



## **Hillel: If Not Now, When?**

*Joseph Telushkin*

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**Hillel: If Not Now, When?** Joseph Telushkin  
**Part of the Jewish Encounter series**

*"What is hateful unto you, do not do unto your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, all the rest is commentary. Now, go and study."*

This is the most famous teaching of Hillel, one of the greatest rabbis of the Talmudic era. What makes it so extraordinary is that it was offered to a gentile seeking conversion. Joseph Telushkin feels that this Talmudic story has great relevance for us today. At a time when religiosity is equated with ritual observance alone, when few Jews seem concerned with bringing Jewish teachings into the world, and when more than 40 percent of Jews intermarry, Judaism is in need of more of the openness that Hillel possessed two thousand years ago.

Hillel's teachings, stories, and legal rulings can be found throughout the Talmud; many of them share his emphasis on ethical and moral living as an essential element in Jewish religious practice, including his citing the concept of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) as a basis for modifying Jewish law. Perhaps the most prominent rabbi and teacher in the Land of Israel during the reign of Herod, Hillel may well have influenced Jesus, his junior by several decades. In a provocative analysis of both Judaism and Christianity, Telushkin reveals why Hillel's teachings about ethics as God's central demand and his willingness to encourage the process of conversion began to be ignored in favor of the stricter and less inclusive teachings of his rabbinic adversary, Shammai.

Here is a bold new look at an iconic religious leader.

## Hillel: If Not Now, When? Details

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## **From Reader Review Hillel: If Not Now, When? for online ebook**

### **Michael Abraham says**

#### **Brilliant and brief look at Hillel.**

Rabbi Telushkin's look at the impact and influence of Hillel is simply a mitzvah to read. Brilliant, yet brief...a must

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### **Hollisa Alewine says**

Excellent analysis of the House of Hillel as well as the House of Shammai, its family foil. I didn't agree with all the author's conclusions concerning the similarities/differences between Yeshua and Shammai, but his historical log and method of presenting those facts and sources is admirable. I have used this book as a research source for my own books in the past, and will likely use it again. The failure of Christian education to help New Testament readers put the dialogues and letters into historical context is remedied by sources such as Rabbi Telushkin's. If students of the Christian Bible understood the dynamics presented in *Hillel*, it could help them decode "The Pharisees" dialogues in the Gospels and attribute statements and attitudes to the proper "House."

A most pleasant surprise to Christian readers would be how many of the Pharisees from the House of Hillel welcomed a non-Jew to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Additionally, Christian readers would have a new context for Pharisees, one that did not include words like "outward observance," "hypocrisy," "self-righteous," or "pretentious." Just as denominations would hate to be judged as a whole by the worst examples of the faith, Judaism should be evaluated according to the facts instead of lazy theology.

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### **Karen says**

A friend who grew up in and is active as an adult in a Conservative Temple really loved this book and I think it may resonate more strongly with people who share his background. A major theme of the book is that the Jewish religious community should be more liberal in welcoming potential converts. My personal experience as a convert to Judaism (Reform) felt like the experience that Teluskin advocates---so I didn't feel compelled by his argument that radical change from current attitudes back to the philosophy of Hillel is needed. Of interest to me were two commentaries: why Hillel's reply to the potential convert was stated in the negative "do not do unto others" ....rather than the positive "do unto others" (easier to commit to; consistent with the approach of the 10 commandments) and the three core differences between Christian and Jewish theology (God can forgive all sins vs. God forgives sins against God, you must seek forgiveness from the person for sins against them; meet evil with pacifism by turning the other cheek vs. meet evil with resistance as in Moses killing the foreman who abused the slave; know God only through Jesus vs. any person can know God directly.)

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## **Rachel says**

I was definitely intimidated by the prospect of reading a book about a Talmudic sage, but Joseph Telushkin has made me LOVE Hillel. I found this book strangely riveting, considering that it's about a man who lived two thousand years ago and whose daily life we know very little about...but Telushkin does an outstanding job of distilling all the details into digestible nuggets of wisdom from the School of Hillel. I find Hillel's teachings profoundly relevant to today's society as a whole, and also to my personal life as a Jewish woman and a teacher of young children.

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## **Michael Johnston says**

A wonderful, concise and easy to read biography of one of the great Rabbinic sages of our history. Telushkin highlights Hillel's belief that Judaism's ethical obligations outweigh almost all other matters in the faith and makes a call for us all to embrace his teachings more emphatically. Indeed, Telushkin notes that "only if one understands Judaism as having an ethical essence can one conclude, as Hillel did on several occasions, that sometimes practicing the Torah literally can lead one to violate the Torah's ethical will."

Hillel was a much more embracing figure than I knew, but it reminds me of a wonderful story about Hillel and Shammai. The two great Rabbinic leaders were debating the importance of truth in the Jewish faith when each was presented with the following question: how does one praise an ugly bride? It is traditional to praise a bride on her wedding day, but Hillel and Shammai had very different viewpoints in answering the question. Shammai, who valued honesty over all else indicated that to say something dishonest about the bride's beauty was abominable to the faith. Hillel on the other hand, noted that all brides are beautiful on their wedding day.

Hillel's answer is why on college campuses across America today the Jewish student organizations are known as Hillels and not Shammais!

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## **Ellen says**

Hillel's wisdom has continued to be studied by Jewish people from his death to the present, and he is among the most popular Rabbis and philosophers in the Jewish canon.

Rabbi Telushkin's portrait of Hillel is clear, concise, and well-researched. What I found especially enlightening is the way Telushkin compared and contrasted Hillel's beliefs with his more conservative and traditional contemporaries. This contrast highlights how liberal and progressive Rabbi Hillel's views are, and how these ideas opened the door to Judaism for both his own contemporary "common readers" and those of the present.

Without Hillel, it's doubtful that the Jewish people would be as compassionate, as open-minded to new ideas, or as welcoming to people who wish to become Jews themselves as we are in the 21st. century. I am grateful for his words - he was a blessing to all of humanity.

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## **Carl Marcus says**

Unlike many of the reviewers here, I was somewhat disappointed with this book, although I do feel it is worthwhile.

Admittedly, this cannot be a true biography of Hillel, there is not a great deal of information concerning him. Still I believe that the book would have been better with more history and less of Telushkin's sometimes strained interpretations of how Hillel would respond to ethical issues today.

It also seems to me that the author occasionally reuses material from some of his earlier books. This may simply be that he addresses the same topics, but he could expand rather than repeat himself.

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## **Deena says**

It's very hard to know how to review this book because there were so many aspects of it that spoke to me. We are fortunate, I think, to have Rabbi Telushkin with us in this age...

I don't think I fully understood the extent to which our religion owes its modern manifestation to the teachings and philosophy of Rabbi Hillel. I certainly didn't understand the extent to which I personally encapsulate so much of his belief and interpretation of Judaism and the Jewish life.

One would not need to be Jewish to gain from reading this - but anyone Jewish who doesn't know Hillel well definitely will benefit from it.

I'm adding some more because the above just wasn't worthy...

I appreciated the explanation of "there is no messenger in a case of sin," for its historical applications (not that they were mentioned in the book).

The discussion on willingness to hear alternative or conflicting viewpoints really resonates today, in so many aspects of life.

The entire chapter on teaching and teachers... can I trade the term "Socratic" for "Hillel-esque" when people describe my classroom method?

So many parts of this book are worthy of mention... It is also extremely readable. You don't need to be a Talmudic scholar to get through it; Rabbi Telushkin offers a glossary, footnotes, and endnotes to help those of us who don't have the religious or historical background to follow along completely. But that makes it sound like this is very dense, and it really isn't. Anyone who is interested in the material could get through this succinct work, regardless of their previous level of knowledge. The length of time it took me to get through it is reflective of my life, and has nothing to do with the book itself - which was so very worth my time.

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## **Donald says**

I was totally unfamiliar with Telushkin before reading this book, but apparently he's generally a sort of pop theology type writer. There are some elements of that here (the book is not technical at all), but this book is not lazy pop theology: Telushkin knows his shit and cites everything. It can get repetitive at times (he makes his point about conversion over and over again), but it covers a lot of ground. He makes a strong argument for ethics being the defining characteristic of religiosity, rather than ritual observance. Highly recommended.

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## **Amanda says**

For the past few years, attending Passover Seder at a friend's home, I have been drawn to stories that come up about Rabbi Hillel. The one that impressed me to read more about him was his explanation of the whole Torah to a convert while standing on one foot: "That which is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the whole of the Law; the rest is commentary. Now, go study." This book not only gave great insight into that story (Hillel's phrasing in the negative which echoed the Ten Commandments, and his very positive attitude towards anyone who wanted to learn more) but also was a crash course in some other basics of Jewish thought. Comparisons between Hillel and Jesus were also very interesting (they were two generations apart), and we're an interesting summary of some basic differences in thought between Jews and Christians through these two figures.

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## **Bill Dauster says**

Joseph Telushkin's book, "Hillel: If Not Now, When?" is a wonderfully alive and tendentious biography of Hillel and his teachings. Telushkin, a Rabbi, writes fluidly and widely on matters of Jewish ethics, often from a how-to perspective. In this book on Hillel, Telushkin plausibly reconstructs the great Jewish sage's character from his teachings recorded briefly and episodically in the classical sources. But Telushkin does not stop there, provocatively projecting Hillel's teachings onto contemporary issues like openness to conversion and mistreatment of animals. The result is a splendidly engaging interaction with one of Judaism's greatest minds, channeled through another. The result is a worthy addition to Nextbook's Jewish Encounters series, of which it is a part.

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## **Craig Bolton says**

"Hillel: If Not Now, When? (Jewish Encounters) by Joseph Telushkin (2010)"

This volume is the latest example of the evolution of Joseph Telushkin from a rather shallow popularizer to a profound Jewish thinker. The two volumes of his planned three volume set on Jewish Ethics are also well worth reading.

This is a pretend biography of Hillel, in fact, we know very little about Hillel on which to base any such biography. The sparsity of the source material has led to all sorts of speculations regarding what Hillel's

complete views are like, some of which speculations have been very very different than Teluskin's present volume.

This volume is really an extended essay and declaration by Teluskin in favor of what might be called "pluralistic Judaism." Pluralistic Judaism is the view that there is no one absolutely indisputably view of the particulars of Jewish law, but that there are and always have been many competing views on virtually every question concerning "observance." Pluralistic Jews not only acknowledge that state of affairs, but consider it as essential to an understanding of the living character of Judaism - which is principally centered around "taking seriously" such questions and debating over them. Those interested in that "take" on Judaism may want to look into the Shalom Hartman Institute, the scholars of which have similar views.

This volume will have one of two fates. It will be totally ignored by Jews [my money is on this one] or it will result in a bloody fight between fundamentalist and nonfundamentalist Jews.

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### **Sean says**

I cannot remember that I have ever eagerly waited for a book to be published. I must say that I was not disappointed! For starters there is not any real biographical information on Hillel in the Talmud, but from what I grasped from this was that Telushkin wanted to revive the essence of Judaism that Hillel promoted. That essence is centered around ethics rather than on ritual observance.

As a Christian I noticed that a similarity between Jesus and Hillel is that both are apparently talked about much more than listening to what they're saying and doing what they are asking. In the section where Telushkin compares and contrasts Jesus and Hillel I was forced to see Jesus in a different light. It is easy to understand one's faith when always surrounded by it, but it is quite another to see it from the viewpoint of an outsider. Even more so when the faith of the one on the inside stems from the faith of the one on the outside. I am impressed by Telushkin not bashing Jesus or Christians, but that he raised certain questions about Jesus concerning his Jewishness and how it differed from Judaism in specific ways and how it also was similar in specific ways as well.

Overall I think it is a good, quick read, but with a lot of good things to remember tucked in there. His annotated bibliography section is also very helpful.

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### **Eris says**

Telushkin's writing is clear and concise, easy to read without being simplistic. I love the chance to learn more about my favorite figure in Jewish history. There are points which may find disfavor among the more legalistic or exclusive of thought, but Hillel's inclusive and loving approach to faith speaks to the heart of what is beautiful in Judaism.

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### **Carol says**

I was interested in reading this book because (1) I knew nothing of the relationship between Hillel and Shammai and (2) what religious teachings by Hillel influenced Jesus' teachings?



The School of Shammai -- It is difficult to comprehend the structure of the theocratic government of Israel in the time of Christ. But the most important group in Israel was the Pharisees who sat under the teachings of a rabbi named Shammai, who founded his school shortly before Jesus was born. Most believed, among other things, that the Hebrew descendants of Abraham were the only people beloved of God, and that no other people were of value in His sight. Salvation was thus only available to Jews--and so, in their early days, the Shammaiites wouldn't even welcome Gentile converts to Judaism. The school of Shammai, which was politically proactive, also had close ties to the infamous zealots, a group of fanatics who favored armed revolt against Rome. It's critical to note that virtually every time you see Jesus or the apostles in strife against what the Bible labels as "Pharisees," it is almost certainly referring to Pharisees or ex-Pharisees from the School of Shammai. Even before he became a Christian, Paul would have had many differences with his fellow Pharisees from this school, which would be the dominant influence in Judaism until the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

The School of Hillel -- The school of Hillel was far more liberal, and its founder was renowned for placing people and justice at the heart of Judaism, whereas Shammai stressed strict observance of religious laws. While Hillel's followers acknowledged that the Jews were God's special people, they willingly accepted Gentile converts to Judaism in the belief that the God of Abraham allowed all to worship Him who would turn from idolatry. When you read about Hellenistic Jews (or about Jews with Greek names), this was the school whose rabbis would typically have accepted these Gentiles into the Jewish faith. Soon after the time when Jesus, at age 12, was in the Temple astonishing the priests with his wisdom, Hillel died and was eventually succeeded by his grandson Gamaliel, who was Paul's tutor. Modern-day Judaism traces its roots to the teachings promoted by the followers of Hillel who survived the destruction of Jerusalem and began codifying their teachings around 200 AD.

Hillel was so wise that even two sayings we commonly attribute to Jesus were supposedly coined by Hillel before his death, and were being quoted by Jesus in the Gospels. These were the Golden Rule, along with the summary of the Law and the prophets-- "Love God with all of your heart", and "love your neighbor as yourself." Whenever you see Jesus interacting positively with the Pharisees (Nicodemus or the rich young ruler), he is probably interacting with Pharisees from the school of Hillel.

An example of the differences between Hillel and Shammai can be seen in the many cases where "the Pharisees" watch Jesus to see if He will heal someone on the Sabbath. We can reasonably surmise that these are Shammaiites by the fact that the school of Shammai viewed attending to a sick person on the Sabbath as work, while the school of Hillel viewed this as a good deed that was permissible on the Sabbath. Another example of the struggle over Jesus between both schools is seen in John 9:16: "Therefore said some of the Pharisees (probably from the school of Shammai) This man is not of God, because he keepeth not the Sabbath day. Others (probably from the school of Hillel) said, How can a man that is a sinner do such miracles? And there was a division among them."

Difference betwn error & sin --

\* A sin is a wrongful act that one knows is wrongful at the time of its commission.

\* An error is a wrongful act that is committed at a time when the person does not know (or has not yet realized) that such an act should not be committed.

This distinction is important in understanding how men came to know the Law, and how they treated others who were yet unenlightened.

(1) Moses was the first to come to discover the Law (he learned the hard way- through error.) Moses' first important error was smiting an Egyptian who was beating a Jew. Moses' act of vengeance was driven by his

passion (anger): he met violence with (an even greater) act of violence. Moses' second important error was striking the rock when God had commanded him to speak to it. (Should call this one a sin because Moses knew he was acting wrongfully.) The choice of speaking (asking) versus striking (coercing) appeared to be unimportant, because it led to the same outcome (the rock gave water). What Moses had not considered was the rock's point of view. By striking the rock, Moses forced it to give water. Had he spoken to it, he would have created an opportunity for the rock to do a Mitzvah, a good deed. Moses' error was in depriving the rock of an opportunity to choose to be helpful.

(2) Hillel discovered the fundamental rule of human conduct: "That which is hateful to you do not do unto your fellow man." Hillel understood why adherence to this rule would lead to social stability, but Hillel probably did not know what action to take when the law was being violated in an important way. In other words, Hillel stated the conditions that had to be met for mankind to live in peace; but he did not have a plan for bringing the nonconforming members of society into compliance.

(3) Jesus was the first man to solve the problem of what to do when Hillel's Law was being violated. He publicized the acts that caused one man to hurt another, and he made clear that the victim (himself included) was being hurt. However, he scrupulously avoided the act of vengeance, and he taught his disciples to do the same ("turn the other cheek"). Jesus, using Hillel's Law as a guide, and introducing the use of nonviolence as a tool to effect social change. Jesus restated Hillel's Law from the negative form ("Do not do unto another that which you would not want done to you") to the positive form ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you").

This is just a small part of this "biography."

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