

CHAPTER 1, MISHNA 13(B): THE CHALLENGE OF LIFE - PART II

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

He [Hillel] used to say, one who seeks a name loses his name, one who does not increase [his knowledge] decreases it (or: will perish), one who does not study deserves death, and one who makes use of the crown [of Torah] will pass away.

Last week we began discussing some of the basic themes of our mishna. We began by noting the contrast between this mishna and the previous, also authored by Hillel. Whereas above Hillel told us to be kindly and easygoing towards others, here he tells us that towards ourselves we must be much less forgiving. Towards others we must be patient and understanding; we must love them in spite of their faults. Towards ourselves, however, we cannot be so smug and content, loving ourselves just the way we are. We were not put on this earth to sit around being happy with ourselves. We were given a mission down here: to improve our characters, to turn our faults into "challenges", and turn those challenges into successes. Life is an ongoing struggle. We must recognize the struggle at hand and rise to it. For, as Hillel puts it, if we are not moving forward, we are falling back.

The commentators understand all or practically all of our mishna's statements as relating to Torah study. Further, as we saw last week, the focus is on Torah study directed towards personal growth -- towards understanding ourselves and our mission on earth.

Hillel's second point is that if one is not increasing his knowledge it is decreasing. (Most commentators actually understand: If he is not increasing, he will perish. He is going nowhere spiritually, and G-d will have little reason to sustain him.) One can never remain the same in his knowledge or accomplishments. Regardless of what one has achieved yesterday, if he does not build on his previous accomplishments, he is stagnating -- and in fact receding. The more we study, the more we understand ourselves and our natures, and the more we in turn become obligated to study and to achieve. We are engaged in a lifelong struggle. We can go up or we can go down, but we can never remain the same.

There is an important principle contained in this. The Torah places more emphasis on the general direction an individual is heading -- in what we might call the slope of the curve (if you remember your seventh grade geometry) -- rather than his or her current level of accomplishment. R. Eliyahu Dessler, of England and later Israel, was one of the great Jewish thinkers during and after the time of the War. He explains as follows (Michtav Mei'Eliyahu, Vol. I, pp. 113-116): G-d constantly challenges each individual according to his or her own level. Divine providence constantly places us in

situations in which we must choose between good and evil -- or between the good we are capable of achieving and the evil to which we are liable to succumb. If we pass the challenge, we condition ourselves for good, and we are ready to face a slightly harder challenge. If we fail, we slip ever so slightly -- and Satan will tempt us with commensurately worse temptations.

What type of challenges we are faced with at any given moment depends upon our background, knowledge, environment, and all the decisions we have made up until this point in our lives. For the pious individual, the challenge might be to study Torah in even greater depth or to teach Torah to even wider audiences. For the less lettered and knowledgeable, G-d might be asking only that he order fish rather than the cheeseburger at the local MacDonald's. G-d does not ask us for more than we are able to give Him. He knows where we come from and what we are capable of -- and He knows what our crucial next step must be. And it's only one small step, no giant leap. One who attempts to scale ten rungs of the ladder of life at once may well find himself on his spiritual rear end (pardon the expression), quite possibly far below where he began. G-d knows who we are and what we are capable of. He expects nothing more, but He asks for nothing less.

And let's state this in even more practical terms. Your current challenge-level does not only depend on your general background and degree of knowledge. It depends upon everything which has happened to you up until this point in your life and this point in your day. If you've been arguing with your spouse for the past 45 minutes, G-d is **not** expecting you to sweetly apologize, kiss and make up. He knows what human beings are and are not capable of. No one can simply "turn off" at a moment's notice and become a different person -- and G-d does not ask that you do. But He **does** ask that you not bring up that **other** sticky old issue, opening up yet another old sore. We will not so quickly become the person we were before the fight began, but there are still challenges, and there are still "right" choices to make. Life consists of endless challenges. They are never the same but they are always present. And in our hearts we know just what G-d wants us to do.

And this brings us to an even more fascinating insight. How good a Jew I am -- how **close** I am to G-d -- in a way depends far more on if I am passing my latest round of tests than on my overall position. The simple Jew, of limited background and understanding, who resists his temptation and orders fish rather than a cheeseburger at the MacDonald's, may very well be more precious to G-d than the learned, fully observant Jew (who of course would never **dream** of walking into a MacDonald's) who has basically stagnated, who is neither growing nor improving over his already considerable accomplishments. The former was challenged and passed what G-d asked of him. The latter is moving nowhere -- and has done (or at least is currently doing) very little to truly make G-d proud.

Of course, the simple Jew must continue to grow from there. He too cannot satisfy himself with the simplest acts of devotion. But G-d knows our backgrounds; He knows where we come from and what we are capable of at any given moment. We must make the effort -- and only G-d and we know just how great that effort must be. Beyond that, we will see -- and G-d will know -- where we

can go next.

This principle relates to many other topics within Judaism. I'll touch on a single one briefly. As we know, Judaism places a great deal of emphasis on raising and educating our children properly. We inculcate our children with Jewish customs and rituals at ages in which they are far too young to fully appreciate the Torah's significance (which for many of us lasts well into adulthood). Some wonder at the efficacy of "brainwashing" children, of forcing all sorts of practices upon them which they can hardly appreciate, without giving them a chance to grow into them maturely -- or even to decide for themselves what practices and lifestyle suit them best.

The idea, however, is that we attempt to raise our children's initial challenge-level. Don't force your children to grapple with the basic laws and ideas of Judaism. Let Sabbath observance, kashrus (dietary laws), and daily prayer become second nature to them -- a given. Let them benefit from our millennia-old tradition, as well as from the collective wisdom and experiences of countless generations which preceded them. Don't force them to reinvent the wheel or fall for the same mistakes as their parents. Allow them to begin with far higher challenges.

In truth, the Talmud tells us, "Where those who repent stand [in proximity to God], the fully righteous do not stand" (Brachos 34b). One who has tasted sin and has afterwards repented has covered far more ground than one who has never faced temptation. Yet we do not ask for trouble: the vast majority of those who taste sin do **not** repent -- or not until far too much damage has been done. Rather, we give our children the best. We do so in the physical and academic realm; we must do so in the spiritual one no less.

The final point of our mishna -- "one who makes use of the crown [of Torah] will pass away" -- appears again in a later mishna , [4:7](#). We will discuss it G-d willing when we get there.

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