

CHAPTER 1, MISHNA 3: LIVING THE IMPOSSIBLE

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Antignos of Socho received [the transmission] from Shimon the Righteous. He used to say: Do not be as servants who serve the Master to receive reward. Rather, be as servants who serve the Master not to receive reward. And let the fear of heaven be upon you.

Antignos of Socho lived in the first generation after the Men of the Great Assembly (of Mishnas 1-2). He served as a bridge between the Great Assembly and the era of the Zugos or "Pairs", to which we will be introduced G-d willing next week. Antignos also lived during an age in which Ancient Greece dominated practically the entire civilized world -- both politically and culturally. Hellenism was the dominant culture of the times, and as we will see below, was making significant inroads into Jewish thought as well. (The Greek influence on Israel -- in perhaps less pernicious manner -- is evidenced even in the Greek name of our mishna's author.)

At its simplest level, our mishna's message is that one should serve G-d for no ulterior motives -- neither honor, social acceptance, nor even to receive reward in the World to Come. Rather, one should serve G-d simply because it is G-d's will -- for G-d's sake rather than one's own. There are, however, a number of difficulties with this simple message, and as always, we will see that the words of the Sages are far more profound than we might first suppose.

First of all, our mishna does not tell us what we **should** have in mind when we serve God. It only tells us how **not** to serve G-d. Isn't there a positive message Antignos could tell us, a positive motive we should embrace? And assuming there is, why did our mishna neglect telling it to us?

Second, we are left with an almost impossible situation. We know in truth that God does reward us for our good deeds. In fact, G-d's purpose in creation was to create beings upon whom He could bestow goodness (as we discussed last week). So what does it mean that we should ignore this? Is our obligation to trick ourselves, to live some kind of illusion, pretending something we know to be true is not? Is Judaism at its ideal level somehow based on denying reality?

Finally, the Midrash (Avos d'Rav Nassan, 5:2) tells us that Antignos had two students who misunderstood his teaching and as a result broke off from traditional Judaism, founding their own religious sects. The students were Tzaddok and Bysos. They understood Antignos' dictum that we should serve G-d not for reward to mean that there **is** no reward for the fulfillment of the commandments. The obvious next step is: "Why bother?" They therefore established breakaway sects, known as Tzaddukim (Sadducees) and Bysusim (Boethusians), which rejected Judaism's Oral

tradition altogether, accepting only the much-more-vague and much-less-demanding Written Torah instead.

The question on this is what in fact was their difficulty with their teacher's statement. What was so difficult or misleading about "Don't serve for reward" which became misconstrued to mean "There won't be any reward?" Were they just willfully twisting their teacher's words in order to take it easy on themselves? Or was there some kind of intellectual basis for their misunderstanding?

To understand our mishna, there is an important principle we must establish. When Israel was given the 613 commandments at Sinai, the intention was not: "Do these actions and get reward." It was rather: "Develop a relationship with your Creator; here's how." The mitzvos (commandments) are not just arbitrary actions which we are rewarded for performing. They are statements of G-d's values. We do not simply (and blindly) perform them. We grow into them. We develop an understanding of G-d's values and grow to become people who appreciate them ourselves. By so doing we become more godlike individuals, more capable of enjoying the resulting closeness we will have with our G-d in the World to Come.

Thus, the mitzvos are not actions and restrictions alone. They are calls to greatness, goads to inspire us to higher levels of awareness. As a simple example, the Torah commands us, "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13 -- the sixth of the Ten Commandments). The intention was never simply that we refrain from the **act** of murder. That is only the mitzvah at its basest level. Rather we were instructed in something much higher, more accurately expressed as, "Appreciate the value of a human life." Human beings are precious and in the image of G-d. We must respect the value of our fellow human being: his life, his health, his self-respect, and his feelings. The Talmud accordingly writes that one should allow himself to be killed rather than **embarrass** his fellow -- just as one must die rather than kill him (Sotah 10b). Making someone else wish he were dead is -- according to G-d's value system -- tantamount to killing him. And we, who are not simply enslaving ourselves to our G-d but are forging a relationship with Him, must obey His commandments with that awareness.

A relationship is in truth a very complex animal. Let's take the example of a marriage. Both husband and wife should love each other and care for the other not for his or her own sake but for that of the other. I do not do for my wife only in order that I'll get back from her. I do because I truly care about her, and am interested in her happiness and well-being. (I realize we're talking on the fairy-tale level, but let us not lose sight of what a relationship and marriage ideally ought to be. Many of us actually got married once upon a time with that in mind...)

At the same time, let us say, that I, the ideal selfless husband, care for my wife for her sake alone, but she doesn't care a fig for me. She's in the marriage entirely for herself -- in getting what she can out of my sizable paycheck (fortunately couldn't be the case in my marriage...). Or even worse: she ignores me altogether, paying no heed to my love and devotion. In being so selfless, am I building a relationship? Or am I just sacrificing myself, wasting my very essence on an uncaring human being?

Giving to another without getting in return is not a relationship. It is meaningless self-sacrifice. It does not build you and bring you closer to the other in the way only a relationship can. Thus, if we were to serve G-d and actually *not* receive reward, we would not be building a relationship with Him at all no matter how selfless we would be. We would be in some sort of miserable, hopeless master-slave relationship. It would have no meaning, and no matter how many mitzvos we would perform, we would never truly be getting closer to G-d.

Thus, for a relationship to be meaningful, both sides must be doing for and responding to the other. I must know that G-d responds to my service and rewards in kind. In fact, I must know that He *cares* how I act towards Him, and that on some level my deeds make a difference to Him. Yet, at the same time, to be a selfless and giving relationship, I must not be serving Him for that reason.

And there, of course, is the rub -- and the dilemma of our mishna. I must know that G-d rewards, but I must not serve Him on account of this. Thus, Antignos gave us no positive reason for serving G-d. I have a relationship with Him. I am not serving Him for *my* agenda at all, but simply because it is what the G-d I love wants. We must live that impossible paradigm of knowing that G-d cares and rewards yet ignoring it all the same. And this is no small feat. Relationships are probably the most difficult -- and meaningful -- form of social interaction we have on this earth. Our relationship with G-d is not -- and should not be -- any less demanding.

(Part of the above based on a lecture heard from my teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#).)

For this reason, perhaps, Antignos' students were not able to come to grips with their teacher's message. If Judaism does reward, then we can serve G-d out of a selfish relationship. This is easy enough; it is how we conduct most of our relationships in life. If, however, we are told not to serve G-d for reward, it means we must serve Him for His sake. And we cannot truly do that -- being wholly selfless -- if we receive **any** kind of reward in return. Thus, taking their teacher's reasoning to its logical conclusion, there must **be** no reward -- unless we are being told to delude ourselves.

The students were unable to overcome this logical and emotional dilemma. And so, being unwilling to sacrifice themselves in true selflessness, they sought greener pastures -- in some of the many other alluring and selfish "relationships" the world has to offer. The poetic but not-terribly-encumbering Scriptures would allay their guilt pangs. But these students were out for their own good and their own pleasures -- and tragically paved the route to be taken by so many other wayward Jews over the centuries -- who would fail to recognize the true wonder and meaning of Judaism.

Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and [Torah.org](#).