

CHAPTER 2, MISHNA 6: A RELIGION OF ANSWERS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

He [Hillel] used to say, a boor cannot fear sin, nor can an unlearned person be pious. A bashful person cannot learn, nor can an impatient one teach. Those who are occupied excessively with business will not become wise [in Torah]. In a place where there are no men, endeavor to be a man.

This week's mishna was authored by Hillel, as the previous mishna. Also as the previous, it contains a number of brief pearls of Hillel's wisdom, many of which we examine below.

Hillel first states that a boor will not fear sin, while an unlearned person ("ahm ha'aretz" -- we'll use the Hebrew term below) will not become pious. The commentators understand fear of sin to be more rudimentary than piety. Thus, whereas the boor will lack even fear of sin, the unlearned ahm ha'aretz may attain fear of sin but will never achieve piety.

The boor is thus clearly inferior to the ahm ha'aretz. Ahm ha'aretz literally means "people of the land" -- the common folk. It implies one who is unlearned in Torah but who is a part of society ("the land") at large. He works at a trade, raises a family, and is generally a law-abiding (and Torah-observant) individual. It does have a negative connotation in the Talmud (and even more so in modern parlance) -- of someone who has never learned the details of Torah law and so whose word cannot be trusted for religious matters. Yet the Sages view this more as a result of lack of knowledge than outright malice.

Such a person can therefore "fear sin." He honors tradition and has respect for authority. He recognizes the importance of religion and structure in his life. He has a place and knows his place in society -- and he basically gets along with others. He is the sort who makes up most of the Jewish masses (cast in the Fiddler-on-the-Roof mold) -- believing on the whole, respectful of tradition, and well-if-sometimes-misguided-intentioned.

An ahm ha'aretz can therefore fear sin. He will honor and uphold the tradition passed along to him -- even if he does not understand it all that well. But piety is beyond him. Piety means sublimating oneself and growing to appreciate the Torah. It implies understanding the meaning and significance behind the laws and going beyond the letter of the law. And without the benefit of Torah study, the ahm ha'aretz will never achieve this. The Torah gives depth to our understanding of Judaism. It teaches not only respect for our tradition but true appreciation of the law. With it, we will grow to love the Torah's commandments and way of life, and we will thirst for knowledge and understanding of G-d. Without Torah study, however, our observance can at best be an expression

of fear and perhaps nostalgia. We will be afraid to reject the tradition passed to us, but we will never truly know what it is all about.

A boor, on the other hand, is as the term implies -- one who is uncultured, lacking in all forms of good graces and manners. (Interestingly, the Hebrew word for it is also "boor" -- although poking around on-line, the English term seems to have only medieval, Indo-European roots.) The commentators understand the boor to be one who is lacking both in Torah and refinement of character (Maimonides, Rabbeinu Yonah), or one not gainfully employed (Rashi). Such a person does not even have positive interaction with the world, whether social or economic. He lacks the most basic sense of fair play and common decency.

And someone who lacks basic proper behavior towards man will not likely be much better towards G-d. Without a sense of respect for temporal authority and proper decorum, one will never truly accept the yoke of the Higher Authority above. (This begins to be reminiscent of our discussion of the last two weeks. People who claim to be acting in G-d's name but lack the most basic respect for human dignity and society at large are hardly servants of G-d, let alone His fierce defenders. You see people in Israel littering the streets tossing leaflets out of car windows condemning improper behavior...) One can be personally unlearned as the ahm ha'aretz but still have respect for tradition and society. But without even the most basic sense of respect for human values, one will never even reach the ground floor.

"A bashful person cannot learn": The student who is too ashamed to admit he does not know will never improve his lot. Better to experience a little embarrassment now when he is able to learn rather than a lot of it later -- if not in this world then in the next. As the commentator Rabbeinu Yonah puts it, bashfulness is admirable in almost all other areas, but not when it comes to Torah study.

In my opinion, one of the most remarkable aspects of Judaism is its sense of intellectual honesty. It does not only tolerate questions but encourages the student to ask and to challenge. Throughout the ages other religions have refused to tolerate dissent, repressing skepticism and often forbidding even the translation of their sacred texts into the language of the masses. I believe it was considered terribly treasonous of Martin Luther to translate the Bible into German. A terrible situation if people not of the cloth actually find out what they believe in -- and perhaps even decide for themselves. More recently someone told me of an authoritarian Christian divinity school in which a student (later to return to his Jewish roots) posed a serious question, and the instructor turned to the rest of the class warning them: "Satan is tempting this student!" Accept the gospel, do as I say (perhaps not as I do), or you're a sinner -- doomed to eternal damnation.

Judaism is quite the opposite. Anyone who has studied so much as one page of the Talmud knows that it is filled with questions, debates and challenges. This is precisely how we relate to our tradition. We do not expect nor do we want our students to swallow whole whatever we foist upon them. Each student must question, debate and clarify for himself -- until he is totally sure. Only

material we have first pondered and then understood do we truly acquire. At the Passover Seder, for example, we want our children to first pose questions. Ask the Four Questions -- and hopefully many more. Let us pique your curiosity. First *want* to know, and then we will tell you what it is all about.

(It's important to add -- so that this isn't taken too far -- that the fundamental aspects of our religion were demonstrated to us unequivocally and divinely so that they would not be relegated to human inquiry. Thus, the existence of G-d, His omnipotence, and the divinity of the Torah were all demonstrated publicly and unquestionably to the entire nation of Israel at its inception at the Exodus -- which in turn passed on the experience to its descendants until this very day. We certainly want inquisitive and probing students, but unless you're an Abraham, there are very few of us who can figure it all out from scratch.)

More generally speaking, G-d was never interested in blind acceptance of the Torah. Intelligent human beings, in search of meaning, should be turning to religion with inquisitive and penetrating questions: What is life all about? How do we know there is a G-d? What does He want from us? If He really exists, why does He seem to hide Himself from man? One who does not have questions must not truly be searching for meaning in life. And far worse, one who does have questions but is either too ashamed, indifferent or fearful of the consequences of asking, is denying him- or herself the opportunity to benefit from the richness of Jewish tradition. Judaism has nothing to hide. G-d wants our questions. Nothing is too trivial to be asked nor too sacrosanct to be questioned. 3300 years of study and debate has produced a religion of answers, of developed and refined scholarship unmatched in any other area of study. G-d gave us the Torah which provides the answers; only we can ask the questions.

How often do we at Torah.org receive questions from students which begin something like: "I'm sure I should know this already, but...", or "This is probably a silly question, but..." Well, first of all, nothing is really silly when you don't know the answer. (Afterwards, we might think ourselves fairly silly not to have known, but we at Torah.org are not in the habit of passing around "silly" questions getting a good laugh behind your backs. :-))

But more importantly, that is really what Judaism is all about. It provides the answers to all of man's silly, stupid, and profound questions about life. Have a question that's "silly", "stupid" or would turn you into a heretic if you posed it? Ask! Try it out! Sincere and probing questioning is what Judaism is! You don't know how we're supposed to believe in a G-d who seems to refuse to reveal Himself to man, how a perfect G-d can allow so much evil in the world, how do we know the Splitting of the Sea really occurred, how can there be an all-powerful G-d who cannot create a stone He cannot lift? Ask! See what our tradition has to offer. See if you become convinced -- or piqued to ask even further. There is no precept so sacred it cannot be questioned, and no question -- nor questioner -- so small it does not deserve our utmost attention.

"In a place where there are no men, endeavor to be a man." We discussed this statement earlier in [Chapter 1 Mishna 10](#). I'll refer the reader to our discussion there.

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