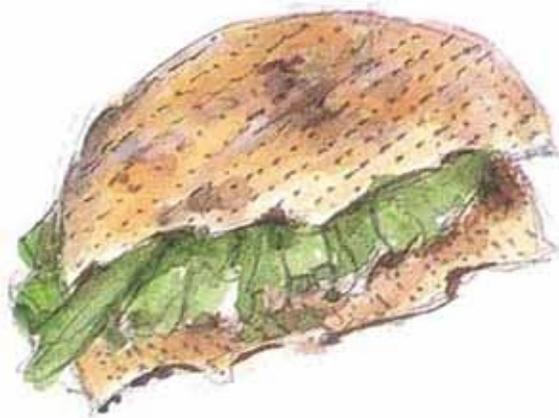


## HILLEL'S OTHER SANDWICH

by Rabbi Moshe Tom Heyn, Temple Israel of Greater Miami - March 2015

Everyone I know loves the Hillel sandwich. It's named after Hillel the Elder, perhaps the greatest rabbi of all time, who was born in Babylon around 60 BCE and died in Jerusalem in 10 CE. He is famous for his patience and humility, as well as for his sayings which are recorded in *Pirke Avot*, a collection of rabbinic aphorisms. But for anyone who celebrates Passover, Hillel is probably best known for the sandwich we are enjoined to eat during the seder.



The inspiration behind this creation is derived from Exodus (12:8) which reads, “and they shall eat the flesh (the paschal offering) that same night, roasted over the fire, with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.” Hillel interpreted this verse to mean that these ritual items should be eaten together, which is what he did back in his day. Today, since we no longer eat lamb at our seders, we use *charoset* instead (usually a mixture of apples and nuts), eating it with bitter herbs on a piece or two of *matzah*.

It's funny, but one of Hillel's best-known sayings is also like a three-part sandwich. Perhaps you've heard it: “*If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?*” (*Pirke Avot* 1:14.) The first question represents a protective stance. It basically says, “I have to defend for myself because no one else will.” It's a position that is inward-directed, focusing primarily on one's own interests or the interests of one's tribe or nation.

Hillel's second question, on the other hand, represents an altruistic stance. It basically asks, “What is the point of my existence if I only care about myself?” It's a position that emphasizes the need to regard even *strangers* with love and compassion. It's an outward-directed flow of generosity toward others.

From one perspective, these two positions are contradictory, representing oppositional forces in a bitter, unresolvable conflict. From a broader perspective, however, they represent complimentary forces. Whereas conservatives tend to favor one position and liberals tend to favor the other, Hillel is suggesting that we adopt a broader perspective which makes cooperation possible. Both positions co-exist in Hillel's metaphorical sandwich, held together by his third question: “*If not now, when?*”

*Pesach* signals a time for freedom from the past; for liberation from old, destructive patterns that have kept us enslaved and from which we must continually strive to free ourselves. Unfortunately however, it seems that our world is stuck in old patterns given that we are still afflicted by so much suffering, violence and enslavement.

When we see ourselves as going forth from Egypt, (i.e. narrowness) it feels as though we are being lifted up along some vast continuum. You may feel it in your life or you may see it happening in the world around you. Whether you believe the Exodus story is an historical narrative or an allegorical depiction, the point is that we are on a journey leading us toward greater freedom.

I've spent years pondering the Exodus story, as well as liberation stories found in other faith traditions, and it's clear that they all affirm this universal truth: We are all on a journey, and a difficult one at times. But there is a progression through which we are able to learn from our mistakes and evolve from lower to higher stages of consciousness. (*continued on p. 2*)



Coming back to the sandwich, Hillel's first question "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" expresses a movement in one direction along the evolutionary spiral. The second question "If I am only for myself, what am I?" expresses a movement in the other direction of the evolutionary spiral. Both are necessary. We can only get to where we want to be from where we are.

It is a tragic mistake, however, when those who favor one direction seek to undermine or override the other. Following this destructive path, one side discredits, delegitimizes and demonizes the other. When a healthy exchange of ideas and energy becomes polarized in this way, the entire system is paralyzed, causing dysfunction and degradation on a massive scale.

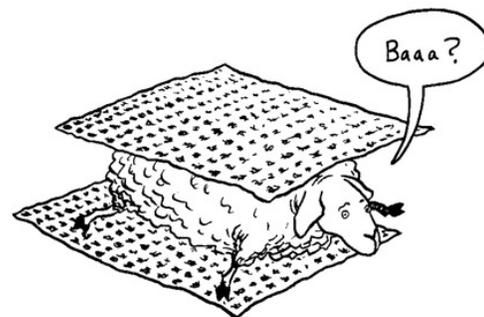
During this season of *Pesach*, Hillel's sandwich becomes most instructive: Now is the time for reconciliation and integration. Now is the time to "seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14) because if not now, then when?

Whether you take part in a seder at home (on April 3<sup>rd</sup>) or at Temple Israel (on April 4<sup>th</sup>) or elsewhere, enjoy a Hillel sandwich and think about this idea: We can no longer afford to perpetuate a polarizing view that demonizes "the other." We are not here to remain stuck in tribal warfare and eradicate our enemies as

that will never be possible. We are here to eradicate, instead, the old patterns that keep us all enslaved. We are here to evolve.

Whether in the machinations of partisan politics, or in our attitudes toward Israel and the rise of extremism in the Middle East, Hillel and his sandwich remind us of this timeless truth: While progressive and regressive forces are always present, we must ultimately align ourselves with the forces that will lift us up and lead us all toward greater freedom.

I hope you will join me as we journey toward freedom from archaic and tribal tendencies -- for ourselves, for our brothers and sisters, and for all creatures everywhere.



*Chag Sameach,*

*Rabbi Tom*