

CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 8(A): THINK GLOBALLY - ACT LOCALLY

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Elazar of Bartosa said, give Him from His own, for you and your possessions are His. And so regarding King David does the verse state, 'For everything is from You, and from Your hands have we given to You' (I Chronicles 29:14).

This mishna seems poetic but is fairly self-evident in meaning. We are instructed to give G-d that which is truly His: our selves and our possessions. Everything we are and have is in truth a gift from G-d. We must use it in the manner He intended.

The commentator Rabbeinu Yonah adds that if we view the matter from the proper perspective, we should be grateful G-d allows us to enjoy any part of our gifts. If all we have truly belongs to G-d, then theoretically we have no right to withhold any part of it for our own pleasure. Even so, G-d allows us to use at least a part of our gifts -- our wealth and talents -- for our own comfort and well-being. And so, rather than feeling burdened by the Torah's command that we be charitable, we should be appreciative that G-d allows us to keep even a portion of it for ourselves.

One issue we might find bothersome with our mishna is its vagueness. Giving G-d that which is His could mean anything -- and so means almost nothing. And I feel this does not really fit into the paradigm of Pirkei Avos. As we've seen many times throughout this study, the Sages in Pirkei Avos offer very practical, almost pedestrian advice. We are not told to save the world but to greet others nicely (1:15), not to end war and famine but to respect others' property (2:17). The catchphrase would perhaps be -- as the rallying cry of the modern-day environmentalist -- "think globally, act locally."

And those are actually very wise and appropriate words. (I wonder if the Sages say them somewhere? No doubt.) On the one hand, we must recognize the global picture -- just how much rides on our behavior, and the degree to which the world hangs in the balance. No deed is too small to be noticed by G-d or is too insignificant to make the difference. (When I traveled to the U.S. several years ago, one of the movies offered was the recent Fox rendition of "Horton Hears a Who" (I didn't watch it -- I had read the book). And the truth behind its basic message still rings loud and clear. The smallest creature in the smallest universe can make all the difference. Not a bad metaphor for how infinitesimal -- and significant -- we are to G-d. Fortunately, He has very big ears.)

The Talmud (Kiddushin 40b) writes that a person should see himself as exactly 50% righteous and 50% sinful. A single action could make the difference between salvation and damnation. And likewise, one must see the entire world as equally hanging in the balance. One good or wicked deed

might just decide it for all mankind. The choice between the world's rise or fall literally lies in our own hands.

But what are we to do about it? Perhaps little more than humble, small and private acts to improve ourselves and our surroundings. We can all improve the world around us, and we certainly can and must improve ourselves. But, practically speaking, we may be limited to that alone, and more importantly, that is probably all G-d asks of us. Will it save the world? Quite likely. But don't let "save the world" obscure the fact that our obligation for the most part is small and unnoticed acts, private deeds of devotion and hard work. Never assume high-profile acts and prime-time coverage are our tickets to saving the world. Will tying ourselves to a tree do more good for the environment -- or taking public transportation? We must see the significance of our actions -- our goal is quite literally to save the world, but we must never forget that the road to true salvation is the quiet, little-taken and little-noticed path of good behavior.

Given all the above, our mishna's language is perhaps frustrating. "Give G-d that which is His." What are we to glean practically from such a message? Let us first "quantify" this generosity we must exhibit towards G-d. We will then, I believe, begin to appreciate just how practical and relevant the words of the Sages are.

As always, as poetic as the Sages often wax, they quantify their words with concrete detail. When it comes to charity, Jewish law provides us with very precise guidelines: how much we must give, what is too little and too much, what types of income must be tithed, to whom we must give, what are the priorities, etc. In the agrarian society of old, Jews were required to bring their first fruits to the Temple, to separate approximately 2% for the Priests, another 10% for the Levites, another 10% for the poor (or to be eaten by the owners in Jerusalem, depending on the year), to leave the "corners" of their fields and fallen stalks for the poor, and to further give a percentage of their dough to the Priests. (This was all in addition to letting their fields lie fallow every seventh year, the tithing of the animals, the giving of the first born animals, the tithing of the wool, etc.)

It seems we were not only instructed to be generous with our earnings, but we were reminded that - as our mishna states -- our earnings are not truly ours to begin with. We will receive the lion's share after it is all done, but the intended recipients are far more numerous than we alone. (The white-collar equivalent of all the above is the relatively trifling 10% of our income.)

When it comes to giving ourselves to G-d, the Sages too provide practical guidelines -- although this admittedly is among the broadest and most unspecific of our obligations. In its most extreme sense, giving ourselves to G-d implies sacrificing our lives for our beliefs (Mishna Brachos 9:5). More practically, however, we are instructed to "resemble" G-d, that just as He clothes the naked (Genesis 3:21), so should we; just as He visits the sick (ibid. 18:1), so should we; just as He comforts the bereaved (ibid. 25:11), so should we; and just as He buries the dead (Deut. 34:6), so should we (Talmud Sotah 14a). Our life-goal must be to emulate G-d, to find our own little way of bringing out

the divine from within ourselves.

There are some fascinating, practical lessons which stem from our mishna's advice. As we will see next week, G-d willing, by giving ourselves over to G-d so wholeheartedly, we become His. And then He, in turn, will take care of us -- simply because G-d takes care of His own.

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