

MISHNA 4: PURPOSE OF RABBIS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

"Yossi ben (son of) Yo'ezer of Ts'raidah and Yossi ben Yochanan of Jerusalem received [the transmission] from them. Yossi ben Yo'ezer used to say: Let your house be a meeting place for the sages, cleave to the dust of their feet, and drink thirstily their words."

This mishna introduces us to the next generation of Torah scholars. Antignos, the author of last week's mishna, lived in the generation immediately after the Men of the Great Assembly. His generation was transitional. With this week's scholars begins a new era in Jewish religious history, known as the era of the Zugos, or Pairs, which lasted for most of the remainder of Second Temple period. A high court of 71 scholars known as the Sanhedrin provided the religious and often political leadership of the Jewish people. It was led by a pair of scholars, firstly a Nasi (prince, nobleman), and secondly an Av Beis Din, or court head.

Most of the remainder of this chapter of Pirkei Avos will introduce us to successive generations of leaders of the Sanhedrin. The era of the Zugos may be considered the beginning of the period of the Mishna since the scholars of this age are occasionally quoted in the Mishna (see Chagiga 2:2 and Sotah 9:9). Yossi ben Yo'ezer and Yossi ben Yochanan lived at approximately the time of the Hasmonean revolt against the Greeks and the Chanukah miracle -- which we're commemorating at the time of this writing.

The basic message of our mishna is that it is not sufficient to study from Torah scholars, but one must ensure that scholars congregate in his home. The implication is two-fold. First, as the commentator Rabbeinu Yonah (of 12th Century Spain) explains, we must make our homes a place worthy of scholars and scholarship, a home in which people who value wisdom will feel comfortable -- regardless of the intellectual capacity of the homeowner himself.

This often requires that we overcome a major psychological barrier. People are often prepared to attend services or lectures in a synagogue or place of study, but such activities are usually relegated to some sacred location outside of the home. Our homes, however, are our own sacred (but not *too* sacred) abodes. We reign supreme -- and we are the sole arbiters of the standards of modesty and behavior to be maintained.

The first message of our mishna is thus that we must not serve G-d on the outside alone, while maintaining our own "space" within our homes. G-d must permeate every aspect of our lives. There cannot be any dark closets in our houses or corners in our hearts which do not allow G-d to enter.

The Talmud writes that on the Day of Judgment the beams of one's own house testify as to a person's true nature (Ta'anis 11a). We are judged not according to how we interacted with our coworkers or with strangers on the street, but by our behavior towards our own family members and in the privacy of our own homes. The mezuzah on our door-post testifies that within is a house of G-d. And inside must be a house in which scholar and layman alike feel comfortable and welcome -- and sense the aura of the Divine Presence. (Based in part on a lecture heard from R. Yochanan Zweig (www.talmudicu.edu.)

The second message of our mishna is that we should not interact with scholars in religious or intellectual contexts alone. We should invite them into our homes. We should see them close up, in personal interaction, and our homes should be molded by such contact. This is because we should not only study Torah; we must see it in action. And this is truly the way we find out what Judaism is all about.

The Talmud writes, "Greater is the service of scholars more than the study from them" (Brachos 7b). What is a Torah scholar really like? How have the Torah's lessons fashioned him as a human being? How does he interact with others, with his wife and family members? What are his values? What kinds of subjects does he talk about? How does he spend his time? The Talmud writes that the light speech of the scholars of the Talmud is equivalent to words of Torah (Eiruvim 54b). True Torah scholars personify the Torah and its lessons, and provide the role models modern man so desperately needs but does not have. A Torah scholar is not one who spouts abstract wisdom. He is one who lives it. And he is the sort we should welcome into our homes and observe in close and intimate quarters.

(It is a point of personal pride on this writer's behalf to have studied under and built personal relationships with R. Yaakov Weinberg of blessed memory and many other Torah scholars in Ner Israel Rabbinical College (Baltimore, MD) and in other institutions of higher learning. Seeing firsthand what Torah study does to a human being was for myself personally a source of growth and inspiration far beyond anything I have ever gained from any Jewish text.)

(It is also worth noting that although the Torah fully permeated each of these individuals, they were all very different personalities. Far from the Torah forcing one type of behavior and demeanor onto these great men, it allowed each of them to fully develop his own personal strengths and qualities. There are many paths to greatness; the Torah guides us along them all.)

(Finally -- as I write now and then -- the Internet as a substitute simply does not cut it. It is a wonderful tool for disseminating Torah teachings to the far corners of the globe. (I've heard back from readers from just about every corner of the planet-- still waiting to hear from Antarctica to complete the circle...) But a student should never feel that reading weekly e-mails is the true road to personal growth. Judaism requires scholars, community structure, and constant personal interaction. "Virtual Judaism" (sorry for the buzzword) is a recent innovation -- and a very poor approximation of

the real thing.)

There is a final aspect to the importance of personal interaction with Torah scholars, which I'll attempt to cover briefly. We discussed not long ago (1:1) that for the truly important things in life -- character development, interpersonal relationships, what kind of people we should be -- there are no hard and fast rules. Ritual is fairly well-defined. Personality development, however, is not the same for any two individuals. We need to know who we are and what our individual qualities are to truly discern the Torah's personal message for us. Now how do we tune in to that message?

This is the true importance of the Torah scholar. It is relatively easy to decide a strictly religious question such as whether or not a chicken is kosher. That requires knowledge of a fairly well-defined set of laws. A rabbi is "useful" for that but not indispensable. Many law books have been written on such topics and a learned layman could usually manage to find the answer himself (or he could just throw out the chicken; no major affair). But what about interpersonal relationships? How do I deal with my mother-in-law? What kind of career should I choose? How much time should I set aside for study, for community work, for spending with my family? What character traits should I focus on and develop? How do I realize my potential?

The only way to answer such questions is to know the entire Torah and recognize its personalized message for me. There is simply no single verse or law we can point to. (Actually there are quite a lot of them, all pointing us in different directions.) One must know everything the Torah has to say about values and priorities, and decide how they relate to him personally. Only a true Torah scholar can do this. And if he knows you personally, he may help you discover the Torah's personal message for you.

Thus, we are told to cleave to Torah scholars. We must not only study Torah from them. We must get to know them -- and get them to know us. It has been thousands of years since Israel has been blessed with prophets. There is no one (sane) who will come to us today and tell us the word of G-d. But we are blessed with scholars, not in abundance, but they dwell among us today: "For it [the Torah] shall not be forgotten from the mouths of its [Israel's] descendants" (Deuteronomy 31:21). The Talmud in fact states that a scholar is greater than a prophet (Bava Basra 12a). Prophets are told the word of G-d, but scholars discern it on their own. And they are our surest means -- and mankind's last great hope -- of discovering G-d's eternal message to mankind.

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