

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted April 12, 2001 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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OOPS! LET'S DO IT AGAIN!

I apologize for putting too much information in the last set of email study materials. My enthusiasm for the Hillel and Shammai stories got away with me! Let's try it once more in a more manageable size.

Hillel and Shammai were the heads of two competing schools of thought. Hillel was more open to converts and beginners while Shammai tended to be stricter and less patient. In addition, Shammai interpreted the Torah much more literally and sided with the rich than Hillel. With that as background, let's look at one of the most famous passages in all of rabbinic literature

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. (B. Shabbat 30b-31a)

Discussion Questions:

1. Hillel's view is almost always the one accepted as law, not because his rulings are any wiser than Shammai's but because he was willing to sight Shammai's views before his own. The sages seem to be saying that *menschlikhkeit* is every bit as important as objectively being "right". When, in your life, has this been so? When has it not? Why?
(For example, some surgeons are brusque, at best, but we tolerate them because their technical skills are so good.)
 2. Hillel assumes that you know what is hateful to you, yet that requires great self-awareness. There's no conventional yardstick for behavior here. The way you treat people is directly related to your unique soul. So what is hateful to you? Have you avoided doing it to other people?
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