

The Rest is Commentary
By
Daniel E. White June 9, 2025

There is special joy when a young person you have taught grows up and teaches you something. It feels like life is unfolding in the way it is meant to.

I had that experience again recently. For many years, I had been reciting what I thought was a teaching of Hillel, the renown Jewish scholar, which asserted that all of humanity was condemned to the inside of a great circle of stone. Men and women went around and around, having no other choice.

But at all times, someone's shoulder was rubbing against the inside of the wall. Eventually, the accumulation of all of that contact made the wall fall down, and the people inside were free.

I like the story for its message. No doubt, the story belongs to someone, just not Hillel.

Nor any other influential rabbi of the past, according to a gathering of several rabbis at a convening attended by my former student (though I never actually taught him but that is a separate story). I had asked him to help me find the origin of my circle stone wall, and none of his contacts knew. But they shared with him a story that was attributed to Hillel, and my young friend, who is the Head of School of a Jewish Day School, sent it along to me, thinking I might be interested.

Was I ever! The story was a part of a blog written by Rabbi Becher called *The Torah on One Foot*. (June 18, 2013)

"I would like to try to explain a very strange statement in the Talmud. A Roman approached the great sage Shammai and said that he would like to convert to Judaism on condition that he is taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Shammai promptly ejected the Roman from his house, and frankly, I would have done the same.

However, this man came to Hillel, Shammai's colleague and good friend, albeit one with whom he strongly disagreed very often. The Roman said, 'Teach me Judaism while standing on one foot.' And Hillel said, 'No problem'. Hillel then went on to say 'That which is hateful unto you, do not do unto your friend, the rest [of the Torah] is commentary, go and learn.'"

Becher explains further: *Hillel's 'friend' has to be understood in a bit of a broader way than just your fellow person. First of all, G-d is called our Friend, our Beloved. The entire Biblical book of Song of Songs describes G-d and the Jewish people as a man and woman in love. G-d is called 'our beloved.' One friend to which Hillel refers is G-d Himself. Clearly also my fellow human being is another form of friend. Our soul is also our friend, and our closest companion.*

So really, what Hillel is saying is that if we conducted our lives such that every decision we made and every step we took, we always took into account our 'friends', meaning G-d, the soul, and the other person, we would be fulfilling the entire Torah. Everything in the Torah is a commentary on how to live your life with a sensitivity toward all three of our relationships. That

is what Hillel meant by saying that which is hateful unto you, don't do unto your friend. The rest is commentary, go and learn."

At one level, Hillel's wisdom just expressed the Golden Rule. Becher's explanation makes Hillel's teaching more, though, very much like The Great Commandment in the Christian tradition: Love God with all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind and your neighbor as yourself. To my mind, that commandment distills the whole of the Christian message into simple and clear terms. Each of the Gospels has some version of The Great Commandment.

A quick review of Islam and Confucianism will remind you that most religions and belief systems contain teachings about how one should regard the Creator and the relationships between human beings. Variations of the Golden Rule are central to many faith traditions. Over centuries, adherents of most religious traditions have worked hard to differentiate their beliefs from those of non-believers. The idea that there is much in common, at least at the core belief level, hasn't found favor with many of our ancestors.

Why? Why have we humans worked so hard over time, in the context of many faith traditions and belief systems, to articulate and refine "the commentary" and so indoctrinate followers such that they would kill people from other traditions and beliefs if those people chose not to adopt that commentary?

And it's not even the case that, for every religion or belief system, there is one commentary for all who claim to be believers. As a result, history records Christians splitting into Catholics and Protestants, Protestants splitting into more than 200 denominations, which doesn't count the churches formed by charismatic preachers and their followers, Islam fostering Sunni and Shia as well as Sufism, Judaism fragmenting into Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. And so on through Hinduism, Buddhism and so many other traditions.

It's enough to make one lament with Ellen DeGeneres: "Why can't we just all get along and judge each other by the kind of cars we drive?"

As a teacher, I harbor a hope that some generation in the future will grasp Hillel's wisdom and be content to explain the core of their belief while standing on one foot. I am sure my student, now the teacher, agrees.

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