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## Stories with a Twist [38]

### "One Should Always Carefully Guard His Disposition" (Insights into Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b)



#### Background to Our Story

##### Hillel and Shamai



Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noe Edition. Beitza – Rosh Hashanah. Koren publishers Jerusalem Page 109

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).

##### Zuz (Jewish coin)



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

A Zuz (pl. zuzzim) was an ancient Hebrew silver coin struck during the Bar Kochba revolt. They were overstruck on Roman Imperial denarii or Roman provincial drachmas of Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, Trajan and Hadrian. Four Zuz, denarii or drachmas make a Shekel, a Sela or a Tetradrachm.



It has been suggested that its name is probably a corruption of the Greek Zeus which was the deity portrayed on the reverse of every drachm and tetradrachm (four drachma) of the Seleucid period and due to the prohibition of pronouncing names of idols, it was called "zuz". This name was used from the Greek era of drachmas, through the Roman era of Denarius, and then as the quarter denomination of Bar Kochba coinage. Another suggestion is that in Hebrew, the word "zuz" means "move", or "to move", so it was called "zuzzim" to show that it was constantly moving around, usually referring to the fact that Jews must give charity, or referring to the nature of money that it moves from one to another, alternating who is wealthy.

In the Talmud, the Zuz and the dinar are used interchangeably. The difference being that the Zuz originally referred to the Greek Drachma which was a quarter of the Greek Tetradrachm weighing approximately 17 grams; while the Dinar referred to the later Roman Denarii which was a quarter of the Tyrian Shekels and had the same weight as the Jewish Shekels and the Roman provincial Tetradrachms at approximately 14 grams.

The Zuz is mentioned in the Passover Haggadah in the Passover song Chad gadya, chad gadya (One little goat, one little goat); in which the lyric of dizvan abba bitrei zuzei (Which Father bought for two zuzim (half shekel) repeats at the end of every stanza

### The Text: Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b

תנו רבנן: לעולם יהא אדם ענוותן כהלל ואל יהא קפדן כשמאי.  
מעשה בשני בני אדם שהמרו זה את זה, אמרו: כל מי שילך ויקניט את הלל – יטול ארבע מאות זוז.  
אמר אחד מהם: אני אקניטנו.

אותו היום ערב שבת היתה, והלל חפף את ראשו. הלך ועבר על פתח ביתו, אמר: מי כאן הלל? מי כאן הלל? נתעטף וניצא לקראתו. אמר לו: בני, מה אתה מבקש? אמר לו: שאלה יש לי לשאול. אמר לו: שאל בני, שאל! מפני מה ראשיהן של בבליים סגלגלות? אמר לו: בני, שאלה גדולה שאלת – מפני שאין להם אחיות פקחות.

הלך והמתין שעה אחת, חזר ואמר: מי כאן הלל? מי כאן הלל? נתעטף וניצא לקראתו. אמר לו: בני, מה אתה מבקש? אמר לו: שאלה יש לי לשאול. אמר לו: שאל בני, שאל! מפני מה עיניהן של תרמודייני תרוטות? אמר לו: בני, שאלה גדולה שאלת – מפני שדרין בין החולות.

הלך והמתין שעה אחת, חזר ואמר: מי כאן הלל? מי כאן הלל? נתעטף וניצא לקראתו. אמר לו: בני, מה אתה מבקש? אמר לו: שאלה יש לי לשאול. אמר לו: שאל בני, שאל! מפני מה רגליהם של אפרקיים רחבות? אמר לו: בני, שאלה גדולה שאלת – מפני שדרין בין בצעי המים.

אמר לו: שאלות הרבה יש לי לשאול, ומתירא אני שמא תכעוס. נתעטף וישוב לפניו, אמר לו: כל שאלות שיש לך לשאול – שאל. אמר לו: אתה הוא הלל שקורין אותך נשיא ישראל? אמר לו: הן. אמר לו: אם אתה הוא – לא ירבו כמותך בישראל.

אמר לו: בני, מפני מה? אמר לו: מפני שאבדתי על ידך ארבע מאות זוז. אמר לו: הוי זהיר ברוחך, כדי הוא הלל שתאבד על ידו ארבע מאות זוז וארבע מאות זוז – והלל לא יקפיד

The Sages taught in a *baraita*: A person should always be patient like Hillel and not impatient like Shammai.

## Introduction

There was an incident involving two people who wagered with each other and said: Anyone who will go and aggravate Hillel will take four-hundred *zuz*.

One of them said: I will aggravate him.

## Act 1

That day that he chose to bother Hillel was Shabbat eve, and Hillel was washing his head. He went and passed the entrance to Hillel's house and said: Who here is Hillel, who here is Hillel? Hillel wrapped himself and went out to greet him. He said to him: My son, what do you seek? He said to him: I have a question to ask. Hillel said to him: Ask, my son, ask. The man asked him: Why are the heads of Babylonians oval?

He said to him: My son, you have asked a significant question. The reason is because they do not have clever midwives. They do not know how to shape the child's head at birth.

## Act 2

That man went and waited one hour, a short while, returned to look for Hillel, and said: Who here is Hillel, who here is Hillel? Again, Hillel wrapped himself and went out to greet him. Hillel said to him: My son, what do you seek? The man said to him: I have a question to ask. He said to

him: Ask, my son, ask. The man asked: Why are the eyes of the residents of Tadmor bleary [*terutot*]?

Hillel said to him: My son, you have asked a significant question. The reason is because they live among the sands and the sand gets into their eyes.

### **Act 3**

Once again the man went, waited one hour, returned, and said: Who here is Hillel, who here is Hillel? Again, he, Hillel, wrapped himself and went out to greet him. He said to him: My son, what do you seek? He said to him: I have a question to ask. He said to him: Ask, my son, ask. The man asked: Why do Africans have wide feet?

Hillel said to him: You have asked a significant question. The reason is because they live in marshlands and their feet widened to enable them to walk through those swampy areas.

### **Finale**

That man said to him: I have many more questions to ask, but I am afraid lest you get angry. Hillel wrapped himself and sat before him, and he said to him: All of the questions that you have to ask, ask them.

The man said to him: Are you Hillel whom they call the *Nasi* of Israel? He [Hillel] said to him: Yes. He [the man] said to him: If it is you, then may there not be many like you in Israel.

Hillel said to him: My son, for what reason do you say this?

The man said to him: Because I lost four hundred *zuz* because of you.

Hillel said to him: Be vigilant of your spirit. Hillel is worthy of having you lose four hundred *zuz* and another four hundred *zuz* on his account, and Hillel will not get upset.



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

### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

**?** What was the wager the two men of our story made with one another?

Bonus **?** Why did they choose Hillel as the "object" of their wager?

**?** Why did the man who wanted to provoke Hillel to lose his temper choose Friday, the eve of Shabbat, to pay Hillel a visit?

**?** What do the three questions the man asked Hillel have in common?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** What else, beside the questions, did the man do in order to exasperate Hillel?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 4 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why did the man wait one hour between visits?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why did Hillel tell the man "You have asked a significant question"?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Bonus **?** At the end of our story Hillel said: "*Hillel is worth your losing four hundred zuz, and [yet another] four hundred zuz.*" To which four hundred and four hundred was Hillel referring to?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

Bonus **?** In the Talmud there are many stories of Satan coming, in different disguises, to test the rabbis. How is our story similar to those stories? How is it different

### **"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts**

! Walking in Hillel Steps: Withstanding despair, rudeness, pettiness, anger, hatred, gossip, badmouthing, disbelief, sarcasm, arrogance, absolute relativism, indifference and cynicism!

! When "the outsider" is out there to change us...

*One day a Tzadik came to Sodom; He knew what Sodom was, so he came to save it from sin, from destruction. He preached to the people. "Please do not be murderers, do not be thieves. Do not be silent and do not be indifferent." He went on preaching day after day, maybe even picketing. But no one listened. He was not discouraged. He went on preaching for years. Finally, someone asked him, "Rabbi, why do you do that? Don't you see it is of no use?" He said, "I know it is of no use, but I must. And I will tell you why: in the beginning I thought I had to protest and to shout in order to change them. I have given up this hope. Now I know I must picket and scream and shout so that they should not change me."*

*Wiesel, Elie: "Words from a Witness," Condensed from an Address, Conservative Judaism, XXI (Spring, 1967), p.48.*



Our story reminds us that we are solely responsible for our behavior. Yes, people around us may act inappropriately or push our buttons, on purpose or inadvertently. While we cannot control what the others do, we always own the way we react.

### **Further Readings:**

Big Berel Outsmarts a Robber: A Children's Treasury of Rebbe Nachman's Tales by Rebbe Nachman of Breslov. Edited by C. Levin and M. Mykoff. Illustrated by: Aharon Freidman. Publisher: Breslov Research Inst., 1996.