

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

THE SAYINGS OF HILLEL: THE ZEN OF MITSVAH MAINTENANCE

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We have been taught a great deal about Hillel: that he was one of the greatest sages, that he formed a school that was the alternative to his co-leader Shammai, that he was from Babylonia and was, as a person, patient and kind. That is what we have been told.

However, looking directly at what Hillel is reported to have said, we get a much different picture of the man. First, it must be said that scholars are not convinced that Hillel existed at all. Josephus, the Roman historian of that time, makes no mention of him and we have no proof of his existence except the texts we find in rabbinic literature. Second, relying on biographical material in rabbinic literature is a risky proposition. The stories about him that we know best (e.g., teaching a person the Torah while he's standing on one foot) are very late; lagging some 500 years after Hillel would have lived.

So how can we best get to know Hillel better? One approach would be to look at what he is reported to have said. One of his most famous teachings is preserved in Pirkei Avot:

Im ein ani li, mi li? "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"
Ukh'she'ani l'atmi, mah ani? "And when I am for myself, what am I?"
V'im lo akhshav eimatai? "And if not now, when?" (Pirkei Avot 1:14)

The Hebrew is included here in transliteration because it has a distinctive rhythm and style. Contrast that saying with this one:

At Simchat Beit Hasho'eivah [the all-night water-drawing ceremony at the end of Sukkot] Hillel the Elder would say:

Im ani kan, hakol kan, "If I am here, everything is here."
v'im eini kan, mi kan? "And if I were not here who would be here?"

And he would also say:

Lamakom she'ani ohev sham raglai molichot oti. "My legs lead me to the place I love."
Im tavo el beiti ani avo el beitcha. "If you come to my house, I will come to your house."
Im atah lo tavo el beiti "If you do not come to my house, "
ani lo avo el beitcha, I will not come to your house." (B. Sukkah 53a)

Discussion Questions:

1. These two sayings, attributed to Hillel the Elder at the most festive ceremony of the year, seem difficult to explain. Does he really mean that if he was not at the ceremony then it would be as if it never happened? Or does it mean that each person must take the attitude that their attendance at the celebration is crucial?
2. Perhaps even more difficult to explain is the teaching about coming to his house. Does it mean that one must

come and learn from Hillel first and then he will come and learn from you? Or does "my house" refer to the Temple?

3. What, if anything, do these sayings have in common? What do you make of the emphasis on reciprocity that seems to be a feature of these sayings?

I look forward to hearing your thoughts!