

CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 5: PART 1

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

Hillel says: Don't separate yourself from the "tzibbur" (community); and don't rely on yourself until the day of your death; and don't judge your friend until you reach his situation; and don't say something could never happen, for in the end it might happen; and don't say "When I have [free] time I will learn, lest you never have [free] time.

It needs to be asked why this lesson of Hillel is located here, rather than with the earlier lessons of Hillel (Ch. 1, Mishna 12-14)?! Furthermore, what is the connection between the various lessons of this Mishna, like separating yourself from the community and not relying on yourself. There doesn't seem to be any common denominator! It should have taught one lesson, and then written "He used to say..." to introduce the next one. This is what we find in the coming Mishnayoth (also quoting Hillel, yet divided from the lessons of our Mishna; as well as in the Mishnayoth in Ch. 1).

Because we were taught at the end of Mishna 2 the value of the tzibbur ("those who are involved with the community...") Hillel's lesson is placed here, teaching us the importance of the community and the shortcoming of the individual in relation to the community.

Therefore, we are taught "Don't separate yourself from the tzibbur," for the tzibbur, which is the klal, stands with stability (this was developed in the earlier Mishnayoth and will be somewhat elaborated on here). Someone who separates himself from the tzibbur is separating away from something that has stable endurance. Additionally, the klal embodies within it the totality of all the elements that make it up, making it encompassing. One who separates from that stands alone, isolated and transitory.

This principle is concretized by our Rabbis in the following way. Included in the group of heretics and apikorsim (Rosh HaShana 17a) are both those who deviate from the way of the tzibbur, in addition to those who deny the Divinity of Torah and the resurrection of the dead (fundamental principles of Judaism). Those who deny these eternal truths remove themselves from the klal, just as do those who behave in ways that are at odds with the behavior of the klal, and as such neither group has a part in the enduring existence of the klal.

The klal is the foundation, while the individual is transitory. The individual is in a state of constant change and transformation, while the klal has stability and endurance.

Which leads us to the next lesson of the Mishna, "...don't rely on yourself until the day of your death." In other words, as righteous as you are at any time, you can never have confidence that you won't become a person who sins, since as an individual you are always subject to variation. Whatever your spiritual level is at the moment, an individual is controlled by the movement of time, which subjects you to the constant possibility of change.

A further consequence of being an individual is that it is not fitting to be judgmental a person due to his actions. "...don't judge your friend until you reach his situation." There many causes for a person's behavior, and it is possible that had you been subjected to all the circumstances of your friend, you would have behaved in exactly the same way. Due to the constant fluctuations that are the nature of an individual, a person can't be overly confident about his success, and cannot pass judgment on the perceived failure of another. As strange and unlikely as a friend's behavior seems to a person, since that person himself can change, and if can also be subject to differing circumstances which may lead him to behave in a way similar to his friends. An individual, who is inherently in a state of change, should never take his own behavior for granted.

The next lesson is not to take any situation for granted, which would be the result of saying that a certain event our outcome could never take place. This attitude can lead a person to be overconfident in his opinion about how to deal with a certain situation. If he had observed a certain outcome, he may suspect that his situation could lead to such an outcome. But being sure that such an outcome is impossible could lead him to behave in an arrogant, and possibly irresponsible, way. For example, a very wealthy person relies on his wealth to behave as he wants, without being forced to consider the opinions of others (if it isn't in his interest). He never entertains the idea that a person of his financial means could lose his wealth, since this appears very unlikely. The Mishna is teaching us to refrain from the attitude that "this could never happen." Because a human being is a transitory individual, even things that appear to him to be unlikely can occur. (The example the Maharal gives is very important in our society, where "money talks," and a person "with the bucks" is allowed to "call the shots." Additionally, the assumption is that there is a level of wealth a person can reach that makes him immune from losing it. Without going in to specific details, we have seen over the past decade how misleading this perception is.)

The Mishna's lessons are developmental. First we are taught not to judge another person on his actions, even if appears unlikely that you would behave in a similar way. Even though it would take a change in your situation to lead you behave as he did, that change could take place. Therefore, you are taught not to judge him "until you reach his situation," representing an imaginable change in the present reality. But one may still feel that a really monumental change can be discounted. So the Mishna continues with the next lesson "Don't say it could never happen -- for it may happen," referring to even very significant departures from the present situation. Due to the constantly changing nature of the physical world, no situation can be discounted.

(We have witnessed this just in our century a number of times. A recent example is the

disappearance of the Soviet Union virtually overnight. A person who had been reading the weekly newsmagazines faithfully for years, with that as his only source of news, would have been sure that he missed at least a couple of years of issues when he picked up the issue announcing the disintegration of what was assumed to be a Superpower. The radical change in the situation in Israel and the government's relationship to Yasser Arafat and the Palestinians between July and October 1993 was something that everyone said was impossible. Things happen in history that would have been dreamed unthinkable. But they happen, and they are accepted, due to the constantly changing state of individuals.)

(To briefly connect the principles taught in this section of the Maharal with Shavuoth: The Jewish people arrived at Sinai completely united as one person, with one heart. See Rashi on Shemoth Ch. 19 Verse 1. This is a prerequisite for the receiving of the Torah. Commitment to the Torah cannot exist when each person, as an individual, is pulling in his own direction, with his own agenda. It requires individuals to be united in a "klal" and devoted to the needs of that klal in the service of a purpose transcending the agenda of any individual. This commitment is the essence of receiving the Torah.)

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