

# SUMMARIES

Personalities  
in the  
Rebbe's Torah

By:  
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מוקדש לחיזוק ההתקשרות לכ"ק אדמו"ר

נדפס ע"י  
הרה"ת ר' יצחק מאיר וזוגתו מרת  
לאה ומשפחתם שיחיו  
שפאלטר

## Humility and Tradition

### Hillel Hazaken

Hillel Hazaken was one of the most prominent *nesi'im* of the Jewish people and an invaluable link in the *mesorah* of *Torah She'baal Peh*.

Under the later Chasmonai kings, the influence of the Chachomim waned and Torah study declined. Sects like the Tzedukim, Baitusim and others began to gain traction. A *nossi* was needed to raise the banner of Torah and to reach the simple Jews, bringing them closer to Torah.

Hillel, taking over from the Bnei Beseirah as *nossi* of the Sanhedrin, revived the spirit of Torah and greatly increased its study, both in quantity of students and in quality of learning. The Gemara compares Hillel's work to that of the great leaders of the Jewish people and champions of Torah—Ezra Hasofer and Moshe Rabbeinu.<sup>1</sup>

The Gemara relates that after coming to Eretz Yisroel from Bavel at the age of 40,<sup>2</sup> Hillel toiled in Torah and spent 40 years serving the Chachomim Shemaya and Avtalyon. Finally, he served as *nossi* of the Sanhedrin for 40 years.<sup>3</sup>

His *nesius* began 100 years before the Churban, and ended when he passed away, 40 years before the Churban (around the same time as King Hurdus's reign)<sup>4</sup>.

Serving beside him as *av beis din* was Shammai (after the short stint of a Tanna named Menachem)<sup>5</sup>. While there are a few disagreements between the two, most disagreements were

between their students – *Beis Shammai* and *Beis Hillel*. Yet, the basis of these opposing schools stemmed from the opposing outlooks and perspectives of their rabbeim – Shammai based in *Gevura* and severity, and Hillel in *Chessed* and *Giluy*.

As a sign of his greatness, he was referred to by name, without a title like Rav or Rabban. As the Rishonim say, “Gadol Meiraban – Shmo” [greater than the title Rabban – is one’s name]

The name Hillel denotes *Behilu* – light and revelation.<sup>6</sup> Appropriately, he led the Jewish people in a fashion of revelation and inspiration, inclusion and tolerance. Hillel looked to see the good in people, and tried to be “*meikil*” – finding things permissible and eligible for elevation.

Beis Hillel – his students, followed in his footsteps, taking a generally more lenient and more accepting approach. The Halacha is almost always decided in their favor.

Hillel was the father of a succession of *nesi'im* for fifteen generations, spanning the entire period of the Mishnah and into the period of the Gemara. The last of his line, Hillel Hanassi, was an Amora who lived at the same time as Rav Pappa.

The Gemara tells us that Hillel had eighty students: thirty who could split the sea like Moshe, thirty who could hold the sun up like Yehoshua, and twenty somewhere in between. The greatest among them was Rabbi Yonasan ben Uziel and the smallest (or youngest) of them all was the great Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai, who would later serve as *nossi* in his own right<sup>7</sup>.

This is hinted in the Possuk which is the acronym for Hillel “*Hamisnase lechol lerosh*”. *Lechol* in Gematriya is 30, 20, 30, alluding to his eighty great Talmidim<sup>8</sup>.

Hillel’s legacy goes a lot further than his actual students. The scholars of Beis Hillel are the basis of the Mishnah, and in essence, of all *Torah She’baal Peh*.

In addition to his impact on *Torah She’baal Peh*, Hillel personified the *middos* that he taught. He was a kind, humble, patient, and accepting leader of the Jewish people. After his passing, his generation lauded him, saying “*Hai Chossid! Hai Anav! Hai Talmido Shel Ezra!*” [Alas, the Chossid, alas, the humble man, alas, the student of Ezra]<sup>9</sup>

## Hillel HaBavli

Hillel was a scion of the house of Shfatya<sup>10</sup> descended from Dovid Hamelech on his mother’s side, and paternally

descended from Shevet Binyomin. He was born in the Jewish community of Bavel and spent the first forty years of his life there.

At age 40, Hillel arrived in Eretz Yisroel to study at the feet of the Chachomim, the *nossi* Shmaya and the *av beis din* Avtalyon. Hillel’s devotion to his teachers resulted in him becoming their greatest pupil, the link to the *mesorah* of the previous generations going back to Moshe Rabbeinu at Matan Torah.<sup>11</sup>

The Gemara tells us that Hillel was very poor and would toil to be able to pay the fees to enter the Beis Midrash. The Rambam writes that he was a wood-chopper. He would earn one Trapoik (half a Dinar), which he would split, half to support himself and his family and half to the watchman of the Yeshiva. Elsewhere, the Gemara explains that Hillel had a wealthy brother named Shevna who offered to support his studious brother, Hillel refused this financial assistance, not wanting to lose the great *zechus* of studying Torah while supporting himself.<sup>12</sup>

One wintery Erev Shabbos, Hillel could not come up with the funds. Unable to enter the Beis Midrash, Hillel climbed up to the roof of the Yeshiva, and listened through the skylight. On Shabbos morning, when the Chachomim noticed that there was a lack of sunlight, they looked up and saw the outline of a man blocking the sun. They ran up and dug Hillel out of three Amos of snow and warmed him by the fire, exclaiming “such a man is worth being *mechalel Shabbos* for”.<sup>13</sup>

The Gemara introduces this story by saying that “*Hillel Mechayev Aniyim*” [Hillel obligates the poor] – no one is too poor to study, because no one is poorer than Hillel was, and nevertheless he devoted himself to Torah study.

The Rebbe quotes the Alter Rebbe that Hillel actually went above the letter of the law in this regard, and Halachically, the basic obligation of *limud haTorah* would not require a person to go to these lengths.<sup>14</sup> The Rebbe explained that Hillel paved the way for every Jew to be able to learn and devote themselves to Torah in a manner of *middas chassidus* – beyond the basic Halacha.<sup>15</sup>

## Hillel’s Chessed

Hillel’s time with Shmaya and Avtalyon did not only improve his learning but shaped his outlook and his *Middos* as well. Hillel learned from them the great importance of *ahavas Yisroel* – following Aharon’s path – promoting peace

and uplifting people to Torah with love and care.<sup>16</sup>

The Rebbe explains that Hillel's statement "*Hevei mitalmidav shel Aharon Hakohen, ohev shalom verodefshalom, ohev es habriyos u'mekorvon laTorah*" [Be of the students of Aharon, loving peace and seeking peace, loving the creations and bringing them close to Torah], is a reflection of the *chinuch* and lessons of his illustrious teachers Shmaya and Avtalyon.

Hillel and Shammai split along the lines of Moshe and Aharon in regards to their style of *ahavas Yisroel*. Moshe and Shammai, following clear-cut Torah, did not involve themselves with *reshaim*. Aharon however, would deal kindly with *reshaim* and that would bring them closer to Teshuva. Hillel too worked with even very distant people and brought even them into the fold of Torah.

This explains why Hillel requires one to not only be a lover of peace, but also a student of Aharon Hakohen, pinpointing the difference between his and Shammai's perspective.

In Tanya, Perek Lamed Beis, the Alter Rebbe quotes Hillel's two sayings about *ahavas Yisroel*. First, that "*ahavas Yisroel is Kol haTorah kulah* and the rest is commentary", and second, "Be from the Talmidim of Aharon Hakohen" to emphasize what *kind of ahava* and care is demanded. The Rebbe explains that the Alter Rebbe uses the title "*Hazaken*" for Hillel, to show that even though there is an opposing school of thought – Shammai's, Hillel's opinion as that of the "*Zaken*" – leader of the generation, is to be followed.<sup>17</sup>

With regard to Hillel's incredible statement that "*Ahavas Yisroel — is the entire Torah, and the rest is commentary*" the Rebbe explains that this refers to a deep level of *ahavas Yisroel* - looking at the source of Yidden, which is even higher than Torah. That is why Chassidus explains that one must love even a *rasha gamur*, because in truth the essence of a Yid is higher than Torah, and through that love – revealing the essence – it will illuminate their daily life – "*U'mekorvon laTorah*"<sup>18</sup>

## Hillel and the Bnei Beseirah

After the passing of Shmaya and Avtalyon, the leadership went to the famed family of Tanaim – the Bnei Beseirah. While they were great Torah scholars, they were not on Hillel's level, neither were they as close as he had been to Shmaya and Avtalyon and able to pass on the *mesorah* of Torah *She'baal Peh* as Hillel could. In a lesson of humility for



EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR OF THE CAVE WITH THE TZIYUN OF HILLEL HAZAKEN AND HIS TALMIDIM.

the ages, the Bnei Beseirah stepped down and crowned Hillel the Bavli as *nossi* in their stead.

It happened when Erev Pesach occurred on Shabbos, and it was unclear whether or not the Korban Pesach should be offered on Shabbos. The Bnei Beseirah were trying to remember what the *din* was but they couldn't. Hillel was called in as a student of Shmaya and Avtalyon who would be able to share the correct *din*. Through examination of the *pesukim* and teachings of the *mesorah*, Hillel proceeded to prove that the Korban Pesach is indeed offered on Shabbos.

It was no coincidence that Hillel's *nesiut* began on Erev Pesach and that it was in connection to Pesach that his supremacy was proven. Hillel represents the attribute of *Malchus*, and so does the Yom Tov of Pesach, with an emphasis

on *emunah* – the *middah* of *Malchus*, which is the last of the *Middos*, and yet the basis of everything.<sup>19</sup>

## Hillel the Nossi

The name Hillel stands for the words “*Hamisnase lechol lerosh*” from the *possuk* “*Lecha Hashem hagedula*” which describes Hashem’s *Middos*. ‘*Hamisnase*’ refers to *Malchus* – apropos of Hillel’s role as *nossi*–*Melech*.

*Sfiras HaMalchus* contains a dichotomy. On the one hand *Malchus* comes after the other *Sefiros* and all it has comes from them. On the other hand, once empowered, *Malchus* is “*Misnase*” – she rises up above the preceding *Sefiros*, encompasses their qualities, and even surpasses them. This *Middah* is clearly seen in Hillel who was both the humblest of men and the *nossi* of the entire nation.<sup>20</sup>

Hillel stands in for Moshe Rabbeinu. Hillel and Moshe were from the four people who lived to 120. Hillel also follows the direct line of transmission of the *mesorah* beginning with Moshe Rabbeinu.

Like Moshe, Hillel stood primarily for Torah, the *middah* of *Emes*. Yet, just as Moshe exalted his brother Aharon and his *middah* of *Chessed* – *ahavas Yisroel*, so too, Hillel, instructs us to follow the ways of Aharon.

The correct way for a Yid to live is with a fusion of *Chessed* and *Emes*, *Ahavas Yisroel* and Torah. Instead of each side pulling the person to opposite directions, they complement each other - *Emes* informs *Chessed*, and *Chessed* enables *Emes*. Following Moshe, Hillel stood up for *Middas haChessed*.<sup>21</sup>

Hillel’s leadership was defined not only by Torah and *Chessed*, but also in the realm of *Chinuch*. The first *Tanna* we see to heed the call of “*Haamidu talmidim harbeh*” [Have many students] is Hillel Hazaken who had eighty exceptional *Talmidim*, ranging from Yonasan Ben Uziel to Yochanan Ben Zakkai. Hillel’s affinity for *chinuch* can be seen in his opening statement in *Pirkei Avos* “*Hevai MiTalmidav*” [be students!].

The Rebbe explains that Hillel highlighted the three main (umbrella) *Mivtzoim* – *Mivtza Chinuch* (as mentioned), *Mivtza Ahavas Yisroel* (*Ohev Shalom*- *Chessed*) and *Mivtza Torah* (*U’Mekorvon Latorah*).<sup>22</sup>

## Hillel and Shammai

Hillel and Shammai, friends and colleagues, were personifications of opposite ideologies and perspectives. Hillel (from the word *behilu* – light, and the word *Hillul* – praise<sup>23</sup>)

champions kindness, openness, and light. Shammai, on the other hand, (from the word *shamma’i* – appraiser) stands for being strict, cautious, and controlled.

The differing attitudes is reflected both in their *hanhagos*, their rulings, and their teachings, continuing in the schools of Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel.

The difference in perspective manifested itself also in their interactions with various people. The Gemara tells three stories of Geirim who came to Shammai wanting to learn about Yiddishkeit and convert, but with preposterous conditions: One only wanted to learn *Torah Shebiksav*, one wanted to learn the entire Torah while standing on one foot, and one said he would convert only if he could become *Kohen Gadol*.

Shammai chased them away with a yardstick, while Hillel accepted them and taught them the Torah’s ways. The Gemara concludes that Shammai’s severity chases us away but Hillel’s humility brings us under the wings of the *Shechina*.<sup>24</sup>

Beis Hillel’s opinion prevails in almost every case. The Gemara explains that this is because the scholars of Beis Hillel were more humble and respectful of opposing opinions than Beis Shammai, yet, the Gemara starts by stating “*Eilu va’eilu divrei Elokim chayim*” [Both opinions are words of Hashem].<sup>25</sup>

The Rebbe explains how both perspectives are essentially the words of Hashem. When dealing with oneself there is benefit to Shammai’s perspective – being careful and calculated about one’s behavior and relationship with the world. When interacting with others, however, everyone must follow the rulings of Hillel with his kind and accepting attitude, embracing people on their level and lifting them up, engaging with the world in a positive manner.<sup>26</sup>

## Hillel’s Humility

One of the most celebrated of Hillel’s exemplary *middos* was *anavah* – humility.

The Gemara tells us that once, in the *aliyah* (attic) of Chonyo in Yericho, there was a gathering of *Chachomim* studying. Suddenly, a heavenly *bas-kol* rang out saying “there is one person here who is worthy of the *Shechina* resting on him, but the generation is not worthy.” All eyes turned to Hillel. The Rebbe explains the deep connection between humility and embodying the *Shechina*. When one is truly humble, they are able to serve as a vessel for Hashem’s holy presence.

The Rebbe elaborates on the concept of humility, highlighting its various levels. The highest level involves not only recognizing that others in the same position could do better

but also actively lowering oneself to uplift even the lowest individuals. Hillel personified this level of humility, evident in the stories of his interactions with potential *geirim*, and in the overall conduct of Beis Hillel).

It is at this elevated level of humility that the *Shechina* can radiate through a person.<sup>27</sup>

In another *sicha*, the Rebbe offers an interesting perspective on Hillel, considering his Babylonian origin. As a Bavli, he had been raised in a state of “*bavel*” – mixture. In such an environment, even while he could attain true understanding of Halacha through strenuous study, Hillel was also more prone to feelings of ego as a result of his involvement in the worldly Bavel. As a result, he had to work on himself to attain true humility.

This explains the Gemara’s story that after Hillel replaced the Bnei Besirah as *nossi*, he told them that the reason why they didn’t know the Halacha was because they didn’t serve

Shmaya and Avtalyon as he did. He needed that extra time in their presence after coming from Bavel, in order to work on this *middah*.

Hillel then taught this lesson to the Bavlim in their native tongue of Aramaic: “*Negad shmei avad shmei*” (one who allows his own name to be overly publicized will lose His name). While one must lower himself down to Bavel and get involved in the its complexities in order to unearth the Halacha, one must not lower oneself, and feel one’s own ego, too much, because if so, then “*Avad Shmei*” Hashem’s name – the Torah, is lost.

At the same time, he continues, one must not shy away from study, nor steer clear of teaching, rather one must stand strong and retain humility and a genuine search for the true meaning of the Torah.<sup>28</sup>

## IN HIS TORAH

אָמְרוּ עָלָיו עַל הַלֵּל הַזֶּקֶן, כְּשֶׁהָיָה שֹׂמֵחַ בְּשִׂמְחַת בֵּית הַשְּׂוֹאֵבָה, אָמַר כֵּן: אִם אֲנִי  
כָּאֵן — הַכֹּל כָּאֵן, וְאִם אֵינִי כָּאֵן — מִי כָּאֵן. (סוּכָה נג, א)

They said about Hillel the Elder that when he was rejoicing at Simchas Bais Hashoeva, he said, “If I am here, everyone is here; and if I am not here, who is here?”

Tosfos quotes Rashi who says that Hillel was speaking in the name of Hashem, and then quotes the Yerushalmi which understands Hillel to be referring to himself.

The Rebbe explains that these two opinions are linked. As a real *anav*, Hillel said something about himself that refers to Hashem, since he really had no existence for himself outside the *Aibershter*.<sup>29</sup>

What is the connection between Simchas Beis Hashoeva and this statement? The Rebbe explains:

Hillel represents *Malchus*, specifically the way Malchus is empowered and rises above its source – *Yesod*, becoming a leader (*Hamisnase*) to *Yesod* (*Kol – Lechol lerosh*).

Simchas Beis Hashoeva is a time of *Ruach Hakodesh*, which also corresponds to *Malchus*. This is what Hillel was exclaiming, “*Im ani Kan*” (If *Malchus* is here) then *Hakol Kan* (all the energies coming through *Yesod* are present as well).

This statement follows a discussion Hillel had about Hashem’s need for the Yidden’s praise and exaltation. Hillel found words to inspire both those who excel at *ratzoi* – lofty excitement, and those who focus on *shuv* – grounded, down-to-earth involvement.

Appropriately, Hillel, symbolizing *Malchus*, with its transcendent and immanent features, is the one that highlights the relevance of Simchas Beis Hashoeva for all types of Yidden.

אָף הוּא רָאָה גְּלִגְלַת אַחַת שְׂצָפָה עַל פְּנֵי הַיָּם. אָמַר לָהּ, עַל דְּאַטְפָּתָּ, אֲטָפוּךְ.  
וְסוּף מְטִיפִיךְ יְטוּפוּן: (אבות ב,ו)

He too saw a skull floating on the face of the water. He said to it: because you drowned others, they drowned you. And in the end, they that drowned you will be drowned.

The Rebbe quotes Kisvei HaArizal that the floating skull was that of Pharaoh, and Hillel as the successor of Moshe Rabbeinu “*Af Hu*” — “he too” saw this skull of Pharaoh and could tell Pharaoh’s lifeless skull that the reason he was drowned was because of what he did to the Jewish children ordering all newborns cast into the river.

On the second half of Hillel’s teaching, “*Vesof matayfoyich yetufun*” [they that drowned you will be drowned], there are two different *sichos*, in which the Rebbe takes two differing approaches.

In the first, from 5736, the Rebbe explains that Hillel is speaking to the Yidden, saying that just as you have seen justice come to Pharaoh, so too, all those who attack you will suffer the same fate.

Hillel lived in Bavel and Eretz Yisroel, while Pharaoh lived in Mitzrayim and Ninveh. Hillel also lived over a thousand years after Pharaoh and his evil decree. The fact that Hillel saw this skull, interacted with it, and found it so important to put in *Pirkei Avos* (that would make it into our *Siddur*) shows the extreme importance of Hillel’s message to the Jewish people: Hashem did not forget about the Yidden and will punish anyone who harms you!<sup>30</sup>

In another *sicha*, the Rebbe offers an alternate explanation: Hillel was in fact talking to the skull itself, telling it that the end of whoever had drowned him would also be drowning.

Even while the lesson of “*Middah kenegged middah*” [retribution measure-for-measure] is a simple idea that doesn’t really need the drama of a floating skull, nevertheless, Hillel taught this lesson from the skull in order to bring rest to its wanderings.

As explained, Hillel’s seeing the skull was definitely not a natural phenomenon, and Hillel understood from its occurrence that there was something he had to do in order to bring rest to Pharaoh’s skull. In learning a lesson from Pharaoh’s demise, and his assurance that the end of Pharaoh’s assassins would be the same, Hillel brought peace to the floating skull.

Though this was the skull of Pharaoh who had tormented the Jewish people and was the antithesis of Moshe Rabbeinu in every way, when the time came for the skull to come to its final rest, Hillel with

his legendary kindness, worked to rectify it.

The Rebbe concluded that we should learn from Hillel the great importance of being *Tov labriyos* (good to all creations).<sup>31</sup>

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו,  
אֵימָתַי: (אבות א, ד)

He [Hillel] used to say: If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when?

Hillel became *nossi* after proving to the Bnei Besirah that the Korban Pesach, even as a *korban yochid* (brought by each individual, as opposed to the communal *korbanos*), can be offered on Shabbos, because it also has the power of a *korban tzibbur* (communal *korban*) that supersedes Shabbos.

The Rebbe explains Hillel's famous line from Pirkei Avos "*Im ein ani li mi li*" to hint in a humorous way to his ascent to *nesius*.

"*Im ein ani li mi li*" [If I am not for me, then who is for me?] – emphasizing the importance of the individual (*yochid*—like the Korban Pesach).

"*U'keshani le'atzmi moh ani*" [but when I am for myself, then what am I?] – Though, if I weren't also part of a greater picture – *korban tzibbur*, then what would I be? – I wouldn't have become *nossi*!

"*V'im lo achshav eimosai*" [and if not now, when?] The Korban Pesach needs to happen in its time, thus it is offered on Erev Pesach, its time, even when it falls on Shabbos.<sup>32</sup>

1. Sukkah, 20a.

2. Yuma 35b.

3. Sifrei - Devorim 357.

4. Shabbos 15a.

5. Mishnayos Chagigah 2:2.

6. Likkutei Sichos, Chelek Alef pg. 157.

7. Baba Basra 134a.

8. Likkutei Levi Yitzchak al Maamarei Razal pg. 179.

9. Sanhedrin 11a.

10. Kesubos 62b. About his descendent Rebbe.

11. See Ben Yehoyada Sanhedrin 11a.

12. Sotah 21a.

13. Yuma 35b.

14. Hilchos Talmud Torah LeAdmur Hazaken, 3:4. Kuntres Achron.

15. Sicha Shabbos Parshas Dvorim 5739.

16. Sicha Shabbos Parshas Shmini 5742.

17. Sicha Shabbos Parshas Matos Masei 5735.

18. Likkutei Sichos Chelek Yud Zayin, Kedoshim 2.

19. Maamar Hachodesh, Shabbos Parshas Tzav, Shabbos Hagadol 5743.

20. Sicha Shabbos Parshas Naso 5743.

21. Sicha Shabbos Parshas Shmini 5745.

22. Sicha Shabbos Parshas Shmini 5737.

23. Likkutei Torah, Shir Hashirim 48, 3.

24. Shabbos 31a.

25. Eiruvin 13b.

26. Sicha Shabbos Parshas Nitzavim 5745.

27. Likkutei Sichos, Chelek 38, Bahalosecha 2.

28. Shabbos Parshas Naso 5743.

29. Reshimos 147.

30. Sicha Shabbos Parshas Devarim 5736.

31. Sicha Shabbos Parshas Emor 5744.

32. Likkutei Sichos - Chelek Yud Ches, Bahalosecha 2.