

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 20: REGARDLESS OF RACE, CREED OR RELIGION

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Masya ben (son of) Charash said, be first to greet every person, and be the tail of lions rather than the head of foxes.

One aspect of Pirkei Avos I always find striking is how suddenly and effortlessly it switches from the heavy and philosophical to the down-to-earth and practical. (Last week we talked about why the good suffer in this world. And by the way, we'll be returning to the "heavy" almost immediately -- and then going back to the "light".) It's almost as if our Sages are telling us as follows: Don't spend too much time delving into the unanswerable quandaries of life. We can analyze and understand so much. But contemplating G-d is not the sole road to salvation. Don't forget to say hello to your neighbor along the way.

As always, Judaism is a practical religion. It tells us -- in fact it almost exclusively focuses on -- being decent, reasonable human beings -- in our behavior towards G-d, our fellow man, and our environment. There are principles of faith and philosophy we must adhere to and internalize. But they only truly become reality -- and life -- through simple, sincere acts of goodness.

And saying hello is certainly a great way to start. As we all know, it's almost uncanny how much a cheerful greeting can accomplish through so little investment of time and effort. The Talmud writes that R. Yochanan ben Zakkai, the leader of religious Jewry in the generation immediately following the destruction of the Second Temple, was always first to greet whomever he came across, even a Gentile on the street (Brachos 17a). We can easily imagine that a world leader would have far too much on his mind to pay much attention to the little man on the street. (It wasn't like he was going to be voted out of office either. And needless to say, it was long before "photo-ops" existed.) But from the Jewish perspective, one only **becomes** a world leader by recognizing that the world consists of countless such little men -- every one of which deserving such respect and attention.

In a practical sense, there are many benefits to greeting another warmly. First, it warms the recipient, who has been deemed worthy of another's regard. And second, it reminds the giver that others are worthy of such regard. It shakes us out of our own self-absorption and reminds us to be concerned with the well-being of others. Third, if the greeter is visibly Jewish, it reflects positively on Judaism and its adherents. Judaism is, quite simply, a religion which cares about others regardless of race, creed or -- remarkably -- religion. (This stands in such stark contrast to that awful and inhuman

attack the world witnessed this past week. [Author's note: I don't remember which attack occurred before an earlier version of this article went out. In a sense, though, they're all the same.] If you're not one of us, we can and well might kill you. We don't have to know who you are or have any real reason to hate you. Hatred for the sake of hatred.) We may differ in outlook, style and substance, but in no way does that interfere with the simple courtesy to which all human beings are entitled.

Lastly, R. Masya advises us to be unconditional in our greetings. Saying hello to others should be reflexive (though not robotic). It should not permit a sense of justice to come into play -- does this person deserve my attention, shouldn't **he** greet **me** first, etc. A greeting is free -- even if invaluable. We should never first ask ourselves if another "deserves" our greeting: he does so naturally. We greet others -- both Jew and Gentile -- because they are human beings. Human beings are created in the image of G-d. No more justification is necessary -- nor should be sought -- to greet our fellow man.

Such simple advice! As much of ethical conduct, it is in no way reserved for the scholarly student or the philosophically-inclined. R. Moshe Chayim Luzzatto, of early 18th Century Italy, was one of the great kabbalists and ethicists of his time. In his introduction to his famous ethical work The Path of the Just, he writes that most of what his book contains is not anything we do not know already. His book is not filled with insights and novelties (actually it is). It is common sense knowledge we are all familiar with. But somehow, that which is so simple and "obvious" to us all -- perhaps because it is so obvious -- is typically neglected by layman and scholar alike.

(R. Luzzatto also bemoans that people do not consider ethics a serious topic for study. **Real** scholars study the more meaty Talmudical jurisprudence. Ethics become the subject of the unlearned -- or not a subject at all.)

Our mishna continues, "Be the tail of lions rather than the head of foxes." It is better to be in the company of those greater than us in Torah. Better to be the lowly, humble student of lions rather than great scholar among the foxes. We naturally adapt ourselves to our environment. If we associate with scholars, we will both learn from their ways and be motivated towards greater growth. If we associate with the unlearned, we will stagnate with little incentive to realize our own potential. There are few who are so self-motivated as to require no outside stimulus for spiritual growth. Only through having our own role models and recognizing who we ourselves can be will we be impelled and inspired to follow the path of the lions before us.

At the same time, we learned above, "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man" (2:6). When one realizes he or she has acquired knowledge and experience and is qualified to give over to others, he must certainly do so. Further, for better or worse, there comes a time in our lives when people will look up to us and learn from our ways, whether children or younger, less- experienced acquaintances and associates. We must ourselves be prepared to assume that role -- as leader and role model to others. At the same time, however, we must see ourselves not solely as head, but also

as tail. We should continue to look upwards towards our own teachers and spiritual mentors for guidance and inspiration. We may at times deservedly see ourselves as leaders and role models to others, yet at the same time we must continue to be the same humble and unassuming student we once were and must continually strive to be.

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