

קול התור על פרקי אבות

Reflections on Pirkei Avos

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Based on Lev Avos, Devarim Nechmadim, Maharal, Abarbanel, Vilna Gaon, and others.

Introduction

We read Pirkei Avos between Pesach and Shavuot because it prepares us to properly accept the Torah. This is the period of time when the students of Rabi Akiva perished because they did not have proper respect for one another. Apparently, it is possible for a person to possess vast Torah knowledge and yet lack the ethical behavior that should accompany it. In order to be a true vessel to receive and transmit the Torah we need to refine our character traits to reflect those found in Pirkei Avos.

The custom is to begin the recital of Pirkei Avos with a quote from the final chapter of Sanhedrin: "כל ישראל יש להם חלק לעולם הבא". All Jews have a portion in the world to come.

This quote is somewhat perplexing. It seems obvious that there have been Jews in our history who did not merit a portion in the world to come. As a matter of fact, the very Mishna in Sanhedrin from which this quote comes, ends with a list of those who have no portion in the world to come. The quote at the beginning of Pirkei Avos seems somewhat disingenuous.

The answer lies in a well-known anecdote attributed to the Berenstain Bears: Brother Bear had trouble with Nail Biting. No incentive seemed to work. They even tried offering him a penny for each nail that he did not bit over the course of a day. It was ineffective. Finally, Mama Bear had the little bear put ten pennies into his pocket at the beginning of the day. As he walked around and heard the coins jingling in his pocket, he was able to control his nasty habit.

In that very same way, G-d puts very one of us into this world with a portion in the World to Come. Some of us will get to use it; some of us won't. But having that portion is incentive to make something of our lives and to keep our eyes on the prize. After all, we already have it; it's just a matter of holding on to it.

This important lesson about the potential of every Jew is the perfect introduction to Pirkei Avos. As we prepare to receive the Torah and to avoid the mistakes of Rabi Akiva's students, we need to recognize that every single Jew has a portion in the world to come. We needed to learn to respect one another.

Are we all Tzaddikim?

The Introductory Mishna quotes a verse from Isaiah: "For Your nation are all Tzadikim". How is this even possible? Certainly, we are all aware of people who are not Tzaddikim?

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A Tzaddik is someone who is perfect. Everything that a Tzadik does is 'Tzodek' – correct. A Tzadim is also a solid basis, a foundation. We can rely on a tzadik to always do the right thing.

Although most of us are not complete Tzadikim, we are all tzadikim in our own tiny way. We all have lines we will not cross and actions that we will always take. It is that type of Tzadik that each one of us can be described as and it is that quality of ours that makes us eligible for the world to come.

Of course, we are supposed to build on that foundation through actions and growth. The verse ends by describing as the saplings of G-d that will continue to grow. In fact, the closing Mishna of every chapter is the quote of Rav Chananya ben Akashya reminding us that G-d gave us many commandments so that we can continue to flourish.

We need to appreciate our inner Tzaddik while continuing to flourish.¹

The First Mishna

Which Fathers?

Our forefathers were close to perfect. There is very little that we can say that they didn't say and there is very little that we can do that they didn't do better. Still, each of the personalities in the Torah was noted for his or her unique strengths. Adam and Chava were the parents of all mankind, Noach saved the world, Avraham rediscovered G-d, Sarah dealt with infertility and a disappointing stepson, Yitzchak was willing to die for G-d, Rivkah believed in Yaacov and supported him unilaterally, Yaacov was faithful to the Torah even as he dealt with the dredges of society. Yosef remained holy and faithful despite all odds, Yocheved raised Moshe who persevered to take us out of Egypt, Bisya negotiated with her father to save Moshe's life, Aharon was our spiritual leader, Miriam never gave up. And the list goes on. Every week the Rabbi gets up in shul and focuses on another biblical hero and his or her story.

In a similar vein, Pirkei Avos is a work of many men. Although they were all close to perfect, it is understood that no one person could excel in everything. And so, dozens of rabbis came together to write our Life's Little Instruction Book, recognizing that each one had something unique and special to teach their generation and ours.

These are the Pirkei Avos. The teachings of our forefathers as transmitted to us by the rabbis of the Mishna.

Fatherly Guidance

¹ Maharal

Like fathers, the sages of the Mishna were able to guide us in each generation. They showed us how to take our inner holiness and our Torah and apply to each generation and its challenges.²

Why Moshe?

What then is the meaning of the first Mishna? Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and gave it to Yehoshua?! Did Moshe alone have the monopoly on ethics? Wasn't this a group effort? Aren't ethics something that we can each excel in personally and teach our own personal message?

Here we need to take a moment to appreciate the uniqueness of Moshe and His Torah. Somehow, G-d was able to take all of the lessons of biblical times and transmit them to Moshe in His Torah. It's all there. Moshe was able to transmit those lessons to Yehoshua, who was able to grasp them as well. But that is where it stopped. Never again (and never before) was one person able to hold the entire Torah. It is almost as if history took a time out to regroup. All of our history and our legacy and our canon was consolidated into one book and taught to one man. That one man taught it to another.

At Sinai, with the giving of the Torah, ethics stopped being an intuitive way of life and became a wisdom, something to be studied, learned and mastered. Where Abraham and Sarah relied on their own intuition, we rely on truisms, aphorisms and the experience of others.

When Adam was asked why he ate from the Tree of Knowledge, he blamed his wife: "the woman that you gave me made me eat it." G-d was not happy with this answer. Our sages tell us "כאן", "כפר בטובה", it was at this moment that Adam stopped appreciating his wife. Worse, it was at that moment that he stopped appreciating the G-d who gave him his wife. Perhaps, this is why his son was a murderer and his grandson worshipped idols. Perhaps the world would be a little more perfect today if Adam hadn't jumped to blame Chava for his shortcomings.

We all know not to complain about our wives. Some of us know because we have been told; others know from experience. Admittedly, those of us who know from experience know the lesson more intimately, but perhaps we would have been better off if we had received the advice earlier, if we had been given the ability to learn from their mistake rather than our own.

The Mesilas Yesharim speaks of a garden maze with a large platform in the center. While everyone else has to blunder their way through the twists and the turns, the person who has completed the maze and stands in the center is able to look down and see all of the traps and dead ends in front of him. He can call out directions to those who are lost, or he could stay quiet and let them enjoy the maze.

² Maharal

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Life is a maze. We will never have all of the answers given to us on a silver platter. The challenge of life and the joy of living is about navigating our way through the maze of life and learning from our mistakes. Still, it is nice to have a head start. This was the Torah, and this was the wisdom imparted to Moshe. Moshe got it all from Sinai, and in this way he had an advantage over Adam and Chava, Avraham and Sarah, Yitzchok, Rivka, Yaakov, Rachel and Leah.

Moshe managed to impart that wisdom to Yehoshua, but it would go no further. The next generation was led by the elders, a group of people who were contemporaries who had judged alongside Moshe and Yehoshua. As a collective they contained the wisdom of the Torah, but as individuals would never come close to Moshe or even Yehoshua.

The Secret of Humility

How was it that Moshe and Yehoshua merited a knowledge that encompassed all that had preceded them? The Torah tells us that Moshe was the humblest of men. Yehoshua was his aide. He would stay behind after all of the other students left to organize the chairs for the next day. Rav Chaim Volozhin points out that a cup with thick wall has less room to hold water. The humility of Moshe allowed him to be a true vessel to capture the word of G-d. Yehoshua was the moon to Moshe's sun. He saw himself as merely reflecting the greatness of his teacher. He didn't consider himself special in his own right. The humility of Yehoshua allowed him to truly accept all that Moshe taught him.

This idea is hinted at in the Mishna. "Moshe received the Torah from Sinai". Moshe did not receive the Torah from Sinai, but from G-d. The Mishna is worded strangely to remind us why Sinai was chosen. She wasn't the tallest or the most beautiful mountain. She was the smallest mountain with no flora or vista. G-d, who first appeared in a burning bush – and not a cedar – chose to give the Torah on a hill and not a mountain. It is all about humility.

Of course, Mt. Sinai did ultimately give forth flowers, and Moshe and Yehoshua had personalities, experiences, and even failings of their own. Still the humility that defined them made them uniquely able to accept the entire Torah and transmit it to future generations.

Connecting to Sinai

The Maharal makes a further point about Moshe's uniqueness. Not everyone could have been drawn to accept the Torah in the desert. Moshe was first drawn to Sinai by the burning bush and later drawn back to receive the Torah.

Often a person has a specific spot where they learn best of all.

I once chose a spot in an out-of-the-way shul in Jerusalem to study only to find out that my father had chosen that very same spot for his own independent study twenty-five years earlier.

In the same vein the Zohar describes this relationship with Torah like a magnet drawing the right person toward us to teach us. We all have teachers and books that we are personally suited for and drawn to. The uniqueness of Moshe was the way he was drawn to Har Sinai and the lesson for us is to recognize when we ourselves are drawn and to allow ourselves to be taught.³

The Zekeinim

The Zekeinim were Chachomim – wise men. The Maharal points out that these men were more attuned than the prophets in how to make the word of Hashem work in our mundane world.

There is an expression in the Gemara that “Chacham adif Minavi”ⁱ. The Maharal explains that it refers to this very concept. A person who is wise and organized in the ways of this world is better than a person who is capable of prophecy. All prophets were both (Nedarim) but their Chochma was more important than their Nevuah.

The Mesillas Yesharim (Ch. 1) writes that we were put into this world, specifically in the midst of some very ungodly things, to fight our battles and become completed and developed human beings. We clearly were not created to escape this world and live supernaturally. For that we did not need to be born.

Seeing the Chochma of G-d in the Seder and Teva of this world is far more impressive than a miracle. The Maharal writes that this is why we don't spend a lot of time discussing the Merkava and the Creation (Chagiga 11). It's not just that they are hard to understand, they are actually below Hashem's dignity.

Why the Prophets?

The choice of Prophets as transmitters of the Torah is a controversial one. Why not the kings? Surely such wise and natural leaders as King David and King Solomon would have been ideally positioned to pass the legacy of Torah to the next generations? Abarbanel – who spent much of his life advising kings – writes that kings are not trustworthy. It was not safe to leave our tradition in the hands of kings. Too many of our monarchs were swayed by their wealth and their power to make some very bad decisions. The people were more unified in the Book of Judges than they were in the Book of Kings. Kings are good. But the Torah was transmitted via the prophets.

Rav Moshe Feinstein points out further that the role of a Jewish king is not to legislate. Where even an American president can issue a pardon, the Jewish king has no ability at all to override the rules. Moshe wanted to be a king, but G-d said, “no. you are lawmaker”. The king facilitates the law, but he is subject to it as well. It would never do for the monarchs to be the custodians of our future.

³ Maharal

Describing G-d

The prophets were not immune to personal feelings. We are taught that no two prophets will ever see an identical prophecy. In the days leading up to the destruction of the first temple the monarchs preferred Chulda the prophetess over Yirmiyahu the prophet. Both preached the word of G-d, yet somehow Chulda was more merciful in her prophecies. She was not allowed to mince words but the visions she described were different than the ones described by Yirmiyahu.⁴

In describing G-d, Moshe (our greatest prophet) used the words א-ל, גדול, גבור, ונורא – Powerful, Great, Strong, and Feared. Yirmiyahu described G-d as Powerful, Great, and Strong, because he did not see G-d as feared. Yirmiyahu spent his lifetime warning people to repent but they did not listen. After the destruction, Daniel described G-d as Powerful and Great. G-d didn't appear strong or feared with his sanctuary destroyed and His children in exile. Yirmiyahu and Daniel knew about the Awe and the Strength of G-d, but they articulated G-d as he was perceived in their generation.

The Men of the Great Assembly were a group of Rabbis who led the Jewish people after our return from exile to build the second Temple. They led for over a century and included in their ranks some of the last prophets that the Jewish people had. They instituted much of Judaism as we know it with a standardized prayer book, Torah Reading three times a week, and synagogues in every town. They were called the “Men of the Great Assembly” because when they wrote their Siddur, they described G-d as Moshe had: א-ל, גדול, גבור, ונורא – Powerful, Great, Strong, and feared.

Did the Men of the Great Assembly restore the words “Strong and Feared” because G-d seemed stronger and more feared in their times? Probably not. History tells us that these were very trying times for the Jews. Inter-marriage was at record highs; assimilation was rampant, and the Men of The Great assembly had their hands full trying to preserve Judaism.

It seems that the change here was not one in our recognition of G-d's strength, but rather in strategy. The Men of the Great Assembly realized that if we sit around and wait until G-d's Awe and Strength become obvious, we will have to wait a long time. And if we continue along the path of Yirmiyahu and Daniel we will need to remove the other adjectives as well. Was G-d's power evident? What about his greatness?

Rather than allowing the prayer book to reflect our perception of G-d, the Men of the Great Assembly, wrote the prayer book and asked the Jewish people to try to perceive G-d as Moshe had described Him and – indeed – as he was. For G-d never stopped being א-ל, גדול, גבור, ונורא – Powerful, Great, Strong, and feared.

⁴ Megilla

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In essence, the Men of the Great Assembly challenged the people. No longer were we relying on intuition like our forefathers. No longer did we have a Moshe or a Yehoshua who could encompass the entire cannon of Jewish Wisdom. Not even a group of Rabbis could faithfully transmit it all. The Men of the Great Assembly asked the people to step up to the plate. This is what made them truly Great. In the words of our sages “They returned the crown to where it had been before”.

My earliest memory of the Unesaneh Tokef prayer on Yom Kippur was in Buffalo, NY. I was young enough to be sitting next to my mother and she had me read the translation in my Machzor. Who will live and who will die? Who by fire? Who by water? Who by strangulation? Who in their proper time? Who before their proper time? Who will be troubled and who will be peaceful?

My mother explained to me that our Chazzan was crying because he had been walking with his two sons during World War II when the Nazi soldiers shot them because they couldn't keep up.

Mr. Fixler is no longer alive, and my Yom Kippur has not been the same. Thankfully, most of us do not have images of brutal death in front of our eyes. It is hard for us to comprehend Hashem's judgment, His reward and His punishment. But we still say Unesaneh Tokef. The pressure is on us to conjure up our own feelings.

By reinstating the appellations of Gibor and Nora the Anshei Knesses Hagedola passed the mandate to us and gave the common man and woman the task of beholding G-d's greatness in this world.

The Three Teachings

The Anshei Knesses Hagedola left us with three major teachings: Be patient in Judgment, Build up many disciples, and Create Safeguards for the Torah.

All three of the traits can be found in our forefather Avraham. When G-d set out to destroy the city of Sedom, he consulted first with Avraham. G-d said, “How can I hide my intention from Avraham who is teaching the world about kindness and will raise a nation of kindness!?” In a way G-d was training Avraham for the very difficult task of compassionate judgment. G-d presented Avraham with an open and shut case: The people of Sedom were evil. They represented everything that Avraham opposed. Avraham opened his home to guests while the Sodomites outlawed hospitality. Still, Avraham begged and pleaded with G-d to find a way to spare the people of Sedom. Because G-d said, “Avraham will teach his children to perform both kindness and justice”.

The Bartenura characterizes patience in judgment as follows: “sometimes a case comes before a judge three or four times. He is tempted to draw on his previous rulings and render a speedy judgment. He may not do so. Rather he must examine the merits of each case individually.” This is what Avraham did in Sedom. In doing so, Avraham may have saved the world. G-d had been

disappointed by the world twice before. It was only Avraham who was able to find merit in the world, to introduce monotheism and to justify our continued existence.

Build Up Many Disciples

“Having many students” seems like an irrefutable approach, but the Bartenura is quick to point out that this Mishna is in diametric opposition to Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh. Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh would not accept a student unless he was completely pure of hypocrisy. Only the best of the best were allowed entry in Rabban Gamliel’s yeshiva at Yavneh. It is fascinating that although Rabban Gamliel of Yavneh is quoted throughout the Oral Law, he is not quoted even once in Pirkei Avos. The Anshei Kenesses Hagedola held strongly that all students must be accepted and taught.

Additionally, the Bartenura quotes a passage from Yevamos. “Even if a person taught students in his youth, he should teach more students in his old age”.

Avraham clearly reflected both parts of this teaching. He welcomed everyone into his tent, even if they were idol worshippers who worshipped the dust on their feet. He began teaching in his youth as the Torah describes “the people who he created in Charan” and he continued through his old age as the Torah reports the “Eishel” that he planted in Be’er Sheva to welcome wayfarers and teach them about the oneness of G-d.

Of course, Avraham’s star disciple was his son Yitzchak. It is interesting to note that Yitzchak is generally associated with a strict approach. It is not unusual to find students that adopt a stricter approach than their teacher.

Create a Safeguard for The Torah

Finally, Avraham is known for “creating a safeguard for the Torah”. We do not hear about this in his lifetime. But after his death, Hashem tells Yitzchak that he will honor His covenant with Avraham who “preserved his Safeguards”. Apparently, Avraham kept the commandments and even took steps to make sure that he would not come close to transgressing them.

It occurs to me that there are three approaches to education. The first is an approach that accepts all students with patience and grace. The second accepts only the best students with the greatest potential. The third accepts many students in the hope that some of them will succeed. In the words of the Medrash: “one thousand students study Chumash, one hundred go on to study Mishna, ten will study Talmud, and one will be a great leader and scholar.”

Perhaps the Anshei Knesses Hagedolah began with the premise that we need to accept all students. We need to be willing to look at even a resident of Sedom and judge him based on any merits we can find. They said, “Be patient in judgment”.

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They also recognized that this is not a complete approach. Patience alone will not build a generation; we need to develop students that are educated and well informed. Perhaps we can argue with Rabban Gamliel when it comes to accepting students, but our ultimate goal must be to build a student to become a true scholar and a worthy teacher of Torah. “Build up many students”

Finally, there are the students who do not become great scholars. For them (or us) patience alone is not a long term solution. A comprehensive education will not work either. For those students we say, “Make a safeguard for the Torah”. Give them some hard and fast rules so that they will not find themselves transgressing the words of the Torah.

Consider the Mitzvah of keeping Kosher. A Jew with a non-kosher kitchen might decide to buy only Kosher meat. Although he isn't keeping Kosher perfectly and we would not eat in that home, an approach of “patience in Judgment” will encourage us to look at him or her as an individual and to praise them in their efforts.

Obviously, just patience will not ensure the future of Judaism. Ultimately, we will need to “Build up many students”. We can give people a very clear and intelligent idea of what is acceptable and unacceptable in a kosher kitchen. We can teach them the entire Yoreh Deiah with a deep understanding of Bitul, P'gam, B'dieved and L'chatchila. We can teach everyone to be a rabbi.

But that approach will not always work. Not everyone is going to be a rabbi. That is why we “Make a safeguard for the Torah”. We tell people to keep non-kosher food out of their kitchens, to keep meat and dairy completely separate, and to not even come close to a situation that might be less than Kosher.

Avraham himself began by “Creating people in Charan” but just “creating people” with patience and kindness was not enough. We don't even know what happened to those people. Ultimately, he needed to educate them, to “build them up as students”. In the end, he was remembered as someone who had “created a safeguard for the Torah”.

This was an approach that worked in the times of Avraham and it was an approach that the Anshei Kenesses Hagedolah chose to employ again as the Jewish people entered a new era. It is an approach that can work for us today as well.

The statement of the Talmud that a person should teach students into his old age is a direct reference to Rabi Akiva. He taught many students in his early years, but they all perished. It was only the students of his later years that went on to teach the next generation.

This is the underlying lesson of Pirkei Avos. We need to use the days of Sefira to recognize and respect each and every person, including ourselves. We are the ones who will receive the Torah and we are the ones who will teach it to the next generation.

The Second Mishna

Shimon Hatzadik

Shimon Hatzadik was the last surviving member of the Kenesses Hagedolah. He was a High Priest and a respected leader. His task was to usher us into a non-prophetic era. The previous generation had assured us that we could keep the Torah alive through patience, education, and safeguards; Shimon Hatzaddik's mission was to tell us which ideas to focus on and emphasize.

The Medrash tells us that Alexander the Great bowed before Shimon Hatzadik. Perhaps Alexander understood that Shimon Hatzadik embodied the pinnacle of philosophy and humanity while at the same time harnessing it for spiritual purposes.

Shimon Hatzadik taught that the world is supported by Torah, Avodah (Sacrifices and prayer), and Gemilas Chasadim (kindness). Each of these reflects a defining trait of our forefathers. Avraham excelled in and taught the world about kindness. Yitzhak is most often noted for his prayer. He Himself was a sacrifice. Yaacov was a "dweller of tents", constantly found in the study of Torah. Shimon Hatzadik is telling us that even if we can't relate to G-d through Torah study, we can still relate to him through prayer. Those Jews who embrace neither Torah nor prayer can still relate to G-d through the trait of Loving Kindness.

Justice, Truth, and Peace

The final Mishna in the first chapter of Avos contains a quote from Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel tells us that "the world exists on three things: Justice, Truth, and Peace". He seems to argue with the three tenets of Shimon Hatzaddik in our Mishna.

Rabbi Yaacov Baal Haturim (1270 – 1340) wrote the basic Jewish Legal text for Judges and entitled it "Choshen Mishpat". He introduces his work by explaining that while the world was created for Torah, Prayer, and Kindness, it continues to exist only because of Justice, Truth, and Peace. He bases this on Rabbeinu Yonah and encourages Judges to recognize their role as partners with G-d in the continued existence of the world.

Rav Yosef Cairo, author of the Shulchan Aruch, was unsatisfied with this approach. If Torah, Prayer, and Kindness were sufficient reasons to create the world, why wouldn't they justify its existence as well?

Instead, Rav Yosef Cairo explains the contradiction between Shimon Hatzaddik and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel by making the following sobering point: Shimon Hatzaddik lived in the times of the Holy Temple; he followed on the coattails of great scholars and prophets. He could truly instruct his generation in Torah, prayer, and kindness. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, on the other hand, led a generation that had been exiled. The Temple had been destroyed. We are no longer

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capable of true Torah, Prayer, and kindness. We just do the best we can. We need to suffice with “Justice, truth, and peace”.

The Bnei Yissoschar (based on the Megaleh Amukos) refuses to accept this stance. It is precisely the Torah, Prayer, and Kindness of Shimon Hatzaddik that we have access to in each and every generation. The world was created for Torah, Prayer and Kindness. They were the message upon which Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaacov based their teachings, and they were the three traits that Shimon Hatzadik used to inspire a generation that had lost hope.

Let Them Eat Cake!

In the Torah we find that Avraham welcomed his guests by offering them עגת or cakes. When we left Egypt we also ate Matzos that are referred to as עגת as well. The word עגת is an acronym for Torah, Avodah, and Gemilas Chasadim, for it was those three ideas that Avraham taught his guests and it was those three ideas that we focused on as we left Egypt.

The Baal Shem Tov is known to have pursued three careers in his short lifetime. He would lead children to school to study Torah, He would lead congregations in prayer, and he would slaughter and inspect livestock which was distributed to the poor. It is said that he chose these three areas in order to inspire Jews in Torah, Prayer and Kindness.

Even where Jews have nothing but kindness to connect them to G-d, they will stay connected. This is G-d's promise to Avraham that the blessing of the forefathers (in Shemona Esrei) ends with Avraham. Even when all connection is lost, we have an unbreakable bond based on the trait of kindness that we inherited from Avraham.

The Minchas Elazar makes a frightening point. The three traits of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel upon which the world exists cannot be faked. False Justice is not justice, Falsehood is not truth, and false friendship is not peace. The directives of Shimon Hatzadik on the other hand are easier to attain, they can be faked: We can study Torah even if we do not feel inspired, we can pray even if we don't mean it, and we can perform kindness even as we carry a grudge.

The Beis Yosef felt that Shimon Hatzaddik's words are beyond our reach today. But the Bnei Yissoschar taught the opposite. It is precisely the words of Shimon Hatzadik that we can access today. They worked for Abraham and they can work for us. Perhaps if we can “fake” Torah study, Prayer, and kindness of creation, they will grow upon us until we are able to exercise the Justice, Truth, and Peace upon which the world continues to exist.

The Third Mishna

Antigonus

Antigonus Ish Socho was a student of Shimon Hatzaddik. Whereas Shimon Hatzaddik had been the last remnant of the Anshei Knesses Hagedola, Antigonus was charged with leading a generation that had no remnant of prophecy at all. Despite the instructions and encouragement given by the Anshei Knesses Hagedola, life was far from idyllic. Heresy, poverty, and persecution reigned. The people focused on Shimon Hatzaddik's pillars of Torah, Prayer, and Kindness but their world continued to crumble before their eyes. One of Shimon Hatzadik's own children went to Alexander the Great and obtained permission to build an idolatrous Temple on Mount Grizim. The struggle of those on Mount Grizim was, in part, a question of why those who abided the word of G-d were not rewarded in kind.

Rather than rule with platitudes, Antigonus chose to challenge his remaining followers. "Don't concern yourselves with reward", he said, "Focus on your love of G-d". Unlike the previous generations who had held up Jewish continuity as an incentive, Antigonus preached no incentive at all. He enjoined the people to enhance their love of G-d.

Some of the students couldn't handle it. Tzadok and Beitus left and formed their own groups called the Sadducees and the Beitusim. Antigonus held his ground. It wasn't forbidden to look for reward, but it wasn't recommended either.

Avraham's First Test

In keeping with his approach to Pirkei Avos, the Bnei Yissoschar explains Antigonus with a discussion about our forefather Avraham.

Avraham Avinu was only commanded to keep seven mitzvos. One of those was the prohibition against bloodshed. G-d told Noach that he and his children were not permitted to take any life, including their own. When Avraham was commanded to either bow to an idol or jump into a fiery furnace, he should have bowed to the idol. It is only Jewish people who are commanded to give up their lives rather than worship idols. We see this from Elisha's ruling to Na'aman in the book of Melachim: Although Naaman hand pledged his loyalty to G-d, Elisha allowed him to bow before an idol when he was accompanying the king on his yearly pilgrimage. The seven Noahide laws don't allow a person to risk his life in order to avoid idolatry.

Avraham lived prior to the giving of the Torah. He was bound by the Seven Noahide laws. When Avraham jumped into the furnace, he didn't do it because he would be rewarded or because he was supposed to. He did it not knowing if he was making the right choice. Nonetheless, out of sheer love for G-d, Avraham didn't see any option other than jumping into the furnace, even knowing full well that he might be forfeiting both this world and the next.

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This was Avraham's first test, and it was a test of his love. It was not included in the Torah because he did not act to fulfill G-d's command. He acted out of pure emotion.

Acting solely based on love is a slippery slope and not a recommended one, but Antigonus suggested that we use the model of Avraham in our motivation to fulfill the commandments.

Antigonus told his generation to stop concentrating on reward and consequence. Instead, we should allow our motivation to be sheer love for G-d. Some couldn't handle that, and indeed later generations pointed out that Antigonus should have been more careful with his words. The human being needs to have some framework of reward and satisfaction.

Fear of Heaven

Antigonus did end by reminding us of Morah Shomayim. Morah Shamayim is an awareness of G-d's existence and His constant presence in our life.

If we can recognize G-d's hand in our life and minor miracles that take place daily, we will be better able to love and serve G-d with enthusiasm. Human nature doesn't produce love spontaneously, we need inspiring consequences and reminders from G-d to awaken our love and set us on the proper path.

Rise for the Wise

Rav Z'eira used to sit down when he knew a scholar was coming so that he could stand up and receive reward. We can understand that he channeled his weakness into a mitzvah, but why the fixation on reward?

Perhaps this is related to the end of the verse, "Rise for the wise and you will fear G-d". The true reward is fear of G-d and that is a worthwhile fixation. Rav Zeira understood that he would need to think about actions and even his potential reward if he was to grow in his love of G-d. We find a similar concept in Nazir 66 where Rav encourages his son to say Amein in order to gain reward. The ultimate reward was the fear of G-d.

This too is learned from the forefathers, each of whom was meticulous about tithing. In Devarim 14:22-23 we are told that tithing leads to fear of G-d. In the book of Malachi G-d asks us to test him with tithing. He wants to show us His reward so that we can grow in our awareness of G-d and through that in our love.

Even at the pinnacle of his love for G-d, when he was willing to slaughter His son Yitzchak, G-d said "Now I know that you are a man who fears G-d". Fear and Love must work together. No human can operate on Love alone.

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Antigonus deliberately instructed his generation with a mix of love and fear. One cannot exist without the other. Fear or, more accurately, awareness of G-d's presence, allows us to make our love of G-d relevant in this world.

The Fourth Mishna

The Zugos

After generations of a single ruler, the Jewish People were now led by two great men: Yosi ben Yoezer and Yosi ben Yochanan.

They only differed on one Halachic point, but their approaches to Judaism and to leadership were very different.

Yosi ben Yoezer said, "Make your home a meeting place for sages. Get dirty in the dust of their feet and drink their words with thirst".

Yosi ben Yochanan said, "Open your house up wide and let poor people be the members of your household".

On the surface, it would seem that Yosi ben Yochanan is the more liberal of the two. He had relaxed entrance policies and was clearly not an elitist. Yosi ben Yochanan, on the other hand, seems to advise limiting one's company to scholars.

There is another approach to this as well.

Antigonus Ish Socho had tried his best to inspire his generation in both the love and the fear of G-d. His message was on the mark, but his generation could not accept it. The concept of love was too daunting, and the concept of fear was almost unnoticed. They certainly couldn't do both. Later generations split the message. One taught love the other taught fear.

This is the depth of "Chabad". It is an acronym for Chochma (Wisdom), Bina, (Understanding), and Daas - which is a combination of Chochma and Bina. Good Daas leads to good decision making. Bad Daas leads to bad decisions.

Everything in life is a combination between book knowledge and street smarts. Every good couple is a combination between information and application. If we are lucky the emergent result is Daas – common sense, which is not very common at all.

In the case of Antigonus, he possessed a Daas that was incomprehensible to those who lived in his times. Instead the next generation focused on either love or fear, either knowledge or understanding.

Find a Holy Person

Yosi ben Yoezer emphasized the importance of knowledge of G-d and serving Him out of love. He understood that some may not be motivated to serve G-d out of the love, but pointed out that everyone can admire someone who does.

Yosi Ben Yoezer gave us an easy way out. Learn about G-d he said, invite scholars into your home, drink their words thirstily, and be willing to get yourself dirty from their dust.

Yosi ben Yoezer did not focus on personal responsibility. He focused on knowledge and role models. That was enough to save the next generation.

Our forefather Avraham was a nomad. He moved around and pitched his tent in many places, but he only received a prophecy in the Plains of Mamre. This was because Mamre was a good friend who admired Avraham and encouraged him to go ahead with the circumcision. He welcomed Avraham into his property, and that brought G-d with him.

Avraham's servant Eliezer was considered a holy man. The Torah tells his story three times because "The idle talk of the servants of the forefathers is more significant than the Torah of the children".

The idea is that we can gain from just being in the presence of a holy person or, better yet, having them in our presence. While we may be lacking in deep and personal understanding, we gain wisdom and knowledge that we would not otherwise have.

Often people will come to a class that they cannot understand just to experience the ambience and the concepts and the conversation. That experience and the knowledge gained is significant.

Holy Disagreements

One interpretation of getting "dirty at the dust of their feet" is that we should watch the arguments. When Eisav and Yaacov fought the language of dust is used as well. When it comes to Torah scholars we are taught that even a father and son can become enemies, but they are not hockey players, they always become better friends at the end of the argument. We have so much to gain just by sitting close enough to the argument for the dust to settle on our clothing.

This was the message of Yosi ben Yoezer to his generation. He was the first Nasi. He was a role model and not a lawmaker. His role was to show the world a holy person and his role was to show the world how holy people argue.

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We need to recognize that even if we are not ready to live the words of Antigonus, there are others who are. We can love Hashem and serve him by drawing those holy people close to us.

Holy Character

In the language of philosophy, a person's house refers to his or her mind. The Abarbanel points out that even if we cannot invite scholars into our literal homes, we can still invite their character and their words into our minds and allow them to form a context of holiness that we can draw upon and eventually emulate.

One of the fondest weeks of my life was the one in which Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg Shlita came to Australia. I was fourteen at the time and was given the task of assisting Rabbi Scheinberg and making sure that all of his needs were met. At first, Rav Scheinberg was very upset to see me and told my father to send me back to school. He begrudgingly relented to my presence when we promised that my Chavrusa would join me in the dining room so that I could continue my learning while he met with people in an office upstairs.

The highlight of my week came in the form of a glass of fresh mousse with a cherry on top. At the request of the woman of the house, I took leave of my Chavrusa and brought the delectable dessert upstairs to the Rosh Yeshiva. The Rosh Yeshiva thanked me politely and, for the first time all week, asked if I would do him a favor. Of course, I said yes. My excitement turned to wonder as he handed me his spoon and asked me to stay for a few minutes and eat the Mousse. It was delicious and I told him so. He thanked me again and I took leave, taking care to return the empty glass to the kitchen.

I returned to my chavrusa but it wasn't long before the woman of the house, noting the uncharacteristic speed with which "Rav Scheinberg" had devoured the mousse, asked me to bring up another glass which she had painstakingly prepared.

She confided in me, saying, "I finally found something he likes". I just licked my lips and smiled.

The rest of the week was as sweet as it was instructive. My role as Rav Scheinberg's assistant was to arrange his appointments, answer the door, and eat his mousse. My chavrusa was a little jealous when he found out, but I had no intention of sharing my responsibilities.

This is what we gain from holy people. Rav Sheinberg spent the week in his Tefillin and Talis. He never uttered an idle word and his prayers and devotion to study were incredible. But I learned the most from his everyday actions. They showed how to live my life as a Torah Jew. By watching even the most mundane actions of holy people we gain a very broad and practical understanding of Torah concepts that we might not grasp on our own. Inviting holy people into our lives helps us grow closer to G-d when we can't do it on our own.

The Fifth Mishna

The Other Approach

Yosi Ben Yochanan was the Head of the Rabbinic Court. He and Yosi Ben Yoezer led the Jewish people for a generation. Both were charged with continuing the legacy of Antigonus Ish Socho that had been so true and yet so ill received by some of their peers.

Yosi Ben Yoezer taught the people hope by encouraging them to connect to wise men, Yosi ben Yochanan disagreed. He wanted to see every man work toward a very deep relationship with G-d. It may be missing in breadth, but it would far make up for it in quality. In Kabbalistic literature this is referred to as 'Bina', a deep understanding.

Yosi ben Yochanan realized that not everyone was going to be a sage or even share company with a sage. Everyone, however, has the opportunity to perform a kindness.

I once visited with an elderly woman who was bedridden and had three weeks to live. She was lonely and had no will to go on. I asked her if she smiled when the nurse walked into the room. She answered that she did. I explained to her that her smile had the potential to change the way the nurse felt in her interaction with her and with the other patients. It had the potential to change the woman's attitude when she came home and sat down to dinner with her family. It was worthwhile for her to go on, if only for her smile.

On another occasion I was approached by a nurse at a long-term care facility. She asked me to pray for her father. I told her I would but pointed out that it would be worthwhile for her to pray as well. She spent all day caring for other people's parents. She could certainly ask G-d to take care of hers.

Nobody will be perfect at everything, but we can all excel at something.

As a matter of fact, it is often the small things that we truly should be putting our energy into. Everyone wants to save the world; nobody wants to help out with the dishes.

I once ducked into Munkacz on Sixteenth Avenue. I had just spent twenty minutes attempting to single park a twelve-seater van that wasn't mine. I was very frustrated with Boro Park.

I was surprised to find that there was traffic inside Munkacz too. A bottleneck had formed at the stairwell and movement had come to a standstill. Unlike the traffic outside, I noticed that nobody was yelling, pushing, or even talking loudly on their cell phones. I peeked forward to the front of the line and saw a distraught man pouring out his heart to the Munkaczer Rebbe. The Rebbe was

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standing riveted to his spot and completely oblivious to the long and patient line of people waiting to go downstairs. This was a type of Boro Park traffic that I could appreciate.

Seeking To Do Good

Avraham excelled in opening up his own house to his guests. His house was open on all four sides. He made himself easy to find. Police sometimes resent having to give a ticket but once they see something they have a duty to address. We also hope the poor man won't find us. We don't want to feel obligated.

Lot learned hospitality from Avraham, but he had a degree of separation from his guests. He believed in welcoming guests but didn't advertise.

Furthermore, Avraham gave up his privacy completely. His house was everybody's house.

Modern day Bedouins also continue this legacy of hospitality, but it only begins once someone has entered the home. They are not obligated to allow a person entry. Interestingly, their tents are open on only three sides. The west side is off limits to guests.

Their hospitality is commendable, but it is not quite the tent of Avraham and Sarah.

The Bnei Yissoschar understands the concept of making poor people members of your household very literally. They should be your staff, the people you work with and need to depend on. At the same time, you should not be above helping your guests personally. Avraham ran to help the guests. When he didn't, he sent his children to help.

Who is The Master?

Antigonus had said that we should be like slaves serving our masters without thought of a reward. The Bnei Yissoschar points out that when it comes to parents and children the roles of slave and master are often switched. Sometimes the master's role is to be a slave. Yosi ben Yochanan made this a way of life. Treat the poor people as members of your household. Be their slaves. This isn't about how to make more money or run things more efficiently, this about serving our "masters" in need and ultimately our Master in heaven.

Yosi ben Yochanan is making a tall order, but we can all be a part of it. Next time we do a kindness, we need to take it just one step further than we did before. Be a little more proactive, give up a little more privacy. G-d does it for us; we can do it for Him.

The Talmud tells us that Rav Shimon ben Shetach once bought a mule. He brought the mule home, and his students discovered a valuable gem hanging around its neck.

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All those around him rejoiced at the rabbi's good fortune. God has answered his prayers! Shimon ben Shetach took the jewel and went immediately back to the merchant to return the jewel. The merchant looked at him with amazement and proclaimed with misery, "It is clearly your jewel" you bought the mule." The rabbi argued and said, "No, it is yours, I bought a mule, I didn't buy a jewel." Upon hearing the words of the rabbi, the merchant exclaimed: "Blessed be the God of Shimon be Shetach!"

By acting G-dly in even one area of our lives, we bring glory to G-d. This is the best way to spread the message of Antigonus.

The Sixth Mishna

Yehoshua Ben Perachia and Nitai Ha'arbeili

Once again we encounter a Jewish nation with two leaders. Yehoshua ben Perachia was the Nasi and he was based in the metropolis of Jerusalem although he was exiled for a time by his Sadducee neighbors. Nitai was the head of the court and based in remote Arbel where he fulfilled his dictum to "Stay away from bad neighbors".

Yehoshua Ben Perachia encouraged interaction with others. He said to "Make a teacher, acquire a friend, and judge every person favorably"

The Rambam, commenting on this Mishna writes that the obligation to judge favorably does not extend to a wicked person who almost certainly is guilty. Elsewhere, the Rambam writes that it is proper to judge every person favorably without exception.

Perhaps this can be resolved by differentiating between actual judges, who are the focus of the commandment to judge favorably, and regular people whose obligation is extrapolated from that of the judges. It would make sense to say that a judge should not and may not defy logic to judge a man favorably. If he is a wicked man he is probably guilty. It is only in our private lives that we have the ability and the right to engage in mental acrobatics to judge our friends favorably.

A more accurate translation of the Mishnah would be to "judge the whole person favorably". By judging the whole person, we are bound to find some merit in their ways. The Bnei Yissoschar points out that G-d Himself gives us free choice. Surely our knowledge of another person's worth is not more comprehensive than that of G-d. We need to recognize the ability of each person to choose to change.⁵

⁵ Bnei Yissaschar Adar 10:1

The Student

Yehoshua ben Perachia is cited in a passage of Talmud that was unavailable for centuries as a result of Christian censorship.

The Talmud tells us to always bring people close to us with our right (stronger) hand even as we are pushing them away with our weaker hand. The Chiddushei Harim encourage us to visualize this statement: If we pull someone toward us with one hand while pushing them away with the other, we can literally turn them around. It is significant that the stronger hand is the one used for bringing closer. The Talmud says that both Elisha the prophet and Yehoshua ben Perachia erred in this regard. Elisha the prophet was too strong with his servant Geichazi and Yehoshua ben Perachia was too strong with one of his students.

Yehoshua ben Perachia had a student named Yeshu. One day, while they were traveling from Alexandria to Jerusalem, Yeshu made an inappropriate comment. Yehoshua ben Prachia refused to speak with him for thirty days. On the thirtieth day, Yehoshua ben Perachia was going to accept his student with open arms but was in the middle of Shema when he entered. Seeing Yehoshua cover his eyes, the student thought that he would never be forgiven. He left to begin his own religion.

The Gemara teaches that Reb Yehoshua ben Perachia was too swift and harsh in pushing away his student. He should have emphasized his redeeming factors and brought him close with his stronger hand, even as he was pushing him away with his weaker hand.

As a result, we can imagine that Yehoshua ben Perachia was very aware of the importance of judging every person in a favorable way or more accurately, judging 'the entire person' favorably. Often, when we look at a person's total experience, we are more equipped to think kindly of them. If we know that a person has a difficult situation at home, we will be more tolerant of their crankiness when they are dealing with us.

Yehoshua ben Perachia emerged with a message. "Make yourself a teacher, acquire a friend, and judge the entire person so that you see them favorably.

Responsibility

There is something very deep here. Yehoshua ben Perachia is telling us to find mentors and to socialize, but at the same time he is telling us to challenge ourselves. We are the ones who need to make, acquire, and judge. We don't always have our friends there to do it for us.

Avraham himself did not really have a teacher. He did seek council with Malki-tzedek and Mamre, but they weren't mentors. That's why he was told "לך לך", "Go to yourself"⁶

⁶ Igra D'kala, Lech Lecha. See also Bereishis Rabba 61:1

The Seventh Mishna

Nitai Ha'arbeli

Nitai Ha'arbeli led the generation together with Reb Yehoshua ben Perachia. They agreed in concept and disagreed in approach. Reb Yehoshua said: Make yourself a teacher and acquire a friend. Nitai Ha'arbeli said: Stay away from bad people and don't associate with evil. Reb Yehoshua said: Judge everyone favorably; Nitai Ha'arbeli said: Evil people will eventually be punished.

Nitai Ha'arbeli lived in the rural town of Arbel where the ruins of his Synagogue can still be seen. He did not want to be around people. He said, 'stay far from a bad neighbor', and he did.

Who were the evil people that Nitai Ha'arbeli sought to avoid? A peek into Avos D'rebi Nosson gives us an insight into Nitai Ha'arbeli's inspiration. He tells the story of a man who found Tzaraas (leprosy) on the walls of his home. The metzora gets his wall knocked down, presumably because he has sinned. The neighbor who shares a wall loses his wall as well - because he has a neighbor who has sinned.

Nitai Ha'arbeli understood that to live next to a metzora is to share his guilt.

What kind of people become 'Metzoras'?

There were ten possible causes, but the top three are Lashon Hora (Evil Speech), Haughtiness, and Stinginess. Basically, Nitai Ha'arbeli moved to get away from bigmouths, show-offs and people capable of doing anything for money.⁷

History tells us that these were exactly the type of who populated Jerusalem in the era of Nitai and Yehoshua ben Perachia.

I once brought my daughter to a doctor. There was a Mezuzah on the door, a complete set of Talmud in the waiting room, a prayer on the wall and a nurse who could not stop saying Baruch Hashem. At the pharmacy, we found the Pesach Guide attached to the counter. It felt like a game of Mitzvah Monopoly.

I was jealous for a few minutes, perhaps rightfully so, but I stopped. Was my judgement based on the Mishna in Avos or on my own comfort level?

Life surrounded by like-minded individuals is very nice, but (possibly) not an end in itself. Nitai Ha'arbeli didn't tell us to stay away from evil neighbors who don't keep the Torah; he told us to

⁷ Kli Yakar

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stay away from bad ones who don't treat people properly⁸. Nitai Ha'arbeili wasn't talking about living on the street with the biggest Lag B'omer bonfire or on the route of Kosher Ice Cream Truck. He was telling us to find neighbors who are loving, humble, and generous. That is what the Metzora did when he made contact with the Cohein and that is what both Nitai Ha'arbeili and Reb Yehoshua ben Prachia agreed was the key to our survival.

The Eighth Mishna

Yehudah ben Tabbai

Yehudah ben Tabbai taught that judges should not be lawyers. When litigants enter a courtroom, they should both be guilty in our eyes; when they leave they should both be considered innocent because they have cooperated in the system of justice.

Although Yehudah ben Tabbai's teacher, Rav Yehoshua ben Perachia, had taught that we must "judge every person favorably", Yehudah ben Tabbai was quick to point out that this was a dangerous position for a judge to take. A judge must be prepared to believe that each one of the people who come before may actually be evil.⁹

Still, Yehudah ben Tabbai believed that if the Torah's system of justice is adhered to then both can be considered virtuous when they depart from the courtroom.

One of the laws in a Jewish courtroom is that both the plaintiff and the accused must wear the same clothing. By involving oneself in the Judicial system a defendant is effectively wearing the clothing of an innocent man.

When we stand before G-d in judgment we are accorded the same courtesy. Though we may come before G-d as sullied wicked men, we leave having donned G-d pure white garments of purity.¹⁰

We begin the case as wicked and guilty but just by virtue of our involvement in the process of judgment we emerge innocent and pure.

In every instance of "zugos" or pairs of sages in the generations surrounding Yehudah ben Tabbai, one leader served as the Nasi and the other as Av Beis Din (Head of the Court). Yehudah ben Tabbai and Shimon ben Shetach had the distinction of serving as both.

Originally appointed as Head of the court, Yehudah ben Tabbai was promoted when Shimon ben Shetach was exiled. Later, Yehudah ben Tabbai stepped down to head of court and yielded the position of Nasi to the returning Shimon ben Shetach.

⁸ See Devarim Nechemadim, see also a definition and discussion of 'good' and 'bad' in chapter two.

⁹ Abarbanel, Nachalas Avos

¹⁰ Bnei Yissoschar, Tishrei, Maamar 3, Drush 2

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The Talmud in Makkos¹¹ tells of a time when the Torah's system of justice was not adhered to. Yehudah ben Tabbai put a false witness to death even though he did not deserve the death penalty. After that case Yehudah ben Tabbi refused to adjudicate a case if Shimon ben Shetach was not in attendance.

On a symbolic level, this was a prime presentation of the interplay between Mercy and Judgment. Initially the head of the court, Yehuda ben Tabbai ascended to the position of Nasi and judged the Sadducee outside of the system of strict Judgment. He subsequently undertook to emphasize judgment as he did in this Mishna but only under the influence of Shimon ben Shetach's attribute of mercy.¹²

The Ninth Mishna

Shimon ben Shetach

Shimon ben Shetach admonished judges to be diligent in questioning witnesses. At the same time, they should be careful not to give witnesses opportunity to lie.

The Talmud tells us that Shimon ben Shetach agreed to serve on the Sanhedrin of his brother-in-law King Yannai despite the fact that the Sanhedrin was primarily made up of Sadducees. Whenever a Sadducee would give a ruling, Shimon ben Shetach would challenge him to source his ruling in the Written Torah. Inevitably the Sadducee would resign from his position in shame.¹³

On one occasion a case was brought against a slave who was accused of murder. The slave belonged to King Yannai. Shimon ben Shetach was faced with a quandary. How could he allow this case to proceed when it would almost certainly be a sham case with the witnesses given both opportunity and incentive to lie?

Shimon ben Shetach avoided the issue by disqualifying the case altogether: He pointed out that the plaintiff in this case was the owner of the slave, King Yannai himself. Shimon ben Shetach insisted on questioning the witnesses at length and insisted that the plaintiff rise for the duration of the questioning. King Yannai refused to rise and the case was thrown out of court.

The entire policy was changed as a result. From that point onward a King in Israel (as opposed to Yehudah) could not judge nor be judged.¹⁴

¹¹ Makkos 5b

¹² See Devarim Nechmadim to Mishna 1:4

¹³ Megilas Taanis, Chapter 10

¹⁴ Sanhedrin 19a

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In a similar fashion, we find ourselves in a quandary when we stand in Judgment before G-d. Perhaps we should subject ourselves to a lengthy testimony of our actions, but we have very little to say and we certainly cannot lie. Instead, we get the case thrown out by pointing out that we are actually just servants of G-d. G-d certainly isn't going to stand in judgment and so our adjudication is effectively cancelled.¹⁵

This was Shimon ben Shetach's approach as a Nasi who had served for a brief period as Head of the Court. He solved the quandary of difficult adjudication and potential lies by questioning the witnesses and thus rendering the case impractical for Judgment.¹⁶

The Tenth Mishna

Shemaya and Avtalyon

Shemaya and Avtalyon were the generation of leaders that finalized the transition of leadership from the High Priest to the Sages.

Since the time of Shimon Hatzaddik, the High priest had held an important position of authority for the Jewish people. Although some High priests were undeserving of the role, the office remained one of prestige.

This changed in the days of Shemaya and Avtalyon. The Talmud¹⁷ tells of an incident in which the High Priest's entourage left his company in order to greet Shemaya and Avtalyon. When the High Priest remarked on this slight Shemaya and Avtalyon did not apologize. They explained that they, and not he, were the true heirs of Aharon the High Priest and the associated honors.¹⁸

There is a difference between the leadership of a High priest and the leadership of a Nasi. A Kohein Gadol in his leadership role must be the focal point of G-d's splendor and glory. The clothing he wears, the honor he is accorded, and his placement in the Temple Service all put him on the role of intermediary between G-d and the people.

A Nasi does not have that role. The Talmud¹⁹ tells us that when a Kohein Gadol would pray, he would bow at the beginning of a blessing but immediately straighten up. He represented G-d's regal status. A King (analogous in this case to a Nasi) would bow down and not rise until the end of the blessing. We find this in King Solomon's actions when he dedicated the Temple. King Shlomo was merely praying, not serving as a conduit for prayer. The Kohein Gadol on the other

¹⁵ Bnei Yissoschar, Tishrei 2:8

¹⁶ Similarly, we find that Shimon ben Shetach circumvented the due process of Judgment when dealing with the witches of Ashkelon. See Rashi Sanhedrin 44b.

¹⁷ Yoma 71b

¹⁸ See Lev Avos. See also Rosh Hashana 14b "שקולה מיתתן של צדיקים כשריפת בית אלוקינו", on both Yom Kippur and Tisha B'av the mourning over the loss of the Kohein Gadol is followed by our mourning the loss of the sages.

¹⁹ Brachos 34b

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hand, had the status of a vessel in the Beis Hamikdash, he was an instrument in the relationship between G-d and man.²⁰

A Kohein Gadol had an obligation to demand respect; a sage could and should choose to avoid it.

This was the advice of Shemaya: Do you work out of love, Learn to despise honor, and do not become overly familiar with power.

Even the power to affect blessing and curse should not be our goal. Unlike a Kohein Gadol, the role of a Nasi is to step aside and allow the supplicant to communicate directly with G-d.²¹

The Eleventh Mishna

Avtalyon

Avtalyon disagreed with Shemaya. Shemaya advised sages to stay away from controlling positions, but Avtalyon considered this impossible. Even the mundane words of a sage emanate from Chochma – Divine Wisdom – and they have the ability to influence events, students, and generations. He told the Sages: “Be careful with your words”.²²

Words can cause alienation and alienation can cause students to stray too far from their teachers and draw upon ‘Bad waters’. Ultimately G-d’s name will be disgraced, all because sages did not realize the power of their words.

The Twelfth Mishna

Hillel and Shammai

Hillel and Shammai were the final generation to present a sharp distinction between the views of Nasi and the Head of the Court.

The Bnei Yissoschar explained in the fourth Mishna that Antigonus Ish Socho had tried his best to inspire his generation in both the love and the fear of G-d. Later generations split the message. One taught love the other taught fear.

This is the depth of “Chabad”. It is an acronym for Chochma (Wisdom), Bina, (Understanding), and Daas - which is a combination of Chochma and Bina. Good Daas leads to good decision making. Bad Daas leads to bad decisions.

²⁰ Biurim L’Pirkei Avos (Chabad).

²¹ Devarim Nechmadim. See also Birchas Avraham on Korach.

²² Devarim Nechmadim

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Everything in life is a combination between book knowledge and street smarts. Every good couple is a combination between information and application. If we are lucky the emergent result is Daas – common sense, which is not very common at all.

In the case of Antigonus, one leader was able to represent the manifestation of 'Daas' but it was incomprehensible to those who lived in his times. In the ensuing generations the Nasi and Av Beis Din were tasked with representing Chochma and Bina, respectively. Each leader focused on either love or fear, knowledge or understanding, mercy or justice. Through the Zugos, students were still able to grasp some semblance of 'Daas'.

After the generation of Hillel and Shammai, students could no longer relate to the 'Daas' of their teachers. Arguments abounded and the tradition of the Torah was compromised.²³

Ultimately, this decline in Torah knowledge was a symptom of the fracturing of the Jewish people. No longer could we rally around one Sanctuary, one Kohein, and one Sanhedrin. Eventually, they were taken from us.

Hillel came in these difficult times and encouraged us to be "Students of Aharon, loving peace and pursuing peace. Loving all creations and bringing them close to the Torah"

The Thirteenth Mishna

Hillel criticized those who misuse the prestige of their Torah knowledge including his former colleague Menachem who had left serious Torah study and succumbed to the temptation of glory.

"If ones name becomes renowned, that name is lost", Hillel said, "If one doesn't continue to study he will lose what he has already attained, if one doesn't study at all he is does not deserve to live, and anyone who misuses the crown of Torah will perish"

Hillel made his statement in Aramaic because of its negative connotations. The power of language is such that if Hillel had made his statement in Hebrew it would have been a potent and dangerous curse.²⁴

In the generation of the Tower of Babel the people misused the Lashon Hakodesh. As a result, they were split into seventy diverse peoples speaking seventy different languages.²⁵

The Fourteenth Mishna

²³ Bracha Meshuleshes, Chagigah 2:2. See also V'heyeh Bracha 3:3. The Bnei Yissoschar notes that he was unable to complete the thought in writing.

²⁴ Devarim Nechmadim. See also Igra D'kalla Beshalach 14:13 quoting the Sefer Chassidim 480.

²⁵ Zohar Chadash 1, 75:2.

Influencing G-d's Judgment

Hillel said, "If I am not myself, who will be for me? If I am alone, what am I? If not now, when?"

As a student of Shemaya, Hillel acknowledged that he was not the exclusive leader of the Jewish people. It was understood that a balance much be reached between the approaches of Hillel and Shammai and we are taught that the students of Hillel would regularly allow the students of Shammai to present their views first.

This tension between Mercy and Judgment was an existential question for the Jewish people and the world at large. If Shammai were to prevail, then the world would cease to exist, but if Hillel were to dismiss Shammai altogether, then the rigid nuances of G-d's Torah would be sacrificed.²⁶

Ultimately, a heavenly voice declared that both Hillel's views and Shammai's are the word of G-d, but the law follows Hillel.²⁷ This is symbolic of G-d allowing his mercy to influence His judgment of our actions.

I once spent the last few hours before Rosh Hashana at an Enterprise car rental agency. Just ahead of me in line was an angry marine who was trying to rent a car without a credit card. (Most marines are nice guys, but this one was not). The Marine tried cash, debit cards, and ID tags, but the clerk just kept repeating the rule: You Need a Credit Card to Rent a Car.

As I stood and watched this exchange, the marine finally lost his patience. He took his entire wallet, closed it and threw it at the clerk.

"Take whatever you need", he said, "Just give me a car".

Everyone in the store was aghast at the man's behavior and the clerk refused to serve him.

A supervisor came out a few minutes later and calmed him down. She said that she could get him a car. She would need to check his credit record, his driving record, and his personal history. She began drilling the Marine: Who is your employer? How many years have you been with the Corp? What is your rank? Who can we call for a recommendation? Do you have any outstanding debts and to which banks? Do you have a criminal record?

The tough marine was embarrassed and humiliated. Only after a full interrogation and extra paperwork was he allowed to take a car.

²⁶ See above Mishna twelve

²⁷ Yerushalmi Kiddushin 1

קול התור על פרקי אבות

A few minutes later, it occurred to me that I might not be much better than this Marine. What is the difference between his behavior and our own? Don't we ask Hashem to ignore the rules and make an exception for us? We too 'throw everything we have' at Hashem and demand that He make it right.

The Bnei Yissoschar addresses this question with a very simple formula: Mercy is not a way to bypass judgment; it is a form of judgment.

Hashem judges us as we judge others. If we are unwilling to bend our will and our desire for others, Hashem will (chas veshalom) act in kind and not veer at all from the rules that he has set forth. On the other hand, if we are merciful when considering the actions of others, Hashem will be merciful when considering our actions as well.

Even in deciding a Halachic ruling, we are encouraged to find leniencies and ways to justify the behavior of the Jewish people. If we seek leniencies for others, G-d will grant leniency to us.²⁸

The last line of Avinu Malkeinu was composed by Rabi Akiva. The Jewish people were desperate for rain and Rabi Akiva asked Hashem to have mercy upon us. He was answered immediately with torrents of rain. The students wondered why Rabi Akiva had been answered so quickly while Rabi Eliezer's many Tefillos had gone unanswered. A heavenly voice explained that Rabi Eliezer was a student of Shammai. He was always strict and unforgiving on the Torah's behalf. Rabi Akiva was a student of Hillel and he was being judged in the way that he judged others.

The Fifteenth Mishna

Shammai

Shammai was an advocate of strict adherence to what is right. He said, "Be firm in your commitment to Torah". Following in the footsteps of his teacher Avtalyon he reinforced the need to "say little but do much". And he reminded us to "Greet every person with a pleasant expression".

Many people make the mistake of taking Hillel's side. They think that Hillel was compassionate and Shammai was not. The truth is that if we consider the story of the potential convert who insisted on learning the entire Torah while standing on one foot²⁹, we can see Shammai in a completely different light. Shammai did not reject the convert because he was unkind or dispassionate, he rejected him because he was making a mockery of the Torah. None of us would have accepted the convert either.

²⁸ Bnei Yissoschar Elul 2

²⁹ Shabbos 31a

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The differences between Hillel and Shammai were differences of approach, not differences in character traits. Shammai himself was the one who said, "Greet every person with a pleasant expression". The Arizal tells us that in the future the halacha will follow Shammai.

The Importance of Shammai's Position

The Gemara in Yevamos tells us about the funeral of Rabi Elazar. The Gemara describes how Rabi Akiva cried inconsolably at the funeral. He even hit himself in agony to the point that blood dripped from his arms. He said, "I have questions that will never be answered now and there are questions that will never be asked".

Tosfos asks how the great Rabi Akiva could have wounded himself in agony, but Rav Shalom Schwadron³⁰ asks an even more basic question: How does this story fit in with anything we know about Rabi Akiva and his ability to find a silver lining in every calamity³¹?

Rav Schwadron explains that Rabi Akiva was able to make peace with everything. He was even able to make peace with the death of Rabi Elazar. Rabi Akiva mourned so strongly because he realized that nobody would ever be able to replace the Torah of Rabi Elazar. Rabi Elazar was one of the last great students of Bais Shammai. He stood alone when everyone else went according to the majority rule of Bais Hillel.

Later, he debated with the sages in the case of the "Tanur shel Achinai" (Baba Metziah, 59b). Rabbi Elazar ruled that such an oven is Tahor (pure), but the majority of the sages ruled that it was Tameh (impure).

Rabbi Elazar refused to give in and was eventually excommunicated. He passed away while in excommunication.

Rabi Akiva realized that Rabi Elazar's Torah was irreplaceable. He had a direct line from Shammai that was lost forever. It was true that he was excommunicated, and that the Halacha did not follow him. Still, Rabi Akiva mourned the loss of the unique contribution of Rabi Elazar.

At the end of Shemona Esrei we all say "V'sein Chelkeinu B'sorasecha". We ask Hashem to give us our personal portion of the Torah: the Torah that we are able to understand and explain in a way that nobody else can. Our job is to share our unique contribution with the world. If we do, we have fulfilled our purpose and the world will be a better place; if we do not, there is no greater tragedy.

During the days of Sefira we mourn the passing of Rabi Akiva's students. Rabi Akiva said that they were punished because they did not respect one another's Torah.

³⁰ Lev Shalom

³¹ See Makos 24b and the description of Rabi Akiva's death

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Like Rabi Akiva recognizing the loss of Rabi Elazar, we need to recognize the contribution that every person makes to our understanding of the Torah. Perhaps more importantly, we need to recognize that we have our own contribution. Rabi Akiva taught us that we can remain hopeful while the Bais Hamikdash is being burnt, but there is no greater tragedy than a person who does not contribute his two cents to our understanding of the Torah.

The Sixteenth Mishna

Rabban Gamliel tells us, "Make for yourself a teacher and stay away from doubt and do not estimate when tithing."

Rav Yehoshua ben Perachia in the earlier Mishna was referring to a teacher of Torah knowledge. Rabban Gamliel is referring to a teacher of Halacha.³²

The Bnei Yissoschar teaches us that our teachers must actually keep us away from doubt. If a teacher of Torah appears to be acting against Halacha, we must not imitate him. We can still respect him and judge him favorably. But he is not to be mimicked.³³

Rabban Gamliel was the first leader in several generations to lead in his own. Abarbanel writes that although Hillel's rulings had been accepted, Rabban Gamliel emphasized the directive of Hillel that we must be firm in our Torah. This means that we must choose ourselves teachers to guide us and keep us honest, but at the same time it means that we need to be willing to question our teachers and not follow them blindly if they go against Jewish Law.

The Seventeenth Mishna

Shimon was the son of Rabban Gamliel. He grew up amongst scholars and translated that experience into leadership of the next generation. He said: "All my life I have been raised among the Sages, and I have not found anything better for oneself than silence. Study is not the primary thing but action." Echoing the words of his predecessor Yosi ben Yoezer, he pointed out that "whoever talks excessively brings about sin."

Too often people emerge from a conversation with a great person and can only report on what they said to the great person. People would rather talk than listen.

The entire theme of Avos³⁴ has been the ability to employ humility in listening to previous generations while finding a way to make their message relevant to our times.

³² Abarbanel, Nachlas Avos

³³ Sur Mei'ra V'aseh Tov, Footnote 97

³⁴ See First Mishna

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The Eighteenth Mishna

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: “the world exists on three things: Justice, Truth, and Peace”.

The Bnei Yissoschar points out that the acronym words “Din, Emes, and Shalom” is דשא or vegetation. Since the moment G-d brought vegetation into the world there has been reason to steal, to lie, and to argue. This is offset by the existence of “Justice, truth, and peace”.³⁵

Above, in the second Mishna, the Bnei Yossoschar pointed out that Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel appears to argue with the three statements of Shimon Hatzaddik that “the world stands on Torah, Prayer, and kindness.

He explains that we begin with Torah, Prayer, and Kindness but our ultimate goal is a world of Justice, truth and Peace.

May we merit it speedily in our days.

תושלבי"ע

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³⁵ Devarim Nechmadim