

# CHAPTER 1, MISHNA 15(C): FAST-FOOD JUDAISM

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***Shammai said, make your Torah study fixed, say little and do much, and receive everyone with a cheerful countenance.***

Thus far we have studied Shammai's first two statements. His final words of advice are that we receive everyone cheerfully. This advice is simple enough. What is more striking, however, is that Shammai the personality is always portrayed in the Talmud as far from easygoing, as one who appeared to have little patience for others.

Recently ([1:12](#)) we quoted the passage in the Talmud (Shabbos 31a) in which would-be converts approached both Shammai and Hillel, Shammai's colleague, asking to be converted to Judaism only if certain outlandish conditions be met. (One asked that he be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot, another asked provided he be appointed High Priest.) Shammai promptly threw the would-be converts out, seeing in them little true appreciation of the greatness of the Torah. Hillel, however, dealt gently with them, teaching them a basic and inspiring principle of the Torah, and all the men eventually became true and sincere converts. Shammai, however -- seemingly ignoring his own advice -- exhibited no such love and patience with the Gentiles. Had Hillel not been there to show them the way, they would have been lost forever to the Torah and to Judaism.

It is important to recognize, however, that Shammai was not merely exhibiting impatience and short-temperedness. He certainly did believe in greeting others cheerfully. Yet at times it is necessary to speak up for one's values. A person who wants to become Jewish in order to wear the High Priest's impressive vestments is seeing Judaism as nothing more than a stepping stone towards fashion and high society (this was an era in which much of the priestly class formed an aristocracy, fashioned after Hellenistic society) -- much as, centuries later, Jews would see baptism as the ticket to European society. (And sadly, the Church was far less discriminating in its willingness to accept less-than-sincere Jewish converts.)

Likewise, a person who expects to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot is in effect stating that in his mind the Torah is so shallow it can basically be condensed into a few meaningless generalities. The fellow was clearly looking for fast and easy inspiration, some quick- and-dirty spirituality which he could pick up through no effort of his own. (Kind of reminiscent of the recent absurdity known as "Kabbalah for dummies" -- as if there's some magical way of getting right down to the deep and transcendental stuff without the years of toil actually required.)

Regardless, the fellow was hardly seeking what Judaism does offer: a comprehensive but rigorous guide for personal growth and meaningful living. He was looking for pleasantries, perhaps some inspiring-sounding but meaningless Biblical prose. He wanted expertise without struggling through the users' manual, well-roundedness through the Readers' Digest, proficiency through Cliff Notes, effort-free inspiration, religious fast-food. (We can come up with more metaphors (or even make up a few new ones), but the picture is clear. The man, perhaps even sensing that Judaism **does** contain some depth and profundity, wanted to have some of it, but was simply not willing to put in any real, "two-legged" effort - - as if someone else can take "meaning" and just hand it to you.)

Shammai's answer was as blunt as the fellow deserved: If you're looking for serious effort and meaningful growth, you've come to the right place. If you recognize that life requires toil and effort, that one can have no meaning and accomplishment without serious study and commitment, we'll talk. If you're willing to make the effort, I'll spend as much time as you require describing Judaism's precise prescription for fulfillment. If, however, you're just looking for some quick and painless way of alleviating your religious guilt-pangs, if you want inspiration without serious study and reflection -- as if religion is sitting back in a theater watching an inspiring film, if you're looking for sweet generalities and platitudes -- an enjoyable Saturday (or Sunday) morning service (perhaps followed with lox and bagels or a game of Bingo) and then back to your old life the rest of the week, something to aspire to but not really make any tangible difference in your life, then forget it. You're looking for what most of mankind wants out of religion but you're not looking for Judaism.

Shammai was hardly being impatient. He was simply standing up for what matters. In his mind, he had just witnessed a terrible affront to Judaism and all it stands for. And he was quick to tell the fellow that coming to a rabbi looking for sweet religious nothings basically misses (or attempts to ignore) the entire point of Judaism.

As we mentioned above, Hillel exhibited much more patience with the would-be converts, and the results were far more encouraging. Hillel's greatness was that he saw the potential for goodness even in the very casual interest of these would-be converts. Their flippancy aside, they were still **coming** to us; they're looking for **something**. And so, said Hillel to the man who wanted the Torah while standing on one foot: You want an easy and simple rule? Try this: "What you do not like yourself do not do unto others." If all you want is some sort of feel-good recipe for ecumenical light-and-easy inspiration -- something you could have just as well read on the back of a sugar pack -- Judaism can give you that as well. The Torah is no less insightful than Poor Richard's Almanac. The Rabbis coined their share of aphorisms. And if that's all you care to see, fine. You will have gotten something for your efforts (or lack thereof).

If, however, from there you begin to recognize that there is more to life than empty moral directives, if you understand that interpersonal relationships -- as everything else -- require effort and careful consideration, you may one day become ready for the real stuff. Take this one rule to mull over. You might stop right there, or it may turn into the first step of many more -- in a very meaningful

direction.

Thus, we are presented with two worthy and legitimate responses to a Gentile's mockery of Judaism. In truth, the Talmud concludes that one should learn from Hillel's softness and humility rather than Shammai's strictness and exactitude. We must be understanding of others and of the world from which they come. Most people are not ready for serious commitment. Religion to them is politically-correct, feel-good platitudes. But if that's all they can handle, at least give them that -- and perhaps one day they will become conditioned for the real McCoy.

Yet Shammai was hardly wrong; he was not simply intolerant. He was standing up for principles which are far too often overlooked. If we do not at times stand firm on our principles, sooner or later there will be nothing left for which we stand -- no red lines of decency and morality which outweigh all other considerations of etiquette and tolerance. In war, in politics, in almost any area, ambivalence and over-tolerance in the face of wickedness is not generally viewed as niceness but as a lack of resolve and a lack of commitment to the good. The world must know where we, the Children of Israel, stand and how far we will go for our beliefs -- and we ourselves certainly must know it. For only through the proper balance between zealousness and tolerance can we be true to our ideals yet a shining beacon unto mankind.

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