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# Speculative Explanation for Two Terms in Rabbinic Literature

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A chance discovery I made while reading Peter Ackroyd's novel *The Fall of Troy* (2007) may shed some light on the origin of the rabbinic term *halakhah*. The word is generally used to describe rabbinic law. In a more precise definition based on etymology, *halakhah* should be read as "rabbinic legal process." *Halakhah* is a Hebrew word the root of which is H-L-KH, to walk, or to go, to proceed. On that ground alone, the term merits an understanding more dynamic than "law," one that suggests development. The term should accurately reflect the ways that rabbinic law works, both in substance and in method. While ideologues who maintain that the Oral Law has a Sinaitic source will reject that inference, those using a historical-sociological analysis will accept it unhesitatingly.

My "discovery" reinforces the latter approach. Ackroyd has his learned professor character (a fictionalized Heinrich Schliemann) explain that the English word "method" is a composite of two Greek words: *meta*, the preposition that means "along," and *hodos*, the noun that means "way" or "road." Thus, "method" means "process," something that is "along the way" or "in process" the way to do thing. Since many Greek legal terms are brought into rabbinic law (such as Rabbi Ishmael's Principles of Rabbinic Exegesis), it is not unreasonable to suggest that the choice of the word "*halakhah*" mirrored Greek legal method or procedure, and that *halakhah* was, in the view of the rabbis of the Greco-Roman era, the proper description of the creative process by which they could formulate appropriate, authentic and, most importantly, relevant guidelines for living Jewish lives in a world that was so very different from the one in which Torah law was originally operative. With *halakhah*, the rabbis would enable Jews to be *t'mimei darekh, ha-hol'khim b'torat Adonai* – blameless ones who walk (*ha-hol'khim*) in the teaching of God. (Psalms 119:1)

A second suggestion is an explanation for the term *al regel ahat*. After nearly 2,000 years of exposure, the term is nearly a cliché, and everyone understands it to mean "quickly" or "simply." I think the meaning is much more interesting, more revealing and far less quirky than the accepted translation "on one foot." The story, found in Shabbat 31a, describes how a proselyte challenges Shammai to teach him the Torah *al regel ahat*. Shammai refuses and sends him away. Hillel, offered the same challenge, responds "Do not do unto others that which you would not have done to yourself" (or, alternatively, "that which is hateful to you, do not do to another"), and he continues, "the rest is commentary; go and learn [it]."

Analyzing Hillel's answer, we see that Hillel has summarized the teaching of the entire Torah in one principle, asserting that everything else in Torah is but elaboration on that guide for human conduct. Shammai has refused to epitomize Torah, and with much justification. Torah is rich and complex, and we can understand why a scholar with Shammai's reputation for strictness would reject such a demand. He's saying that the commandments can't be boiled down to a single principle. Hillel disagrees, as do Rabbi Simlai in Makkot

23b-24a (“the righteous shall live by their faith” – Habbakuk 2:4), Rabbi Akiba (“you shall love your neighbor as yourself” – Leviticus 19:18), and Ben Azzai (“this is the book of the generations of Adam” – Genesis 5:1). In B’reishit Rabah, (Genesis 24:7), Hillel presents a single principle and uses the principle to frame an ingenious and honorable response to the proselyte’s challenge. His answer, though simple, does not deny the Torah’s complexity: “The rest is commentary; go and learn.”

Based on this analysis, the term *al regel ahat* should be understood figuratively, not literally. It does not mean “on one foot” but “in one principle.” We do not find the literal use of the term anywhere else in rabbinic literature so it is extremely unlikely that *al regel ahat* was a figure of speech in common use at that time. And, in at least one other instance, *regel* is used figuratively: *raglayim la-davar* – “there is a reason (or basis) for the matter.” (M. Nazir 9:3) For me, the clincher for this explanation lies in the resemblance in sound of *regel* to the Latin word for basic principle, *regula*, a word the rabbis would have known. (The slight shift in vocalization is similar to that of “Epicurus” becoming *apikoros*, *epikomos* becoming *afikomen* and Tryphon becoming Tarfon. Examples abound.)

Conversion to Judaism requires *kabbalat ol ha-mitzvot*, personal acceptance on the part of the proselyte of the obligation to keep the commandments. Seen in that light, Hillel’s answer is much more than a quick response to a possibly frivolous challenge. Rather, it reaffirms his reputation for openness offered without any compromise of integrity.

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*N.B.* This connection was made in an article by Raphael Jospe, “Hillel’s Rule,” published in the *Jewish Quarterly Review*: New Series, Volume 81, Number 1/2 (July-October 1990), pp. 45-57. Jospe attributes the connections to Mordechai M. Kaplan.

The article was brought to my attention by Dr. Philip Miller, librarian at HUC-JIR, New York.