

On One Foot

The On One Foot poster is inspired by a story from the Talmud.

Tractate Shabbat 31a	שבת לא.
An incident about a non-Jew who came before Shammai.	מעשה בגוי אחד שבא לפני שמאי
[The non-Jew] said to him [Shammai], "Convert me on the condition that you teach me all of the Torah while I am standing on one foot."	אמר לו גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת
He pushed him away with the builder's cubit [a type of stick] in his hand.	דחפו באמת הבנן שבדו
[The non-Jew] came before Hillel. [Hillel] converted him.	בא לפני הלל גייריה
[Hillel] said to him, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah. The rest is interpretation. Go study."	אמר לו דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך פירושה הוא זיל גמור

A Note About the Word *Ger*

The person who approached Shammai and Hillel expressed a desire to be Jewish. The verb used to relate this action is *לגייר*—*l'gayeir*, which means "to initiate into the Jewish faith" or, more colloquially, "to convert." The noun form of one who goes through this process is *גר*—*ger*. Jewish wisdom from the Torah ([Exodus 22:20](#)) to the Sages ([Bava Metzia 59b](#)) and onwards is very particular about not only not oppressing the *ger* but also about the *ger's* status being the same as that of any other Jewish person. How one chooses to translate or explain the word *ger* is a subject of some debate. However, that debate is outside the purview of this collection of activities.

What follows is a collection of activities connected to the narrative about the *ger* who approached Shammai and Hillel. While these activities can certainly be used on their own, they are intended to work in conjunction with the On One Foot poster, which is [available at JTeach.org](#).

The Long and Short of It—The *ger's* request has influenced modern Hebrew language. In modern Hebrew, the phrase *al regel achat* means "in summary" or "in brief." Try incorporating the phrase into your conversations when you ask someone to summarize something or when you ask them for the short version of a story.

On One Foot

Do It on One Foot—Choose something to explain to someone else and do so on one foot. Try different actions on one foot. How long can you stand on one foot? How long can you stand on one foot with your eyes closed? How long can you hop on one foot? How far can you jump on one foot?

A Call to Action and Inaction—Hillel's view of the Torah is based on the Torah's command, "וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ" (You shall love your fellow as yourself) ([Leviticus 19:18](#)). Compare and contrast the idea as presented in the Torah and as presented by Hillel. How might one's actions following the positive focus in the Torah differ from one's actions following the anti-action of Hillel's statement? (In modern parlance, one might summarize the difference between the two as "Be a mensch" and "Don't be a jerk.")

There's Gold in Them Rules—Hillel's statement is sometimes known as the Golden Rule in general society. Many communities have different versions of the Golden Rule, some stating it as a positive, "Do to others what you would have them do to you." Research other versions of the Golden Rule. What, if anything, is particularly Jewish about Hillel's statement? Is there anything comparable to Hillel's idea about having a whole book of commentary about the Golden Rule?

613—Traditional Jewish wisdom posits that there are 613 mitzvot in the Torah and that they are divided into two categories: מִצְוֹת עֲשֵׂה—mitzvot that are fulfilled by doing an action (e.g. respecting one's parents)—and מִצְוֹת לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה—mitzvot that are fulfilled by refraining from an action (e.g. not stealing). Some of these mitzvot are *bein adam l'makom*—between a person and God—while others are *bein adam l'haveiro*—between two people. Write a reflection on how you can fulfill Hillel's dictum. Are all types of mitzvot equal when following Hillel's teaching? Which, if any, might take priority? Why? How do the different types of mitzvot complement each other?

Be Nicer—Develop steps you can take to be nicer to other people. It can be very easy to find steps to be nicer to friends. What additional steps can you think of that you might need to take in order to be nicer to those who are not your friends?

Be Nice (or Don't)—Shammai had a very different approach to the potential *ger* than Hillel did. Evaluate the two different approaches. Why was Hillel's approach successful? When might Shammai's approach be appropriate? Create a video short that shows the difference between the two approaches.

Design Your Own—The *Al Regel Achat* poster shows the *ger* standing on one foot. Design a poster that shows Hillel and his posture during this encounter. Design one that shows Shammai during his encounter. Consider the *ger*'s position. Do you think this is how he was standing *al regel achat*? Show what you think his posture was.

On One Foot

Smile!—This narrative seems to present Shammai as a stickler who has no patience when others make seemingly disrespectful requests. However, the Mishnah records Shammai as saying that one should receive all people with a pleasant countenance ([Pirkei Avot 1:15](#)). Practice your pleasant countenance. Then, when someone says or does something disrespectful to you, try to keep your pleasant countenance. Reflect on how your expressions and responses to others affect your interactions with others.

Keep It Simple—The Kli Yakar ([commentary on Leviticus 19:18](#)) states that the *ger* was sincere in his desire to become Jewish. According to the Kli Yakar, the *ger* was concerned that there was too much to remember; so he requested something simple through which he could remember the whole Torah. Try distilling what being Jewish means to you in one sentence. For an added challenge, write the Six Word Torah.