

Snow from Heaven:
Hillel in the Study Hall of Shmaya and Avtalyon

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The tale of Hillel at the *beit midrash* of Shmaya and Avtalyon tells of Hillel in his youth as a student struggling to earn enough to pay for his daily tuition. One day he did not earn his wages, and was refused entry to the study hall. Young Hillel climbed atop the roof to hear the word of G-d from Shmaya and Avtalyon. The falling snow covered him until he nearly froze. In the morning he was discovered by his rabbis who quickly took him in. The tale ends with Hillel's rabbis acknowledging his worth. The tale leaves the reader awed by Hillel's devotion and dedication to the Torah. However, a deeper reading incorporating an intertextual approach reveals allusions to other biblical and rabbinic sources. An examination of those implied sources and the context in which they appear sheds new light on the tale. A comparison with the writings of prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah reveals that the snow covering Hillel may actually refer to the word of G-d metaphorically falling onto him. The *beit midrash* to which Hillel was refused entry is depicted as dark, hinting at a darkness that pertains to a spiritual state. The *beit midrash* undergoes a process of amendment, and its occupants learn to treat Hillel differently.

The tale is one of three primary talmudic stories about the life of Hillel; all of them occur on Friday afternoons (*erev Shabbat*), a liminal time between the profane and the holy. A comparison of the tales reveals an important idea that Hillel propounded: the notion of the Shekhinah as a presence that accompanies the individual.