

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 17: THE CROWN OF TORAH

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Shimon said, there are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship. And the crown of a good name is superior to them all.

There are two basic issues in our mishna which require discussion. The first is, what actually is the concept of a crown? Our mishna is not just referring to a king, scholar or priest, but to those who wear the "crown" of these positions. What does it mean to be crowned a scholar rather than just to **be** one? We know, of course, that kings physically wear crowns, but the other crowns are clearly allegorical. (In fact, we would suggest that the fact that a king literally wears a crown -- this being a universal practice -- is a physical reflection of a metaphysical truth the world instinctively recognizes.) If so, what is the metaphor of a crown, and how does it distinguish the true king, priest or scholar from the mere pretender?

The second issue which requires explanation is the reference to the "crown of a good name." The simple reading of our mishna is that this is a separate crown, superior to the other three. The commentators point out the obvious difficulty with this: Our mishna began by stating there are three crowns, not four. If so, the good name seems not to be a crown of its own at all, but something which exists only in conjunction with the other three. How does this work?

We dealt with the concept of a crown not too long ago, in [mishna 7](#). There we discussed primarily the crown of a king. Here I would like to approach it from a slightly different angle and focus more on the crown of Torah. The Talmud points out that not only is this crown superior to the others, but it is the only one available to all who are prepared to devote themselves to it. As the Talmud (paraphrased) expresses it: The crown of priesthood Aaron merited to take. The crown of kingship David merited to take. The crown of Torah is still in its place. All who want to take it, let him come and take (Yoma 72b).

Of Maimonides' many classic works on Judaism, his greatest is the Mishneh Torah (lit., copy or repetition of the Torah). It is a detailed, comprehensive, yet highly-readable summary of virtually all Jewish law. (Torah.org's [Jewish Law Overview](#) is an excellent abridgment of it, written by my father of blessed memory.)

One of the sections of the Mishneh Torah is devoted to the laws of Torah study. Chapters 1-2 there discuss the basic obligation -- who must study, what one must study, when one must study, the obligation of a father to a son and of a community to maintain Torah institutions, etc. Chapter 3

seems to begin anew. It begins by paraphrasing our mishna (as well as Yoma 72 quoted above) and continues with a discussion of the crown of Torah, the greatness and uniqueness of the Torah, the ideal way to study it, and deterrents to accomplishing in Torah study.

Before we look more closely at that chapter, we note that is unique within the Mishneh Torah (to my knowledge). When Maimonides explains other mitzvos (commandments), he does not first explain the basics and then come along afterwards to explain even greater ways to fulfill them. He explains each mitzvah in its entirety and moves on. There is no "crown" of the other mitzvos. By Torah study, however, Maimonides approaches it on two distinct levels -- the regular obligation, and the "crown" approach. What is it about Torah study that it contains within it an entirely different level of fulfillment known as the crown? And again, what **is** the concept of a crown?

Maimonides writes there (Law 6): "Whoever's heart impels him to fulfill this mitzvah properly and to be crowned with the crown of Torah may not interrupt his mind with other matters. He should not imagine that he will acquire Torah together with wealth and honor." In Law 8: "One should lessen his worldly activities and study Torah." Law 12: "The words of Torah do not remain with someone who is lax about them. Nor do they remain with those who study while pampering themselves or [enjoying] food and drink. They remain only with one who kills himself for it, who constantly exerts himself, and who does not give sleep to his eyes nor slumber to his eyelids." Law 13: "He who wants to merit the crown of Torah must be careful with all his nights not to waste a single one with sleep, food, drink, idle chatter, and the like, rather with the study of Torah and words of wisdom."

If a person studies in the manner described by Maimonides, he earns the crown of Torah. What is different about this person? He has devoted himself wholly to the Torah, body and soul. It is not just a subject he studies, even studies well. It is his life pursuit. He puts aside all other interests and activities, even justifiable ones, in his search for the Torah and G-d.

Such devotion is not required of us all. Every Jew must study -- at least a little bit each day, as Maimonides writes in Chapter 1, but he may pursue a career, enjoy other interests, take vacations, and live "normal" lives. This is how most of us live and is perfectly acceptable within the realm of Jewish thought. One who does so serves G-d properly, even admirably. And he fully fulfills the mitzvah of Torah study. But he does not earn the crown.

What is a crown? It is an object which serves no utilitarian purpose. It **does** nothing, yet universally, kings and queens wear it, while non- royalty never does. A crown represents that its bearer completely identifies with his mission. A king does not only rule. He identifies with and becomes one with the state. He is so bound to his country that it becomes his life and sole identity. He **is** the state, so much so that his essential self -- his head -- is crowned with the symbol of his calling.

So too with the Torah scholar. One whose whole purpose of existence is to study, to understand, and to spread Torah wears the crown of Torah. It is not an activity of his; it is his life work. And in assuming this mission and unswervingly dedicating himself to it, he becomes the embodiment of

the Torah and all it represents.

(Possibly for this reason there were times in our history in which it was customary for a bride and groom to don crowns as part of their wedding regalia (see Mishna Sotah 9:14). In wearing crowns they symbolize that they are not only celebrating a joyous occasion, but they are devoting their essences, wholly giving themselves over to a new relationship and level of existence. They no longer exist as separate individuals. They merge into a new, indivisible unit known as a Jewish home. Towards this end they dedicate and give themselves over, body and soul.)

Extending the metaphor of a crown a bit further, the true Torah scholar cannot skip a single night in his pursuit. If a crown would be missing a single jewel, it would be no crown. A crown's beauty is not in its functionality but in its perfection. It must be whole and complete -- just as the Torah scholar's dedication must be complete and unwavering. Something would just be missing if the scholar takes off a single night to watch the game. If his devotion to Torah is divided, he may be a wonderful and devoted Jew: how many of us take off only an occasional evening for our diversions? But his crown is no longer whole. A chair which is a little wobbly is still basically functional, but a dented crown is worse than useless.

Our mishna concludes that the crown of a good name is superior to the other crowns, or more literally "goes up upon them." As we observed and the commentators note, this cannot be a separate crown but is one which enhances the other three crowns. I.e., the other three crowns are only truly fitting if they carry with them a good name. What exactly is a "good name" and why is it so imperative for one who possesses a crown?

The answer is that if I identify so wholly with my mission, I must have a good "name" as well. Identifying **too** strongly with a cause can be a dangerous thing. Is my calling an obsession, a fanaticism I am committed to against all rationality and common sense? Such a person will be devoted to the Torah so utterly that it is to the detriment of everyone and everything else around him. It is easy -- in fact tempting -- to turn ironclad commitment into a barrier between myself and mankind. All I care is about "it" -- and the fact that "its" purpose -- i.e. the purpose of dedication to Torah -- is ultimately to love G-d and mankind is somehow lost along the way. A cause easily assumes a life of its own, and my intense devotion to it may cause me to lose all sense of what it's truly all about.

Thus, a crown must reflect positively on its bearer. The true Torah scholar must not only diligently study; he must transform himself into a being loved and admired by others as well. Or to state it differently, he must not only reflect the wisdom of Torah; he must reflect its beauty as well. I'll conclude with a relevant passage from the Talmud (Yoma 86a), since it says it far better than I could: "One should study Torah and deal kindly with others, so that they say, "Fortunate is his father who taught him Torah! Fortunate is his teacher who taught him Torah! Woe to those who do not study Torah! This one who has studied Torah, see how beautiful are his ways!"

(Based in part on a lecture heard from [Rabbi Yochanan Zweig](#) and thought heard in the name of HaRav Aharon Kotler, zt"l.)

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