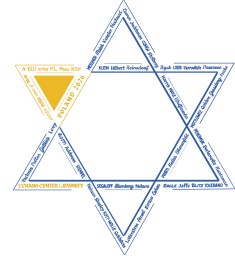


Beit Midrash | Shabbat 31a

Three Converts, Two Teachers, One Foot

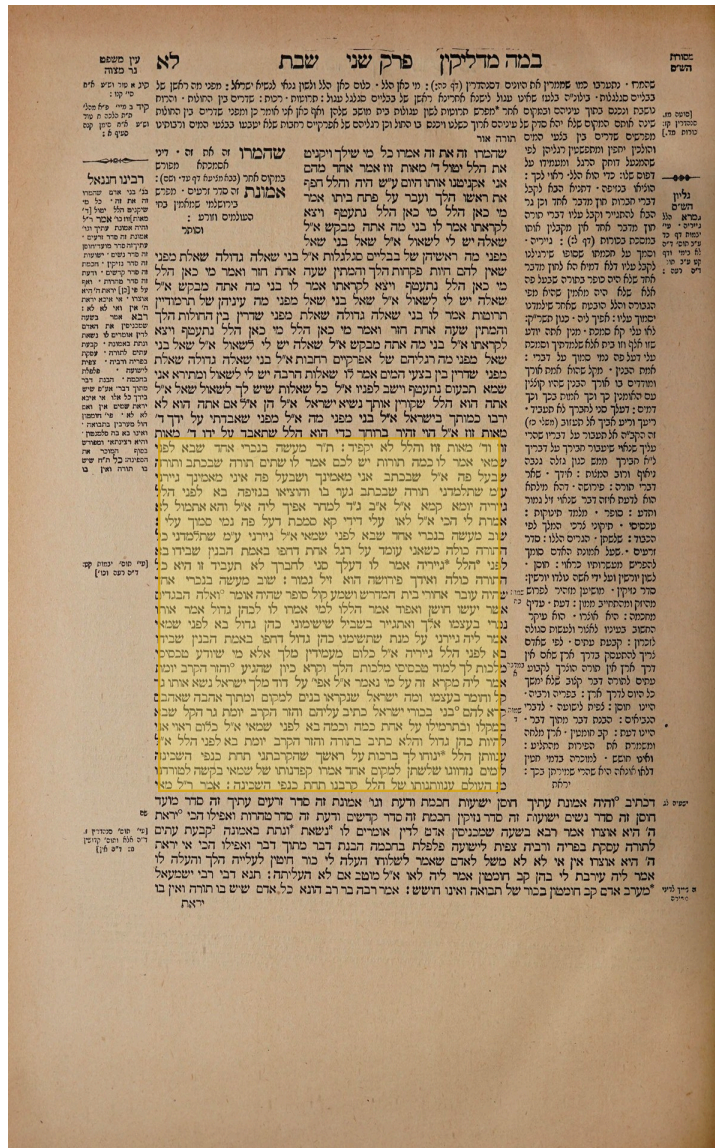
A *daf* is a two-sided page of Talmud. Today we open *Masechet Shabbat*, page 31a. The Talmud records 3 strangers who came, one after another, asking to become Jewish. Each one went first to Shammai, then to Hillel. Read slowly. Notice what each asks for, how each teacher answers, and what changes.



Sources

Text: Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, folio 31a. **Aramaic + English:** William Davidson Edition (Koren Noé Talmud with Steinsaltz commentary), CC BY-NC via Sefaria.org. **Biblical quotations:** Exodus 28:4; Numbers 1:51; Exodus 4:22 (all in Story 3). **Daf image:** Vilna Edition (Romm, 1883; 1925 reprint), Duke University Libraries / Internet Archive. Public domain.

Shabbat 31a in the Vilna edition. The highlighted region is our three stories and the coda.



Chavruta: Study in Pairs

12 minutes. You do not have to answer every question. Start with what pulls you.

- 1.** Which of the three strangers is asking something that feels familiar to you, and why?
- 2.** How does Shammai see the person standing in front of him? How does Hillel see the same person? What is the difference?
- 3.** Hillel says: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to another." Why the negative form, rather than "love your neighbor," as the whole Torah?
- 4.** He adds: "the rest is its interpretation. Go study." If the core is already given, why keep studying?
- 5.** In Story 1, Hillel teaches the alef-bet, then reverses it the next day. What is he really teaching? Would it have worked on you?
- 6.** The three converts later say Hillel's patience brought them beneath the wings of the Shekhinah. Where have you met a Hillel? Where have you met a Shammai?

1. The Convert Who Wanted Only the Written Torah

The Sages taught: There was an incident involving one gentile who came before Shammai. The gentile said to Shammai: How many Torahs do you have? He said to him: Two, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The gentile said to him: With regard to the Written Torah, I believe you, but with regard to the Oral Torah, I do not believe you. Convert me on condition that you will teach me only the Written Torah. Shammai scolded him and cast him out with reprimand. The same gentile came before Hillel, who converted him and began teaching him Torah. On the first day, he showed him the letters of the alphabet and said to him: Alef, bet, gimmel, dalet. The next day he reversed the order of the letters and told him that an alef is a tav and so on. The convert said to him: But yesterday you did not tell me that. Hillel said to him: You see that it is impossible to learn what is written without relying on an oral tradition. Didn't you rely on me? Therefore, you should also rely on me with regard to the matter of the Oral Torah, and accept the interpretations that it contains.

תנו רבנן: מעשה בגוי אחד שבא לפני שמאי. אמר לו: כמה תורות יש לכם? אמר לו: שתיים, תורה שבכתב ותורה שבעל פה. אמר לו: שבכתב אני מאמינה, ושבעל פה — איני 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: לאו עלי דידי קא סמכת? דעל פה נמי סמוך עלי.

2. On One Foot

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.

שוב מעשה בגוי אחד שבא לפני שמאי. אמר לו: גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה בשאני עומד על רגל אחת! דחפו באמת הבגנו שבגדו. בא לפני הלל, גייריה. אמר לו: דעלך סגי לחברך לא תעביד — זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך פירושה הוא, זיל גמור.

3. The Convert Who Wanted to Be High Priest

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 eford, and a robe, and a tunic of checkered work, a mitre, and a girdle” (Exodus 28:4). The gentile said: These garments, for whom are they designated? The students said to him: For the High Priest. The gentile said to himself: I will go and convert so that they will install me as High Priest. He came before Shammai and said to him: Convert me on condition that you install me as High Priest. Shammai pushed him with the builder’s cubit in his hand. He came before Hillel; he converted him.

שוב מעשה בגוי אחד שהיה עובר אחריו בית המדרש, ושמע קול סופר שהיה אומר: “ואלה הבגדים אשר יעשו חושן ואפוד”. אומר: הללו למי? אמרו לו: לכהן גדול. אמר אותו גוי בעצמו: אלה ואתגזיר בשביל שישמוני כהן גדול. בא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: גזירני על מנת שתשמוני כהן גדול. דחפו באמת הבגן שבגדו. בא לפני הלל, גזירה.

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 Bible. When he reached the verse which says: “And the common man that draws near shall be put to death” (Numbers 1:51), the convert said to Hillel: With regard to whom is the verse speaking? Hillel said to him: Even with regard to David, king of Israel. The convert reasoned an a fortiori inference himself: If the Jewish people are called God’s children, and due to the love that God loved them he called them: “Israel is My son, My firstborn” (Exodus 4:22), and nevertheless it is written about them: And the common man that draws near shall be put to death; a mere convert who came without merit, with nothing more than his staff and traveling bag, all the more so that this applies to him, as well.

אמר לו: כלום מעמידין מלך אלא מי שיודע טכסיסי מלכות, לך למוד טכסיסי מלכות. הלא וקרא. פיון שהגיע “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 שאהבתם קרא להם: “בני בכורי ישראל”, כתיב עליהם “והזר הקרב יומת” — גר הקל שבא במקלו ובתרמילו, על אחת כמה וכמה.

Coda

The convert came before Shammai and told him that he retracts his demand to appoint him High Priest, saying: Am I at all worthy to be High Priest? Is it not written in the Torah: And the common man that draws near shall be put to death? He came before Hillel and said to him: Hillel the patient, may blessings rest upon your head as you brought me under the wings of the Divine Presence. The Gemara relates: Eventually, the three converts gathered together in one place, and they said: **Shammai’s impatience sought to drive us from the world; Hillel’s patience brought us beneath the wings of the Divine Presence.**

בא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: כלום ראוי אני להיות כהן גדול? והלא כתיב בתורה: “והזר הקרב יומת”. בא לפני הלל, אמר לו: ענוותן הלל, ונחו לך ברכות על ראשך, שקרבתיני תחת כנפי השכינה. לימים נזדווגו שלשתן למקום אחד, אמרו: קפדנותו של שמאי בקשה לטורדנו מן העולם, ענוותנותו של הלל קרבתנו תחת כנפי השכינה.

Source: Shabbat 31a:5–9 (Davidson / Sefaria). See Sources on page 1.