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Questions & Answers / A Conversation With Joseph Telushkin

The writer and teacher discusses his new book about the Talmudic sage Rabbi Hillel.

By David Green

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin is one of the most prolific and respected interpreters of Judaism in the United States. His more than 15 books include several volumes about Jewish ethics, three mysteries starring a rabbi sleuth, and "Jewish Literacy," his biggest-selling book to date, a fat compendium summarizing the history, thought, literature and practice of the Jewish people.

In his newest book, "Hillel: If Not Now, When?" (Schocken/Nextbook; 272 pages, $24), Telushkin looks at the 1st century B.C.E.-1st century C.E. Talmudic sage Rabbi Hillel. It was he who coined the saying, which appears in the tractate Ethics of the Fathers, "If I am not for myself, who will be? And when I am for myself, what am 'I'? And if not now, when?," and he as well who, when asked by a gentile contemplating conversion to summarize the Torah while standing on one foot, famously said: "What is hateful to you, do not do unto your neighbor. This is the whole Torah. All the rest is commentary. Now go and study." Despite Hillel's celebrity, Telushkin, 61, who received Orthodox ordination from Yeshiva University, feels strongly that the sage's ethical teachings are underappreciated. Understanding the moral imperatives of what it means to be Jewish, says Telushkin, can help us to interpret the intentions of the ritual commandments. As proof of this, Telushkin cites Hillel's development of the concept of tikkun olam. Though understood today as synonymous with acts of social justice, for Rabbi Hillel, tikkun olam was a way of using Jewish law to try and circumvent a well-intentioned mitzva that ended up doing more damage than good. For example, Hillel, observing that the law that canceled all outstanding debts in the seventh year had the effect of discouraging potential creditors from lending money to the needy, out of fear they would never be repaid, developed a legal loophole (the prozbol) that made it possible for debts to remain active even during the sabbatical year. Haaretz spoke with Rabbi Telushkin by phone from his home in New York City.

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Ostensibly, your book is about Rabbi Hillel. But it seemed to me that its real purpose is its ethical message.

That definitely was my intention. I think it's sad that the word "religious" is associated in people's minds exclusively with ritual observance. If two people are speaking about a third, and the question is raised, "Is so and so religious," the answer will be based exclusively on the person's level of ritual observance, as if ethical behavior is a sort of extracurricular activity, and not essential. Don't misunderstand me. I'm someone who passionately believes in ritual observance: I think we need it for a sense of holiness, for Jewish continuity, and because it contains ethical lessons. But it's striking to me that in the most famous story in the Talmud, when Hillel is asked to summarize Judaism, he puts the emphasis on the ethical.

There has been a tendency to define Judaism by that which distinguished us from our neighbors, and I think there was a fear that if we emphasized values that were universal, it could lead to assimilation. This may have been a somewhat legitimate fear, because in the aftermath of emancipation, many Jews did assimilate. But Hillel had a more confident attitude: He believed that Judaism had an ethical message to teach, and that that didn't need to lead to Jews being swallowed up.

But isn't ritual observance more demanding? Shouldn't ethical behavior come naturally, in a way?

On the contrary. It is harder to be an ethical person, because the demands of ethics are relentless and never-ending. "Love your neighbor like yourself" is a very difficult demand to carry out. Ethics has a way of being relentless in its demands. Nobody would actually say, God forbid, that you only have to keep Jewish rituals and not the ethical laws. But in the popular mind, relisiosity is defined by ritual observance.

I think it's important to emphasize the centrality of ethics as taught by Hillel, who after all, is the most well-known rabbi in the Torah. We know that he also thought that rituals were highly significant. If we look at his and his disciples' disputes with Shammai, they were overwhelmingly on ritual issues, but if you know that ethics are an essential value, it can give you guidance on other questions. So, even if the Torah says you should cancel all debts in the seventh year, if Hillel looks at this mitzvah, and sees that in practice it is stopping people from making loans, he will seek out the prozbol, because doing so will better fulfill the Torah ethic to help the poor. In the First Book of Maccabees, we read that there was a 2nd-century B.C.E. group called the Hasidim who didn't fight back on Shabbat. They understood the Sabbath laws to be absolute, and they allowed themselves to be killed, all of them. It's important to have essential principles to tell you when the law can be modified.

You mention a rabbinical discussion recorded in the Talmud about whether mankind would have been better off never having been created – with the majority accepting the negative conclusion. What led to a conversation like that?

The context isn't given in the Talmud. Probably, it was during a period of political unhappiness, when life seemed very very tough. But, it's odd that the Talmud doesn't give a context. Moreover, it it seems to be a debate that went on for several years. Many of us have the argument about the value of life within ourselves, but not necessarily with other people. You know the Hasidic saying about how each of should carry two pieces of paper with us at all times, one in each pocket: one that says, I am but dust and ashes, and the other reading, for me was the world created. And depending on your mood at the moment, you consult the appropriate piece of paper.

You are known mainly for your writing and speaking. Did you ever intend to have a career in the pulpit?

No, my career has always been primarily devoted to writing and lecturing. It seemed to me that there were certain aspects of Judaism that needed to be taught, that weren't getting proper attention. I was particularly interested in the laws of lashon hara, and the other Jewish teachings on the ethics of speech, including the principle of ona'at dvarim, of not oppressing others with words. The truth is that if you'd listen in at a therapist's office, I think you'd learn that more people are hurt by things that people have said to them than by things that may have been said about them. Things that are said in anger, unfair criticism – there's a whole host of issues. In my book "Words that Hurt, Words that Heal," I tried to draw examples both from Jewish sources and from daily life to show how intensely important it is to guard our speech. For one thing, though children may say, "Sticks and stone may break my bones, but words can never hurt me," adults know, or should know, that throughout history, words have motivated people to pick up sticks and stones, and inflict terrible hurt on people.

You deal extensively in the book with the subject of conversion, about which Hillel had a far more liberal and accepting attitude than his rival, Rabbi Shammai. Is this as charged a topic in the U.S. today as it is in Israel?

In Israel, it's more charged, because you don't have a division there between religion and state. I would like to see Hillel's arguments and his openness to would-be converts brought into the discussion there. Today, his teachings on this subject are ignored. The most famous of rabbinic sages, with an open approach to conversion, and yet you don't see his position cited. If Israel has 400,000 people from Russia who are not halakhically Jewish, it's in Israel's pressing interest to find a way to integrate them into the Jewish homeland.

For American Jewry, is this the best of times or the worst of times?

I think it's both. We are declining in size, and we are in many ways an aging population. The average age of Jews in Israel is much younger than in the U.S. On the other hand, there is a great openness here to Jewish knowledge. In Europe, in contrast, even after emancipation, Judaism lacked the status that it has today in America. There it was common to be a Jew at home but not in the street. Whereas, in the U.S., Sen. Joseph Lieberman could run for vice president and get away with – in fact be praised for – his decision not to campaign on Shabbat. The flip side is that it's easier to assimilate where you don't have to convert to a majority religion to be accepted. The reason why the opening line of "A Tale of Two Cities" is what it is, is because it always seems, in every society, that it's the best and worst of times.

Herman Wouk, who spent a fair amount of time with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, quotes him as saying: You can't tell American Jews to do anything – but you can teach them to do anything. It's not going to work with an authoritarian approach, but with an open one.

Jewish fundamentalism seems to be on the rise. Why do you think this is?

If you look around the word, you'll find that more fundamentalist interpretations of religions are in the ascendance all over. And I think that in that regard, Hillel represented a more moderate force, is sorely needed at this time. He was very inclusive, he was open to all sorts of Jews, and he was also open to non-Jews who wanted to become Jews. The alternative on this issue was Shammai, whom the Talmud depicts as chasing people away who didn't want to be religious in the way he was. Shammai represented an exclusivist, as opposed to inclusive, approach.

I think most Jews today understand that, without ritual, you can't have continuity. Michael Walzer, the political theorist, has argued that the story of the Exodus has influenced more movements of social change than any narrative in recorded literature. But if we Jews hadn't celebrated that story in a seder every year, the story would still have influenced people – but we as a people wouldn't exist.

Jews may argue about which rituals to observe, but few would argue that you don't need rituals. Thus, the lighting of Shabbat candles brings an element of sanctity into the meal that otherwise it wouldn't have. These rituals help focus Judaism's

distinctiveness.

Hillel put great emphasis on the study of Torah. One of the advantages of studying ancient texts is that they can challenge your beliefs in indirect ways. Given that many Jews are passionately political, many liberal, some conservative, I always ask people if they study texts that challenge some of their political beliefs. If they don't, then it would seem that their real religion is liberalism or conservatism and they just isolate Jewish texts to reinforce what they already believe.

This story is by:

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