

CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 7: THE SPIRIT OF G-D

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Chalafta ben (son of) Dosa of K'far Chananya said: When ten people sit and study Torah, the Divine Presence dwells among them, as the verse states, 'The L-rd stands in the assembly of G-d' (Psalms 82:1). How do we know this applies even to five? As it states, 'He has established His band on the land' (Amos 9:6). How do we know even three? As it states, 'In the midst of judges will He judge' (Psalms 82:1). How do we know even two? As it states, 'Then those who feared the L-rd spoke one to the other, and G-d listened and heard' (Malachi 3:16). How do we know even one? As it states 'In every place where My Name is mentioned I will come to you and bless you' (Exodus 20:21).

This week's mishna tells us that G-d's Presence dwells, so to speak, in places where Torah is studied. Although as our mishna concludes G-d appears even for a single person, the commentators explain that the larger the group, the more strongly G-d's Presence can be felt. (See also Talmud Brachos 6a for other distinctions between smaller and larger groups.)

I'd like to begin by clarifying a few surface issues with our mishna; then we'll go in for a deeper look.

Regarding ten people, R. Chalafta derives his principle from the verse's use of the word "assembly" (Hebrew: "aidah"). This word is also used in Numbers (14:27) when G-d complains to Moses of the wicked "assembly" of spies who spoke ill of the Land of Israel. As we know, twelve spies were sent in to Israel, one from each tribe, and two -- Joshua and Caleb -- were righteous. Thus, the assembly there referred to consisted of ten individuals.

Regarding five people, R. Chalafta employs a verse referring to G-d's "band" or bundle ("agudah"). This term can also mean a handful. The commentators explain that since the hand has five fingers with which to hold a bundle, a handful is assumed to contain five items.

Finally, regarding three people, the verse invoked refers to judges, and a minimal court typically consists of three judges (see Mishna, Sanhedrin 3:1).

Jewish literature often makes reference to actions or places which either draw the Divine Presence closer or drives it away. In Exodus 25:8, G-d instructs Moses that the Children of Israel "shall make for Me a sanctuary, and I shall dwell among them." In addition, the Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 2:2) states that following the Temple's destruction the Divine Presence never departed from the Western Wall.

(That Midrash incidentally was authored at the latest shortly after the destruction of the Second Temple. Yet its prophetic message rings loud and true today. The western wall of the Temple mount

has continued to stand through two destructions and countless years of exile. For it is a place in which G-d's Presence literally rests -- as the hundreds of Jews who visit it daily sense. And likewise, out of the entire Land of Israel our enemies most strongly oppose our connection to that one place. For it symbolizes our eternal bond with G-d -- one our enemies will oppose to the death.)

Further, the Talmud writes that G-d may be found in the synagogue, and that He is present whenever ten people assemble to pray (Brachos 6a). (When an individual prays, however, the angels must first "transport" his prayers to G-d; see Talmud Sotah 33a).

Finally, we are taught that if husband and wife merit [to build a harmonious home], the Divine Presence dwells among them (Talmud Sotah 17a).

Conversely, Deut. 23:15 states that G-d's Presence "walks" among a Jewish army camp, and that lewdness or uncleanness will cause Him to depart -- and the military effort will suffer accordingly. The Talmud lists many other actions which drive away G-d's Presence, such as refusing to accept one's rabbi's authority (Brachos 27b) or walking with one's head held high (i.e., with a sense that he, rather than G-d, is the master of his surroundings) (Brachos 43b).

We should not, of course, understand these statements too literally or superficially. One of Judaism's most fundamental beliefs is that G-d is infinite and omnipresent. He is not constrained to any place, nor can we say that He exists "more" in one place than in another. In fact, the Midrash writes that G-d is the "place" of the world rather than the world being His place (Bereishis Rabbah 68:10). The universe is quite literally contained within G-d. He exists above time and space; His creation of space by definition cannot exist outside or independently of Him.

Thus, clearly the meaning of our mishna and such statements of our Sages is not that G-d exists "more" in certain places, but that He allows His Presence to be more keenly felt. And this becomes clear when we examine the illustrations above in greater detail. When individuals join together in Torah study, there is a public admission of the authenticity of the Torah. When individuals (or even a single person) demonstrate that the Torah is important and worth studying, it increases the perception in this world that there is a G-d and that His Torah is true.

Similarly, when the Temple stood, G-d revealed Himself to mankind. We will learn later in Pirkei Avos ([5:7](#)) that ten miracles occurred regularly in the Temple. We were able to witness G-d's Presence revealed. And perhaps even more significantly, the world at large was able to see G-d through His emissaries. Visiting the Temple in Jerusalem, the nations witnessed a nation united in the service of a single G-d. Judaism stood in stark contrast to the pagan religious notions of the time. The Midrash writes that Gentile visitors were amazed to see an entire nation worshipping a single G-d from a single Temple via a single priestly family. (See Sifri 354, brought in Rashi to Deut. 33:19.) At a time when most of the world saw religion as a means of appeasing "angry" gods -- often with human sacrifice -- and in order to bargain him for a good harvest, visitors saw in Judaism the belief in a single, just and moral G-d, worshiped by a nation observing a rational, ordered and moral code of

laws. The Temple showcased a religion eons ahead of its time. It could have been inspired by none other than G-d.

Finally, a happy marriage can be nothing short of proof of G-d's existence. When a couple lives together in an environment of harmony and sharing, there is a godliness to their behavior -- one which could never be achieved by an individual living alone. It becomes evident that human beings are not just intelligent monkeys who build nests, mate, and raise young as does the rest of the animal kingdom. When a person exhibits selflessness, a love and concern for someone outside of him- or herself, it becomes clear that humans have an eternal soul, and that they were created in the image of G-d.

This is conversely true for any of the types of behavior which drive away G-d's Presence. Immorality implies that man in fact is an animal; it dispels the notion that we are spiritual beings in the image of G-d. If someone challenges Jewish tradition and authority, he weakens the image of a true, G-d-given tradition. Likewise if he acts with arrogance, he obscures the fact that there is a Creator before whom we must all submit. All such activities make the world just a little more godless, G-d forbid(!).

One of the blessings recited at a Jewish wedding contains a prayer (based on Jeremiah 33:10-11) asking that there will one day again be heard the joyous sounds of bride and groom in a rebuilt Jerusalem. My teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#) asked why in particular do we pray that Jerusalem be rebuilt in order that we may celebrate weddings there? Of course we await the rebuilding of the Temple; with the redemption life will improve immeasurably in all its aspects. But why do we pray -- and does Jeremiah foretell -- that weddings in particular will become joyous after the redemption?

R. Zweig explained that at this point in history, when G-d's Presence is not so evident, the aspects of creation which suffer most are those which normally receive the Divine Presence. A marriage is capable of bringing the Divine Presence into Israel. It is a receptacle for sanctity. And today it cannot realize that potential. Until the Messiah, G-d is simply not willing to fully reveal His Presence and dwell among His people. And so, husband and wife are not capable of fully sensing the divinity of their relationship. And the temptation is consequently far greater for each spouse to live selfishly, to take advantage, and to see the other as an object. And so, their receptacles for sanctity can never be entirely filled. (Perhaps this is hinted in our custom to break a glass under the chuppah, the wedding canopy. (Okay, in many weddings today a light bulb is used to make things easier on a nervous groom. But I'm sure we could come up with an explanation for that one too... ;-))

We can only conclude with a prayer that the days in fact do speedily arrive in which G-d's Presence is revealed to all Israel and the entire world. May the time soon come in which our weddings, our synagogues, and our very selves are revitalized and invigorated with the Divine spirit which truly dwells among us.

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