to him: You see that it is impossible to learn what is written without relying on an oral tradition. Didn't you rely on me? Therefore, you should also rely on me with regard to the matter of the Oral Torah, and accept the interpretations that it contains.

There was another incident involving one gentile who came before Shammai and said to Shammai: Convert me on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot. Shammai pushed him away with the builder's cubit in his hand. This was a common measuring stick and Shammai was a builder by trade. The same gentile came before Hillel. He converted him and said to him: That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.

There was another incident involving one gentile who was passing behind the study hall and heard the voice of a teacher who was teaching Torah to his students and saying the verse: "And these are the garments which they shall make: A breastplate, and an *efod*, and a robe, and a tunic of checkered work, a mitre, and a girdle" (Exodus 28:4). The gentile said: These garments, for whom are they designated? The students said to him: For the High Priest. The gentile said to himself: I will go and convert so that they will install me as High Priest. He came before Shammai and said to him: Convert me on condition that you install me as High Priest. Shammai pushed him with the builder's cubit in his hand. He came before Hillel; he converted him. Hillel said to him, to the convert: Is it not the way of the world that only one who knows the protocols of royalty is appointed king? Go and learn the royal protocols by engaging in Torah study. He went and read the Bible. When he reached the verse which says: "And the common man that draws near shall be put to death" (Numbers 1:51), the convert said to Hillel: With regard to whom is the verse speaking? Hillel said to him: Even with regard to David, king of Israel. The convert reasoned an *a fortiori* inference himself: If the Jewish people are

called God's children, and due to the love that God loved them he called them: "Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Exodus 4:22), and nevertheless it is written about them: And the common man that draws near shall be put to death; a mere convert who came without merit, with nothing more than his staff and traveling bag, all the more so that this applies to him, as well. The convert came before Shammai and told him that he retracts his demand to appoint him High Priest, saying: Am I at all worthy to be High Priest? Is it not written in the Torah: And the common man that draws near shall be put to death? He came before Hillel and said to him: Hillel the patient, may blessings rest upon your head as you brought me under the wings of the Divine Presence.

The Gemara relates: Eventually, the three converts gathered together in one place, and they said: Shammai's impatience sought to drive us from the world; Hillel's patience brought us beneath the wings of the Divine Presence.