

How do we connect?

SUNDAY EVENING
NOVEMBER 10, 2019 | 12 HESHVAN 5780

WARMING UP

(Take about 10 minutes)

Think of a particularly good teacher or mentor of yours. Now consider this question: What was it about you that enabled that teacher or mentor to be successful? Use the space below to make some notes.

Follow the Small Group Halacha, introducing yourselves and sharing your answer to the question above.

HAVRUTA STUDY

Take about 20 minutes to read the following in *havruta* (pairs) and discuss the questions that follow with your partner. Read through all of the texts, including the piece below, the piece from Talmud, and that from Pirkei Avot. Questions follow.

Consider the following observation by educator and writer Parker Palmer:

The relation established between the knower and the known, between the student and the subject, tends to become the relation of the living person to the world itself.

What Palmer seems to say is that way we relate to teachers, authorities, subjects, and work has a way of molding the way we relate to people and ideas and also to life in general. In the essay that this quotation comes from, Palmer goes on to argue for educational reform that is rooted in the idea that life and knowledge are fundamentally communal enterprises. He defines community as “a capacity for relatedness within individuals—relatedness not only to people but to events in history, to nature, to the world of ideas, and yes, to things of the spirit.”

Community is a word we use a lot in Jewish Federations and in Jewish life generally. But we have some questions: What is community? How do we build community today? How do we help people connect with each other, institutions and organizations, ideas, history, tradition, the world? How do we do it when they haven't necessarily grown up with those connections, or even know that those connections could be good for them or be important in their lives? And what do we need to change or give up in order to help those we seek to engage to experience community on their own terms?

A Story about Engagement from the Talmud

The Talmud¹ tells the stories of three converts, each of whom came to the sages Shammai (50 BCE - 30 CE) and Hillel (110 BCE - 10 CE) seeking to join the Jewish people. Working with your neighbor (a havruta partner), please read together the stories as well as the short piece from Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Sages) that follows and then turn to the discussion questions below the stories.

תלמוד בבלי שבת לא.

תנו רבנן מעשה בגוי אחד שבא לפני שמאי אמר לו כמה תורות יש לכם אמר לו שתים תורה שבכתב ותורה שבעל פה אמר לו שבכתב אני מאמינך ושבועל פה איני מאמינך גיירני על מנת שתלמדני תורה שבכתב גער בו והוציאו בניזיפה בא לפני הלל גייריה יומא קמא אמר ליה אב גד למחר אפיך ליה אמר ליה והא אתמול לא אמרת לי הכי אמר ליה לאו עלי דידי קא סמכת דעל פה נמי סמוך עלי:

שוב מעשה בגוי אחד שבא לפני שמאי אמר לו גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו בא לפני הלל גייריה אמר לו דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד זו היא כל התורה כולה ואידך פירושה הוא זיל גמור שוב מעשה בגוי אחד שהיה עובר אחורי בית המדרש ושמע קול סופר שהיה אומר ואלה הבגדים אשר יעשו חושן ואפוד אמר הללו למי אמרו לו לכהן גדול אמר אותו גוי בעצמו אלך ואתגייר בשביל ששימוני כהן גדול בא לפני שמאי אמר ליה גיירני על מנת שתשימי כהן גדול דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו בא לפני הלל גייריה אמר לו כלום מעמידין מלך אלא מי שיודע טכסיסי מלכות לך למוד טכסיסי מלכות הלך וקרא כיון שהגיע והזר הקרב יומת אמר ליה מקרא זה על מי נאמר אמר לו אפילו על דוד מלך ישראל נשא אותו גר קל וחומר בעצמו ומה ישראל שנקראו בניו למקום ומתוך אהבה שאהבם קרא להם בני בכורי ישראל כתיב עליהם והזר הקרב יומת גר הקל שבא במקלו ובתרמילו על אחת כמה וכמה בא לפני שמאי אמר לו כלום ראוי אני להיות כהן גדול והלא כתיב בתורה והזר הקרב יומת בא לפני הלל אמר לו ענוותן הלל ינחו לך ברכות על ראשך שהקרבתני תחת כנפי השכינה

לימים נזדווגו שלשתן למקום אחד אמרו קפדנותו של שמאי בקשה לטורדנו מן העולם ענוותנותו של הלל קרבנו תחת כנפי השכינה:

Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

(Translation by Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, courtesy of Sefaria.org)

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 Torah². 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.

¹ Talmud: The body of Jewish civil and criminal law, legend, and scholarly discussion compiled in Palestine and Babylonia between 100-500 CE

² The ancient Rabbis believed that God revealed to Moses both a written Torah—the one written on a Torah Scroll—and an Oral Torah. The Oral Torah included additional laws and principles for interpreting the Written Torah.

The same gentile came before Hillel, who converted him and began teaching him Torah. On the first day, Hillel showed him the letters of the alphabet and said to him: Alef, bet, gimmel, dalet [that is, in the regular order]. The next day Hillel reversed the order of the letters and told him that an alef [the first letter] is a tav [the last letter] 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.

There was another incident involving one gentile who came before Shammai and said to him: Convert me on condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot. Shammai pushed him away with a builder's cubit (measuring stick) that he had in his hand. 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.

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*³, and a robe, and a tunic of checkered work, a mitre⁴, 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.⁵ 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 rod in his hand. He came before Hillel who converted him.

Hillel said 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. 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"⁶ (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 [who was not a member of the priestly caste]. The convert reasoned to himself: If the Jewish people are called God's children... 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.⁷

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.

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.

³ A sleeveless garment.

⁴ Ceremonial headgear, such as that worn by bishops in the Catholic church today.

⁵ As the convert will soon learn, according to the Torah membership in the priestly caste is only available to a man whose father was a priest. A convert can therefore never become a priest, much less the High Priest.

⁶ The verse refers to the prohibition on non-Priests entering the holy areas of the ancient Tabernacle.

⁷ That is, the convert realizes he could never become the High Priest.

Pirkei Avot 2:5

Hillel used to say: "A timid person cannot learn, and an impatient person cannot teach."

HAVRUTA DISCUSSION: WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?

1. What do you notice about how Hillel and Shammai are each portrayed in the story?
2. What do the converts mean when they say that "Shammai's impatience sought to drive us from the world," while "Hillel's patience brought us beneath the wings of the Divine presence"?
3. Try to imagine yourself as one of the converts in these stories. What is going through your mind as the story unfolds? How do you change?
4. What does Hillel mean when he says that a timid person cannot learn and an impatient person cannot teach? How do the opposite traits manifest in Hillel's leadership or in the converts' questions?

TABLE DISCUSSION: WHAT DOES THE TEXT BRING UP FOR US?

Take about 25 minutes to discuss the following with the group at your table.

1. When you think about Jewish engagement in light of the converts' experiences in these stories, what comes up for you?
2. When you think about Jewish engagement in light of Hillel and Shammai in these stories, what comes up for you?
3. What do we learn about the nature of authority from the responses of both Shammai and Hillel? How do they use authority?
4. In helping our organizations become more engagement-oriented, what do we need to do to be more like Hillel (and less like Shammai)?

As you wrap up your table conversation (around 9:10), please prepare brief individual responses to the following on sticky notes and bring these to the large white wall paper:

1. YELLOW sticky notes: What do you learn from Hillel and Shammai about Jewish engagement?
2. GREEN sticky notes: How can we be more welcoming (as Jewish Federations, in our organizations)?
3. BLUE sticky notes: What challenges keep us from being as welcoming as we could be?