



TEXT STUDY 3

The Motivations of Adult Learners

The famous story of Hillel and the three proselytes provides a wonderful opportunity to reflect on what motivates adults to learn, and the ways in which the teacher might respond.

- **Read the following texts from the Talmud, tractate *Shabbat* 31b with your partner:**

A certain heathen came before Shamai and asked him, “How many *Torot* do you have?” “Two,” he replied, “the written Torah and the oral Torah.” Said the heathen, “I believe you with regard to the written one, but I do not believe you concerning the oral one. I want you to make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the written Torah.” Shamai rebuked him and threw him out in a rage. He came before Hillel who converted him. . . .

[Another Gentile came before Shamai.] He said to him, “Make me a proselyte on the condition that you teach me the entire Torah while I am standing on one foot.” He drove him away with the builder’s measuring stick which was in his hand. He came before Hillel, who converted him. Hillel said to him, “That which is hateful to you do not do unto your fellow. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary—go learn it. . . .”

On another occasion, a heathen was walking behind a schoolhouse and heard the voice of the teacher saying, “And these are the garments which they shall make [for the high priest]” (Exodus 28:4). Said the heathen to himself, “I will go and become

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a proselyte in order that they should make me a High Priest.” He came before Shamai and said to him, “Make me a proselyte on condition that you make me a High Priest.” He drove him away with the measuring stick which was in his hand.

He came before Hillel, who converted him. Hillel said to him, “Is a king ever appointed who does not know the strategies of kingship? Go now and study the strategies of kingship (in your case, the priesthood).”

The Talmud then explains at length that during the course of his studies the proselyte discovers that no one who is not of the priestly lineage, not even a king, may become a High Priest.

He came before Hillel and said to him: “O gentle Hillel, may blessings rest upon your head for bringing me under the wings of the divine presence.”

After some time, the three of them met in one place. They said, “The impatience of Shamai sought to drive us from the world; the gentleness of Hillel brought us under the wings of the divine presence.”

Let’s assume, for the moment, that the proselytes of Hillel’s era can be compared to the Jewish adult learners of today. And let’s further assume that the proselytes can be seen as paradigms for three different types of adult learners.

- What do the three proselytes have in common? What are the differences between them?
- How do you understand the different approaches taken by Hillel and Shamai? What reasons would Shamai give for his actions? What reasons would Hillel give for his?
- What insights can we get from this text about the issues and challenges of adult Jewish learning?

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