

# CHAPTER 1: MISHNA 15: PART 1

*by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky*

***Shammai says: Make your Torah (study time) fixed; say little and do much; and greet every person with a pleasant expression.***

(This Mishna is a good example of the Maharal's analysis of the words of Chazal in general, and Pirkei Avoth in particular. On the surface, this sounds like a few lessons for being a more effective person: Good time management, underpromise and overdeliver, and winning social techniques. But we will see that there are fundamental principles being taught here.)

As with the previous pairs of Tannaim, Shammai (the second Tanna) teaches a lesson from the perspective of "yirah," fear, instructing one to take care against violating what is required. In this case, we are warned against violating our fixed time for Torah. Furthermore, if one will say a lot, he may not fulfill what he has promised, violating his words. And not greeting a person pleasantly is an insult to the person, something which a person must take care against doing, since man is created as a reflection of G-d. All of these lessons emanate from a "fear" of violating what a person is required to do.

These lessons contrast with Hillel's lessons. The character trait needed to pursue peace is one of flexibility, where the person encourages each side to yield and be accommodating. This was certainly the fundamental character trait of Hillel (not strict, but patient and compliant, as we have written in an earlier Mishna).

In response to this, Shammai taught his lessons. Certainly in worldly and interpersonal matters, one should be flexible and accommodating. But this is not always appropriate behavior. In spiritual matters, one must be strict. For if he is constantly exhibiting flexibility, it will lead to a lack of reliability and resolve in his Torah (learning and observance).

This distinction is based on a fundamental difference between the physical and spiritual dimensions of man. Physical matter is in a state of constant change. Spiritual reality doesn't change.

(Don't confuse this statement of the Maharal with the fact that man's spiritual level is constantly changing. If we don't grow spiritually, we regress. This is because we are physical beings with a spiritual component. Pure "sechel" -- intellectual and spiritual reality -- never changes, as evidenced by angels. These purely spiritual beings have no element of progress or regression. Their reality and

level is fixed. They exist to serve their specific and exclusive function.)

In worldly matters, built on the physical existence of man, flexibility and accommodation are the proper behaviors. Since man himself is constantly changing, his interactions with others should be built on adaptability and compromise. Yielding rather than holding firm is appropriate behavior for the human being composed of physical matter which is in a constantly changing state.

But in spiritual matters, which transcend the fluctuating nature of man, permanent and solid structures are appropriate. Therefore we are taught that one's time for Torah study should be fixed, rather than changing and fluid. The only time it should be changed is when the (fixed) intellect dictates the change (as opposed to the constantly changing "feeling" of the person). Just as the Torah itself never changes, so, too, the (time set for the) learning of Torah should not be subject to (external) change.

We are further taught to say little and do much. For promising to do something and not delivering is not appropriate for the (structured) intellectual/spiritual dimension, but the result of the (constantly changing) physical dimension.

These lessons are in line with the approach taken by Shammai in serving G-d: structured and meticulous (as we are taught in Shabbat 31a, in contrast to Hillel). A person is supposed to be strict in establishing and following his times for Torah study. For allowing these times to be subject to fluctuation is inappropriate for the Torah, in addition to creating a foundation for all of the person's behavior to be erratic.

The final lesson -- greet every person with a pleasant expression -- is also appropriate to Shammai. Hillel's approach of flexibility and concessions might lead one to be careless in the way he relates to others, since they are supposed to be forgiving and yielding. Shammai might agree that the recipient of the (inappropriate) behavior is not supposed to be so critical and demanding. However, this lesson is directed towards the person exhibiting the behavior, and he is required to strive for strictness in (what is for him) a spiritual matter.

With this, Shammai has complemented the lessons taught by Hillel, and together they present a complete picture of the way a person should behave. In interpersonal matters, one should not be strict and demanding, but flexible and compromising. However, in spiritual matters one should be strict and meticulous. Even at a time when the recipient is supposed to be forgiving (in the event he doesn't receive the proper respect or attitude due him) the person himself is required to be strict in exhibiting the proper behavior. Scrupulous care is the proper approach to all matters relating to Torah study and principles.

(This section of the Maharal alludes to something written by Rav Yisrael Salanter, Or Yisrael, chapter 28. It is common to interpret the Gemara in Shabbat (30b-31a) about Shammai and Hillel as meaning that Hillel had a flexible personality, so his opinion was that one is supposed to serve G-d with compromise and flexibility. And since Shammai had an inflexible, strict personality, his opinion was

that one should always be strict. Rav Yisrael Salanter writes quite strongly against this interpretation. It was an ideological and intellectual argument between them about the proper way to serve G-d. Had Shammai agreed with Hillel ideologically, he could and would have modified his behavior in line with the correct way one is supposed to serve G-d. And if Hillel had been convinced, intellectually and ideologically, that Shammai was correct, he would have behaved exactly as Shammai did. The disagreement was not a result of their innate personalities; their behavior was a function of their ideology. The Maharal here seems to anticipate this insight of Rav Yisrael. Where appropriate, Shammai instructed a person has to be flexible and forgiving. And Hillel would agree that there are times when structure and strictness are required. Since Hillel's way of serving G-d was noted for its extreme patience and flexibility, he emphasizes this aspect of one's behavior. Ditto for Shammai. Each one was extreme in the path they chose as the correct one. What is being taught to us in this set of Mishnayot is to find the appropriate balance in each situation we find ourselves.)

(Not to stretch the point too far, but to make some connection with "inyana d'yoma," topics of timely relevance - Sukkoth: Part of the source of the extra "simcha," rejoicing associated with Sukkoth is based on the balance of the seemingly conflicting elements. Sukkot is the third of the three festivals, as well as the third of the three holidays in the month of Tishrei. We know from the opening Mishnayoth that the third is the balance point. Sukkot is associated with Yakov, the third of the Avoth, and the one who built a house and "Sukkoth" (see Breishith 33: 16-17). He was the blend of the two extremes, Avraham and Yitzchak, and it is this blend (not compromise, but the knowledge of when to use each trait appropriately) that is the source of completeness leading to true joy.)

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