

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 15(B): ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL - PART II

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Elazar ben (son of) Shamua said, the honor of your student should be as dear to you as your own; the honor of your colleague should be as the fear of your [Torah] teacher; and the fear of your teacher should be as the fear of Heaven.

Last week we began discussing this mishna, and we posed two questions: (1) Is our mishna asking us to play make-believe: to inflate the honor of our associates knowing it is beyond what they truly deserve? (2) If we are being asked to exaggerate simply so we don't underrate, why does this apply to one's own associates more so than any other Torah teacher, colleague or student?

We continued with the historical account of the death of the students of R. Akiva -- the teacher of our mishna's author -- on account of not showing proper respect for one another. To this we asked why of all people were they the students of R. Akiva -- great proponent of "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) -- to fall short in such an area.

Finally, we contrasted R. Akiva's principle of "Love your neighbor" with that of his colleague Ben (son of) Zoma -- All human beings are created in the image of G-d (based on Genesis 5:1). Whereas R. Akiva's principle begins with love of self -- and only then (hopefully) concludes with love of all, Ben Zoma's both begins and ends with the love of the entire human race.

As we left off, it appeared that R. Akiva's principle compared unfavorably to Ben Zoma's. Focusing first on yourself may engender a form of self-centeredness. If I'm so great, I may recognize the same in others -- or I may become so full of myself as to have no patience for and interest in them. Love of self may inhibit rather than foster love of others. We often see people of great talent and/or accomplishment being interviewed by the media. They are often so full of themselves; they go on and on about themselves as if no one could possibly be interested in anything else. Now if we had the slightest conception of our **own** G-d-given greatness, we too might fall into the same trap -- leaving little room for the rest of mankind. This, as we explained, was Ben Zoma's basis for disputing R. Akiva.

We now approach this issue from R. Akiva's perspective -- in order to explain why he preferred his approach over Ben Zoma's. Why begin with loving oneself?

The answer is that human beings feel an instinctive love for and attachment to themselves. It is

human nature to root for and never give up on ourselves -- nor our natural extensions, our children -- far beyond logic and reasonable expectations. We love and accept ourselves in spite of a lot of faults -- often ones we can't stand in others. Our self-love is irrational; it blinds us. And when one is in love, he can overlook many annoyances, bad habits and foibles.

This, according to R. Akiva, is what we must project onto other people. If we begin as Ben Zoma with love of all, we will view mankind far too objectively. Do they really deserve such unconditional love? What of all their faults? What of their differentness? What of bad breath? (I write that last example because I had to suffer it at close range this morning at synagogue...) :-) However, if we begin with our own natural love of self, we will be capable of loving others as they truly deserve. For we may recognize that our own self-love stems from something so much deeper: the recognition that we possess a divine soul, one naturally sacred and inherently beautiful. And only then can we begin to love others in the same intense and nonjudgmental manner G-d Himself loves us.

So R. Akiva had a point -- and a grand one. We will often -- always, in fact -- find in the debates of great Torah scholars that neither opinion should be considered "wrong" -- even if Jewish law can follow one opinion alone. As the Talmud puts it, "These and these are the words of the living G-d" (Gittin 6b). Both opinions are valid and are based upon relevant, vibrant Torah truths ("of the living G-d"). And each is correct and applicable in its proper context.

Similarly, in our context R. Akiva's position is correct and relevant. Self love is an excellent starting point to achieve universal love. Nevertheless, there is one context in which it is potentially dangerous, very much so: in the study hall. Torah study does not merely have the potential to make one feel good about him- or herself. It makes him feel great about -- and full of -- himself. When a person studies and begins to understand the Torah, there is a feeling of vastness and grandeur. He has attached himself to an infinite body of wisdom; he has had a greater-than- life encounter. He experiences the grandness of the Torah -- the word of G- d which he can understand, interpret and expound. It makes him feel different, greater. He is overwhelmed, he is exhilarated, and he is quite possibly very swell-headed.

This can be particularly true with the beginner. We often find the greatest zeal, exactitude -- and arrogance -- in younger students who know so much less. To the new student, the world is far more black and white -- and often if you're not "in" ("black" in some circles) :-), there's little room for shades of gray. Such people sometimes feel morally and intellectually equipped to criticize and preach to the unlearned masses which they themselves have not progressed so far beyond. This is not entirely due to immaturity or lack of knowledge. It is true in part because the student has acquired that overwhelming sense of grandness and infinity, but has not yet tempered it with the more mature understanding of the Torah and of man.

There's an ironic passage in the Talmud I like to quote regarding this. It states that when a student of the scholars gets angry, "it is the Torah which heats him up" (Ta'anis 4a). This sounds at first like a

very noble appraisal: His anger is not his own; he is championing the Torah's cause. The Talmudic commentator Rashi, however, understands it somewhat more realistically and unsentimentally: We are not dealing with a scholar but a student of scholars. He feels very grand due to his new-found knowledge. Because of this, he takes things much more to heart -- and gets far more carried away. And, concludes Rashi, we must be patient and put up with him till he outgrows it.

This, we may suggest, caused the downfall of R. Akiva's students. Beginning with love of self simply does not work in the competitive world of the yeshiva (Torah academy). Loving myself, the Torah scholar, is no means towards universal love. It will cause quite the opposite. It will create intellectual rifts of conflict and misunderstanding. I will be ever more sure of my own convictions and less patient of those who disagree. The most subtle issues of belief and practice -- which to the layman appear hopelessly inconsequential -- will to great scholars and theologians be matters of utmost significance -- which they will fiercely fight to the death.

As a result, R. Elazar, a later student of R. Akiva and author of our mishna, formulated a different principle. When it comes to our Torah colleagues, we must minimize ourselves -- almost taking ourselves out of the picture entirely. It is not so much that we exaggerate the worth of others, but that we remove ourselves from the equation, and by so doing raise their relative worth by one. If we take into consideration our own relationship with the Torah we may feel too good about ourselves to give our associates the respect they deserve. Someone very wrapped up in and proud of his own achievements may not feel the same pride in his student's or colleague's Torah thoughts. He may consider them a threat -- infringing upon his own sense of self-worth. His feelings of grandness stem from his own special relationship with the Torah, the unique set of insights and explanations he has originated. The accomplishments of anyone else may be perceived more as a threat than an indication that others too can and do achieve greatness through the Torah.

This is the self-effacing approach suggested by our mishna. We may strive and exert ourselves in our quest for growth in Torah, but in the final analysis we must see ourselves as passive recipients of G-d's great gift of wisdom. The Talmud states that the Torah remains with one who makes himself as nothing (Sotah 21b). Only one who is a nothing can be a something. (That made sense, didn't it?) Such a person does not attempt to inflate himself by swallowing up the infinity of Torah. He humbles himself, attaches himself to G-d's Torah, and by so doing merits to be recipient, bearer and teacher of G-d's living Torah.

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