

CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 5: PART 2

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.

The Mishna then continues "don't say "When I have [free] time I will learn, lest you never have [free] time" for a person has no guarantee of existence and stability for even a short period of time. Therefore, he should not delay his learning for an hour or two "when he has time" with the confidence that in during such a short time frame he can be confident of the future. While a person may feel that in the next few hours there won't be any great distraction, so he can push of his learning for a little while, he must know that change is the nature of his existence. He may not have that time, for constantly changing circumstances may present unexpected distractions.

(Many people interpret this lesson as a Rabbinic version of "Don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today" or "A stitch in time saves nine." But the Maharal is going to the underlying, unifying principle being taught in this Mishna. Rather than simply a lesson in effective habits, we are being taught something about the essence of man's existence in this world. This is an example of the contrast between what the Rabbis are teaching us in Pirkei Avoth, and Benjamin Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac!")

All of these lessons are built on the principle that a person exists as a dynamic, constantly changing being. Therefore "don't rely on yourself (and the stability of your past accomplishments). "Don't judge your friend...don't say this thing could never happen" and don't say "When I have [free] time I will learn." An individual contrasts with the tzibbur: only the tzibbur, which is all encompassing, has an enduring and stable existence.

In this Mishna we have been taught all the possible transformations to which a person can be subjected. First, the fact that man is a physical, material being makes him causes change in his essence, which is in the nature of the material. Secondly, a person is subject to change due to changing circumstances that affect him. Thirdly, there is an element of the changing fortunes and times in the life of every individual. And finally, there is the simple unpredictability of the coming moments. Each of these dimensions of change are represented by a lesson of our Mishna.

Due to the changing nature of the physical, man should not be overly reliant on himself.

Due to the changing environmental circumstances that man can be subjected to, he should not judge his friends. He may have failed as his friend did, if he was subjected to the same circumstances.

Due to the changing cycles of fortune and historical periods, unexpected things happen, and a person should not say that something could "never happen."

The above are indicative of the forces of potentially significant change. But a person must recognize that there are constant, minor changes that can significantly affect him. Due to these changes, a person should not assume that an opportunity that exists now will still exist a short time from now. A person should not say that he will learn "soon," since a person's own situation is subject to potentially constant change.

All of these changes are due to the fact that man is a individual, as opposed being an element subordinated to the encompassing "klal." These lessons grow out of the lesson "Don't separate yourself from the 'tzibbur' (community)," which has enduring, stable existence. A person who separates himself from the encompassing "tzibbur" stands alone, simply as an individual, which is subject to all the changes we have discussed. One who has a clear vision can see that these lessons reflect the true reality of the person.

(The lessons here go to the heart of political philosophy. Does the community exist to serve the individual, which is the underlying principle of Western democracy and other many other political forms of government. Or does the individual exist to serve the community? (One can see how easy it was for Jews to develop communism and socialism...) Judaism is finely honed balance between the value of the individual -- "For me the world was created" -- and the need to be attached to the tzibbur.)

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