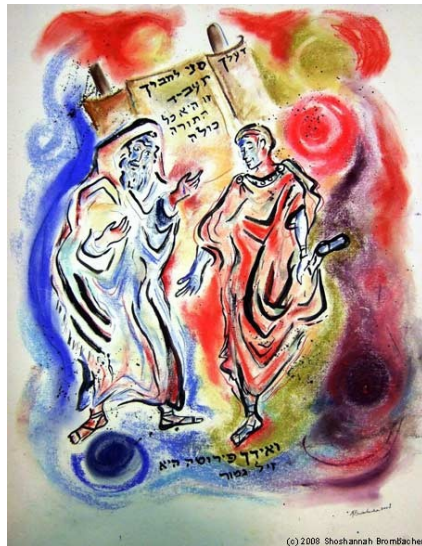


From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [22]

“Convert Me (to Judaism) on Condition....” (Three Stories of Conversion)

(Insights into Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a)



Background to Our Story

Hillel the Elder



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hillel_the_Elder

Hillel (born Babylon 1st Century BCE – died? Jerusalem, 1st Century CE) was a famous Jewish religious leader, one of the most important figures in Jewish history. He is associated with the development of the Mishnah and the Talmud. Renowned within Judaism as a sage and scholar, he was the founder of the "*Beit Hillel*" ("House of Hillel") school for *Tanna'im* (Sages of the *Mishnah*) and the founder of a dynasty of Sages who stood at the head of the Jews living in the land of Israel until roughly the fifth century of the Common Era.

He is popularly known as the author of two sayings: "If I am not for myself, who will be [for me]? And when I am for myself, what am 'I'? And if not now, when?"^[1] and the expression of the ethic of reciprocity, or "Golden Rule": "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn."^[2]

Hillel was recognized as the highest authority among the Pharisees (predecessors to Rabbinic Judaism). Hillel lived in Jerusalem during the time of King Herod and the

Roman Emperor Augustus. His activity of forty years likely covered the period of 30 BCE to 10 CE.

Footnotes

1. Pirkei Avot 1:14
2. Babylonian Talmud, tractate Shabbat 31a. See also the ethic of reciprocity or "The Golden rule."

Shammai



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shammai>

Shammai (50 BCE–30 CE) was a Jewish scholar of the 1st century, and an important figure in Judaism's core work of rabbinic literature, the Mishnah. Shammai was the most eminent contemporary and the halakhic opponent of Hillel, and is almost invariably mentioned along with him. Shammai's school of thought became known as the House of Shammai (Hebrew: Beit Shammai), and Hillel's was known as the House of Hillel (*Beit Hillel*).

Oral Torah



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oral_Torah

According to Rabbinic Judaism, the oral Torah, oral Law, or oral tradition (*Torah she-be-`al peh*) is the oral tradition received in conjunction with the written Torah (and the rest of the Hebrew Bible), which is known in this context as the "written Torah" (Hebrew: תורה שבכתב, *Torah she-bi-khtav*). The Mishnah is the record of the oral Torah.

According to Rabbinic Judaism, Moses and the Israelites received an oral as well as the written Torah ("teaching") from God at Mount Sinai. The books of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) were relayed with an oral tradition passed on by the scholarly and other religious leaders of each generation, and according to classical Rabbinic interpretation, the teachings of the oral law are a guide to that interpretation of the written law which is considered the authoritative reading. Jewish law and tradition thus is not based on a strictly literal reading of the *Tanakh*, but on combined oral and written traditions. Further, the basis of *halakha* (Jewish law) is the premise that the written law is inherently bound together with an oral law.

The "oral law" was ultimately recorded in the Mishnah, the Talmud and Midrash.

Hebrew Alphabet

destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem. The high priests, like all priests, belonged to the Aaronic line.

His vestments

The Torah provides for specific vestments to be worn by the priests when they are ministering in the Tabernacle: "And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for dignity and for beauty" (Exodus 28:2). These garments are described in detail in Exodus 28, Exodus 39 and Leviticus 8. The high priest wore eight holy garments (*bigdei kodesh*). Of these, four were of the same type worn by all priests, and four were unique to the Kohen Gadol.



Those vestments which were common to all priests, were:

- ← Michnasayim (breeches)—linen pants reaching from the waist to the knees "to cover their nakedness" ([Exodus 28:42](#))
- ← Ketonet (tunic)—made of pure linen, covering the entire body from the neck to the feet, with sleeves reaching to the wrists. That of the High Priest was embroidered ([Exodus 28:39](#)); those of the priests were plain ([Exodus 28:40](#)).
- ← Avnet (sash)—that of the High Priest was of fine linen with "embroidered work" in blue and purple and scarlet ([Exodus 28:39](#), [39:29](#)); those worn by the priests were of white, twined linen.
- ← Mitznefet (turban)—that of the High Priest was much larger than that of the priests and wound so that it formed a broad, flat-topped turban; that for priests was wound so that it formed a cone-shaped turban, called a *migbahat*. The tzitz, a golden plate encribed with the words: "Holiness unto JHWH" was attached to the mitznefet.

The vestments that were unique to the High Priest were:

- ← Me'il ("Robe of the Ephod")—a sleeveless, purple robe, the lower hem of which was fringed with small golden bells alternating with pomegranate-shaped tassels in blue, purple, and scarlet - tekhelet, argaman, tolaat shani.
- ← Ephod—a richly embroidered vest or apron with two onyx-stones on the shoulders, on which were engraved the names of the tribes of Israel
- ← Hoshen (Breastplate)—with twelve gems, each engraved with the name of one of the tribes; a pouch in which he probably carried the Urim and Thummim. It was fastened to the Ephod

← Tzitz (crown)—a gold plate inscribed with the words "Holy unto YHWH" which was attached to the front of the Mitznefet, so that it rested on his forehead.

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

תנו רבנן: מעשה בגוי אחד שבא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: כמה תורות יש לכם? אמר לו: שנים, תורה שבכתב ותורה שבעל פה. אמר לו: שבכתב – אני מאמינה, ושבועל פה – אני מאמינה. גיירני על מנת שתלמדני תורה שבכתב. גער בו והוציאו בגזיפה.

בא לפני הלל – גייריה, יומא קמא אמר ליה: א"ב ג"ד, למחר אפיך ליה. אמר ליה: והא אתמול לא אמרת לי הכי?! אמר ליה: לא עלי דידי קא סמכת? דעל פה נמי סמוך עלי.

שוב מעשה בגוי אחד שבא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה פולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת. דחפו באמת הבגין שבגידו.

בא לפני הלל, גייריה. אמר לו: דעלך סני לתברך לא תעביד – זו היא כל התורה פולה, ואיך – פירושה הוא, זיל גמור.

שוב מעשה בגוי אחד שהיה עובר אחורי בית המדרש, ושמע קול סופר שהיה אומר: "ואלה הבגדים אשר יעשו חושן ואפוד". אמר: הללו למי? אמרו לו: לכהן גדול, אמר אותו גוי בעצמו: אלף ואתגיר, בשביל שישמימני כהן גדול. בא לפני שמאי, אמר ליה: גיירני על מנת שתשימני כהן גדול. דחפו באמת הבגין שבגידו.

בא לפני הלל – גייריה. אמר לו: פלום מעמידין מלך אלא מי שיודע טכסיסי מלכות? לך למוד טכסיסי מלכות. הלך וקרא, פיון שהגי □ ע "והזר הקרב יומת" אמר ליה: מקרא זה על מי נאמר? אמר לו: אפילו על דוד מלך ישראל. נשא אותו גר קל וחומר בעצמו: ומה ישראל שנקראו בנים למקום, ומתוך אהבה שאהבם קרא להם: "בני בכורי ישראל" – כתיב עליהם: "והזר הקרב יומת", גר הקל שבא במקלו ובתרמילו – על אחת כמה וכמה!

בא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: פלום ראוי אני להיות כהן גדול? והלא כתיב בתורה: "והזר הקרב יומת"! בא לפני הלל, אמר לו: ענוותן הלל, גנחתו לך ברכות על ראשך שהקרבתי תחת כנפי השכינה.

לימים גזדווגו שלשתן למקום אחד, אמרו: קפדנותו של שמאי בקשה לטורדנו מן העולם, ענוותנותו של הלל קרבנו תחת כנפי השכינה.

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. The convert **said to him: But yesterday you did not tell me that.** Hillel **said to him: 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 turban, and a sash" (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 [takhsisei]** of royalty **is appointed king? Go and learn the royal protocols** by engaging in Torah study. **He went and read** the Torah. **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 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.**

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.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

- ?** What elements do the three stories have in common?
- ?** Why did Shammai reject the candidates for conversion?
- ?** At the end of the story we read: "Eventually, the three converts gathered together in one place, and they said: Shammai's impatience sought to drive us from the world." Do you think that these three proselytes are fair to Shammai in their statement? Why yes? Why not?
- ?** Do you think that Hillel disagrees with Shammai's basic assessment of the proselytes? If not, what motivates him to accept them?

More Analysis Questions

- ?** What happens when someone asks the "wrong" questions?
- ?** Trust, patience, dedication, and selflessness are essential elements in any healthy relationship. The question is: Do we need these elements as a prerequisite (from the beginning) or can we immerse ourselves in the relationship and hope that basic trust, patience, dedication, and selflessness will grow as time progresses?
- ?** How can our stories help us think/re-think interpersonal relationships, long term commitments, friendship and love?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

! Hillel and Shammai: *"The words of both schools are the words of the living God, but..."*

Time to Rethink Conversion Policy?

The Jewish Week - Wednesday 02/27/2013

When one of the country's leading Conservative rabbis states publicly his discomfort with a major policy of the movement, it warrants attention and consideration.

In his Shabbat morning sermon last weekend, Elliot Cosgrove, rabbi of the [Park Avenue Synagogue](#), offered up what he called "a trial balloon," sharing his thoughts about conversion, interfaith relationships and the status of non-Jewish family members in Jewish families, at times waxing eloquent, and at times speaking bluntly.

"The most significant reason I don't like our policy [on conversion] is that it doesn't make sense in my gut," he said, while first making clear that no policy change at the synagogue was planned and that he was, essentially, thinking aloud with his congregants.

Rabbi Cosgrove said he has seen during his rabbinate that love trumps religious affiliation, with the result being that few families are immune from the situation of a child coming home with a non-Jewish partner and wanting to be married in a Jewish ceremony.

At present, Park Avenue, like many Conservative synagogues, has an active conversion program where the non-Jewish partner completes a yearlong course of study before going to mikveh or having a modified brit milah, and then is permitted to wed as a Jew. But the rabbi feels couples see it as putting obstacles in their way.

He observed that while the Orthodox take a strong stand against intermarriage and set "a high bar for conversions," and the Reform, since 1983, say that the child of a non-Jewish father and Jewish mother is considered Jewish if raised in a Jewish home, the Conservative camp is, not surprisingly, somewhere in the middle. That means Conservative rabbis advocate in-marriage and do not officiate at intermarriages, but encourage conversion after the fact.

"I am worried that our present policy is internally conflicted and thus strategically self-defeating," the rabbi said. "The idea of refusing to be present for the wedding and then expecting the couple to feel warmly embraced by the Jewish people strikes me as a policy constructed by someone who doesn't know the mind of a young couple. ... I am not exactly clear on the message the Conservative movement is sending out into the world, and I am not sure if it is a viable policy in the long term."

He likened it to joining a gym, noting that a potential gym member is not told first to exercise, get in good shape and then join. Rather, if the person is willing to join, he or she signs up and then the work begins. Moreover, the rabbi added, this logic is not just one of good consumer policy but is consistent with traditional Jewish teaching.

In one of the most famous Talmud stories, the man who wants to learn all of the Torah while standing on one foot is shooed away by Shammai, who has no patience for him, but welcomed by Hillel.

"First, Hillel converts, and then Hillel teaches," Rabbi Cosgrove said. "First you join and then, once you are a vested member, you figure out what it's all about."

In that way, the rabbi suggested that it might be more effective for Conservative rabbis to first accept converts and then teach them.

He readily acknowledges that there are flaws, unanswered questions and risks with such a bold plan, not to mention halachic issues to resolve.

"It is fair to ask if Judaism as a whole is not cheapened by making conversion so easy." Still, he told The Jewish Week "there were no guarantees for Hillel, or for rabbis today.

"My priority is to create Jewish homes, and everything I do is toward that goal," he said. When a congregant's adult child comes to him with a non-Jewish partner and wants to get married, he now describes the yearlong conversion program requirement that is a prerequisite to the wedding. Many of them, he says, never come back, choosing a justice of the peace or other clergy to marry them.

"It weighs heavily on me," acknowledged the rabbi, who sees his suggestion as a way "to shift the conversation to one of muscular embrace."

What's clear is that the current system isn't working. A full discussion and debate on how best to ensure the continuity of Jewish life is in order, and Rabbi Cosgrove should be commended for broaching the difficult topic.



When referring to the topic of conversion, Rabbi Cosgrove writes: "...while the Orthodox take a strong stand against intermarriage and set "a high bar for conversions," and the Reform, since 1983, say that the child of a non-Jewish father and Jewish mother is considered Jewish if raised in a Jewish home, the Conservative camp is, not surprisingly, somewhere in the middle."

? What do you think about Rabbi Cosgrove's reference to the Conservative Camp as being "not surprisingly, somewhere in the middle"?

"I am worried that our present policy is internally conflicted and thus strategically self-defeating," the rabbi said. "The idea of refusing to be present for the wedding and then expecting the couple to feel warmly embraced by the Jewish people strikes me as a policy constructed by someone who doesn't know the mind of a young couple. ..."

? Do you agree with Rabbi Cosgrove's reading of the situation?

In that way, the rabbi suggested that it might be more effective for Conservative rabbis to first accept converts and then teach them.

? Do you agree with Rabbi Cosgrove's solution to the situation?

He readily acknowledges that there are flaws, unanswered questions and risks with such a bold plan, not to mention halachic issues to resolve.

? Do you think that Rabbi Cosgrove's plan is a bold one? What are some of the flaws, unanswered questions and risks –if any– with Rabbi Cosgrove's suggested solution to the situation?