

On One Foot: An In-Depth Analysis of B. Shabbat 30b–31a

Louis A. Rieser

It may be the best-known story in all rabbinic literature. Ask the question, “Teach me the Torah while standing on one foot” and the answer is almost a reflex—“That which is distasteful to you do not do to another.” As it is usually told, however, the story is incomplete. It is part of an extended literary unit that teaches a much larger lesson than can be gleaned from the one, admittedly powerful, story of Hillel on one foot.

The full passage is composed of a series of stories framed by the admonition that one should be as gentle as Hillel, not as impatient as Shammai. (The Hebrew word translated as “gentle” is *anavah* and part of the discussion will focus on the meaning of this word.) The several stories serve to highlight the contrast between these two seminal personalities who form the foundation of the Rabbinic movement. Taken as a whole, the passage serves to highlight several issues: the dangers of anger; the virtue of gentleness or humility; the openness to proselytes; the program of the nascent Rabbinic movement. Though the passage reads as a series of simple stories, the simplicity conceals a much larger message.

This review aims to explore three issues. First, it will examine this passage as a literary unit consisting of a collection of stories within a defined frame. The individual parts are so well known that it takes some effort to see this passage as one unit and not a mere collection of stories. The passage enacts a kind of morality play between the gentleness (*anavah*) of Hillel and the impatience (*qapdanut*) of Shammai, which is emblematic of a larger dispute between two viewpoints. This review will show how the intentional literary structure reveals the contrast between the parties.

LOUIS A. RIESER (C75) is rabbi of Etz Hayim Synagogue, Derry, New Hampshire.

Second, this passage sets out a programmatic outline for the nascent Rabbinic movement. The central principles of that program are illustrated by the individual stories and emphasized by the context in which this passage is located. The program promoted by this passage is not simply a listing of the key elements of the Rabbinic movement. Rather, the examples cited illustrate the methodology of the movement. It is important to consider the values endorsed, explicitly and implicitly, by this tale.

Finally, implicit in this exploration are questions of the historicity of these stories and of Hillel. I contend that it was necessary to express the core values of the Rabbinic movement through a personality who was present at the creation of Rabbinic Judaism. Hillel embodies the values of the rabbinic world as no other figure does, so the creators of the Talmud reached back to Hillel in order to make these particular arguments. The contrast between literature and biography is crucial in this passage.

While we will examine the passage in its separate parts, it may be helpful to see it as a whole, as it is recorded in *b. Shabbat 30b–31a*.

A.

Our Rabbis taught: A man should always be humble like Hillel, and not impatient like Shammai.

B.

¹ It once happened that two men conversed with each other, saying, “Whoever goes and angers Hillel shall receive four hundred zuz.” Said one, “I will go and anger him today.”

² That day was *erev Shabbat*, and Hillel was washing his head. He [the man] went past the door of his [Hillel’s] house, and called out, “Who here is Hillel, who here is Hillel?”

[Hillel] wrapped himself up and went out to him, saying, “My son, what do you want?”

“I have a question to ask,” said he.

“Ask, my son,” [Hillel prompted].

Thereupon he asked, “Why are the heads of the Babylonians so round?”

“My son, you have asked a great question,” replied he. “Because they have no skillful midwives.”

³ He departed, waited an hour, returned, and called out, “Who here is Hillel, who here is Hillel?”

[Hillel] wrapped himself up and went out to him, saying, “My son, what do you want?”

“I have a question to ask,” said he.

“Ask, my son,” [Hillel prompted].

Thereupon he asked, “Why are the eyes of the Palmyreans ¹ bleary?”

“My son, you have asked a great question,” replied he. “Because they live in sandy places.”

⁴He departed, waited an hour, returned, and called out, “Who here is Hillel, who here is Hillel?”

[Hillel] wrapped himself up and went out to him, saying, “My son, what do you require?”

“I have a question to ask,” said he.

“Ask, my son,” [Hillel prompted].

He asked, “Why are the feet of the Africans wide?”

“My son, you have asked a great question,” said he. “Because they live in watery marshes.”

⁵“I have many questions to ask,” said he, “but fear that you may get angry.”

[Hillel] tightened his robe, sat before him, and said, “Ask all the questions you have to ask.”

⁶“Are you the Hillel who is called the *nasi* of Israel?”

“Yes,” Hillel replied.

“If that is you,” he retorted, “may there not be many like you in Israel.”

He said, “Why is that, my son?”

“Because I have lost four hundred *zuz* through you,” [he complained].

⁷“Be careful of your moods,” [Hillel] answered. “Hillel is worth it that you should lose four hundred *zuz* and yet another four hundred *zuz* through him, yet Hillel shall not lose his temper.”

C.

¹Our rabbis taught: A certain gentile once came before Shammai and asked him, “How many *Torot* have you?”

“Two,” he replied, “the Written Torah and the Oral Torah.”

“I believe you regarding the Written, but not regarding the Oral Torah; convert me on condition that you teach me the Written Torah [only].” [Shammai] rebuked him and made him go out in anger.

²He went before Hillel, who accepted him as a proselyte. On the first day he taught him *alef, bet, gimel, dalet*; the following day he reversed [the letters] to him. He said to [Hillel], “But yesterday you did not teach them to me this way.”

“Must you then not rely upon me [for this]? Then rely upon me with respect to the Oral [Torah as well].”

³ On another occasion it happened that a certain gentile came before Shammai and said to him, “Make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.” [Shammai] knocked him over with the builder’s cubit that was in his hand.

⁴ He went before Hillel, who converted him. [Hillel] said to him, “What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary; go and learn it.”

⁵ On another occasion it happened that a certain gentile was passing behind a bet hamidrash, when he heard the voice of a scribe reciting And these are the garments which they shall make: a breastplate, and an ephod (Ex 28:4).

[The gentile] said, “For whom are these?”

They said, “For the High Priest.”

That gentile said to himself, “I will go and become a proselyte, that I may be appointed a High Priest.” He went to Shammai and said to him, “Make me a proselyte on condition that you appoint me a High Priest.” He knocked him over with the builder’s cubit that was in his hand.

⁶ He then went before Hillel, who converted him. Said [Hillel] to him, “Can any man be made a king without knowing the order of government? Go and study the order of government!”

He went and read. When he came to and the stranger [non-priest] that comes near shall be put to death (Num 1:51), he asked [Hillel], “To whom does this verse apply?”

“Even to David King of Israel,” was the answer. That proselyte reasoned for himself *qal v’homer*: if Israel, who are called sons (Deut 14:1) before God, and from the love with which He loved them called them My son, My firstborn, Israel (Ex 4:22), yet it is written of them and the stranger that comes near shall be put to death, how much more so a mere proselyte, who comes with his staff and his bag!

⁷ Then he went before Shammai and said to him. “Was it ever possible for me to be a High Priest?! Is it not written in the Torah, and the stranger that comes near shall be put to death?”

⁸ He went before Hillel and said to him, “O gentle Hillel; blessings rest on your head for bringing me under the wings of the Shekhinah !”

D.

Some time later the three [proselytes] met in one place; said they, Shammai's impatience sought to banish us from the world, but Hillel's gentleness brought us under the wings of the Shekhinah .

A cursory reading of this text demonstrates that it is not as simple as it first seems. It is evident that this is a carefully constructed literary unit, multiple stories within a frame. The frame proclaims Hillel's gentleness and Shammai's impatience. The frame begins by admonishing people to follow the example of Hillel, while the closing frame notes the consequences of that behavior.

The first set of stories is striking because it makes no reference to Shammai, despite the introductory line, which derides his impatience. Rather, the story focuses on one man's strange and unsuccessful attempts to anger Hillel and closes with a cryptic warning about the danger of angering Hillel.

The second set consists of three patterned tales. In each, a non-Jew approaches first Shammai and then Hillel with a request to convert based on seemingly impossible criteria. In each case Shammai summarily dismisses the non-Jew. Hillel, by contrast, converts them. Hillel's success leads to the closing half of the frame in which his gentleness is applauded as that that saved the men. Shammai's failure is doubly emphasized by the declaration that his actions did not merely drive the men away in this world, but banished them from the world to come!

It is possible to appreciate each story within the frame as an individual tale. Each story conveys a significant message in its own right. But there is a larger message waiting for the reader willing to decode the entire passage. In order to see that larger message, however, it is necessary to look first at each of the parts individually before putting the whole back together again.

The passage opens with a declaration that Hillel is an anav — translated variously as gentle, modest, patient, or forbearing. It seems like an admirable, but not exceptional, virtue. Even in contrast to Shammai's impatience (qapdanut), it seems merely a measure of his integrity. The only inkling within this passage that this might be something more important comes in the closing line, where we learn that Shammai's actions are damning whereas Hillel's are salvific. Later in this paper we will explore the full

importance of this virtue, but at this point it is sufficient to note that Hillel embodies a virtue of the highest order.

The questions posed by the anonymous man clearly should succeed in their intent of angering Hillel. The man staggers his interruptions so they come ever closer to the eve of Shabbat. The timing seems planned to disrupt not only Hillel's preparation for Shabbat, but a proper beginning to Shabbat as well. Nonetheless, Hillel comes down each time with his wet hair, wrapped in a towel, ready to answer any question asked. While the questions seem to be irrelevant and insulting, in fact they are carefully crafted.

Each question asks about a stereotypic physical characteristic of a certain ethnic group. The questions seem absurd. The questions, however, focus on specific places and specific organs of the body, all of which carry symbolic value. These suggest that a symbolic reading may yield more understanding.

The questions focus on three parts of the body—the head, the eyes, and the feet. Each might have multiple associations.

The head could be the leader or the site of intelligence and reasoning. Later in B. Shabbat 61a it teaches that “Whoever wishes to anoint the entire body should first anoint the head, for it is king over all his limbs.”

The Torah notes that the eyes can steer one's course in the world. The well-known verse included in the siddur as a part of the Shema (Num 15:39) declares “Look at it [the fringe] and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and your eyes in your lustful urge.” The eyes lead one through the world, whether for good or evil. They can see clearly or be blinded by what is before them.

We stand on our feet and walk with them. They move us through the world and form the foundation on which we stand. In the Book of Proverbs (6:18) feet do the dirty work for an evil mind—“The heart hatches evil plots while the feet are quick to run to evil.” Like eyes, they can carry us astray or carry us on the true path.

The locales cited have historical and symbolic resonance. Two of the locales are easily recognized. Egypt, of course, is the place where we were slaves, where we entered as a family and emerged as a people, where God acted on our behalf. We walked out of Egypt. Babylonia is equally clear. It is the ancestral home of Abraham. It is the place of our exile, but also the place from which Torah was restored to Israel by Ezra. Hillel comes from Babylonia and, like Ezra, he is credited with returning Torah to Israel.² Babylonia

is the once and future leader of Rabbinic Judaism, beginning with Hillel's restoration of Torah and culminating in the great amoraic centers in Nehardea and Sura.

Palmyra, also known as Tadmor, is a bit more difficult to understand. While Palmyra is not well known to us, it is an ancient city and had various connections with the Jews of its day.³ It is an oasis in the Syrian desert and a key crossroad between Canaan and Mesopotamia. II Chronicles 8:34 records that Solomon built the city as a storehouse, and it would have controlled a great deal of commerce that had to pass through that area. In the Rabbinic period, Palmyra continued as an important center both commercially and strategically between the Roman and Persian empires until it was destroyed by Emperor Aurelian in 273 C.E. It did have an active Jewish community but was looked on with suspicion by the rabbis, as illustrated by the comment in B. Yebamot 17a, "The future destruction of Palmyra will be a day of rejoicing for Israel."

It is not necessary to decode the questions posed to Hillel in order to recognize that they are not simply nonsense. While the overt meaning of the questions is to anger Hillel, we can see that the covert meaning is linked to something larger. As will become evident, the covert meaning does find its analogue in the second half of the passage.

In the second half of the passage, the potential proselytes pose challenges that are more significant than they might seem on first reading. Each challenge questions a principal element of the rabbinic program. The responses do more than simply parry the challenge, rather, they model the rabbinic method.

The first question is a straightforward challenge to the principle of the Dual Torah. The proselyte is willing to acknowledge the sanctity of the Written Torah, but not the Oral Torah. It is not such an unreasonable challenge. Throughout the first century B.C.E. or C.E. there existed competing forms of Judaism, and one point of differentiation is what each accepted as sacred scripture. The Rabbinic movement was differentiated from other sects by its assertion of a single revelation inclusive of both the Written and the Oral Torah. Although the assertion of the Dual Torah would become emblematic of the Rabbinic movement, in fact it took shape and developed over time.

The first signs of that development can be discerned in the Mishnah, the earliest redacted document of the Rabbinic movement. Neusner notes that the Mishnah is "remarkably indifferent" to

certain important considerations, including “the fact that they [the rabbinic authors] work within the framework of an established history and culture, that is to say, in the structure defined for all time by the Hebrew Scriptures.”⁴ The Mishnah speaks in an independent, authoritative voice and is not dependent on citations from the Hebrew Scriptures to justify its claims. The Mishnah neither relies on the Hebrew Bible for its authority nor proclaims its genesis in a revelation at Mt. Sinai. That linkage would come later.

Citing M. Avot, Martin Jaffee notes that the early rabbinic writings do not proclaim the theme of the Dual Torah, rather that claim is present only in the faintest form.

Absent in M. Avot where we might most expect to find it, the theme [of the dual revelation of a Written and Oral Torah] emerges in only the faintest form and lies buried obscurely in but two passages of midrashic exegesis—not an auspicious beginning for an ideological conception that would, within a generation or two, come to dominate rabbinic discourse about the origins and authority of halakhic norms.⁵

The first challenge is to the basic rabbinic assertion of a single revelation consisting of the Written and Oral Torah.

Hillel’s response accepts the validity of the Dual Torah as an axiom. His response, however, points beyond the axiomatic assertion toward the basic method of the nascent Rabbinic movement. He recites the most elemental unit of Torah—the letter. First Hillel has the proselyte agree to the order of the alef-bet. The second day he presents him with the order in reverse. When the proselyte objects that he did not teach it that way on the first day, Hillel responds, “Must you then not rely upon me [for this knowledge]? Then rely upon me with respect to the Oral [Torah as well].” If the proselyte must rely on Hillel for the order and the integrity of the letters, how much more so for the meaning of the words? Hillel is no trickster, but a teacher illustrating that the meaning of the teaching can only be learned in a teacher-disciple relationship. Hillel’s answer establishes the Oral Torah as a body of received revelation that is dependent on the teacher-disciple relationship for its transmission. Without the teacher it cannot exist.

Additionally, Hillel’s answer reveals something of the basic method of the Oral Torah. After all, an oral tradition could be transmitted in a variety of ways other than a teacher-disciple relation-

ship.⁶ The tradition could have been reserved for public, ritualistic performances that were shared through declarations with a limited or unlimited public on only certain prescribed occasions. For example, a designated and limited teacher class might proclaim the teaching in formal, standardized words on limited ritual occasions. The tradition could have been performed in elaborate dramas that expanded on the written text of the Torah as, for example, the Medieval Passion plays expanded on the New Testament. One recognized source for the midrashic collections comes from the public lectures taught by rabbis on Shabbat afternoon in public settings.⁷ Any of these could have constituted the method of the oral Torah, with only an elite receiving a more detailed instruction.

Hillel's answer defines the method as one rooted in the teacher-disciple relationship. The tradition is passed from one to the next and is dependent on the teacher as the sole authority. This portrait is reinforced by the admonition in Pirke Avot 1:16: "Rabban Gamaliel said: Acquire a teacher for yourself and remove doubt." In a similar vein the very next Mishnah, Avot 1:17, teaches the virtue of learning from the sages: "Simeon his son, says: 'All my life I grew up around the sages, and I found nothing better than silence.'" There is an equally strong concern expressed on care in the precise use of words. "Rabbi Judah said: 'Be careful in study, for an unwitting error in study is considered as a conscious sin'" (Avot 4:13). Since the teacher's words are Torah, accuracy is crucial.

It is important to recognize that Hillel's answer presupposes that the privilege of study is open to anyone who might wish to pursue it. One might assume that it is a privilege limited to an elite corps of scholars. If not that, it would be reasonable to assume that only Jews are permitted access to the holy teachings of the Dual Torah. Access to the teachings of the Torah and the sages, however, is open. After all, if it is possible for a proselyte to study, then surely the path is open to all Jews.

From the first challenge we learn that the Dual Torah, Written and Oral, is axiomatic, not open to debate or compromise. Access to the Oral Torah is dependent on the teacher-disciple relationship. The words of the teacher transmit and constitute the Oral Torah. The transmission of the Oral Torah is person to person, open to all interested seekers.

The second challenge is the well-known "teach me the entire Torah while standing on one foot." The question seems like a frivolous, if not a hostile, challenge. Certainly, given the breadth of

Judaism's teachings, reducing the entire tradition to one sentence seems an absurdity. There are, however, other attempts to state the essence of the Jewish message in a short form. There is a long passage found in B. Makkot 23b ff. (B. Sanhedrin 81a) that begins with R. Simlai's declaration that 613 commandments were revealed to Moses. The passage moves through several, ever shorter summations until it reaches Habakkuk's one-line formulation, "The righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab 2:4). This second challenge asks for the core teaching of the Jewish faith.

It is worth noting that Hillel does not ground his response in the Written Torah. No verse from the Tanakh is cited either as primary or supporting evidence. He responds on his own authority. Indeed Jaffee notes that

As far as the traditions behind the Mishnaic and Toseftan traditions are concerned, the bulk of the oral-literary tradition of halakhic norms is conceived to be of rather recent vintage, promulgated by teachers whose disciples—or whose disciple's disciples—could still be consulted for details.⁸

The words of the sages were the authoritative words of Torah and no other source was necessary to substantiate their teaching.

Hillel's answer focuses on the twin tenets of Rabbinic Judaism: practice and study. By putting the focus on doing, Hillel notes the primacy of action. The theme of acting, even before committing to the principles of Torah, is found in many places. To cite just one: "For R. Judah said in the name of Rav, One should always occupy oneself with Torah and mitzvot, though it is not for the sake of heaven, for from acting not for the sake of heaven one will come [to act] for the sake of heaven" (Pesachim 50b).⁹ Indeed, this echoes the affirmation cited in Exodus (24:7): when the people heard the covenant of the Torah they responded, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will hear." First action, then study.

But Hillel does not choose the word that one might expect from the later development of Jewish life—*halakhah*, nor does he use a related word. Rather, Hillel focuses the action on the relationship between the actor and the one acted on—"that which is distasteful to you do not do to another." The Hebrew is *aseh*, doing, rather than some form of the word *halakh*—to walk a certain path. Hillel opts for a more general term. Does this mean that *halakhah* was not yet the keyword when this passage was composed? Or is this passage

less concerned with the technical term and more focused on the aspect of relationship implicit in the statement, which would link it more closely with the verse from Leviticus (19:18): “Love your neighbor as yourself.” While Hillel’s statement does closely echo the verse from Leviticus, it is worth noting the choice of words.

Study, the quintessential rabbinic activity, buttresses the action. “This is the entire Torah, go and study.” Study follows and deepens action. Still, it is clear that neither is sufficient alone. Hillel’s answer requires both action and study.

Implicit in Hillel’s answer are several important principles. First, the sage is a sufficient source for authoritative teaching. Second, Judaism is not solely a tradition of contemplation. Study and reflection are necessary, but not sufficient. Third, Judaism is not solely a matter of ritual. Indeed, this formulation makes no reference whatsoever to any form of ritual. Finally, it asserts that the core of Jewish practice lies in relationship, the personal relationship between an individual and his fellow and, by implication, between the individual and God.

The last challenge is more complex. The proselyte chances to hear a scribe reciting a description of the privileges due the High Priest and he wants to enjoy those privileges. Rebuffed by Shammai, he approaches Hillel, who directs him to study the passage. From that study the proselyte discovers for himself that his goal is unattainable. Still his study is apparently sufficient.

This challenge brings several issues into focus. A contrast is offered not only between Hillel and Shammai, but also between the behavior of the scribe and of Hillel. Implicit in that contrast is a comparison between the program of the rabbis and that of the scribes who preceded them. Second, it teaches more about Hillel’s pedagogic method. Finally, it demonstrates the universal accessibility of Torah study, and the exalted status of the student of the Torah.

Note the contrast between the portrait of the scribe and that of Hillel. The proselyte first hears the scribe reciting from the Torah. It is a passive process; it is not even clear whether the scribe knew the man was listening. Hillel certainly understood from the first moment that the proselyte’s request was impossible, and could have simply dismissed him. Nonetheless, he directs the man to study the text directly and to examine the text through the lens of logic tools, such as *qal v’homer* (an argument from the lesser to the

greater) form of reasoning. Clearly, Hillel is engaged with the proselyte just as the proselyte is directly engaged with the text.

This matches the contrast described by Jaffee between the oral method of pre-rabbinic times with that represented in the earliest rabbinic texts.

The scribal literati of Second Temple times found the oral life of written texts ideologically meaningful only when reflecting upon the origins of the works they themselves composed and taught. By contrast, the figures whose opinions are formulated for transmission in the earliest rabbinic texts seem to have been intensely aware of possessing a comprehensive, orally mediated textual tradition. That this tradition was found most immediately in the instructions of Sages rather than in written books was taken for granted.¹⁰

The contrast between the scribe and Hillel is clear and significant. Hillel's response models the method and program of the Rabbinic movement.

This passage hints at the method of teaching used by Hillel. If the study began with the Torah text, it moved quickly to include both analogous texts (the case of the king) and the use of logic (the *qal v'homer* argument). The study was not passive; the student did not merely sit and listen to the teacher lecture. Rather, the student clearly explored for himself, under the guidance of his teacher, and uncovered the truth. And the study was not restricted. Hillel encourages the proselyte to study the text directly. The text is not limited to a certain class, nor even to Jews, but is universally available to anyone who would seek its wisdom.¹¹

I find the last part of the story poignant. The proselyte, now having studied the Torah, confronts Shammai, who had so brusquely dismissed him. "You knew," he says in effect, "but would not tell me." Shammai closed the book before the proselyte; Hillel opened it. But now the student has become the teacher. The proselyte teaches Shammai the essential truth—no non-priest, Jewish or non-Jewish, can aspire to the status of High Priest. The moment of confrontation marks a crucial transition. The proselyte who cannot become High Priest has become a teacher of Torah—a status that ranks even higher, according to the rabbinic system. "Even an idolater who becomes a proselyte and studies the Torah is like a High Priest" (B. Avodah Zarah 3a and B. Sanhedrin 59a and

B. Baba Kamma 38a). The proselyte has achieved the exalted status he first desired, even if he does not get to wear the fancy clothes.

The passage closes with a restatement of the opening frame. The passage opened with a declaration: be gentle like Hillel, not impatient like Shammai. The closing frame expands the statement and explains the implication. Hillel's gentleness brought the three proselytes under the wings of the Shekhinah, giving them a new life in this world (and presumably the next). Shammai's harshness deprived them of life in both worlds. The contrast could not be drawn more sharply.

So far we have looked at the message discussed in the passage, but there is also a message embedded within the structure of the passage. This embedded message reinforces and extends the explicit message of the passage.

The key to the passage lies in the frame that draws the contrast between Hillel and Shammai. The frame seems a bit strange since Shammai plays no role in the first half of the passage. Indeed, in the version of this passage found in Avot d'Rabbi Natan, ch 15, one extra line is added in the middle of the passage to draw attention to Shammai: "What was this impatience of Shammai the Elder?"¹² As we will see, the focus of the passage throughout is on Hillel and the position he represents, whereas Shammai is merely a foil.

The center of the passage, "Be careful of your moods," serves as the fulcrum. The three stories that precede that point pair with the three stories that follow it. Taken as a whole this passage describes the program of the Rabbinic movement.

The first step pairs the first of the proselyte stories with the last of the attempts to anger Hillel. The first proselyte story, as we have seen, challenges the assumption of the dual Torah, "How many *Torot* have you?" Hillel's answer asserts the axiomatic nature of both the Written and the Oral Torah, and models the relationship between sage and disciple. It establishes the basic structure of Torah as it is understood within the Rabbinic movement.¹³ The last of the questions intended to anger Hillel asks about the feet of Africans. Feet provide the foundation, the steady support on which the rest of the body stands. So it is that the conception of the Dual Torah, the one revelation of the Written and the Oral Torah, provides the foundation for the Rabbinic movement.

The middle pair also match. The questioner tries to anger Hillel by asking about the bleary eyes of the Palmyreans. As the windows on the world, eyes allow perception, alertness, and action. So it is

that Hillel's response to the challenge, "Teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot," also leads to action and perception. While in the first instance Hillel counsels "What is hateful to you do not do to" others, the action depends on the insight gained from the study that follows.

In the last of the stories the proselyte seeks to become High Priest, the head of the Jewish people. So it is that the first of the questions, seeking to anger Hillel, asks about the heads of the Babylonians. As the proselyte story teaches that the ultimate leadership of the Jewish people is the sage/teacher, so the parallel question points to the head as that which leads the body. Perhaps there is a political message embedded in this passage as well, since it is Hillel the Babylonian who serves as the *nasi*, the head of the Jewish people.

The fulcrum point of this passage, noted above, is the admonition not to anger Hillel. Why should anger, a most common emotion, serve as the focus for this tale? Many passages within rabbinic literature deal with the emotion of anger, and virtually all consider it to be a negative emotion and extremely harmful. B. Berachot 29b states simply, "Elijah said to R. Judah the brother of R. Sala the Pious: 'Do not be hot-headed and you will not sin.'" But that is only the beginning of the looming dangers to which anger can lead. Anger can also lead to idolatry.

Did it not happen in the Bet Keneset of Tiberias that R. Elazar and R. Yose differed on the matter of a door bolt that had a knob at its head¹⁴ until a Sefer Torah was torn by their anger.¹⁵ R. Yose ben Kisme was present and he said, "I would not be surprised if this Bet Keneset became an idolatrous place." And so it did! (B. Yebamot 96b)

No one is immune from the ravages caused by anger, which can be extremely severe. B. Pesachim 66b teaches: "Resh Lakish says: 'Whoever becomes angry, if he is a sage, his wisdom is taken away. If he is a prophet, his prophecy is taken away.'" Moses serves as the example of a sage who loses his wisdom,¹⁶ while Elisha serves as the prophet who loses his prophecy. Even Hillel falls victim to his anger. On one occasion Hillel became angry at the Bene Batyra and rebuked them. The text goes on to record that

The [Bene Batyra] said to him [Hillel], “Rabbi, if one forgot and didn’t bring a knife on *erev* Shabbat [with which to perform the Passover sacrifice], what should he do?”

He said to them, “I have learned this *halakhah*, but I have forgotten it. But leave it to Israel; if they are not prophets they are the children of prophets” (B. Pesachim 66a).

Like Moses, Hillel’s outburst of anger causes the loss of his wisdom. Anger, then, can cause the loss of Divine gifts of wisdom and prophecy.

Another passage serves as a brief catalog of the many dangers caused by anger. Here the scriptural proof texts provide a rationale, explaining why anger brings on such loss.

Rabbah bar R. Huna said: “When one is angry, even the Divine Presence is unimportant to him, as is said, ‘At the height of his wrath, the wicked thinks, God never punishes, there is no God’” (Ps 10:4).

R. Jeremiah of Difti said: “He loses his learning and his folly grows, as is said, ‘For anger rests in the bosom of fools’” (Ecc 7:9).

R. Nahman bar Isaac added: “It is well known that his transgressions exceed his merits, as is said, ‘A wrathful man abounds in transgression’ (Prov 29:22)” (B. Nedarim 22b).

Now we understand why Hillel warns his questioner that it is better to lose a bet than to anger Hillel. The stakes are very high. Anger leads to progressively higher losses: to sin, to the loss of wisdom, the loss of prophecy, and to the loss of the Presence of God.

Just as this passage contrasts the character of Hillel and Shammai, so it contrasts two emotions. Anger, as we have seen, is a negative emotion that leads to progressively larger losses. The positive virtue is that of the *anav*, a word that defies any simple translation into English. As noted earlier, our passage hints that this is no ordinary virtue. In our passage in B. Shabbat it is often translated as “gentle” or “forbearing.” In one of the selections that follow, it is best translated as “meekness” and in another it seems best to leave it untranslated.

Moses is the only person called an *anav* in the Torah. In the *Mekhilta*, the Midrash notes both the source (contact with the cloud) that makes Moses an *anav* and the effect that it had on him:

And Moses came into contact with the cloud. It caused him to be humble, as it says, “the man Moses was very humble” (Num 12:3). The text teaches that whoever is anav will, in the end, cause the Shekhinah to dwell with man on the earth, as it says: “So says Adonai, high and mighty, dwelling forever, holy is his name (I dwell on high, in holiness, but [also] with the contrite and lowly in spirit...¹⁷(Isa 57:15)”) (Mekhilta, HaUodesh 9).

This midrash leaves no doubt of the rare quality of this virtue possessed by Moses. Touched by the Divine cloud he becomes an anav and Moses thus gains the power to draw the Shekhinah to dwell among humans.

In the Mishnah, R. Pinchas b. Yair lists a progression of values, each higher than the one before:

R. Pinchas b. Yair said: “Zeal leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to purity, purity leads to restraint, restraint leads to holiness, holiness leads to humility (anavah), humility (anavah) leads to fear of sin, and fear of sin leads to holiness, holiness leads to the holy spirit, the holy spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead. And the resurrection of the dead will come by means of Elijah of blessed memory. Amen” (M. Sotah 9:15).

Anavah ranks very high, sixth of nine, in R. Pinchas b. Yair’s typology. Again, it is clear this is a virtue possessed by only a very few.

When this same list is presented in the Bavli, in a slightly different order,¹⁸ the virtue of anavah rises even higher. In the Bavli anavah now ranks eighth of twelve virtues listed. But R. Joshua b. Levi teaches:

for R. Joshua b. Levi said, “Anavah is greater than all of them, as it says, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the anavim” (Isa 61:1). It does not say ‘the pious’ but the anavah. So you learn that anav is greater than all the others” (B. Avodah Zarah 20b).

R. Joshua b. Levi reads the word anavim, which in the context of Isaiah means “the poor,” to refer to the term anavah as it appears in our context. R. Joshua b. Levi implies that the spirit of the Lord rests on those at the very top of the list. In the long list of virtues that lead one toward salvation, anavah ranks at the top.

The admonition that frames our passage, to be gentle as Hillel, is now seen in all its glory. If one can attain that exalted virtue, then he can reach the Shekhinah and bring God's Presence to earth. It is what Moses did. It is what Hillel does in this passage, as attested by the three proselytes. We now see that Hillel possesses the very highest of the virtues, a distinction he shares with Moses. This passage showers Hillel with great praise.

We can now draw an easy link between this passage and the Mishnah to which it is attached. On first glance, the placement of this passage seems strange. The Mishnah, at the end of B. Shabbat 29b, addresses the conditions under which one may extinguish the Shabbat candles. The formulation seems straightforward and the Gemara begins its discussion in kind. But in exploring the permission that is given to extinguish the Shabbat light "for the sake of one who is ill," the Gemara draws a connection between the lamp and the soul. Now the discussion veers toward a broader discussion of extinguishing and igniting souls.

The Gemara weaves a path from the very concrete discussion of igniting and extinguishing lamps to the more metaphorical exploration of extinguishing and igniting souls. Judith Abrams notes that the

Gemara is metaphorically extending the mishnah and its concrete concern about extinguishing light. Shammai, with his brusque manner, is in danger of extinguishing the lights of curiosity and attraction toward Judaism. Hillel, with his open attitude and friendly demeanor, brings people "under the wings of the Shekhinah."¹⁹

In the realm of souls, in contrast to the matter of Shabbat lights, the concern is to light the flame, not extinguish it. Just as permission is given to extinguish the Shabbat light "for the sake of the ill," it is now clear that one may reach out beyond the bounds of the Jewish community to ignite souls. Hillel, the *anav*, succeeds in igniting souls by bringing them "under the wings of the Shekhinah," while Shammai extinguishes the souls.

Throughout this article I have treated this passage as a literary composition designed to convey a specific set of values, not as a historical account of the life of Hillel. There are consequences to that point of view. Viewed as a literary composition this passage reads as a sharply honed morality tale. The good and the bad are

clearly delineated. In what ways might this story accord with the historical record?

Hillel and Shammai are cultural icons within the rabbinic mythology. They are the earliest teachers to convey a significant body of learning. Though they are the last of the pairs delineated in the opening chapter of *Pirke Avot*, they are the first in significant ways. They are the first to leave schools of disciples. While there are relatively few teachings ascribed to Hillel and Shammai in the Mishnah, the schools of Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai are well represented. The proud tradition of rabbinic disputation seems to begin with Hillel and Shammai. For example, the Tosefta (*Hagiga* 2:8) asserts, “From of old [i.e., during the days of the *zugot*] they did not differ concerning *smikhah*...” Just after that the Tosefta (*T. Hagigah* 2:10) asks, “What is the issue of *smikhah* on which they differed?” and proceeds to articulate the difference between Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai on this matter. Hillel is portrayed as the one who comes up from Babylonia to restore a forgotten Torah to Israel.

For in ancient times when the Torah was forgotten from Israel, Ezra came up from Babylon and established it. [Some of] it was again forgotten and Hillel the Babylonian came up and established it. (*B. Sukkah* 20a)

Hillel and Shammai are acknowledged as the starting point for a variety of rabbinic traditions and mores.

Jaffee states the seminal role played by Hillel and Shammai in unequivocal terms. He asserts that the Mishnah and Tosefta find their grounding not in the distant past, nor in the writings of the prophets, nor in the traditions of the Second Temple scribes.

Indeed, the Mishnah and Tosefta find little need to locate rabbinic halakhic traditions in the distant past. With the exception of a single reference to a practice initiated by unnamed prophets (*M. Megillah* 3:5), the Mishnah identifies no *halakhah* from the pre-exilic period at all. Similarly, it attributes virtually nothing to anyone who might have lived from the time of the exiled Judeans’ return to their land under Cyrus in 539 B.C.E. until the beginning of the Hasmonean period, about 150 B.C.E., when traditions ascribed to the shadowy “Pairs” begin to emerge (e.g., *M. Hagigah* 2:2; cf. *M. Avot* 1:4–12). The earliest named figures routinely represented as passing on halakhic materials as oral-literary tradition are Hillel and Shammai, contemporaries who were active

toward the end of the first century B.C.E. and on into the first C.E., and whose disciples are routinely assigned opposing views in halakhic controversies.²⁰

Jaffee looks to the sources of the Mishnah and Tosefta and finds that Hillel and Shammai are the starting point. That matches the texts cited above that acknowledge these two personalities as the first in so many arenas.

With so much evidence pointing toward the seminal role played by Hillel it seems natural to read the tales about him through a historical lens. But there are problems. Presumably, Hillel lived from the middle of the first century B.C.E. into the middle of the first century C.E. Since there are no stories about him that include the Roman wars or the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, it is safe to assume that he died before that war erupted. His death is dated as roughly 30 C.E.

We have no contemporary mention of Hillel, nor any in the generation that followed. He is not mentioned in any of the writings that may have come from his lifetime, the Dead Sea Scrolls or the writings of any of the various other sectarian groups. Josephus makes no mention of Hillel either in his *History* or in the *Jewish Wars*. While some speculate that Josephus mentions Hillel using a Greek name, Pollion, the evidence is extremely weak and unconvincing.

The first direct mention of Hillel occurs in the Mishnah, composed approximately 210 C.E., minimally 180 years following his death. Unfortunately, we learn extremely little about Hillel from these first meager citations. Excluding *Pirke Avot*, Hillel is cited in ten Mishnah paragraphs commenting on seven different issues. Most famously he is noted for establishing the *prosbul*, a novel economic tool.²¹ In *M. Baba Metzia* 5:9 and *M. Arakhin* 9:4 he is cited on the related issue of lending. Three citations are related to the offerings for a festival or at the Temple.²² Finally, Hillel is cited twice on the issue of *Niddah*, though the quote is the same in both cases.²³ From these few citations we learn nothing of Hillel the person, nor do we learn much about his outlook. The material is simply too sparse to build on.

Pirke Avot is the first post-Mishnah composition of the Rabbinic movement. Neusner dates the compilation of the book about half a century later than the Mishnah, based in part on the listing of names included in the composition.

The chronologically latest names to appear in the tractate generally are thought to have lived in the middle of the third century, about a generation beyond the publication of the Mishnah by Judah the Patriarch. Thus we may guess that the tractate was compiled some time afterwards, perhaps around 250–275 C.E.²⁴

Hillel is quoted six times in the first two chapters of the tractate, but again we learn nothing about his person. No mention is made of family or background.

The earliest we find any story that tells of Hillel's background is in the Tosefta. For example, in T. Pesachim 4:1 we learn that Hillel was consulted for a ruling on whether the necessities of the Passover sacrifice override Shabbat when the fourteenth of Nissan falls on Shabbat. Hillel provides an answer and is appointed *nasi*. Though we are now beginning to learn some tales of Hillel, they are sparse.

The tale we have been considering first appears in B. Shabbat 30b. The Babylonian Talmud was compiled in the sixth century, nearly five hundred years after Hillel's death. The tale is not recounted, as we have seen, in the earliest levels of rabbinic literature. Indeed, no tale is recounted in the Mishnah or Pirke Avot. This tale is not found in the Yerushalmi nor in any of the tannaitic collections of midrash.

Perhaps it is useful to consider a parallel between the mythology surrounding Hillel and George Washington. Washington is clearly accepted as a key founder of our nation, as Hillel is a key founder of the Rabbinic movement. Both have become the object of legend. Several of the tales of Washington emerged early in the life of our nation; for example, the story of his chopping down the cherry tree, but they are inventions created for other purposes.

The story of Washington and the Cherry Tree, a tale that still lingers through probably every grammar school in the U.S., was invented by a parson named Mason Locke Weems in a biography of Washington published directly after his death.²⁵

We know that the tales of Washington were created shortly after his death and continue to circulate as if they were biography. But the tales of Hillel did not appear for five hundred years after his death! If we had not heard of George Washington and the cherry tree until this year, with no other information about his youth or back-

ground, would we accept it as history? Certainly not. Without a stronger basis it is hard to value this story as biography.

Many scholars agree that these tales cannot be considered historically accurate.

The Mishnah (and rabbinic tradition generally) knows very little about the pre-rabbinic sages who are alleged to have lived during the second temple period. Some of them, notably Hillel and Shammai (approximately the time of Herod), are the heroes of anecdotes of dubious historicity... Hillel, Shammai, and all the rest are disembodied names whose function is to bridge the gap between the prophets of the Bible and the rabbis of the Mishnah.²⁶

In addition to their function as a bridge between eras, these narratives serve as foundational tales for the Rabbinic movement. This literary tale was composed intentionally to invoke the stature of Hillel and to establish a position that no other character could make. This passage presents a morality tale in which Hillel repeatedly and decisively overcomes Shammai.

Hillel and Shammai represent two different schools of thought. Hillel welcomes the proselyte; Shammai beats him. Hillel shares the wisdom of the sages; Shammai guards it. Hillel is credited with many disciples including links to Judah HaNasi, the compiler of the Mishnah,²⁷ as well as the line leading to Yohanan ben Zakkai,²⁸ who founded the academy at Yavneh following the destruction of the Temple. Shammai has few disciples recorded by name, and none of them bears any ongoing significance for the development of the Rabbinic movement. Despite the significance of the two Houses of study, Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, only Hillel's lineage defines the future of the Rabbinic movement.

In addition to the ideological differences between the characters of Hillel and Shammai, there is a geographic difference. Hillel comes from Babylonia, which had an independent tradition of learning, while Shammai presumably comes from Judea.²⁹ The success of Hillel's lineage represents the ascendancy of the Babylonian school over the Palestinian.

Finally, and a bit speculatively, the moral of the tale might be told in the very names of the characters. Each name has a root in Hebrew that conveys meaning. The name Hillel certainly comes from the root H-L-L which means "praise." The name Shammai does not line up as easily, but could come from the root SH-M-M

which means “to be wasted or destroyed.” The message would then be complete from beginning to end; Hillel represents the salvific wave of the future and Shammai upholds the discredited program of the past.

The uniform contrasts between Hillel and Shammai add to the sense that this is a literary construct, not a biographical tale. The tale functions to read the rabbinic program back into an earlier time, specifically into the late Second Temple period. By invoking the mythic figures of Hillel and Shammai, this tale creates a bridge back to the ancient days. It also serves to justify the rabbinic program by retrojecting the evolving rabbinic methods and assumptions back to the period of the founders, Hillel and Shammai. As the opening paragraphs of M. Avot build a continuous chain of tradition from Moses to the rabbis, so this tale retrojects the methods and assumptions of the rabbinic program to an earlier time.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Rabbi Judith Abrams, who has served so well as my mentor in this and other studies. Her guidance has been invaluable.
Palmyra is known also as Tadmor, an oasis in the Syrian desert. See Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumin, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Pardes Publishing House, 1950), p. 1648.
2. At least that seems to be the import of the story at B. Pesachim 66a, where the Bene Batyra have forgotten the halakhah and call on Hillel to remind them. He is then appointed head over them. A similar, though shortened, version is recorded in the earlier text, Tosefta Pesachim 4:1.
3. Pinchas Artzi and editorial staff, “Tadmor,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* (CD-Rom version; Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1997).
4. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: An Introduction* (Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson, 1989), p. 5.
5. Martin Jaffee, *The Torah in the Mouth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 98. Throughout chapter 4, “The Ideological Construction of Torah in the Mouth,” Jaffee charts the emergence of the notion of the Written and the Oral Torah as a single revelation.
6. Among the studies on orality in ancient Israel, see particularly Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), and Martin Jaffee, *The Torah in the Mouth*.
7. Note particularly the tale of R. Meir, who would discourse at the end of Shabbat. Y. Sotah 1:4 and Leviticus Rabba, Tzav 9:9.

8. Martin Jaffee, *The Torah in the Mouth*, p. 80.
9. Also Arachin 16b, Horayot 10b, Sanhedrin 105a, Nazir 23b, and Sotah 23b.
10. Martin Jaffee, *The Torah in the Mouth*, p. 66.
11. Neusner argues that the very character of classic Jewish monotheism lies in a universal appeal to “the shared intellectual qualities of the human mind. It is a universal monotheism based on shared intellect.” Jacob Neusner, *Recovering Judaism: The Universal Dimension of Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. xi.
12. Since Avot D’Rabbi Natan is a late composition (seventh to ninth century), it is beyond the scope of this paper. It is of interest, nonetheless, that the editors of that text felt compelled to add a line to increase Shammai’s presence in the story.
13. Martin Jaffee provides a fascinating description of the ways in which the concept of the Dual Torah developed in his chapter, “The Ideological Construction of Torah in the Mouth,” in Martin Jaffee, *The Torah in the Mouth*, p. 84ff.
14. The dispute is found at B. Eruvin 101b.
15. I omit a later gloss that tries to minimize the offense.
16. VaYikra Rabba 13:1 records the three instances in which Moses loses his temper and his wisdom, but the details are not necessary here.
17. The prooftext that demonstrates that an anav will cause the Shekhinah to dwell on earth is in the part of the verse of Isaiah not quoted in the midrash. I include the fuller quotation here.
18. The end of M. Sotah 9:15 does not appear in the version of the Mishnah cited in either the Bavli or the Yerushalmi. The listing is found, however, at Y. Shabbat 1:3 8b and Y. Shekalim 3:3 14b. It is also included in the Bavli with a slightly different ordering of virtues at B. Avodah Zarah 20b. The difference in order is not significant in this context.
19. Judith Z. Abrams, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Topical Guide* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002), p. 17.
20. Martin Jaffee, *The Torah in the Mouth*, p. 80.
21. M. Shevi’it 10:3 and M. Gittin 4:3.
22. M. Hagigah 2:2, Eduyot 1:2 and 1:3.
23. Eduyot 1:1 and Niddah 1:1.
24. Jacob Neusner, *Torah from Our Sages: Pirke Avot* (Chappaqua, N.Y.: Rossel Books, 1984), p. 4.
25. “The Moral Washington: Construction of a Legend (1800–1920s)” found at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/gw/gwmoral.html>.
26. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), pp. 156–57.
27. B. Shabbat 15a.
28. Sifre Deuteronomy 357.

LOUIS A. RIESER

29. Shammai's roots are not described in any passage of the Talmud. He is located in Judea and is not described as coming from elsewhere, so I have presumed that he comes from Palestine and not from Babylonia.