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This book is dedicated to my parents, whose love, support, encouragement and attention provided a solid foundation for my brother and me. Their achievements and their integrity – along with the nurturing home they created – have been a lifelong inspiration to me.

So too is this book dedicated to my wife. I could not have dreamt of a more special person with whom to share the rest of my life.

It is also dedicated to the memory of my father's parents and two brothers, all of whom perished in the Holocaust.

We will never know what contributions they – or the eleven million other human beings whose lives were cut so short – may have made to our world.

Most of all, this book is dedicated to you, the reader. It is in your hands that the wisdom of Adin Steinsaltz's Insights – and the beauty and brilliance of the Talmud itself – can find some meaningful application.

I am thankful for the many blessings and opportunities which I have been given. I am particularly grateful for the experience my wife and I have had in getting to know Rabbi Steinsaltz, and for the opportunity we have had to introduce him to others.

For that I must thank Toby and Itzhak Perlman, who first introduced me to the Rabbi, and the staff of the Aleph Society.

Daniel H. Adler

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Editor's Note

This book describes a world very distant from us, spiritually as well as historically. We therefore appended a glossary to which the reader may refer for explanation of italicized words. In addition, we appended an annotated bibliography of all the books mentioned in this volume, and an historical chart.

In the footnotes, quotes from the Babylonian Talmud are preceded by the name of the Tractate in italics, followed by the page number. The names of all other sources are cited fully. Translations of the Babylonian Talmud quotations are based on the Soncino Talmud, except for those for which a Steinsaltz translation was available.

The foreword and chapters 1–6 were translated by Yehudit Keshet; chapter 7, by Ditsa Shabtai, who also edited the translation; and chapters 8–13, by Faigie Tropper. Thanks to Rabbi Yehonatan Eliav, Rabbi Gershon Kitsis, and Yechezkel Anis for their ongoing and indispensable assistance. Special thanks to Margy-Ruth Davis for her insightful comments and, as always, her help.

Introduction

The heroes of the Oral Torah are heroes of a special kind. Their stories are not tales of war and battles, and their chronicles are devoid of impressive events. These heroes are heroes of the spirit, whose acts of heroism lie in their thoughts and their words. The palaces and fortresses they established are invisible to the eye.

The Talmudic sages themselves declared that it is inappropriate to erect mausoleums on the graves of scholars, since their teachings are their monuments. What is more, the books created by these scholars: the Mishna and the Talmud, the *Tosefta*, *Midrash Halakha*, and *Midrash Aggada* are not intended, by their nature, to tell the history of individual scholars. Their main concern is with ideas and thoughts, discussions, and conversations of the sages of Israel.

Thus, not only do these texts tell us almost nothing about the heroes of the period, but even general historical events are mentioned only in passing. In addition, there is a basic tendency in the literature of the Oral Torah to leave things in a sort of “eternal present,” in which the ideas are the permanent element, while the chronology of time and generations is of only secondary significance. This is not because the sages considered knowledge of the history of the nation and its

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scholars unimportant. Rather, this kind of information was not written or organized. Insofar as it was recorded at all, it remained in the private archives of the great yeshivot. Only very few of these texts have survived. It is therefore not surprising that only in recent times has the history of the sages of the Mishna and Talmud been collected from the material scattered throughout the literature of the Oral Torah. In spite of the great efforts invested by academics and scholars, the unknown exceeds the revealed.

Nevertheless, the literature of the Oral Torah, even in its most technical parts, is neither dry nor impersonal. The personalities of the different sages and their spiritual characters (and sometimes even private and trivial events in their lives) emerge from this apparently “legalistic” material. The special way in which this literature is edited – in the form of debates and discussions – produces figures which are alive and human, characters that we can relate to, identify with, and love. The many details found in the various sources, when put together, reveal the personalities who produced the Oral Torah, with all the multiplicity of types and the differences among them.

This slim volume does not attempt to provide a history of the sages, nor to describe their different schools of thought. It is intended to give a certain impression, a sketch of personalities not only as thinkers and scholars but also as human beings, whom we ourselves – as have others throughout the generations – can see standing before us today, alive.

Chapter one

Hillel the Elder

Hillel was surely one of the most versatile and influential figures of the Second Temple period. He was given the honorary title “The Elder” because of his dual positions as head of the Council of Elders and as the *Nasi* of the *Sanhedrin*. Born in Babylonia¹ he came to the land of Israel to study Torah. Apparently, he went back to Babylonia, later returning to the Land of Israel. Hillel’s family was indirectly descended from the House of David.² This royal connection heightened the special status of his sons and their descendants in the eyes of the generations that followed. In a certain sense, they were regarded as the representatives of the Jewish monarchy even in times of slavery and oppression.

Hillel himself, however, came to the Land of Israel not as royalty, but as a pauper. Although he had an extremely rich brother in Babylonia (*Sotah* 21a), he did not want to take advantage of family wealth. Instead, he chose a life of poverty in the Holy Land, where he was forced to earn

1. He is referred to as “Hillel the Babylonian”; *Sukka* 20a.
2. *Ketubot* 62b; Jerusalem Talmud, *Ta’anit* 4:2. In *Kilayim* 9:3 it says explicitly that he was not descended from the male line of the House of David.

his living as a woodcutter³ – an occupation which enabled him to work for only half a day, leaving the other half free for study. Furthermore, the *batei midrash* of those days were semiprivate institutions that charged an entrance fee, partly to exclude people who were not serious students. So from his already paltry wages, Hillel was required to deduct a considerable sum to pay the gatekeeper of the *beit midrash*.

We know that Hillel had acquired his basic learning in Babylonia where he was already regarded as a scholar. In the land of Israel he became the pupil of the two outstanding scholars of the time: Shemayah and Avtalyon. It seems that they both recognized his stature, although it is doubtful that others did. Hillel's rise to fame and greatness came suddenly, years later, and was the result of a rare occurrence in which the eve of Pesah fell on Shabbat. This created a new situation, which at that time did not have a known halakhic solution; even the leading scholars of the day were unable to solve the problems arising from this special coincidence. It became clear that Hillel was the only person who had the knowledge and the ability to find the halakhic solution. In an unprecedented gesture, the heads of the *Sanhedrin*, of the Bnei Batira family, resigned, appointing Hillel in their stead (*Pesahim* 66a; Jerusalem Talmud, *ibid.*, 6:1). For this reason the Bnei Batira are counted among the genuinely humble personalities in Jewish history, people who surrendered their position and status in favor of someone who seemed to them more fitting for the task.⁴

Hillel's official rise to the position of head of the *Sanhedrin* was, by then, no more than formal recognition of the fact that he was indeed the greatest and most outstanding scholar of his generation. However, this is never made explicit. We know almost nothing about Hillel before his appointment to the leadership of the *Sanhedrin*; we know equally little of the other sages of those days. It was an age in which scholars still strove to reach a unified opinion in the *beit midrash*. This is why

3. *Yoma* 35b. For his being a woodcutter, see Maimonides' commentary on *Pirkei Avot* 2:45.
4. *Bava Metzia* 85a. They are: Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel, Bnei Batira, and Jonathan, the son of Saul. And in the Jerusalem Talmud, *Pesahim* 6:1, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria in place of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel.

the majority of halakhic decisions are anonymous and simply called: “rulings of the sages of Israel.” Dissenting opinions, like the personalities of the individual scholars themselves, are set aside in favor of the majority consensus.

Yet of the little that we do know about those scholars and their contribution to halakha, it appears that Hillel himself was the founder of, or at least developed, a new method of study. He was the first to systematically organize the rules of *Midrash Halakha* and to use them in a consistent way that clarified and resolved halakhic issues. *Midrash Halakha* did exist before Hillel’s time, but not in a systematic or standardized form. Hillel was the first to articulate general rules for *Midrash Halakha* which, in spite of undergoing a certain amount of redefinition over the generations, are in essence the basic rules of the *Midrash Halakha* known to us today.

The “Seven Principles” of the *Midrash Halakha* that Hillel taught the Bnei Batira (see *Tosefta Pesahim* 7:11) are also the basis for the Thirteen Principles of Talmudic Exposition of the scriptures, formulated later on by Rabbi Yishmael (introduction to *Sifra*).

Beyond the sphere of learning, however, Hillel’s major impact is most clearly felt in the far-reaching changes he introduced in the public life of the Jewish nation. He created a special status for the *Nasi* of the *Sanhedrin*, a status enjoyed by his descendants for over four hundred years – one of the longest-lived dynasties ever known in the history of nations.

Hillel’s period, which largely parallels that of King Herod, was not an easy one in terms of the role and influence of Jewish leadership. At that time, the king of Judea ceased to express the will of the Jewish people, gradually becoming a more or less tolerable foreign ruler. The High Priest, too, became a mere religious functionary. Hillel shaped a new role for the *Nasi* of the *Sanhedrin* as the national leader, patterned on the role and status of Moses – namely, that the *Nasi*, the spiritual head of the nation, served as the preeminent figure in almost every sphere of life. Like Moses, Hillel lived to the great age of 120 years (*Sifrei*, Deuteronomy 357). Two other sages reached that age: Hillel’s outstanding pupil Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, and Rabbi Akiva (*Sukka* 28a) – each of whom, in his turn was, like Hillel, the central pillar of the Jewish

people. It is through them that Jewish tradition was transmitted and reshaped, not only for their time, but for the generations that followed. Indeed, Hillel became such a pivotal figure that his sons and their sons after them – some of whom were great men in their own right – derived their power from the fact that they were his descendants.

Hillel was famous as a lover of humanity, and even more for his appreciation of the uniqueness of each person he encountered. He was known for his ability to address each one who approached him in a way that was most appropriate for that person. An interesting expression of this ideal is his attempt to summarize the Torah on “one leg”:⁵ “Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.” This negative formulation of the Biblical passage: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) expresses most aptly the notion that each of us has unique qualities, and therefore one must not judge others by the same criteria that one uses to judge oneself.

The verse “You shall open your hand to him [i.e., your poor brother] and provide him with all that he requires, all that is lacking unto him” (Deuteronomy 15:8) was interpreted by our sages to mean that one who requires it [e.g., a rich man who became poor] should be provided with “even a horse and a carriage, even a slave to run before him” (*Ketubot* 67b). It is said that Hillel took care of such an impoverished person, who had formerly been extremely wealthy, providing him with a horse and carriage and a slave to run before him. Once, when he could not find a slave to do the job, Hillel himself ran before the poor man’s carriage, announcing that so and so was about to pass in the street. This story, more than demonstrating Hillel’s humility, emphasizes his understanding that respect and honor are as essential for some people as food and drink are to others. Hillel, who himself was able to manage with very little, understood that others lived by different standards. He, who was so unassuming that no one could shake his composure, knew that

5. *Shabbat* 31a: “On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, ‘Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.’ Thereupon he (Shammai) pushed him away with the builder’s cubit which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he (Hillel) said to him, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it.’”

to enjoy peace of mind, that particular man needed a slave to run before him and declare that the great so-and-so was now passing in the street. A delightful story about him in the Talmud tells:

It once happened that two men made a bet, saying, whoever goes and makes Hillel angry shall receive four hundred *zuz* (a great sum). One said: "I will go and incense him." That day was the Sabbath eve, and Hillel was washing his head. He went, passed by the door of his house, and called out, "Is Hillel here, is Hillel here?" Thereupon he [Hillel] put on a robe and went out to him, saying, "My son, what do you need?" "I have a question to ask," said he. "Ask, my son," he prompted. He asked: "Why are the heads of the Babylonians round?" "My son, you have asked a great question," replied he: "because they have no skillful midwives." [That man] departed, waited a while, returned, and called out: "Is Hillel here, is Hillel here?" [Hillel] again put on a robe and went out to him, saying, "My son, what do you need?" "I have a question to ask," said he. "Ask, my son," he prompted. He asked: "Why are the eyes of the Palmyrenes bleared?" "My son, you have asked a great question," replied he: "because they live in sandy places." He departed, waited a while, returned, and called out: "Is Hillel here, is Hillel here?" He again put on his robe and went out to him, saying, "My son, what do you need?" "I have a question to ask," said [the man]. "Ask, my son," [Hillel] prompted. He asked: "Why are the feet of Africans wide?" "My son, you have asked a great question," said he: "because they live in watery marshes." "I have many questions to ask," said he, "but fear that you may become angry." Thereupon [Hillel] robed, sat before him and said, "Ask all the questions you have to ask." "Are you the Hillel who is called the *Nasi* of Israel?" "Yes," he replied. "If that is you," he retorted, "may there not be many like you in Israel?" "Why, my son?" [Hillel] queried. "Because I have lost four hundred *zuz* through you," complained he. "Be careful of your moods," he answered. "Hillel is worth it that you should lose four hundred *zuz* and yet another four hundred *zuz* through him, yet Hillel shall not lose his temper." (*Shabbat* 31a)

Hillel's belief in the individuality of each person is also reflected in his halakhic methodology, and to a great extent also in that of his followers, *Beit Hillel*. This is not necessarily expressed in any clearly defined halakhic concept. Rather it underlies the ability to be flexible on certain problems, to distinguish not only the general principles of truth, but also the exceptions to the rule – distortions and the changes that often happen, or individual eccentricities – and to deal with them.

Much is told of Hillel's humility and patience⁶ and of the humor in his sayings and habits. Some of his great patience derived from his ability to be very realistic without being overly serious. He had the capacity to see the comic and the likable in people and in situations. The man who came to Hillel at an inconvenient time not only failed to upset him (and lost the bet), but also got a series of teasing answers to his questions. Yet, despite their sharpness, these answers are consistent with truth, and also express an interesting idea: racial diversity is the result not of essential differences, but, by and large, of circumstances and conditions. Moreover, that man did not know that Hillel could see through people. Hillel was surely aware of that fellow's intention to annoy him, and purposely caused him to lose the bet. His righteousness and humility did not stem from mere simplicity or innocence and were accompanied with clear thinking and, sometimes, humor.

The many sayings of Hillel in *Pirkei Avot* (1:12–14, 2:4–7) have become, each one in a different sphere, foundation stones of Jewish thinking. Together they express the complexity of Hillel's personality and religious viewpoint. On the one hand, there was his simple devotion to the mitzvot as reflected in the stories of Hillel in the Temple;⁷

6. *Shabbat* 30b; *Ketubot* 87b; *Beitza* 20a (and *ibid.*, Rashi); *Shabbat* 17a (and *ibid.*, Rashi); *Sotah* 48b; *Vayikra Raba* 1:5; and more.
7. *Sukka* 53a: "It was said of Hillel the Elder that when he used to rejoice on Simhat Beit HaShoeva [a ceremony of the Temple celebrated during the feast of Sukkot with much rejoicing], he used to recite: 'If I am here, everyone is here; but if I am not here, who is here?' He also used to say: 'To the place that I love, there My feet lead me. If you will come into My House, I will come into your house; if you will not come to My House, I will not come to your house, as it is said (Exodus 20:21): In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned, I will come unto you and bless you.'" (The capitalized personal pronouns in this passage refer to the Divine Presence.)

on the other, we see the breadth of his all-encompassing vision, which regarded change as part of the nature of our world. Hillel was able to see the outcome, the reward and the punishment of a given course of action. He could see where certain ambitions would lead, and therefore what checks and balances would be required. All these were part of his overall philosophy. He did not need to express them constantly and explicitly, because they were, for him, part of the fabric of reality, which was also the reality of his personal life.

Hillel's life was full of sharp transitions. He came from a noble family in Babylonia to the Land of Israel, where he first lived in poverty, eventually becoming the ruler and leader of Israel. These changes of status and location, from one world to another, formed Hillel's complex approach to the world around him. He used lofty language along with simple folk proverbs, stories drawn from life, and descriptions of everyday reality. In setting and establishing the status of Torah sages, he created a new aristocracy, but he was also the first to attempt to breach the walls of the *beit midrash*, making it more open and accessible to all. It was he who abolished tuition fees and made the study of Torah available to the poor from whom, he said, "Torah would go forth" (*Nedarim* 81a, not cited in the name of Hillel). The creation of an aristocracy based on the merit of Torah study, ecstatic devoutness combined with the ability to relate to all human beings – these were among the defining characteristics of Hillel the Elder.