

CHAPTER 2, MISHNA 10-11(A): FOLLOWING IN OUR FOOTSTEPS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Mishna 10

Rabban Yochanan ben (son of) Zakkai had five [primary] students. They were: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkenos, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yossi the Priest, Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach.

Mishna 11

He used to enumerate their praises: R. Eliezer ben Hurkenos is a cemented pit which never loses a drop; R. Yehoshua ben Chananya -- fortunate is she who bore him; R. Yossi the Priest is pious; R. Shimon ben Nesanel fears sin; and R. Elazar ben Arach is as an increasing river.

Mishnas 10-19 deal with the five primary disciples of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and their teachings. (We were introduced to R. Yochanan in the previous mishna.) In Mishna 11 R. Yochanan lists the respective qualities of each student.

It's interesting to note from the start that not all of the talents listed are scholastic. R. Yochanan realized firstly that his students were not simply his academic disciples. He saw his mission as not only teaching Torah knowledge to his students, but in grooming Israel's next generation of leaders. His students were his spiritual heirs far more than merely his intellectual ones. And so, R. Yochanan viewed them in their totality. And he saw the potential for greatness in each one of them.

Often, a young man or woman has the potential to contribute mightily to his community, to Israel and to mankind, but not necessarily in a strictly scholastic sense. R. Yochanan recognized this and nurtured each student according to the particular quality he saw in him. He, as all true leaders, was broadminded enough to recognize greatness in all its guises -- not only in those people most similar to him (as most of us measure greatness) -- and to nurture it in whichever form it could be found.

A second equally-significant introductory observation is the simple fact that R. Yochanan enumerated his students' praises. R. Yochanan did not merely observe his disciples' qualities. He articulated them -- and we can be quite certain he let his students know just what he felt about them. Tell your student or child what you see in him or her. Let him know what you expect of him and what you know he is capable of. We as parents and teachers often see far more in our developing youngsters than they are capable of being aware of themselves. And often, just a few words of encouragement or of faith that he will meet the goals you have set for him will open a

youngster's eyes to his own unrealized potential -- and he'll go off running with it.

We now begin looking at some of the particular qualities of R. Yochanan's students.

"R. Yehoshua ben Chananya -- fortunate is she who bore him:" This is perhaps the most cryptic of the qualities of our mishna. R. Yochanan does not really state what was great about R. Yehoshua -- just that he grew up to make his good Jewish mother proud. The inference here is thus that his mother played a great role in his development. His greatness -- whatever precisely it was (but all Jewish children are great in the eyes of their mothers) was a reflection of the mother who raised him so.

In the same vein, the commentators quote from the Jerusalem Talmud the intense yearning his mother had that her son grow up to be a Torah scholar. The Talmud writes that when his mother was pregnant, she would go around from one study hall to the next asking the sages to pray that her child grow up to be a scholar. Another tradition is that she placed his crib near a study hall so that her son would hear nothing but words of Torah his entire life. Whether or not this second act made any difference practically is besides the point. The single-minded devotion of R. Yehoshua's mother clearly had an effect on her son's development. R. Yehoshua -- as well as G-d -- saw the intensity of her longing that he succeed in his studies -- and it could not go unnoticed. R. Yochanan likewise recognized that R. Yehoshua's greatness did not develop in a vacuum. It was a reflection of the values so lovingly and patiently instilled in him by his parents. The apple did not fall far from the tree.

This brings to my mind an amusing paradox regarding child rearing. There is a known and very simple axiom regarding children: They will rebel. A child wants independence -- to stake out a path of his or her own choosing rather than the one set by the previous generation. Attempt to force a career or lifestyle upon your child and he will seek his pleasures elsewhere. Tell him you want him to decide for himself and he'll resent your lack of direction. (In some things in life you just can't win; parenting is one of them.) ;-) Whatever you try will somehow backfire. Children have to be different, to learn things on their own in the hardest way possible. (I'm certainly not condoning or recommending this. But we as parents must accept that our children will just want to find things out for themselves.) That is simply the nature of human beings, and, for better or worse, that is the way we ourselves all matured into adults at one time or another.

Many years ago I had the unfortunate opportunity of paying a shiva call (a visit to a person in mourning) to a former Torah teacher of mine who had lost his wife tragically as a result of a car accident. During the course of the visit, he quoted a very wise remark she once made regarding the raising of children. At the wedding of one of their older children she recommended that they not arrange to have the men and women seated separately (a practice which, although debatable if a religious requirement (outside of the synagogue), has become quite prevalent in Orthodox circles today). She explained, children will always rebel. Better that we lower our standards here and there so that they rebel by becoming more Orthodox than we rather than less.

If so, we are left with a dilemma: How do we raise our children? Do we take the approach of Mama

Yehoshua -- making every effort to see to it our children realize the goals we have in mind for them? Or do we back off and give them their own space -- if anything telling them to be what we don't really want in the hope that they'll actually turn out the way we do?

The answer is actually fairly simple -- not of course that there is really any magical solution. Our children will certainly not accept all that we tell them. Some kids are more rebellious than others, but no child will accept everything you tell him or fill the precise mold you feel is best for him. Children will want their independence, and one way or the other they'll get it.

However, our children will definitely pick up one thing we impart to them (whether consciously or not) -- our own behavioral patterns. From our deeds -- far more than our advice and lectures -- they will subconsciously learn the definition of acceptable behavior. Their default behavioral patterns and their basic value system will be fashioned after what they observed in the home. From our own decorum and the tone we set in the home they will learn how to talk to a spouse, be selfless or selfish in a relationship, behave in front of children, discipline, and talk behind others' backs. If our own behavior in the privacy of our homes has taught them bickering, immaturity and intolerance they will, for better or worse (usually worse), have learned something from us. And when they strike out on their own, they will relate to us and their own families accordingly.

If, however, we create an environment of mutual respect and love for one another, it will make an equally-strong impression on them. When our children come of age and redefine and realign themselves, they may just continue to exhibit the honesty and respect for us they learned in the home.

Let me not pretend there really is such a simple solution to all of this. (I'd rather not get x-thousand irate e-mails after writing this). Many parents do everything right and their children are monsters, and many do everything wrong and their children are angels. As we all know, G-d most certainly has a sense of humor -- and let's just say He always gets the last laugh. But there is much truth to the fact that our children learn from our deeds much more than our words. We are their most intimate role models. Whether or not we or they realize it, their emerging behavioral patterns will be fashioned after our own (and most of us will note that we've grown into the parenting roles we saw our parents act out -- as much as we didn't want to...). Their default attitudes and positions will be our own -- unless they consciously override them.

And this is the weapon we wield when we impact on our children, our students, or anyone we come in contact with. R. Yehoshua's mother was not praised for lecturing to her son or dragging him out of bed on time. It was for permeating his environment with a love of Torah and good deeds, even at a time when he was far too young to consciously understand this. Thus, for her own love and devotion, "fortunate is she who bore him."

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