

CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 3

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

Beware of those in [positions of political] power, for they only bring a person close to them for their own needs. They appear as friends when it benefits them, but they aren't there for the person when he is in trouble.

After teaching that one should be involved in communal matters, the Tanna warns about those in positions of power and control. Individuals in positions of political power are actually an opposing force to the community (the all encompassing entity of the "tzibbur"). Those in power, because of their importance and [perceived] greatness, separate themselves from the "tzibbur" (community). They appear to be involved in the welfare of the community by guiding it. In fact, rather than serving the community, they are simply exerting power in their quest to control it. This separates the politicians from the people, with whom there is no real attachment. This is the nature of those who seek power over others.

Even if political leaders appear to create a relationship with someone, giving the appearance of loving that person, this is deceiving. The only reason they maintain closeness to a person is for their own benefit. Any time they derive no benefit from the person, even when he is in a very difficult situation, they abandon him. This indicates that the relationship was in essence one of self-interest.

Why is this so? Because people who wield power separate themselves from the community. Even if they appear to be creating a bond, there is no real love and attachment to others.

(The principle at work here is the one taught to us by Rav Dessler in his "Kuntres Hachessed" (Michtav M'Eliyahu; Strive For Truth) which we touched on in the last shiur of Mishna 2. We love those to whom we give. Giving to and serving others is a way for me to extend myself, which creates an attachment and a bond between myself and those to whom I give.

(Many times people appear to be giving to others when in fact they are motivated by the need to exert control over them, as a way to build up their own egos. This distinction in motivation is at the root of what the Maharal is teaching us in this Mishna. A proper communal leader is one who is motivated exclusively by the recognition of his responsibility to serve others. This person views his existence as being a series of continuous opportunities to serve others and give to them. This is the true meaning of imitating the Almighty. Most people in positions of power view their position as a means towards accomplishing personal goals, rather than a way to help others accomplish their

own goals.)

What is the connection between the previous Mishna ("...all those who are involved with the community...") and our Mishna? A person is supposed to strive for the welfare of the community utilizing all his energy and resources. Yet there are people who look to flatter those in power, trying to ingratiate themselves with these leaders. They may give them advice which is really for their own welfare, in contrast to what is best for the community, hoping to attain personal benefit from them. It is these people our Mishna is addressing.

"Beware of those in power." Why? Because "they only bring a person close to them for their own needs." If a person sees that the leaders are showing him favoritism, it is only for their own benefit. So people who try to ingratiate themselves with the authorities lose on two counts. Firstly, they are punished for pursuing their own welfare at the expense of the community's welfare. And they will not succeed in their attempt to attain their desired goal (their own benefit), for the people in power will never pay back the favors done for them when it doesn't suit their own agendas.

(Admittedly, this doesn't present people in positions of power in the most complimentary light. We discussed this topic in Chapter 1, Mishna 10, parts 3 and 4. As we have written in our introduction, Pirkei Avoth is not simply words of wisdom on who to live a more effective life. As Mishnayoth, they are Halachoth. The Halacha being taught us here is that a person is required to focus on how he can serve others. Most people in positions of power are not motivated by this commitment to serve. One who tries to cooperate with them for his own agenda, in a way that compromises the welfare of the community, will ultimately fail, since those in power are motivated by the same selfish drives as he is. And **they** have the power! We have to be focused on serving others.)

The class is taught by [Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky](#), Dean of [Darche Noam Institutions](#), Yeshivat Darche Noam/Shapell's and Midreshet Rachel for Women.
