

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

LIGHT=WELCOME

"We'll leave the light on for you!" is a phrase that means, "No matter how late you return, we welcome you!" This is by no means simply a modern turn of phrase. Rather, it is a concrete and metaphorical expression of the concept, "Come on in. We welcome you." The stage for the exploration of this metaphor comes, in the mishnah, unsurprisingly, with the examination of the Shabbat light and why it may be extinguished and what justifications do not suffice for doing so.

One who extinguishes the [Shabbat] light because he is afraid of idol worshippers, because [he's afraid of] robbers [or] because of an evil spirit, and if it was for a sick person, so that he might sleep, he is absolved [of the sin of putting out the Shabbat light. [But if he put the Shabbat light out]. [But if he put it out] to spare the light or to spare the oil or to spare the wick [i.e., to conserve them and not let them burn to honor the Sabbath then he is] guilty [of this sin]. (Mishnah Shabbat 2:5)

The mishnah here deals with a very concrete issue. When is it permissible to put out the Shabbat light? If there is a threat of danger or to help a sick person sleep, one may snuff out the light. However, if it was simply to preserve the materials of light-making, then this behavior is not allowed. Notice that it is all in one's intention. The same act may be accepted or forbidden depending on one's motivation.

The Gemara takes this concrete mishnah about when to keep a light burning and when to put one out and extends it metaphorically to knowledge and wisdom. Which texts should be saved (kept lit) and which should be forgotten (snuffed out)? And in whom does wisdom burn most brightly? Whose wisdom should light Judaism's way. These metaphorical questions, implicit in the text, are answered by an extended passage about the different styles of two important teachers: Hillel and Shammai.

Our Rabbis taught: let a person always be forbearing like Hillel and not irritable like Shammai. A story is told of two men (31a) bet against each other. They said, Anyone who can go and make Hillel angry will win 400 zuz. One of them said: I will go and anger him. That very day was the Sabbath eve [the time on Friday afternoon when preparations for Shabbat are carried out in a hurry so that they may be done before the sun sets]. And Hillel was washing his head. [The man who'd made the bet] went and entered [Hillel's] house, saying: Who here is Hillel? Who here is Hillel?. [Hillel] wrapped himself up and went out to greet this person and he said to him: What do you desire?

He said, I have a question to ask.

He said to him, Ask, my son, ask!

Why are the Babylonians' heads so round?

He said to him, My son you have asked a great question. [The answer is] because they do not have skilled midwives [to shape their heads correctly at birth].

He went away, hesitated for an hour and returned and said: Who here is Hillel? Who here is Hillel? [Hillel] robed himself and went out to meet him. He said to him, My son what do you desire?

I have a question to ask, said he.
Ask my son, ask! said [Hillel].
Why are the eyes of the Tarmodin [desert dwellers] bleared?
My son, you have asked a great question, replied he, because they live in sandy places.

He went away, hesitated for an hour and returned and said: Who here is Hillel? Who here is Hillel?
[Hillel] robed himself and went out to met him. He said to him, My son what do you desire?

I have a question to ask, said he.
Ask my son, ask! said [Hillel].
Why are the feet of the Africans wide?
He said, my son, you have asked a great question. It is because they live in watery marshes.
He said to him [Hillel], I have many questions to ask but I feel afraid lest you become angry
[with me taking up all your time].
[Thereupon] he robed and sat down before him and said to him: All the questions that you
have to ask, ask.
He said to him, Are you the Hillel who is called the Prince of Israel?
He said to him, Yes.
He said to him, If you are he, may your like not increase in Israel.
He said to him, My son, why?
He said to him, Because I have lost four hundred zuz on account of you [not losing your
temper].
He said to him, Be careful of your spirit. Hillel is worth it that you should lose four hundred
zuz and [yet another] four hundred zuz because of him, and Hillel did not lose his temper.

Our Rabbis taught: An idolater once came before Shammai. He said to him: How many Torahs do you
have?

He said to him: Two, the Torah in Writing and the Oral Torah.
He said to him [Shammai]: I believe you about the Written [Torah] but I do not believe you
about the Oral Torah. Convert me on the condition that you teach me [only] the Written
Torah.
[Shammai] became angry with him and removed him from the premises with a reprimand.
[This same man] went before Hillel who converted him. On the first day he taught him, Alef,
bet, gimmel, dalet. The next day he reversed [them] to him.
He said to him, But yesterday you did not say it to me this way?
He said to him: Didn't you depend on me for this [information about the Written Torah]? So
for this also [i.e., the Oral Torah] depend on me.

There was yet another story about an idolater who came before Shammai.

He said to him: Convert me on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand
on one foot. He [Shammai] pushed him away with the builder's cubit-measure which was in
his hand. He came before Hillel, who converted him. He said to him: What is hateful to you,
do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole, complete Torah and the rest is its commentary
thereof. Go and learn.

There was yet another story about an idolater who was passing behind a Study House when he heard a
teacher's voice saying, "And these are the garments which they shall make: a breastplate and an ephod.
(Exodus 28:4)"

Said he: For whom are these [fine garments]?
They said to him, For the high priest.
So that idolater said to himself: I will go and convert so that I may be made a High Priest [and

wear the garments I heard described]. He went before Shammai and said to him: Make me a High Priest. But [Shammai] pushed him away with his builder's cubit-measure that he had in his hand. He then went before Hillel, who converted him [to Judaism].

[Hillel] to him: Can any man be made a king but he knows the arrangements of kingship? Go and learn the arrangements of kingship! He went and read [about this subject]. When he came to [the verse], "[And when the tabernacle goes forward, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is pitched, the Levites shall put it up] and the stranger [ger, the same word as convert] that comes near [it] shall be put to death (Numbers 1:51)" he said to him Hillel: To whom does this verse apply? He said to him: Even to David King of Israel.

That convert reasoned to himself an a fortiori [case]: If Israel, who are called children of God and who, in [the] love [He] loved them, He called them, "Israel, my son, my firstborn (Exodus 4:22)" it is written about them, "[And when the tabernacle goes forward, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is pitched, the Levites shall put it up] and the stranger [ger, the same word as convert] that comes near [it] shall be put to death (Numbers 1:51)", how much more so a convert [ger] who comes with [only] his staff and wallet [in hand, with no ancestral merit].

He [then] came before Shammai [and] said to him: Am I fit to be a High Priest? Is it not written in the Torah, "and the stranger that comes near shall be put to death?" He went before Hillel [and] said to him: O kind Hillel, blessings rest on your head for bringing me close, under the wings of the Shekhinah!

[After] some time the three [converts] met in one place. They said: Shammai's impatience sought to drive us from the world but Hillel's kindness brought us under the wings of the Shekhinah. (B. Shabbat 30b-31a)

These stories--some of the most well-known in all of rabbinic literature--could have been placed anywhere in the Talmud. Why here? Because the Gemara is metaphorically extending the mishnah and its concern about extinguishing light. Shammai, with his brusque manner, is in danger of extinguishing the lights of curiosity and friendliness toward Judaism. Hillel, with his open attitude and friendly demeanor, brings people "under the wings of the Shekhinah". It is his example we are to follow. We are to leave a candle in the window, metaphorically speaking, to welcome all those who would enter into Judaism.

Discussion Questions:

1. As you prepare your house and yourself for Pesach, imagine Shammai checking out your kitchen. Then imagine Hillel. Given the passages above, how do you think they would see you?
2. As you use light in your final bedikat chameits, your checking the house for leavened products, and light the festival candles, imagine extending those lights metaphorically. What are you searching for on a spiritual level? Is there something you've been holding on to that you'd like to let go?

Happy Pesach!