

Hillel v. Shammai (Jerusalem, ca 30 BCE)

The Case of the Three Converts

We all know the story of the great rabbis,
Shammai & Hillel. Or do we?

CASE 1: The Skeptical Convert

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.

The Talmud encourages us to side with Hillel over Shammai, yet both are eminent Torah scholars who (it is said) disagree on only 3 issues [Shabbat 14b].

1. *Make the case for Shammai's point of view. E.g. Why should a world-renowned teacher waste time on a student with a questionable attitude?*
2. *Hillel seems like a really nice teacher (rabbi). But are his arguments compelling? Should the student be convinced?*

CASE 2: The Impatient Convert

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.



Builder's
Cubit Stick

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.

The
Golden
Rule

3. *Here we have a student with naïve, even arrogant, expectations. Would you take on such a student to learn medicine? Aviation? Your own discipline? Why or why not?*
4. *What's the message here on desired traits for rabbis or teachers in general? Have you ever felt like Shammai, e.g. dealing with "snotty" middle-schoolers or "keg-happy" college students?*

CASE 3: Short or Long Way?

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* [sleeveless garment], 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.



Priest,
looking cool!

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 of royalty is appointed king? Go and learn the royal protocols by engaging in Torah study.

5. *What’s Hillel pulling here? The convert wants to be High Priest, not King.*

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 a [*kal vachómer*] 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.

Simple &
complex
cases

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.

6. *The student wants instant gratification. Shammai sends him packing, yet Hillel invites him down a long path to find his own answers. Have you ever chosen the quick fix that doesn’t pan out as opposed to the “long path”? How did it go?*

7. *What do you think of the student’s analysis: if an ordinary (born) Jew could never aspire to become a priest, how could a “mere” convert expect to? Is this an argument you’d endorse today?*



CASE CLOSED: Hillel for the Win

The Gemara [commentary] 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.**

Shammai believed only the most worthy students should be admitted to Torah study. **Hillel** believed less capable students could change their ways and become Torah scholars: Hillel started out as a poor woodcutter, beginning his own scholarly career at age 40.

8. *Have you had a patient teacher in your life who's made a difference: a friend or co-worker even?*
9. *Contrariwise, have you ever had a toxic teacher, who "sought to drive [you] from [their] world"? What did you do?*

In the Torah, the word for **immigrants** is **ger-im**. By the Talmudic period, the Rabbis use the term overwhelmingly to refer to **converts**— another case of outsiders who wish to join the group.

10. *How might this text be used to create a Talmudic approach to the treatment of immigrants? Would you follow Beit Hillel or Beit Shammai? What do you think the Talmudic rabbis' position would be?*

We remember Hillel for his version of the **Golden Rule** (page 1), which is almost lost in the drama: "**That which is hateful to you, do not do to another.**"

11. *Is there a connection between the Golden Rule and the Talmud's ideal teacher?*
12. *If the Torah and Talmud tell us we should treat converts and immigrants well, what would you infer (**kal vachómer**) about how we should treat one another?*