

## WAS IT BETTER THAT THE HUMAN BEING WAS CREATED?

Rabbi Tom Gutherz  
Yom Kippur 5779  
Congregation Beth Israel  
Charlottesville, Virginia

I wanted to remind you about the teaching from Hillel that we shared on Rosh Hashanah: *If I am not for myself, who will be for me etc....*

Later that day, one of you came up to me and asked me: *Rabbi Tom, what does Shammai have to say?* That person knew, as do many of you, that Hillel, the first-generation rabbi whose many teachings are still at the center of Jewish practice today. also raised up a school of disciples: Beit Hillel, the school of Hillel. And that there was a rival school, Beit Shammai, followers of his contemporary Shammai. The debates between the two of these sages and their schools range over a great many topics in Jewish law and thinking.

Some are well-known. For example the one about a non-Jew who came to Shammai and said to him:

*"I would convert to Judaism if you can teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot."*

Shammai chased him away with the builder's cubit that was in his hand.

The same person came before Hillel, and said to him:

*"I would convert to Judaism if you can teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot."*

Hillel did not chase him away. He appreciated the sincerity of the request and perhaps the sharpness of the challenge: Can you boil down all this teaching, all these words, to some core principles?

So Hillel replied:

*"What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.  
That is the whole Torah.  
Now: Go and learn it!"*

There is also the famous dispute between them about the meaning of the words we recently recited in the first paragraph of the Shema:

“*when you lie down and when you rise up.*” Both agreed that the Shema should be said in the morning and in the evening. Shammai insisted that the evening Shema must be recited lying down, meaning in a **lying-down position** just like it says in the Torah: “*when you **lie** down.*”

Hillel ruled that one can say the evening Shema in any position you choose. And why? Because the literal words *when you lie down* are to be understood to mean *in the evening, when people lie down to go to sleep*. And words right before that phrase instruct us to say these words *b’lechtechá baderech; as you walk by the way*. Meaning: *whatever is your **derech, your way**, in whatever way you find yourself*.

Hillel, typically, takes both a less literal and more easy-going reading of the text. The Mishnah goes on immediately to tell us that a certain Rabbi Tarfon once complained to his colleagues that he was traveling along the road, and, laying down to say the Shema like Shammai taught, he narrowly escaped being attacked by bandits. His colleagues were definitely not sympathetic. They said: *You deserve whatever came to you for disobeying the ruling of Hillel!*

The Talmud records no fewer than 316 disputes between the school of Hillel and the School of Shammai. In all but six of them, Hillel’s opinions are accepted as the normative practice. Although there are some exceptions to what I am about to say, Shammai tends to take a more pessimistic view of humankind and relies on strict interpretations and careful boundaries. Hillel takes the more optimistic view--both more creative in his interpretation of the words of Torah along with a kind of generous acceptance of the innate potential and goodness of the human being.

There was one dispute, however, which was so contentious that we are told the competing schools debated it for two and a half years without coming to a conclusion.

The Talmud says:

*For two and half years the house of Hillel and the House of Shammai debated a certain question. One school said :*

**It would have been better if the human being had never been created**  
*The other said: It was better that the human being had been created.*

The Talmud does not tell us how they conducted this argument. I imagine they must have brought up incidents and stories from the human history that they knew. Almost as if they were walking through a photo gallery, pointing to this or that incident: What about that? Better yes or better no? What about that one? Better yes or better no?

I was reminded of this dispute on a recent visit to the Newseum in Washington DC, which has all sorts of interesting artifacts and displays relating to the importance of the press and freedom of the press.

There is a permanent exhibit there of all the winning photographs of the Pulitzer Prize for Photography since that category was established in 1942. These photographs, many of which we would all recognize, won the prize because they are so evocative. In a single image they can manage to capture something about the human situation: the pathos, the tragedy, the horror, the joy, the confusion, the struggle.

At the entrance to this exhibit, larger than the rest was the photo we have all seen over and over again. It's the photograph from last year in Charlottesville, taken by Ryan Kenney of the Daily Progress, of the car driving through the crowd on Fourth Street, murdering Heather Heyer and wounding so many others.

There were others photos there, that jogged my memory:

There was Babe Ruth, standing at home plate, his hand resting on his bat almost like a cane, taking a bow at his last game in 1949.

There were the American soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima.

And from 2010, a heart stopping moment when a firefighter, hanging from a makeshift harness, extends his hand just a little further to reach a woman being swept away by flood waters.

But there were others:

One from South Africa in 1991, where members of African National Congress stand in front of a man who they had just set on fire, his entire body burning like a human torch. They thought he was a Zulu spy.

From 1994, a photograph of a small child in the Sudan, almost all skin and bones, the result of a famine partly man-made, crawling forward to a feeding center, while a vulture almost twice the size of the child stands in waiting only five feet away.

From 2016: a train window, opened as far as it can go, with two sets of hands reaching out and holding on to a grown teenager, a refugee who has been handed up to that window, struggling to bring him through the window of the train as it heads towards northern Europe

And from 1996, the photo of a one -year-old child, small and fragile, in the large hands of a dirty and soot-covered firefighter after being carried out of the site of the Oklahoma city bombing.

In 2014 the Pulitzer Prize went to John Haner of the NY Times. He won the Prize for a series of photos documenting the recovery of 27-year-old Jeff Bauman, who lost both his legs in the Boston Marathon bombing from a year before.

I wandered in this exhibit for about 20 minutes. But then I was truly overcome. I sat down on a bench with tears in my eyes. I just could not go on for a good long while. Something about these powerful images of suffering in our world, from the past and the also of the present: relentless, unyielding, unresolved, ever-repeating brutality and hatred and war made me think of that question:

*perhaps it would have been better  
that the human being had never been created*

## TAKE A VOTE IN YOUR OWN MIND

I want to ask you to sit with this for a moment and, in your own mind, think about your own feelings, the gallery of your memories your experiences:

Was it better that the human being was created?  
Or would it have been better if we had never been created ?  
How would you vote?

## HOW THE ARGUMENT TURNED OUT

So let me tell you how that argument came out, the one between Hillel and Shammai, which is found on page 13b of the Tractate Eruvim in the Talmud:

*Two and a half years the house of Hillel and the house of Shammai*

*Sustained this argument:*

*Shammai argued: It would have been better that the human being had **not** been created*

*Hillel argued: It **was** better that the human being was created*

*Finally they took a vote and decided: It would have been better if the human being had not been created.*

Hillel lost the argument. But that's not the end of the story.  
The Talmud continues :

*It would have been better if the human being had not been created*

*(they said) But now that he has been created: **Yifashfesh b'ma'asav**  
Let him carefully examine his deeds.*

Hillel lost this argument.

But the argument is not lost.

There is still this: *let a person carefully examine her deeds.*

The Hebrew word *yifashfesh* is a hard word to translate. It means to rummage around, to turn things around over and over. The best I can do is to give an image:

You know when you move from one house or apartment to another? Most of the boxes are well labelled. And when you unpack you find most of the things you need. But there are always a couple things missing. Where are they?

Then you come across those one or two boxes, the last ones packed, the ones that have all that stuff that was still lying around when the movers were moving around quickly, thrown together kind of randomly.

Or maybe it's another box, full of objects charged with mixed emotions--objects from your childhood, from an old relationship, from a previous job that was not so good--objects that you didn't quite know how to label.

You didn't know whether you wanted to hang on to them. But you weren't ready to let go of them either

When you've searched everywhere for what you're missing, you get to one of these boxes, and your hands go into it to rummage through it, touching everything, wondering:

*Why are all these things here together? What connects them?*

Hoping to find the thing you are looking for.

*L'fashfesh*. To examine carefully. There is an alternate version:

*L'mashesh*: to rub one's hand over the surface of a thing, to feel around with curiosity. This examining of our deeds--this *cheshbon hanefesh*, the souls accounting for itself, turning our experience over and over, reflecting on what we have done, to look for connections, to figure out why it is we do what we do-- if we can do this, perhaps the argument of Hillel and Shammai will come out differently one day.

Judaism seems to understand that there is no short cut here. The only answer to the debate about what to think about our vexed human condition, is that to fix our world, we first have to fix ourselves. And that we need to examine our deeds.

If we want to make the world a more compassionate and loving place, we need to understand why it is so hard to be loving ourselves, what holds back our compassion. If we want to make the world a more just place, we need to understand how greed and selfishness works in our lives

Back in the day we used to say: **the personal is political**.

But it also true, that **the political is personal**.

Every system the human imagination has ever devised to make our world a better place, to alleviate suffering and bring peace and well-being--the laws of biblical world, the classical world, the advances of the enlightenment, socialism, capitalism, liberalism-- they all founder on the same rock. They all have the same flaw, that they are carried out by us humans.

On the one hand, Shammai was right: they all failed in some way  
On the other hand, maybe there was more good than bad in there?

This is the importance of this day. We need to take the Talmud's suggestion: *l'fashfesh b'ma'asav*, to rummage around in our deeds. We need to figure out the heart of the human being. What motivates us, what empowers us, what holds us back, what trips us up.

Hence the long catalogue of sins we have just read, and this practice of spelling out and accounting for our sins: *Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi....*

## WHY DO WE FOLLOW HILLEL?

But even as we do that, we are also aware that there are some things that don't quite fit neatly into that inventory. The things we did--sins or strengths? Half good or half bad? The progress we made since last time we were here: is the glass half full, was it better on the whole? Or is it half empty--not good enough? Have we made enough progress to even see?

There is another teaching on that very same page of the Talmud, where the argument between Hillel and Shammai about human nature is found. The Talmud records that there was **another** issue about which they disputed for many years, without being able to reach an outcome. At the end of this time, no less than a heavenly voice, a *bat-kol*, had to intervene and renders the decision. It proclaimed:

*Both these and these (the rulings of Hillel and the rulings of Shammai )  
Are words of the living God -- **divrey elohim chayim**  
But the halakha, the Jewish practice, follows Hillel.*

It then goes on to ask:

*If both are words of the living God, why do we follow Hillel?*

The answer might surprise you:

*We follow the school of Hillel  
because they were agreeable and forbearing in the way they argued.  
When they taught the halakha, the law, they taught both their own rulings  
and the rulings of their opponents, the school of Shammai.  
And not only that, but they taught the teachings of Shammai first.*

If you wish we lived in a world where we followed the practice of Hillel, where there was a confidence that the truth was so evident that it could stand the honest appraisal of bitter opponents, that we could generously present the opinions of our bitter opponents and have confidence that the truth will emerge and people will follow the correct course of action--then you are not alone.

[I want to put a thought in your head—to look for the announcement of this year's scholar in residence, Rabbi Amy Eilberg, who will join us for a weekend of learning in early March. She has written a fantastic book called *From Enemy to Friend*, where she summarizes the Jewish teachings on these questions of how we argue, how we rebuke one another, what we may do to win an argument and what we may not do. The Jewish tradition has a rich and interesting conversation on these ideas, and I am hoping you will join us as we learn from her.]

We follow Hillel in Jewish law not just because he is lenient, optimistic, and filled with a love for humankind, and creative in thinking about Jewish law. But also because our tradition values his approach to the way we **think** about things: Generous, subtle, able to live with the conflicting opinions, and to be comfortable in the unclear middle ground. Hillel's thinking evinces a resistance to the idea that you can just capture a single photograph that covers it all--Good or bad? Sins or not sins? It has that ability to find that fine balance in things.

We too can continue to think about those things, the ones that don't yet fit into the boxes, things that fall between the extremes. Arguments about whether the world or humanity is good or bad tend to gravitate towards extreme positions: obviously good / or obviously bad. We are reminded of the big sensational moments in human history. And in our own life stories.

The reality is that the great mass of events in between those photos in the Newseum, and between the big events that happened in our lives, that stick in our mind, fall into that big grey zone: Maybe they are good. Maybe they are bad. Maybe we can't tell yet.

We don't know where to put them. We don't know what part of ourselves was being expressed in those things, or where they might lead in the future.

That's why Hillel may have lost the argument for a moment. But the idea is



that we have to continue to have the bravery to keep rummaging around in those boxes, and to keep learning about ourselves.

## THE MAN IN THE COWBOY HAT

At the Newseum I mentioned the photo of the young man who was wounded in the Boston Marathon. But then I thought of another photo from the Boston Marathon. It was not in the Newseum, but perhaps you will remember it when I describe it to you. It has come to be known as the “man in the cowboy hat” photo. It is a picture of a guy with long curly hair beneath a cowboy hat, pushing that very same victim, Jeff Bauman, pushing him in his wheelchair out of danger and towards an ambulance.

The man in the photo is named Carlos Arredondo. He was seated in the VIP section near the marathon finish line, to greet a group of runners from the National Guard. One of those Guardsmen was running the race in memory of Carlos’ son, a Marine who lost his life in Iraq.

In the words of Rabbi Adam Raskin, who wrote about this photo:

*“When the bomb blast went off, people began running in all directions, Carlos ran in one direction—toward the scene...toward the injured... toward the hurt and maimed. While others were running for their lives, Carlos was running to save other people’s lives. He broke through the snow fence and scaffolding that separated him from the street and began wrapping the wounds of the injured with his own clothing.*

*His hands covered with blood, he steered the wheelchair of the gravely injured 27-year-old Jeff Bauman [away from the scene and to an ambulance]. Bauman ended up losing both of his legs below the knees, but likely survived the blast because of that hero in the cowboy hat, as Carlos Arredondo is now being called.*

In an interview he gave to a reporter just after the bombings Arredondo told about what he did. And he added:

*So many people were begging for help, I could only help one at a time*

In a time when we are so overwhelmed, feeling so disempowered by coverage of the catastrophes unfolding around us, maybe that image and these words can serve as a reminder

One thing at a time.

One issue at a time.

One campaign at a time.

One person's mind changed.

One step forward where we can move forward.

One insight that changes everything.

One clarification.

One turning.

One *teshuvah*, and then another and then another.

*Now that the human being **has** been created*

*Let us examine our deeds*

Ultimately this is all we ever have--our own ability to conquer our evil inclination with our good inclination; to make the decision, as we will hear in our Torah portion in a few moments--to choose life and blessing.

When we engage this way, it is hard to see the whole. But I think we need to have some confidence that if we keep on this path--one thing at a time--perhaps next year or the year after that, the argument between Hillel and Shammai might have a different ending. Maybe next year the accounting might come out differently.