

CHAPTER 1, MISHNA 5(A): CHARITY BEGINS AT HOME

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Yossi ben (son of) Yochanan of Jerusalem said: Let your house be open wide, let the poor be members of your household, and do not chatter excessively with women. This was said regarding one's own wife, certainly with another's wife. Based on this the Sages have said, one who chatters excessively with women causes evil to himself, wastes time from Torah study, and will eventually inherit Gehenna.

Last week our discussion in part focused on the sanctity of the home. The previous mishna stated that Torah scholars should be welcome in one's home. As we explained, the home must be a place suited for scholars and scholarship. Religion must not be relegated to the synagogue or other places external to ourselves. It must permeate our homes and our very lives. Our homes are not our castles in which we -- rather than G-d -- reign and set the standards. The mezuzah on our doorpost testifies that within is a dwelling place of G-d. And our behavior within must be worthy of receiving the Divine Presence.

This mishna, authored by the colleague of last mishna's author, continues the same theme. Our homes are not only places in which venerated, respected Torah scholars are welcome. The poor and downtrodden must be welcomed as well. And as we will see, this often requires an even greater degree of selflessness.

We sometimes feel our homes are our sanctuaries -- to which we retreat and close ourselves off from the world's problems. I personally know the feeling when a disheveled and unsavory-looking beggar comes to our door (unfortunately, an ongoing occurrence in my neighborhood in Israel). The knee jerk reaction can be summed up as: "Here are a few dollars (or shekels); now get out of my life!" (as my teacher R. Moshe Eisemann once put it.)

We really don't want to be bothered by other people's problems. We are willing to part with a few dollars for their sakes -- we do feel genuine sympathy for our fellow human beings -- but we're hardly willing to make their problems our problems. It disturbs our equanimity and peace of mind to see such suffering face to face. (Those of us who are aware of the facts in our homeland can only begin to appreciate the incredible heroism and sacrifice of the Israeli security and emergency medical personnel.) However, for most of us, charitable causes come no further than our doorsteps -- if even there. Within is my own life -- my personal "space" which I am simply not willing to compromise.

This mishna obligates us infinitely further. We must not be charitable with our wallets alone; we must open up our homes. (Many of the commentators understand the advice of the mishna to be that one invite the indigent into his home as hired workers -- providing them the most dignified form of charity possible.)

Further, when our doors are open to those in need, our charity assumes an entirely different dimension. When I, the prestigious philanthropist, donate generously to a Jewish institution, I **expand** myself. A wing of a Jewish school is named after me (or maybe after my father if I'm really "selfless"). I wax greater. I am the well-known and well-admired benefactor of Jewish causes, the guest-of-honor at the annual banquet.

However, when I allow others into my home, I become **smaller**. I have constricted myself, giving of my own space -- and of myself -- for others. Such a small and contracted dwelling has taken so little for itself that it may well contain room for the Divine Presence.

When G-d instructed Israel to collect material for the construction of the Temple, He commands them to "take for Me a gift-offering" (Exodus 25:2). Why **take** for Me? Why not **give** to Me? The answer is that to build a home for the Divine Presence, we must "take" of ourselves. Charity of the highest form is not an act of expansion -- generously bequeathing **our** money on the Temple. It is a "taking" of ourselves -- and making room for the Divine.

(Many years ago I was driving in an unfamiliar neighborhood. In the distance, I could see a building with large words figuring prominently along the top of its length. Before being able to make out the writing, I knew immediately I was approaching a Jewish neighborhood. Sure enough, before long "The Alfred and Gladys Mermelstein Educational Center" (or whatever) towered before me. One can always recognize a Jewish institution in that buildings, wings, hallways, rooms, furnishings, light switches are all named after some generous benefactor. We could just imagine the Temple today: The Irving and Sadie Finklestein Ark of the Covenant, Ernest and Phyllis Peckman Menorah, Arthur and Sonya Perlowitz Altar etc. (These names are all purely fictional of course. I hope I wasn't real unlucky just now... ;-).)

So too, in constructing the Temple, Israel was not attempting to take over the holy sanctuary, to make it theirs. They were diminishing themselves, parting with their wealth and greatness just a little bit -- and in the process making room for the Divine Presence. (Based in part on a lecture heard from R. Yochanan Zweig.)

(By the way, people who do donate generously to Jewish causes **are** deserving of honor. It is a worthy and well-accepted Jewish practice to accord honor where it is due -- allowing such philanthropists to serve as a model for others to emulate. However, one cannot deny that such is not charity at its highest level.)

Likewise, one of the principal collections for the Temple was the silver half-piece, the "machatsis hashekel" (Exodus 30:11-16). This was brought as a completely anonymous gift. The rich, the poor, all

gave the same identical piece of silver. We neither draw attention to ourselves nor take credit for ourselves when giving charity. The plain, unembellished half-piece represented that we all stand equally before G-d, that no one, whether rich or poor, has greater claim to the Temple and to Israel's heritage. In fact we are all "halves" (as the half-shekel coin) -- only to become whole when we unite with our fellow Jews.

Thus, charity at its highest level is an act of contraction -- of making ourselves smaller and in so doing becoming one with G-d. And so, it is man's greatest act of expansion.

We now arrive at the final topic of our mishna, the husband-wife relationship. As we will see, this forms the most crucial element of the home. Only a home and marriage whose foundations are based firmly upon sanctity and meaning, rather than frivolity, will be able to open itself up to guests and strangers. This, however, is a discussion in itself and will be dealt with G-d willing next week.

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