

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 14: UNITED WE STAND

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Yochanan the sandal maker said: Every assembly which is for the sake of Heaven will eventually endure. And one which is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure.

The theme of this week's mishna is that assemblies or gatherings -- even (or especially) for worthy causes -- will not meet success if the participants are not acting with sincerity and for the sake of Heaven. If parents are active in a school board meeting in order to put the principal in his place, or if families join to form a synagogue -- basically in order to make a statement to the **other** synagogue they're breaking away from, the effort will ultimately fail. (And the synagogue or school does not have to physically collapse for it to be clear that the undertaking was a shameful failure.) Bad motives and bad agendas make for bad institutions. We are all human and carry our share of bones to pick and axes to grind. (I'm sure I could come up with a few more metaphors.) But if the underlying purpose of our meetings and undertakings is for anything short of the sake of Heaven, the results will be as fleeting and temporal as human beings themselves tragically are.

(I was once asked to attend a synagogue meeting (of a synagogue I rarely attended) specifically to vote against a certain individual for synagogue president. I did so partly because the requester was not one I could easily refuse, and partly because the case against the candidate was fairly convincing. (Note how I leave out virtually every detail.) ;-) So perhaps it was justified, but still... Religious causes should not become fronts for airing our personal dislikes and vendettas.)

It's worthwhile to draw an important distinction here. Generally speaking, the Rabbis view insincere deeds quite favorably. The Talmud writes often that it is better to learn or perform good deeds insincerely, for insincere deeds lead to sincere ones (Pesachim 50b). Better to "do" -- study Torah out of not-fully-committed curiosity, or perform mitzvos (commandments) for reward or recognition. The doing itself is valuable, in fact invaluable. Good deeds themselves wield an influence on a person and touch the soul.

Likewise, one should not spend so much time doubting his motives to an extent as to bring himself to spiritual stagnation (though of course self-reflection is always worthwhile). Don't get caught up in inconsistencies and logical traps: "Why should I do this if I don't do so many other things?" "What a chutzpah it must be to be careful about X if both G-d and I know how careless I am in other areas!" Learn the Torah, perform what you can and know -- even if you have your doubts or are not yet fully committed. But do **something**! The studying and doing themselves will work their magic on you.

Our mishna, however, demands even higher standards. A gathering, if for anything short of the sake of Heaven, will fail and not bring any positive results. Why here are the Rabbis so much less tolerant of human weakness and failing? If the cause is basically worthy -- say to raise money for a charitable cause -- will insincerity really make it so inconceivable that success be had?

I'd like to suggest the following answer. When individuals join together in a united effort, be it an organization, a partnership -- or a marriage -- it is by definition an impossible task. (Ask my wife if you don't believe me.) People are different. They have different needs, different desires, different purposes, and different shortcomings. Joining together such differing, opposing forces towards a common goal is an inherently impossible task. It is difficult enough for a single person to get anything done. (I can attest to that.) Join together a group of conflicting, clashing styles and personalities, and the differences will multiply, leaving little room for unity and collaboration.

King Solomon wrote in Proverbs: "The separated one will seek out his passions" (Mishle 18:1). Why is a pleasure seeker referred to as a "separated one"? Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerona (13th century Spanish rabbi and ethicist; The Gates of Repentance 1:31) explains that once a person follows his or her desires, no two people are alike. Each has his own set of lusts and urges, and each will go his separate way. One kid will skip school for the basketball courts, one will become a computer hacker, one will memorize every statistic and batting average in the league. Human beings, once loosed on their passions, have less and less in common, and for that matter, exhibit less and less humanity.

What is the one force which binds and unites? Dedication to a higher cause. If we are all united in purpose -- that purpose being the glorification of G-d's Name -- we have much in common. Once people are willing to subordinate their own wants towards a common goal, they will be able to overcome their differences and work in harmony. Differences will not clash; they will complement, and the total will be much greater than the sum of the parts. If people put aside selfishness and self-interest and recognize that in joining they devote themselves to a purpose impossible to one yet beneficial to all, there is little they cannot accomplish. But they must not be focused on self; they must place the common good before all else. This is the formula -- and the prerequisite -- for a successful union as well as a successful marriage.

Tragically, the same principle holds true when individuals join for evil purposes. A group of people who are willing to commit themselves, even sacrifice themselves, for a sinful cause can do untold damage to society and humankind. This is precisely what occurred in the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). What appears in the Torah as an innocuous building project was in truth a terrible act of defiance against G-d (see Talmud Sanhedrin 109a). G-d, so to speak, was forced to respond to such a display of strength and unity: "And the L-rd said, 'They are one nation with one language... Nothing will be withheld in all they attempt to do'" (v. 6). (This translation follows most commentators.) There is nothing a dedicated, united group cannot achieve. Unity and willingness to sacrifice oneself for a cause can accomplish tremendous good as well as unimaginable evil. G-d had to act immediately and decisively before the damage became irrevocable.

And, tragically, as we've seen before our eyes in Israel in recent years, angry mobs united in the cause of hatred and violence can turn into a terrible, consuming force of evil. (Note: The first version of this class was written when the Intifada was at its height.) Devotion to evil -- in this case the counter force to the Jewish return to Israel and its holy places -- unites, binds, and feeds upon itself. It erupts into a self-perpetuating force of hatred and destruction, not allowing for moderation or compromise.

And such can only truly be combated if we ourselves exhibit an even greater devotion to Israel and Judaism. We must live and reflect dedication to and sacrifice for the Torah, and we must unite -- Jews of all races, nationalities and political persuasions -- as well as believing Gentiles -- in this Divine effort. May G-d grant us the strength to demonstrate our commitment, our dedication and our unity, and through it may we unite ourselves and the world over in recognition of and devotion to G-d.

Text Copyright © 2009 by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld and **Torah.org**.