MISHNA 1(C) : THE AGE OF WISDOM

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

*Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it Joshua. Joshua transmitted it to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They [the Men of the Great Assembly] said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise many students, and make a protective fence for the Torah."

For the past two weeks, we have been discussing the introductory lines of our mishna. As we saw, they offer the historical backdrop not only to the Mishna as a whole, but to Pirkei Avos in particular -- as a means of stating that even the practical advice of our Sages is sacred and a part of our eternal tradition emanating from Sinai.

We now at last arrive at the actual advice of our mishna, the words of the Men of the Great Assembly. (The Great Assembly was Israel's primary legislative and judiciary body during the Second Temple era.) As we will see, their advice too was built upon our mishna's introduction. They recognized that a transition was occurring during their very lifetimes -- from the Age of Prophecy to the Age of Wisdom.

If we examine a little more closely the era of the Prophets mentioned in our mishna, we will note that it spans an enormously long and varied period of history. A lot happened during their sole jurisdiction. The period began with the generation immediately after Joshua, with the passing of the Elders who, together with Joshua, led the nation in the conquest and division of the Land of Israel. The period continued with the era of the Judges, the Prophet Samuel, King Saul, the Davidic dynasty, the building of Solomon's Temple, the secession of the northern tribes into the Kingdom of Israel, the exile (and disappearance) of the Ten Tribes, the destruction of Solomon's Temple, the Babylonian Exile, the ascendency of the Persian Empire, and finally the return to Zion of Ezra, Nehemiah, and the few who came to build the Second Temple. Oh, and by the way, the Purim story occurred somewhere in there as well.

Clearly, much political, military and social history elapsed during this extended period. From any sort of historical standpoint, it is difficult to imagine lumping this entire period into a single era. Yet our Sages -- from the perspective of Pirkei Avos -- do just that.

The reason for this is because our Sages were viewing Jewish history through an entirely different lens. Regardless of empire, war, expulsion, upheaval, and revolution unfolding around them, Israel's link to G-d and Sinai was secure. We had prophets. Israel's greatest men and women received
instruction and exhortation directly from G-d’s heavenly emissaries. Our socioeconomic situation rose and fell, and often seemed to hang by a thread. But we had no doubt as to who we were and what our sacred national mission was. G-d was there to tell us and to remind us -- in fact, not to let us forget it. He was still in direct communication with Israel, and so we were bound to a Torah and tradition whose import and significance surpassed all other military, political and societal considerations.

The Men of the Great Assembly recognized that in their own lifetimes that era was coming to an end. The few remaining prophets were dying out in the beginning of their days -- not to be replaced until the End of Days. In many other ways as well, G-d’s guiding hand was no longer revealed to Israel as it had once been. The Second Temple did not house the Divine Presence in the same manner as the first (see Talmud Yoma 21b). At the same time, however, Torah study was flourishing and reaching new heights -- as foreseen by the Prophet Zachariah (4:1-6, see Talmud Sanhedrin 24a).

Thus, the Sages recognized that a new age was dawning: the Age of Wisdom. We would no longer have prophet to enlighten us as to G-d’s lofty plans and designs for us. We would have to seek Him out ourselves. And our single tool for Heavenly inspiration would be the Torah -- and the application of our own frail but creative human minds to its infinite wisdom. Our own ability to discern truth and understand the wisdom handed to us from past generations would now be our most precious asset. And it would sustain us through an endless succession of exile and persecution, and for generations on end.

And so, the Men of the Great Assembly advised their generation -- and future generations -- what their focus must now be: studying the Torah carefully and deliberately, giving it over to our own students, and safeguarding its laws. The advice of our mishna revolves around these ideas.

Yet there is an even deeper message here. My teacher, R. Yochanan Zweig (www.talmudicu.edu & www.torah.org/learning/rabbizweig), explained as follows: If we connect to G-d through knowledge rather than prophecy there is an inherent danger. We are now the instigators. Our own brains and efforts become our new source of inspiration. And in such a situation, it is easy to feel that we are the center of our own religion, that we have sought and found G-d -- and we did it on our own terms. If any given law makes sense to me, if I see it as correct and inspiring, I will observe it. If not, it is out of the realm of my concept of religion. I have found G-d -- and I have created Him in my own image.

This, in spite of the awesome beauty of Torah study, presents an enormous danger. And so, the Sages found need to warn us: Our knowledge is valid only insofar as it allows us to connect to our G-d. We may study and contemplate the Torah’s timeless laws, but we are not its arbiters, nor do we form the centers of our own religion. We are only the bearers of the Torah -- understanding it to the best of our abilities and passing along intact that which preceded us.

Thus, the mishna’s first statement: “Be deliberate in judgment.” Do not be quick to pass judgment -- not on others nor on any other perspective on life or wisdom. Do not suppose religion is valid only to
the extent you understand. It is not our job to pass judgment on the wisdom handed down to us, or to be so sure of our understanding as to reject out of hand all who disagree. We must be exceedingly careful in judgment -- and certainly in rejection -- of any part or aspect of the wisdom of the Torah.

Second, our Sages tell us to raise many students. Our own knowledge is often limited and myopic. We view wisdom from our own perspective alone. By raising many students, we ensure that the Torah will not be limited to any single approach or perspective. Torah knowledge must be disseminated to as wide an audience as possible. (Some even use the Internet for such purposes...)

R. Zweig noted further that the Hebrew word used here for "raise" is "ha'amidu" -- which literally means "cause to stand." Do not just teach students what 'you' have to say, creating carbon copies of yourself (to use a rather dated expression). Cause them to stand on their own feet -- to question, to think for themselves, and to establish their own unique relationship with the Torah. These are the hallmarks of Jewish education. We will then have a strong, national connection to the Torah and a rich gene pool of wisdom to draw from. And no one scholar, no matter how great, will be able to claim he has the one true approach to the Torah. The more people we have connecting to Torah and the more approaches to wisdom, the wider the reach and relevance of the Torah to the nation as a whole -- and the more lasting and meaningful a connection we will have to Sinai.

Lastly, our Sages exhort us to create fences for Torah observance, to safeguard Torah law through Rabbinic injunction. (A simple example is "muktza", forbidding us to handle e.g. a pencil on the Sabbath lest one forget and come to write.) Here again we see the same critical message. We may today connect to G-d through our own intellect, but we must never let that intellect become the determinant of how and when we will serve G-d.

We have all heard the following type of argument, in many forms and in many contexts: "The Torah only forbade lighting a fire on the Sabbath when it involved rubbing two sticks together and required a great exertion. Nowadays it’s just a matter of flipping a switch and in no way compromises our Sabbath ‘rest’, and so there’s no reason to forbid it." Or more simply: "I don’t feel commandment x is meaningful to me. I get nothing out of it. There’s no reason to alter my lifestyle just to accommodate some dated old ritual."

The Sages thus warn us, and in no uncertain terms: Our tradition is sacrosanct and untouchable. We use our wisdom to study and interpret our tradition, but never to judge or replace it. If anything, we must use our wisdom and creativity to further safeguard the Torah’s laws. We are not the owners of G-d’s word nor the centers of our own faith. The intellect may be ours, but we subordinate it to G-d’s infinite Torah. And so our own human wisdom, rather than being a tool for revision and corruption, becomes yet another sacred link in Israel’s timeless tradition.

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