



A Winter's Talmud Tale



The Talmud tells the following the narrative about Hillel the Elder (Yoma 35b):

Each and every day, Hillel would work and earn a *Terapa'ik* (a small amount of money). He would give half of it to the guard of the *beit midrash* (house of study) and half of it was for his livelihood and the livelihood of his household. One time, he could not find work and the guard of the *beit midrash* would not let him enter. He climbed up, suspended himself and sat on the skylight [of the *beit midrash*] so that he would hear the words of the living God from the mouths of Shemayah and Avtalyon. They said that that day was Erev Shabbat (i.e. Friday evening) and that it was the season of Tevet (i.e. winter). Snow fell from the sky. When the sun rose, Shemayah said to Avtalyon, "Avtalyon, my brother, every day the *beit midrash* is bright; but today it is dark. Perhaps the day is cloudy." They raised their eyes and saw a figure of a man on the skylight. They went up and found snow on him three *amot* (about 54 inches) high. They pulled him out, washed him, anointed him, and sat him down before the fire. They said, "For this one, it is appropriate to desecrate Shabbat."

Hillel the Elder became the spiritual and political leader of the Jewish people. He is known for his eagerness to bring people closer to Judaism.

Shemayah and Avtalyon were the leaders of the Jewish people before Hillel. Shemayah was the equivalent of the president while Avtalyon was the equivalent of the vice-president. They were considered to be *gedolei hador* (giants of their generation).