

RITES OF PASSAGE: RABBINIC AND PRIESTLY MODELS

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INTRODUCTION

One erev Shabbat perhaps 50 years before the Common Era Hillel fell asleep on the roof of the study hall. He was a regular student there, but this day he lacked the necessary tuition and was denied entry by the guard. It was the middle of winter, the solstice, and snow fell that night blanketing the eager student. In the morning the teachers looked up from their darkened room, saw Hillel outlined in the skylight. Even though it was Shabbat, they went outside and carried him down. They brought him into the study hall, revived and warmed him. So goes the outline of a popular Talmudic tale (B. Yoma 35b) included in many religious school books¹. It is an appealing story for use in that setting. After all, it demonstrates the ethic that one violates the Shabbat in order to save a life. The story presents Hillel as the model of surpassing devotion – Torah study persists despite his poverty. More, it provides a dramatic example of the value of Talmud Torah: indeed this is a student who struggles to attend class, even on a snow day! How we wish our students would absorb the lesson of Hillel the student!

I contend that this story of Hillel conveys a much deeper message. Mishnah Yoma 3:6-7, to which this story is connected, concerns the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. The story itself, as presented in the Gemara, is one of three tales linked in a triptych focused on entering heaven. Read within this context the story is less about entering the Academy for class than about entering the new era of Rabbinic Judaism.

While a simple reading yields an appealing story of a struggling student, a close reading reveals an implausible tale.

It was reported about Hillel the Elder that every day he used to work and earn one tropaik, half of which he would give to the guard at the House of Learning, the other half being spent for his food and for that of his family. One day he found nothing to earn and the guard at the House of Learning would not permit him to enter. He climbed up and sat upon the window, to hear the words of the living God from the mouth of Shemayah and Avtalion. They say, that day was the eve of Sabbath in the winter solstice and snow fell down upon him from heaven. When the dawn rose, Shemayah said to Avtalion: Brother Avtalion, on every day this house is light and today it is dark, is it perhaps a cloudy day? They looked up and saw the figure of a man in the window. They went up and found him covered by three cubits of snow. They removed him, bathed and anointed him and placed him opposite the fire and they said: This man deserves that the Sabbath be profaned on his behalf.

There are three points at which a careful reading raises eyebrows. First, perhaps most glaring, is the snow. Three cubits – four and one half feet of snow – would do a great deal more than chill the aspiring student. Anyone buried under that much weight and cold would be dead of hypothermia or suffocation by morning. They could bathe and anoint him all they pleased, but it

¹ Two of the textbooks that include this story are Naomi Passachoff, **Basic Judaism for Young People, Vol. 1**, W. Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1986, pg. 26 and Sol Scharfstein, **Understanding Jewish History, Vol. 1**, Hoboken, NJ: KTAV, 1996, pg. 92-3.

would not revive him. According to the Encyclopedia Judaica² snow is infrequent in Jerusalem, falling primarily in January or February – not December as this story demands. Additionally, a heavy rain in Jerusalem would be 2 inches, converting to perhaps a foot of snow. Four feet plus of snow falling overnight on a December night in Jerusalem is simply not credible. Second, it is curious that the date is specified as the coincidence of Shabbat and the solstice. It is not a rare event, occurring every 7 years³, but it is an auspicious time of transition on multiple levels – from ordinary to holy time and from the fall to winter season. Simply locating the story at the crossroads of so many transitions begs the question of what other transitions are imbedded in the tale. Thirdly, the proclamation at the end of this section seems extravagant. After all, it is a clear principle that one violates the Shabbat in order to save a life.⁴ Yet the proclamation at the end of this tale suggests that this one was even more deserving. Because of the proclamation, the fact that they anointed Hillel may be more significant. Without the proclamation, the anointing would seem a standard part of washing, but alongside the proclamation there is a hint that something more may be afoot.

In order to better understand this tale I want to examine it within the larger context provided by the other stories of the triptych and the frame offered by the Mishnah. Within that context we will see this story in the frame of entering and transformation. We will also consider whether Hillel is truly the key player in the triptych. We will examine the story as one of a “rite of passage”, but will suggest that it is not Hillel but the Rabbinic movement that is the object of this transformation. This reading is supported by other accounts of Hillel within the literature which place him at a crucial juncture within a lineage of Torah that extends from Moses to Judah haNasi – each in turn responsible for bringing the Torah to the People Israel. Viewed through these lenses, Hillel emerges from the snowy mound on the roof as the crucial link in the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism.

MISHNAH

The Gemara that includes the story of Hillel explicates Mishnah Yoma 3:6-7. (In the text of the Mishnah this is presented as two Mishnayot, but in the text of the Babylonian Talmud it stands as one Mishnah. For the sake of this paper I will discuss this as one Mishnah, following the pattern of the Talmud.)

They brought him to the Parwah Chamber which stood in holy ground. They spread a linen sheet between him and the people. He sanctified his hands and his feet and stripped off his clothes. R. Meir says: He stripped off his clothes and then sanctified his hands and his feet. He went down and immersed himself, came up and dried himself. They brought him white garments; he put them on and sanctified his hands and his feet.

In the morning he was clothed in Pelusium linen worth twelve *minas*, and in the afternoon in Indian linen worth eight hundred *zuz*. So R. Meir. But the Sages say: In the morning he wore [garments] worth eighteen *minas* and in the afternoon [garments] worth twelve *minas*, thirty *minas* in all. These were at the charges of the congregation, and if he wished to spend more he could do so at his own expense.

The Mishnah describes the preparations taken as the High Priest readied himself to enter the Holy of Holies to make the offering for Yom Kippur. Several transitions are marked within the text. The transition from ordinary space to holy space was marked both on a communal and personal

² Elisha Efrat, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Jerusalem: Geography and Archeology”, CD-Rom version.

³ Wondering if the coincidence of Shabbat and the solstice might tell us a precise date for this story I contacted several astronomers via the Internet. The answers I received agreed that this is not an uncommon event, but that since the systems of calculating the calendar have changed so often in the interim it would be impossible to date the story by reference to the solstice.

⁴ The Mishnah (Yoma 8:6) already states with clarity in the name of R. Mattyah b. Heresh: “Whenever there is a doubt whether life is in danger this overrides Shabbat.”

level. On a communal level a physical boundary was created by the linen sheet which separated the High Priest from all others. The change of clothing and the sanctification of hands and feet effected the personal transition of the High Priest. The clothing for this occasion is distinct from that used for all other occasions. Even the description of the garments worn by the High Priest constitutes a separation, an economic separation.

This Mishnah places us precisely at the moment of transition. Chapters one and two of Mishnah Yoma describe the early preparations for Yom Kippur – the preparations of the High Priest in the week preceding the observance as well as the preparations of the altar. Immediately before our Mishnah there is a description of the Daily offering made by the High Priest. Immediately following our Mishnah the High Priest enters to perform the rituals of Yom Kippur. But our Mishnah places the High Priest on the threshold, now ready to enter the Holy of Holies.

As we will see the theme of transition is the key. The preparation that is required for the High Priest and the transition that he will undergo as he fulfills this ritual of Yom Kippur and the story of Hillel can be read to include parallel steps. Just as the High Priest stands on the threshold, so we will see that Hillel is perched on a threshold of his own. And like the High Priest, Hillel is preparing for a momentous entry into a new and holy status.

GEMARA

The Gemara to this Mishnah is brief. Quick definitions are offered for the terms Parwah and Byssus (translated as linen above). Then the discussion shifts to focus on the value of the clothing worn by the High Priest. Two instances are cited in which the mothers of High Priests made very expensive garments for them to use. The first concerns R. Ishmael b. Phabi whose mother made him a garment worth 100 minas. Then they tell of an exquisite cloak made for R. Eleazar ben Harsom by his mother. This cloak was worth 20,000 minas. The weave was so fine that he looked naked, and R. Eleazar was removed from the altar by his fellow priests.⁵

It is the mention of R. Eleazar which serves as the apparent bridge to the Baraita that follows. The Baraita states that the poor, the rich and the sensual come before the heavenly court. On one level the Baraita fits simply because it provides an additional description of R. Eleazar b. Harsom, who is the exemplar of the rich person who nonetheless devotes himself to study of Torah. But a close reading points us in other directions.

First, a look at the Baraita (B. Yoma 35b) as a whole:

- 1) Our Rabbis taught: The poor, the rich, the sensual⁶ come before the [heavenly] court.
- 2) They say to the poor: Why have you not occupied yourself with the Torah?
If he says: I was poor and worried about my sustenance, they would say to him: Were you poorer than Hillel?

It was reported about Hillel the Elder that every day he used to work and earn one tropaik, half of which he would give to the guard at the House of Learning, the other half being spent for his food and for that of his family. One day he found nothing to earn and the guard at the House of Learning would not permit him to enter. He climbed up and sat upon the window, to hear the words of the living God

⁵ These two stories are first recorded in the Tosefta (Yom Kippurim 1:21-22) but the values are reversed. Ishmael's cloak is valued at 20,000 minas, and Eleazar b. Harsom's at 100 minas.

⁶ The text uses the word "rasha", literally wicked one. But based on the description later, that he was one troubled by his "yetzer", evil inclination toward sexuality, I have used the term, "sensual" from the Soncino translation.

from the mouth of Shemayah and Avtalion. They say, that day was the eve of Sabbath in the winter solstice and snow fell down upon him from heaven. When the dawn rose, Shemayah said to Avtalion: Brother Avtalion, on every day this house is light and today it is dark, is it perhaps a cloudy day. They looked up and saw the figure of a man in the window. They went up and found him covered by three cubits of snow. They removed him, bathed and anointed him and placed him opposite the fire and they said: This man deserves that the Sabbath be profaned on his behalf.

- 3) To the rich man they said: Why have you not occupied yourself with the Torah?

If he said: I was rich and occupied with my possessions, they would say to him: Were you richer than R. Eleazar?

It was reported about R. Eleazar b. Harsom that his father left him a thousand cities on the continent and over against that one thousand boats on the sea. Every day he would take a sack of flour on his shoulder and go from city to city and from province to province to study the Torah. One day his servants found him and seized him for public service. He said to them: I beg of you, let me go to study the Torah. They said: By the life of R. Eleazar b. Harsom, we shall not let you go. He had never seen them, for he was sitting all day and night, occupying himself with the Torah.⁷

- 4) To the sensual person they would say: Why have you not occupied yourself with the Torah?

If he said: I was beautiful and upset by sensual passion, they would say to him: Were you perchance more beautiful than Joseph?

It was told of Joseph the virtuous that the wife of Potiphar every day endeavored to entice him with words. The garments she put on for him in the morning, she did not wear in the evening, those she had put on in the evening, she did not wear in the morning. She said to him: Yield to me! He said: No. She said: I shall have you imprisoned. He said: *The Lord releases the bound.* (Psalm 146:7) She said: I shall bend thy proud stature. He replied: *The Lord raises those who are bowed down.* (Psalm 146:8) She said: I shall blind your eyes. He replied: *The Lord opens the eyes of the blind.* (Psalm 146:8) She offered him a thousand talents of silver to make him yield to her, *to lie with her, to be near her,* (Gen. 39:10) but he would not listen to her; not to *'lie with her'* in this world, not *'to be with her'* in the world to come.

- 5) Thus [the example of] Hillel condemns the poor, [the example of] R. Eleazar b. Harsom condemns the rich, and [the example of] Joseph the virtuous condemns the sensual.

The baraita shares several concerns with the Mishnah. Both describe the preparations to enter before Divinity. The High Priest will enter the Holy of Holies while the poor, the rich and the sensual will enter the heavenly court. The Priest must go through a process of sanctification in order to successfully enter the Holy of Holies. The baraita describes a parallel path in which Torah serves as the prerequisite for entering the Holy realms of heaven. Just as the High Priest is separated from the ordinary people as part of his preparation, so these others must separate

⁷ A similar report of his wealth is included in the Yerushalmi (Ta'anit 4:8), "There were 10,000 cities on the king's mountain; Eleazar b. Harsom owned 1,000 of them, and corresponding to them he owned 1,000 ships on the sea, and all were destroyed."

themselves from their particular social condition, overcoming their circumstances in order to succeed.

R. Eleazar b. Harsom wanders the world to study Torah, living a peddler's life in spite of his huge wealth. He is as divorced from his wealth as possible – he does not recognize his own employees, nor do they recognize him. His sole focus is Torah, and that is sufficient to make him an exemplar of the rich who are nonetheless devoted to Torah. Similarly, Joseph declines the erotic enticements offered by Potiphar's wife and remains unmoved by her cruel threats. He maintains his loyalty to God and Torah, which is sufficient to make him the exemplar of the one who overcomes the attraction of the sensual world to study Torah.

The example of Hillel bears strong similarities to the other two. Like the other men featured in this baraita, Hillel distinguishes himself through his devotion to Torah. Like the other two, his life is put at risk because of his study. Eleazar is seized by his servants, Joseph is threatened by the wife of Potiphar, and Hillel “nearly” freezes to death. In some manner, each of them overcomes their social condition. Each earns and deserves praise for their devotion.

Hillel is subtly distinguished from the other two characters by movement. Ben Harsom, as we learn in Y. Yoma 17b, is brought down from the altar by his fellow priests who considered his robe immodest. Joseph, of course, is thrown down into the pit by his brothers, goes down into Egypt and is thrown down into the dungeon following the false accusation of Potiphar's wife. Only Hillel goes up – climbing up to the roof. While ben Harsom and Joseph both descend, Hillel ascends.

Hillel is explicitly differentiated from the other two because of the proclamation at the end. “This man deserves that the Sabbath be profaned on his behalf.”⁸ Going out to pull the freezing Hillel off the roof should be a given, even a commonplace, decision. But extravagant note is made of the choice to save Hillel and the comment invites further attention.

SOME DIFFICULTIES IN THE GEMARA

While the baraita seems to offer a balanced presentation, there are some difficulties with this passage that are of interest to our exploration. The baraita offers three different kinds of characters, instead of three who would be parallel to one another. Joseph is Biblical, ben Harsom is primarily priestly, while Hillel is clearly rabbinic. Additionally, the structure of the passage raises some question as to which character is most important, if any.

One could question why Hillel is the central character in this triptych. He is, after all, only one of three characters profiled. Structurally, we might be more inclined to focus on the middle character or even the last. The opening position might seem to be the least important position. Additionally, one might ask why the three characters in the triptych are drawn from different communities. It might read better if they were all three Biblical characters or all rabbinic personalities instead of two rabbinic and one Biblical character. They certainly could have found a rabbinic character to fill the role of the “sensuous” one.⁹ So what can we learn from the structure of the triptych?

I suggest that the editor wanted to contrast the two characters – Hillel and ben Harsom – but with some subtlety. The Mishnah and the discussion in the Gemara focus the reader on the priests

⁸ The Mishnah (Yoma 8:6) already states with clarity in the name of R. Mattyah b. Heresh: “whenever there is a doubt whether life is in danger this overrides Shabbat.”

⁹ For example, B. Menahot 44a, the tale recounted by R. Nathan. See below page 7.

preparing to enter the most sacred space of the Temple. While in the Yerushalmi this passage concludes with the story of ben Harsom and his finely woven cloak, the Bavli adds the triptych, refocusing the reader on the values of the rabbinic movement. The reader now considers the ability of “the poor, the rich and the sensuous” to enter heaven. The version in the Bavli contrasts the rabbinic value with the priestly hegemony over the Temple.

I believe the editor deftly turns the structure of the passage to his purpose. While a cursory reading of the piece will give the reader the impression that ben Harsom, the priest (and the stand-in for the priestly model), is central, a closer reading will show that he is displaced by the lowly Hillel who is in the least important position. In order to understand this argument we need to look at each of the three positions in the triptych and consider why they are presented as they are.

Ben Harsom is a contradictory character. He earns praise in three ways: he is one of only four High Priests who served in the Second Temple for longer than a single year, indeed his tenure lasted eleven years.¹⁰ He also earns note for his extraordinary wealth, as described in our text and others.¹¹ As noted in our text he is also recognized as a sage, denoted by the title *rabbi*. This praise, however, is tarnished by the further tales of ben Harsom. He is referred to a total of 15 times in the Talmud. Accounting for parallels there are only 5 distinct tales.

While ben Harsom is one of the four priests who serve multiple years, nonetheless his fellow priests remove him from the altar. The version recorded in Y. Yoma 17b is slightly more explicit than our text. The Mishnah limits the amount of public funds to be spent on the clothing for the High Priest, but allows him to spend more of his own money on the stipulation that the clothing now belongs to the community.

A tale of Rabbi Eleazar ben Harsom. He wore a garment worth 20,000 minas, ascended and made an offering at the altar. His fellow priests removed him from the altar because he appeared naked in that garment. What did he do? He soaked the garment (so the water would cause the fabric to swell and cover him better) and he circled the altar 7 times. (Y. Yoma 17b)

The version found at B. Yoma 35b adds that the garment was bought by his mother, but excludes the solution of wetting the garment so he could continue on the altar. In the Yerushalmi this story of ben Harsom closes the gemara on this point.

Why do they remove him? The explicit reason is that he appears immodest.¹² But perhaps there is another reason as well. Our gemara (B. Yoma 35a) records two instances in which the mother of the High Priest provided their own, more expensive garments. The first is R. Ishmael ben Phabi who spends 100 minas. The second is ben Harsom who spends 20,000 minas – *200 times as much*. Perhaps the story does not praise ben Harsom, but points out the arrogance of wealth. Despite (or because) of all his wealth he has clothes that do not cover. His expensive clothes bring shame in the place of honor. His display causes him to be removed from the scene. While the text seems to praise ben Harsom as one of the few “good” High Priests, this story suggests that his tenure was not exemplary. It may be that he flaunts his wealth in an era when the office of High Priest was characterized by corruption. The story may show his arrogance more than his merit.

Ben Harsom is noted for his wealth, as noted (B. Yoma 35a) “his father left him 1000 cities on the continent and 1000 ships on the sea.” Our passage seemingly praises ben Harsom for his

¹⁰ B. Yoma 9a.

¹¹ B. Kiddushim 49b, parallels found at Y. Ta’anit 24b and Midrash Rabbah, Lamentations 2:4.

¹² T. Yoma 1:23

ability to devote all of his efforts to study. His example is cited as a response to those who say they have no time to study because they must attend to the needs of their economic empires. Ben Harsom, by contrast, wanders the world with a sack of flour on his shoulder. He is so divorced from the workings of his empire, however, that he is nearly kidnapped into forced labor by one of his own employees. He escapes only by paying a large ransom.

By contrast, other stories about ben Harsom's wealth reveal an empire that is crumbling as a result of neglect. In our text we learn that his workers are kidnapping people off the street. He does not know – or object – to the practice. A second story is cited in Lamentations Rabba 2:4 (with a parallel at Y. Ta'anit 24b).

There were 10,000 cities on the King's Mount. R. Eleazar ben Harsom owned 1000 of them, and corresponding to them he owned 1000 ships on the sea. The taxes of three of these cities – Kabul, Shihin and Magdala [were so heavy] that they had to be carried to Jerusalem [in a wagon]. Why was Kabul destroyed? Because of the dissension that was rife there. Shihin [was destroyed] because of the witchcraft which prevailed in it, and Magdala because of its licentiousness.¹³

While these stories effectively demonstrate how unconcerned and undistracted ben Harsom was by his possessions, they simultaneously illustrate the high moral cost of such neglect. As owner and steward of these properties ben Harsom is implicated in kidnapping, communal conflict, witchcraft, and prostitution. This hardly seems the background one would proclaim as a Torah scholar – nor would it seem a hearty recommendation for one to earn their way into heaven.

This background changes the portrayal of ben Harsom. He is neither the exemplary priest nor the ideal of wealth that one might have assumed. Yes, he is High Priest, but is removed by his fellow priests. Yes, he opts to spend his time in Torah study, but it leads to moral disaster in his possessions. It is also curious that he is listed as “rabbi” though it is not clear that he has a teacher or any disciples. He is a wanderer; not a regular student in a set house of study. Against this background ben Harsom seems damned by faint praise. He occupies the central position in the triptych, but can hardly stand as the strongest character.

The triptych could focus on the third position, but in this case it is anomalous. Joseph is chosen as the ideal of the sensuous character who earns his way into heaven. He is not comparable to the other two characters, both of whom come from the early rabbinic period. The choice of Joseph must be conscious, since the rabbis could easily have chosen one of their own to illustrate the devotion of the sensuous person. Indeed the tale recounted by R. Nathan in B. Menachot 44a would serve this purpose well. He tells of one man who was very scrupulous about the mitzvah of Tsitsit. He heard of a very high priced harlot and made an appointment with her. But at the last minute he was struck in his face by the fringes, and he turned from his pursuit of her to return to the study of Torah. So moved was the harlot that she demanded the name of the school in which he studied Torah. She divided her wealth and went to the school of R. Hiyya to become a proselyte. In the end she converted and married the student who visited her. The text notes: “This is the reward in this world; and as for its reward in the future world I know not how great it is.” Surely this story could have illustrated the point as well as the story of Joseph.

While Joseph may serve adequately to illustrate a person who is both sensual and virtuous, he does not serve as a contrast to either of the other two characters. It would be as if comparing apples and oranges. He serves, in effect, as a placeholder. While he illustrates the point, he does

¹³ Rabbi Dr. H Freedman and Maurice Simon, **The Midrash Rabbah, Vol. 4**, London: The Soncino Press 1977, pg. 162.

not serve as a living example in the way that Hillel and ben Harsom do. He is from ancient times, while they are roughly contemporary. He acts out of the old paradigm, while they are contending for the new one.

Once Joseph is no longer a contender, the passage contrasts the characters of Hillel and ben Harsom. As ben Harsom's glow fades the spotlight shines even more strongly on Hillel, the unlikely contender who sits in the least important spot of the piece. He is poor, but he is a student who struggles to learn from his teachers in a recognized house of study, and he is devoted to raising up disciples who will carry the tradition forward. Hillel embodies the virtues of the rabbinic model as none of the others do. With no other contenders left (neither the Biblical nor the priestly character serve) it is the rabbinic model that prevails. With a struggle between the priestly and the rabbinic factions, this shift serves to put down the priestly faction in a subtle but effective way. Hillel simply overshadows ben Harsom.

Now, we too can turn our attention to Hillel, who "deserves" special notice. He occupies a pivotal place in both the mythology and the history of the Rabbinic movement. The proclamation of his special status in this story serves as one more note among many to his pivotal role as the new Judaism of the rabbis begins to emerge.

RITE OF PASSAGE

The key elements of the Hillel story correspond to the stages common to a rite of passage ritual. A rite of passage, as described by Victor Turner, "indicates and constitutes transitions between states."¹⁴ The ritual serves to move one (or a group) from one status to the next. It marks a significant change in the life of the individual or group. The most recognized transition is from childhood to adulthood or from the rank of a neophyte to an initiate. The rite of passage includes "three phases: separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation."¹⁵ One can easily draw a comparison between the stages of the rite of passage described by Turner and the story of Hillel. As we look at this story through the lens of the rite of passage we will first mark Hillel's movement through the three stages. In order to appreciate the new status that emerges, however, we will need to examine the lineage ascribed to Hillel by the tradition.

"The first phase of separation comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure or a set of cultural conditions (a "state")."¹⁶ According to the story, Hillel is a regular student at the House of Learning. He pays his fees regularly and takes his place. There is no reason to think that he is unknown to the guards, or that he would be considered a risk for payment. Perhaps the guards are under orders never to allow a student to enter on credit, but that seems a very strict measure for a school (or a movement) that is so young and tentative as the early rabbinic movement seems to be.

Hillel's exclusion from the House of Learning can be viewed as the first step in a rite of passage. The regular, and ordinary student, is denied entrance; separated from his fellow students and teachers. Rather than going home, or demanding to see someone in charge, he complies with the exclusion only to invent a novel way around it. He goes up on the roof and rests on the skylight – though in the beginning of the story he does not block the light streaming into the room. Hillel is now perched on the edge literally and figuratively – he balances on the roof but also places

¹⁴ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols*, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*", Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967, pg. 93.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pg. 94.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 94.

himself between the teaching of the Holy word and the Heavens. Hillel is in between – just as the rite of passage would have him be as he enters the liminal stage of the ritual.

“During the intervening liminal period, the state of the ritual subject (the “passenger”) is ambiguous; he passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.”¹⁷ When Hillel ascends to the roof he is on the edge in every way. He is physically balanced on the edge of the building. His position places him spiritually between the Holy teaching and the Heavens. He is on a temporal edge between the ordinary time of the week and the sacred time of Shabbat. He is on an astronomic edge between fall and winter as the solstice marks the changing of the seasons. Finally Hillel finds himself buried in the snow, on the edge between life and death. Every aspect of the story prepares us to see Hillel move from one side to the other – to cross over the edge.

While it is easy to understand many of the ways in which this story places Hillel on the edge, it is worth a particular look at the image of snow in this story. Hillel is covered with a huge amount of snow, three cubits (4 ½ feet) as measured by the text. As noted earlier, it is not a credible claim for two reasons. First, it vastly exceeds any normal expectation of snow in Jerusalem. Secondly, that volume of snow would likely kill the young student.

The amount of snow is significant, however. The measure of three cubits shows up in two other contexts. The first source appears in the vision of Ezekiel. In the 25th year of exile Ezekiel was taken by the “hand of the Lord” and brought to Jerusalem where he was shown the city in all its details. “Mortal, look closely and listen attentively and note well everything I am going to show you...and report everything you see to the House of Israel.” (Ezekiel 40:4)¹⁸ Ezekiel records the details of the altar which stands before the Lord: “a wooden altar three cubits high and two cubits long and having inner corners.” (41:22) The altar is the place where offerings are made to God; it is the contact point between heaven and earth. Trapped on the roof, Hillel is symbolically suspended between heaven and earth and also teeters between life and death.

A second significant reference to the measure of three cubits is found regarding the mikveh. As part of his preparation the High Priest immersed himself multiple times in a mikveh, a ritual bath. The dimensions of a mikveh are detailed numerous places within the Talmud. In B. Yoma 31a it describes the mikveh this way: “What is its quantity? One cubit by one cubit with a depth of three cubits. The Sages set the measure of the waters of the mikveh at 40 seahs.”¹⁹ Just as the High Priest purified himself in a volume of three cubits of water, so Hillel is symbolically purified by the same volume of snow, crystallized water.

The images of the altar and the mikveh overlap. Each serves a transformative role in the life of the community -- the mikveh through its ritual of purification, the altar as the place where Israel’s sacrifices are accepted by God. Buried under three cubits of snow Hillel is symbolically purified, readied for the next step.

There are other significant ways in which snow serves as a potent image in the liminal period of this rite of passage.

¹⁷ Op. Cit., Victor Turner, pg. 94.

¹⁸ **Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures**, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988, pg. 962.

¹⁹ See also B. Eruvin 14a.

Hillel is literally buried under the snow. That matches one of the ways in which the liminal period may be enacted. Turner notes, “The neophyte may be buried, forced to lie motionless...”²⁰ Hillel is covered, left alone in the darkness of that long night. Buried under a heap of snow, and certainly not dressed for the occasion, it is fair to speculate that Hillel suffered from hypothermia and was on the verge of death, if he had not already crossed over. As Shabbat entered, as the other students surely went home to mark the observance, Hillel remained on the roof. It was only as the next day’s lessons began that Shemayah noticed their darkened study room and discovered the motionless body of Hillel. The students removed him from his snowy “grave” and brought him in to be reborn. The mound of snow serves as a parallel to the burial of the neophyte described by Turner.

Snow can be seen as a sign of blessing. When Isaiah states: “Be your sins like crimson, they can turn white as snow....” (1:18), the image is of snow as a sign of purity and ritual cleanness. Snow is crystallized rain, so we can derive the symbolic meaning of snow from that of rain. Ellen Frankel states that rain, since it falls from heaven, “symbolizes the descent of spirituality into our world, a material manifestation of the divine.”²¹ Even the whiteness of snow can serve as a positive sign. When R. Eleazar b. Azariah is chosen to ascend to the presidency of the Sanhedrin at Javneh, his wife worried that he would not receive the proper honor due the position because he was so young. As recorded in B. Berachot 28a, a miracle occurred for him that day and 18 rows of his hair turned white. Viewed through this symbolic lens, Hillel is abundantly blessed by the mound of snow that covers him with blessing and purity, preparing him for the next stage.

“In the third stage the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations of a clearly defined and “structural” type...”²² Hillel is brought down from the roof, bathed and anointed. As noted earlier this all would be commonplace were it not for the proclamation that follows: “This man deserves that the Sabbath be profaned on his behalf.” In light of this proclamation the word, “anointed”, takes on added meaning.

The root of the word “sikhuhu” has to do with pouring or anointing with oil.²³ It can be a part of one’s grooming. Naomi counsels her daughter-in-law, Ruth, to “bathe, anoint yourself, dress up and go down to the threshing floor.” (Ruth 3:3) Ruth is not merely getting ready to greet the day, but is making herself attractive in preparation for her meeting with Boaz. The same word is listed among the afflictions of Yom Kippur (M. Yoma 9:1): “On the Day of Atonement it is forbidden to eat, to drink, to wash, to anoint oneself, to put on sandals or to have marital intercourse.” More importantly, the term anointing signifies the anointing of a king or the Messiah. So Psalms (2:6) “But I have anointed My king on Zion, my holy mountain.” Perhaps the most evocative use of the term is found in Ezekiel 16: 7-9 the term is used in a longer passage in which God makes a covenant with the people Israel: “You were still naked and bare when I passed by you [again] and saw that your time for love had arrived. So I spread my robe over you and covered your nakedness, and I entered into a covenant with you by oath – declares the Lord God; thus you became mine. I bathed you in water and washed the blood off you, and anointed you with oil.”

²⁰ Op. Cit., Victor Turner, pg. 96.

²¹ Ellen Frankel and Betsy Platkin Teutsch, **The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols**, “Rain”, Northvale, N.J.: Jason Aronson Inc., 1992, pg 134.

²² Op. Cit., Victor Turner, pg. 94.

²³ Marcus Jastrow, **A Dictionary of the Targumin, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature**, vol. II, New York: Pardes Publishing House, Inc., 1950, pg. 963.

It is striking that the verses from Ezekiel have a consonance with the story of Hillel. In our story Hillel is brought in, washed, anointed, and restored to his position by the fire. In the verses from Ezekiel we find a similar order – she is noticed, brought into the covenant, washed, cleansed, anointed, and dressed so that she became fit for royalty. The order is not exact, but similar enough to make us understand that Hillel’s anointing carries special significance.

In our setting the term carries the more significant meaning. Because the proclamation sets this story off from the other two in the triptych it is reasonable to conclude that this “anointing” points us to something more than a mere cleansing of the body. Hillel, the only one to fully embody the rabbinic ideal, is anointed because of the new, elevated status he enters. The rite of passage is complete.

HILLEL’S NEW STATUS

But what is the new status accorded to Hillel? The fledgling Pharisaic movement does not gain in power with the appearance of Hillel. Indeed, Josephus, a century later, clearly describes a competition between various parties for the claim to the leadership of the Jewish people. And there are certainly other rabbis who place a distinctive mark on the character of the rabbinic movement. But Hillel stands at the beginning.

In order to understand why Hillel stands at the beginning we need to consider his role from several sides. On the simplest level we will contrast Hillel and his teachers, Shemaya and Avtalion. As we will see there is a significant difference in the quality of the material concerning Hillel’s biography and that describing the background of Shemaya and Avtalion. It is also essential that we consider the way in which the texts place Hillel in the longer lineage of Torah. We will see that Hillel sits at a crucial juncture in the development of Rabbinic Judaism, a juncture recognized in both the self-description of the text and in the historical record.

A rite of passage does not mean that the subject emerges wise and mature, only that the new stage of life has been entered. The ritual marks the point of departure as the subject, now a new person, grows into the new status. Hillel sits at just that point in the development of the rabbinic movement.

HILLEL AND HIS TEACHERS

We know very little about Hillel’s background. From our story we know that he was poor and that he had a family, since half of his earnings went to support them. We learn from Sotah 21a that Hillel had a brother, Shebna, who was successful in business and offered Hillel a role in the business. Hillel declined the offer in order to devote himself to the study of Torah. And we learn from B. Pesachim 66a that Hillel came from Babylon.

Contrast this biography with the one story that constitutes the background of Shemaya and Avtalion. Their story is recorded in two passages in the Bavli.²⁴ Both passages list the descendants of archenemies of the Jewish people who studied Torah, converted to Judaism or otherwise allied themselves with the Jewish People. The list includes Naman, the Syrian general who kills Ahab (II Kings 5); Nebuzaradan, who destroys the Temple under orders from Nebuchadnezzar (II Kings 25); descendants of Sisera; and descendants of Haman. Shemayah and Avtalion are included in this list as the descendants of Sennacherib. The passage from B.

²⁴ B. Sanhedrin 96b, paralleled at B. Gittin 57b. The two passages are identical at the beginning. The Sanhedrin passage suggests that even the descendants of Haman studied Torah at B’nei Brak, but the angels objected to God’s intention to bring them “under the wings of the Shekhinah”.

Sanhedrin notes that they taught Torah to the multitude while the parallel from Gittin says they gave public expositions of the Torah.

It is not necessary to view any of these accounts as historical in order to see that they present significantly different portraits of these teachers. The accounts of Shemayah and Avtalion reside entirely in the realm of myth. Not a single detail is offered to suggest a flesh-and-blood person or a normal biography. There is no mention of where they came from, how they chose the path toward Torah, whether they had wives or children, if they had any other occupation. While the accounts of Hillel are sparse they do provide the basic information of a biography. We are told he had a brother, a wife, children; that he had an occupation, and a place of origin.

Shemayah and Avtalion reside in the mists of myth. Hillel's story has aspects of a real biography. The difference is significant. It is one reason I suggest that Hillel stands at the beginning of the line of Rabbinic Judaism.

THE TRADITIONAL LINEAGE

A number of passages describe a distinguished genealogy for Hillel. It is important to read these passages with an appreciation of the difference between a genealogy based on biology and one based on a lineage of Torah. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz details the ways in which one's Torah lineage supercedes even biological kinship ties.²⁵ "The rabbinic community thus formed a set of Torah ties that competed with and in some cases superceded kinship loyalties. Rabbis fathered "children" through teaching Torah."²⁶ Eilberg-Schwartz cites a number of texts from the Mishnah in which attention to one's teacher takes precedence over attention to one's biological father. And he notes the teaching that one's father brings one into this world, while one's teacher brings one into the world to come. (M. Baba Metzia 2:11)²⁷

Hillel's impressive lineage of Torah contrasts sharply with the spare biographical details we are given about his life. A series of texts, some later and some early, situate Hillel at a critical juncture in the history of the transmission of Torah. He is linked with Moses, David, and Ezra going back and Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai, Akiba and Judah Ha-Nasi going forward. These connections tell us a great deal about the position attributed to Hillel in the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism.

He is linked to Moses, as well as Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai and Rabbi Akiba:

And Moses was 120 years old: He was one of 4 who died at age 120, and these are they: Moses and Hillel the Elder, Rabban Johanan b. Zakkai and Rabbi Akiva. Moses was in Egypt 40 years and in Midyan 40 years and sustained Israel for 40 years. Hillel the Elder came up from Babylon at age 40, served the sages for 40 years and sustained Israel for 40 years. (SIFRE DEUTERONOMY 357)

He is descended from David:

²⁵ He develops this idea at length in two of his books: Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, **The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism**, Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1990, pg. 229 ff., and Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, **God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism**, Boston: Beacon Press:, 1994, pg. 211 ff.

²⁶ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, **God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism** Boston: Beacon Press:, 1994, pg. 212.

²⁷ Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, **God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism**, Boston: Beacon Press:, 1994, pg. 213.

The Rabbis debated this question. From whom was Hillel descended? R. Levi said: A genealogical scroll was found in Jerusalem, in which it was written that Hillel was descended from David. (GENESIS RABBAH 98:8)

He is linked with Ezra. Significantly here Hillel is specifically associated with the establishment, indeed the reclamation, of Torah.

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. Sukka 20a)

He is tied to the Patriarch, and so to Judah Ha-Nasi:

Surely it was taught: Hillel and Simeon [his son], Gamaliel and Simeon wielded their Patriarchate during one hundred years of the Temple's existence. (B. Shabbat 15a)²⁸

One other aggadah assigns Hillel a crucial place in this lineage of Torah:

On one occasion [some Rabbis] were sitting in the upper chamber of Gurya's house in Jericho; a *Bat Kol* was granted to them from heaven which announced, 'There is in your midst one man who is deserving that the Shechinah should alight upon him, but his generation is unworthy of it'. They all looked at Hillel the elder; and when he died, they lamented over him, 'Alas, the pious man! Alas, the humble man! Disciple of Ezra!' (B. Sotah 48b)

This genealogy places Hillel at the pivotal juncture in the transmission of Torah. On one hand, this list is concerned with the preservation of Torah, while on the other hand it follows the line of those who established a viable community.

Moses transmits the Torah from God to the people. When the Torah is forgotten by the Jews in the Land of Israel, it is returned to the people by Ezra after the Babylonian exile. Later, when the Torah is again forgotten by the people in Israel, Hillel brings the Torah from Babylon. It is striking that in each instance the Torah is brought from outside and presented/restored to the people. Were it not for Hillel, Torah might have been forgotten and lost. So Hillel stands with Moses and Ezra as the ones who gave the Torah to Israel.

Similarly Hillel is credited with a critical position in the lineage that orders the Mishnah. The text from the Sifre Deuteronomy 357 links Hillel with Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai and with Rabbi Akiba. In B. Shabbat 15a he is linked with the Patriarchate, and so with Judah HaNasi. Just as Hillel stands with Moses and Ezra to give the Torah, so he stands with Rabbi Akiva and Judah HaNasi to order the Mishnah. Indeed Hagiga 14a suggests that from "the days of Moses until Hillel there were 600 orders of the Mishnah... But in Hillel's time respect for the Torah became weak, so Hillel and Shammai only established six orders."

Hillel then stands at the junction point. Moses and Ezra both present the Torah to the People. Hillel does likewise and stands as the last in that line preserving the Written Torah. Simultaneously he is the first in the line developing the Mishnah, the earliest version of the Oral Torah we now possess.

²⁸ While the tradition states with some clarity that Simeon, Rabban Gamaliel, etc. stem from Hillel's biological line, this cannot be demonstrated. Rabban Gamaliel "is supposed to have been the son of a certain Simeon who in turn was Hillel's son. The existence of this Simeon is highly doubtful ...but even the assumption that Gamaliel was Hillel's son, or at least belonged to his school, cannot be demonstrated." Strack & Stemberger, **Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash**, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, pg. 67.

Hillel holds a similar position in the development of a stable community. David, of course, becomes king and establishes his hereditary line. Ezra re-establishes the community after the return from the Babylonian exile. Hillel is reported to have established a school, as did Shammai, which institutionalizes the transmission of Torah. Similarly Yohannan ben Zakkai establishes the academy at Yavneh.

Jacob Neusner notes that *Pirke Avot* details two stems along which the tradition develops – the sages on one side and the patriarch on the other.

One is the stem represented by the name of Judah the Patriarch and his two sons, hence, late-second- and early-third-century C.E. authorities. Judah the Patriarch stands behind the Mishnah as a whole. So he was one principal figure.

The other stem lists Yohanan ben Zakkai and his disciples. Yohanan ben Zakkai bridged the abyss from the time in which the Temple stood to the aftermath of the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E. and the founding of the sages' movement and school at Yavneh."²⁹

Hillel stands at the head of both lines of development.

Moses, David and Ezra established the nation. Rabban Yohanan b. Zakkai, R. Akiba and Judah Ha-Nasi develop the Oral Tradition. But it is Hillel who stands at the crossroads.

THE HISTORICAL RECORD

The history of the period is sketchy, at best. And the record presented by the rabbinic texts might be more reliably read as their mythology than as their history. It is clear that there exists a gap in the tradition's version of its history between Ezra and Hillel. "Early rabbinic statements which purport to relate the sequel to Ezra's activities are notoriously sketchy. Until they reach the time of Hillel (a gap of almost 350 years) they name very few names and supply only random notes about both the topics of scholastic research and the methodology of its applications. Instead, what they provide are patent idealisations, most of which are clearly designed to convey an impression of infrequently interrupted consensus."³⁰ And when the story resumes on the near side of that gap – the side on which we encounter Hillel – the consensus is broken; disputation has entered the picture.

The consensus breaks with the appearance of Hillel and Shammai. The *Tosefta* (*Hagiga* 2:8) asserts "From of old [i.e., during the days of the *zugot*] they did not differ concerning *smicha*..." Just after that the *Tosefta* (*T. Hagiga* 2:10) asks, "What is the issue of *smicha* on which they differed?", and proceeds to articulate the difference between Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai on this matter. The two camps are presented as being sharply at odds, so much so that they threatened the unity of the Torah. A dispute concerning grapes that would be used for making wine is recorded in *B. Shabbat* 17a. A vote is called for and this is the description of the proceedings: "And on that day Hillel sat submissive before Shammai, like one of the disciples, and it was as grievous to Israel as the day when the [golden] calf was made."³¹

This is not the place to examine the various disputes between Hillel and Shammai or their schools. Rather it is sufficient to note that with the appearance of Hillel and Shammai on the scene something seems to change. There is more recorded disputation between the camps. The

²⁹ Neusner, Jacob, **Torah From Our Sages: Pirke Avot – A New American Translation and Explanation**, Chappaqua, NY: Rossel Books, 1984, pg. 7.

³⁰ Stuart A. Cohen, **The Three Crowns: Structures of Communal Politics in Early Rabbinic Jewry**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, pg. 74.

³¹ Rabbi Dr. I Epstein, **The Soncino Talmud, Shabbat, Vol. 1**, London: The Soncino Press, 1938, pg. 70.

characters are presented within the text in greater detail. Hillel is not the first recorded member of the rabbinic line, but he is the first to be portrayed in such detail and with such depth.

Neusner argues that the sage forms an integral part of the canon alongside Scripture and Mishnah. “In saying what the other parts meant and in embodying that meaning in his life and thought, [the sage] took primacy of place.”³² It was important for the Talmud to record the life of the sage in a way that had not been true for Mishnah. So this tale of Hillel is preserved only in the Bavli, as is true of a majority of the biographical tales about him.³³

It is striking to consider that this tale, which purportedly occurred some 50 years before the Common Era, was first recorded over 500 years later in the compilation of the Bavli. What would make this story relevant at that juncture of history?

One factor could be simply that Hillel hails from Babylonia. The claim that a central character in the development of the Rabbinic model comes from Babylonia could be a valuable asset in the competition between the Babylonian and Palestinian communities.

Additionally, we have already considered that the story pits Hillel, the sage, against the model of R. Eleazar ben Harsom, the priest. In that match ben Harsom fairs badly. His wealth and arrogance lead to his removal from the altar, the destruction of his properties, and the moral decay that follows from his neglect. Hillel, and by extension the Rabbinic model, emerges from that match as the paragon of virtue.

Finally, it may also be worth considering what it is that Hillel strives for in the story, and how that might make this an appealing story for the editors of the Bavli. In the triptych Joseph acts to evade the clutches of Potiphar’s wife and quotes Psalms in the process. B. Harsom wanders the world studying Torah, but he is alone. Hillel struggles to hear the words of Torah from the mouth of his teacher. It is Hillel who personifies the ideal of the Rabbinic movement. At the core of the Rabbinic movement is the relationship of teacher and disciple which is implicit and necessary to the Oral Torah.

This story reinforces the myth of the dual Torah as existing from the days of Sinai. Neusner offers this comment to another story of Hillel, where a heathen asks first Shammai and then Hillel, “How many Torahs do you have?” (B. Shabbat 31a)

“The foregoing passage is most commonly cited as evidence of belief “from very early times” in the doctrine of the two Torahs. Since it speaks of Hillel, it is conventionally assumed that people in the time of Hillel held such beliefs. But, as we observe, the story occurs for the first time only in the final composition of the entire rabbinic canon. Standing by itself, it demonstrates that at circa A.D. 500—600, people not only believed in the myth of the two Torahs but ascribed that conviction to Hillel.”³⁴

In a similar way this tale serves to demonstrate the ideal of the Rabbinic movement. The distinctive model of teacher and disciple prevails in conveying the dual Torah – by written word and by word of mouth.

³² Jacob Neusner, **Judaism: The Classic Statement – The Evidence of the Bavli**, Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1986, pg. 45.

³³ Jacob Neusner, **Judaism: The Classic Statement – The Evidence of the Bavli**, Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1986, pg. 149-150.

³⁴ Jacob Neusner, **Judaism: The Classic Statement – The Evidence of the Bavli**, Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 1986, pg. 222.

REPRISE: THE MISHNAH

So far I have asserted that the story is not to be understood merely as a pious tale supporting the virtue of learning. Nor should it be seen as simple praise for persevering in the face of poverty. I suggest that the story differs from the two other tales of the triptych because of the final proclamation declaring the special worth of this man, Hillel. One step remains. Finally I want to consider the placement of the story in connection with this Mishnah which describes the preparation of the High Priest to enter the Holy of Holies.

I noted earlier that the triptych is included in part because of the mention of R. Eleazer b. Harsom. In the Gemara Eleazer is mentioned as an example of a priest who wore expensive robes and the triptych is added to deepen our understanding of his character. All three stories are used, not merely the one about R. Eleazer b. Harsom, because they constitute one piece, a literary unit that could not be divided. That might be a sufficient explanation for including the story here.

There are, however, parallels between the entry of the High Priest and the story of Hillel to be considered. The description of how the teachers, Shemayah and Abtalion, revive Hillel bears a striking similarity to the way the High Priest is prepared in the Mishnah.

Both are separated from all others. The High Priest is brought to the Parwah Chamber and separated from other by the linen sheet. Hillel is excluded from the House of Study and then covered by a blanket of white snow.

Both are stripped of their clothes and bathed. The High Priest is stripped of his clothes and immersed in 3 cubits of water. Hillel, unconscious under 3 cubits of snow, is brought into the study house and bathed by his teachers.

Both are dressed again. The High Priest receives new white garments and sanctifies himself. Hillel is anointed.

Both then enter before the fire. The High Priest moves toward the fire to make the Holy offerings. Hillel is placed before the fire where the final proclamation of the story declares him to be especially noteworthy.

These four parallel steps suggest that there is a conscious reason for including this story at this place in the Talmud. The High Priest enters the Holy of Holies to present the sin offering and to atone for the people. It is all an enactment of the verse from Torah: "For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you: from all of your sins shall you be clean before the Lord. (Leviticus 16:10)" His success in presenting the offerings of the people means that the people will survive and thrive.

If I am correct in considering the tale as a rite of passage, then we now know something more of what is on the other side of that passage. Hillel ushers in the new era of the rabbinic movement. The old patterns of Torah and Bible give way to the new methodologies of Mishnah and Midrash. The text points to important parallels between the High Priest, the three examples in the triptych and the role of Hillel. The High Priest prepares to enter into the Holy of Holies. Each of those noted in the triptych prepares themselves to enter into heaven. And Hillel prepares the Jewish people to enter a new, blessed and holy path that will become known as the rabbinic movement.

We know that the rabbinic path was not the only possible path along which Judaism might have developed. Josephus describes some of the other varieties of Judaism existing at his time.

Historians have described more of the various groups that vied for the honor of preserving the “true” Judaism. The sages who created the rabbinic movement surely understood that other possible paths existed and created a mythology to support the claims of their path. I suggest that this simple story of Hillel frozen like a snowman on the roof of the House of Study is one support for that mythology – marking the coming of age of the tiny movement that would define Judaism for the next two millennia.