

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist

[252]

What Is This Silence?

Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Beitzah 20b



Background to Our Story

Babylonian Talmud, Beitzah 20a. See: Stories with a Twist [251]- But a Certain Elder of the Disciples of Shammai the Elder Was There

The Sages taught in a *baraita*: There was an incident involving Hillel the Elder, who brought his burnt-offering to the Temple courtyard in order to place his hands on the animal's head on a Festival.

The students of Shammai the Elder gathered around him and said to him: What is the nature of this animal that you are bringing?

Hillel did not want to quarrel with them in the Temple and therefore concealed the truth from them for the sake of peace. He said to them: It is a female, and I have brought it as a peace-offering, as burnt-offerings are always male. He swung its tail for them so that they would not be able to properly discern whether the animal was male or female, and they [The students of Shammai] departed.

On that day, when the incident became known, suggesting that even Hillel had accepted Shammai's view, Beit Shammai gained the upper hand over Beit Hillel, and they sought to establish the halakha in this regard in accordance with their opinion. But a certain Elder of the disciples of Shammai the Elder was there, and Bava ben Buta was his name, who knew that the halakha is in accordance with the opinion of Beit Hillel in this matter. And he sent for and brought all the high-quality sheep of Kedar that were in Jerusalem, and he stood them in the Temple courtyard and said: Anyone who wishes to place his hands on the head of an animal should come and place his hands there. And on that day Beit Hillel gained the upper hand over Beit Shammai, and they established the halakha in this case in accordance with their opinion, and there was no one there who disputed the matter in any way.

Hillel and Shammai



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Hillel the Elder and Shammai were the last of the pairs of Sages who transmitted the Oral Torah to successive generations over a period of about two centuries; Hillel served as *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin while Shammai was the president of the court. Hillel and Shammai lived about one hundred years prior to the destruction of the Temple, at the beginning of Herod's reign. Hillel and Shammai founded two schools, Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, which flourished for many years after their passing, but they themselves disagreed about only three or four issues. The main difference between Hillel and Shammai was one of personality. Hillel treated himself and others in an easygoing manner, avoiding conflict whenever possible. Shammai, by contrast, took a more severe approach, attempting to scrutinize people's motivations and habits.

Tradition has it that Hillel began as an impoverished student who took on menial labor in order to pay to attend the lectures of Shemaya and Avtalyon. The Gemara compares Hillel to Ezra the Scribe, crediting him with reestablishing Torah study at a period in history when it was utterly neglected (*Sukka* 20a). His disciples were praised as well. According to the Gemara, Hillel the Elder had eighty students: Thirty of them were worthy that the Divine Presence should rest upon them as it rested upon Moses; thirty were worthy that the sun should stand still for them, as it did for Joshua bin Nun; and twenty were average. The greatest among Hillel's students was Yonatan ben Uzziel and the least among them was Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai (*Sukka* 28a).

Mishnah Beitza 2:4

בֵּית שַׁמַּאי אוֹמְרִים: מְבִיאִין שְׁלָמִים וְאֵין סוּמְכִין עָלֵיהֶן, אֲבָל לֹא עוֹלוֹת. וּבֵית הִלֵּל אוֹמְרִים: מְבִיאִין שְׁלָמִים וְעוֹלוֹת, וְסוּמְכִין עָלֵיהֶן.

Beit Shammai say: One may bring peace offerings on a Festival, but one may not place his hands on them, as this is considered using animals, which is prohibited on a Festival by rabbinic decree. However, one may not bring burnt-offerings, apart from the obligatory daily and additional offerings of the day, because burnt-offerings are consumed entirely on the altar and not by people, and slaughter is permitted on a Festival only for the purpose of human consumption.

And Beit Hillel say: One may bring both peace offerings and burnt-offerings, and one may even place his hands on them.

Placing hands on the heads of offerings



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All offerings brought by an individual, whether obligatory offerings or gift-offerings, require that the owner's hands be placed on the head of the animal before it is slaughtered, with the exception of the firstborn-offering, the tithe-offering, and the Paschal lamb (Rambam *Sefer Avoda Hilkhhot Ma'aseh HaKorbanot* 3:6).

The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Beitza 20b

שׁוֹב מַעֲשֵׂה בְּתַלְמִיד אֶחָד מִתְלַמְּדֵי בֵּית הִלֵּל שֶׁהֵבִיא עוֹלָתוֹ לְעֹזְרָה לְסוּמוֹ עָלֶיהָ.

מִצָּאוֹ תִלְמִיד אֶחָד מִתְּלָמִידֵי בֵּית שַׁמַּי. אָמַר לוֹ: מָה זֶה סְמִיכָה? אָמַר לוֹ: מָה זֶה שְׁתִּיקָה? שָׁתַקוּ בְּנִזְיָפָה, וְהֵלֵךְ לוֹ.

אָמַר אַבְיִי: הֲלֵכָה, הֲאִי צוֹרֵבָא מֵרַבָּנֵי דְאָמַר לִיהַ חֲבֵרִיהַ מִלְתָּא – לָא לְהֵדֵר לִיהַ מִלְתָּא טְפִי מִמַּאי דְאָמַר לִיהַ חֲבֵרִיהַ, דְאִיהוּ אָמַר לִיהַ "מָה זֶה סְמִיכָה" וְקָא מֵהֵדֵר לִיהַ: "מָה זֶה שְׁתִּיקָה".

And there was another incident involving a certain disciple from among the disciples of Beit Hillel who brought his burnt-offering to the Temple courtyard in order to place his hands on the animal's head on a Festival.

A certain disciple from among the disciples of Beit Shammai found him and said to him: What is this placing of hands?

He [Beit Hillel's disciple] said to him: What is this silence? Why do you not stay silent? He silenced him with a rebuke, and he, Beit Shammai's disciple, departed quietly.

Abaye said: Therefore, it is clear from here that a Torah scholar whose colleague says something reprimanding or insulting to him should not answer back with something more than his colleague had said to him, to avoid adding fuel to the fire, as in the above story the one said to the other: What is this placing of hands? and the latter responded to the former using the same language: What is this silence?



Explaining the Story (What is the sequence of events that take place in the story?)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Bonus **?** How do we know from our story that the issue in the discussion is a highly controversial one?

? Why did the disciple of Hillel bring his burnt-offering to the Temple courtyard in order to place his hands on the animal's head on a Festival?

? How do we know that the disciple of Shammai, wished to quarrel with the disciple of Hillel?

Extra Bonus ? "He [Hillel's disciple] said to him [to Shamai's disciple]: What is this silence?"

In the preceding story in Tractate Beitza (See background), Hillel the Elder disguises his true intentions in order to avoid a confrontation with the students of Shamai. Why does Hillel's disciple in our story give a sharp retort to Shamai's student instead of imitating his humble teacher's behavior?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? How does Abaye's statement complement the story?

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

! "I don't wish to talk about this" or "it's none of your business!" – a seldom used reply, which is extremely helpful in dealing with meddling people and in avoiding confrontations and lose –lose situations.

EPILOGUE

Busybody



The kind of person you just want to [punch in the mouth](#) for being so [dumb](#) annoying. They have no life and way too much time on their hands. They frequently use their excessive amount of time to annoy and monitor others, tattletale for small meaningless crap, butt into everybody's business except their own, and spy on people as if they think they are a cop or an important person or something.

You know busy bodies when you see them: they eavesdrop, will report you for "child abuse" when you discipline your kids in the mall by giving them a small [smack on](#) the hand, they knock on your apartment door for "being too loud" when chopping vegetables on your counter for dinner, will tell flight attendants something like "excuse me but I saw that man using his cell phone during the safety demo" and will tell a COP something like "excuse me sir but I saw that man's license plate tag as being expired." What do you want me to do about a cell phone or an expired tag you stupid, loser? I had a friend once who was a busybody. He told me 6 months after I moved to Arizona that "I am going to report your car to the state DMV [if you don't get your](#) car registered with the state." He did exactly what he said and I punched him in the face for it. We are not friends anymore. I can't stand ANY busybody like this. Let's just say busybodies are the fingernails and we are their [chalkboard](#).

Busy bodies are usually self-righteous hypocrites that are quick to point out the faults in others but get defensive when you point out theirs.

[I can't stand](#) any busybody. I want to [punch](#) them all in [the mouth](#).