

CHAPTER 1, MISHNA 18(A): JEW VS. GENTILE IN THE EYES OF THE TORAH - PART I

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Shimon ben (son of) Gamliel said: On three things does the world endure: justice, truth and peace, as the verse states, "Truth and [judgments of] peace judge in your gates" (Zechariah 8:16).

This mishna is similar to an earlier mishna in this chapter. Mishna 2 stated as follows: "The world is based upon three things: on Torah, on service [of G-d], and on acts of kindness." Here we are presented with a perfectly reasonable but entirely different list. Further, the earlier mishna enumerated three things which the world is "based upon" ("omaid" ("stands on") in Hebrew), whereas here the mishna lists that which the world "endures" upon ("kayam" = "lasts" or "is sustained"). What is the difference?

The difference is evidently based on the discrepancy in language between the two mishnas. Above the focus was on what the world is based upon; i.e., upon what basis or for what reason was the world created. And the mishna proceeded to list the three pillars which form the purpose of creation. They are: (a) that man serve G-d, (b) that we act towards one another with kindness and brotherhood, building perfect and Divine societies, and (c) that we study Torah and become spiritual people capable of forming a relationship with G-d. This is of course only the most hopeless of summaries -- of our discussion there which in itself attempted to explain far too much in far too little space. Nevertheless, for today's purposes, we note what Mishna 2 **was** about -- and what ours is **not** about: G-d's purpose in creating the world.

Here R. Shimon focuses on how the world can "endure" -- what is required in order that the world continue to operate smoothly and not disintegrate into anarchy. And this refers to the much more mundane. Justice, truth and peace, although seemingly lofty goals on their own -- and ones which man usually falls far short of -- do not constitute the purpose of creation. They imply that societies function smoothly: that both individuals and nations interact peacefully and honestly, and that governments uphold justice, both respecting and protecting the rights of their citizens. These are not the true purposes of creation. G-d did not create the world only in order that wars **not** be fought or that individual liberties "not" be suppressed -- nor did He create it so that people would be able to walk down the street without fear of getting mugged. But these are the needed prerequisites so that true religion and devotion to G-d can take hold. Once truth, peace and justice prevail, man, rather than struggling for his basic survival, will be able to turn his attention to religion and spiritual growth.

It's significant to note that the obligation to establish healthy and functioning societies is universal -- one which G-d placed upon all of mankind and not only upon Israel. There are seven universal laws -- known as the Seven Noahide Laws -- whose performance G-d obligated upon all of mankind, both Jew and Gentile. (The Talmud (Sanhedrin 57-8) derives these laws from verses in the stories of Genesis and Noah, before the advent of Abraham and Israel.) These laws are (six negatives and one positive): (1) idolatry, (2) cursing G-d, (3) murder, (4) adultery / incest, (5) robbery, (6) eating a limb torn from a live animal, and (7) organizing judicial systems.

As we will see G-d willing next week, the purpose of these laws is not so that man become overly spiritual or ascetic. G-d does not ask all of mankind to refrain from forbidden foods, to rest on the Sabbath, or to restrict his behavior in any really infringing way. But G-d does ask man to create societies which function smoothly and which provide man with at least the most basic respect for moral values. No society can survive while condoning murder and robbery -- with no degree of respect for human life and property. Likewise, adultery -- the destruction of the family unit -- destroys the most basic building block of human society. Finally, functional justice systems are required to uphold the law and make it binding. (Number 6 -- eating limb torn from a live animal -- is a related but separate discussion, which we will touch on G-d willing in [4:1](#)).

Most important, however, is the belief in G-d. This is the most crucial basis for any law to be meaningful. If we refrain from murder only because **we** think it's the wrong thing to do, laws become worthless -- and empty excuses for true moral conviction. Such laws do not create a sense of respect for truth and absolute values -- only for human expediency. I can't kill you because tomorrow your brother will come and kill me. But if we all agree that blacks or Jews can be killed -- or that an unborn child isn't really living anyway, etc. etc. ad nauseam -- nothing is sacred. Without belief in G-d and the adherence to an absolute, G-d-given code of values, no law, no matter how reasonable and expedient, will be sacrosanct and above human corruption.

We are taught further that if a Gentile observes the Seven Laws -- and he does so because G-d commanded him, not because they simply conform to his own perception of morality -- he is promised a share in the World to Come (Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Hil' Melachim 8:11). Judaism distinguishes itself from all other religions (to my knowledge) in that it does not claim that all non-believers are condemned to eternal damnation if they don't do things our way. Israel was given a special mission in this world -- to serve as an example of spirituality for all mankind to see. But the rest of the world has hardly been "forgotten" by G-d. G-d still places commandments on all mankind, accepts their prayers, and rewards and punishes them according to their deeds. G-d is there and patiently awaiting all who seek Him, both Jew and Gentile.

Thus far we have learned the three pillars upon which the world endures. And we have learned that G-d asks all mankind -- not only Israel -- to uphold these pillars. And this provides us with an interesting insight into G-d's design for mankind. G-d does not ask all mankind to become ascetics or religious fanatics. Within a certain framework, they can live lives of their own choosing. But He does

ask that Gentiles create basically stable societies.

And within these societies Israel will be able to flourish.

G-d has entrusted the world not to Israel but to all mankind. And He asks man, both Jew and Gentile, to make it a place sufficiently worthy that religion and spirituality may take hold. G-d does not force intense religious practice or doctrine upon all of mankind, but He does ask that man fashion a world which is basically receptive to -- and can aspire to -- something greater. It is almost as if G-d says to man as follows: "Create civilizations which might be secular (so long as not idolatrous), but which uphold certain basic moral principles. Promote justice, brotherhood, and a basic appreciation for humanity and ethical behavior. And within, religion will be able to take hold and flourish. Israel will be able to serve Me freely -- and the world may just be receptive to its message."

This brings us to an important insight regarding the difference between the roles of Gentiles and Jews within the world. We will explore this G-d willing next week.

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