

## CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 23: A TIME FOR SILENCE

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***Rabbi Shimon ben (son of) Elazar said, do not appease your fellow at the time of his anger, do not console him at the time his dead lies before him, do not ask him [to regret his oath] at the time of his oath, and do not attempt to see him at the time of his downfall.***

The advice of this week's mishna is straight, simple and powerful -- words which hardly needs Dovid Rosenfeld's embellishment. In addition, as I like to point out, Pirkei Avos is eminently capable of jumping from "What is the World to Come?" to "Be a nice guy" without batting an eyelash. It's all part of our Torah; one aspect could not exist without the other.

The basic theme of this week's mishna is that we must be careful not to do the right thing at the wrong time. As Jews we are obligated to be concerned about our fellow man and assist in his needs -- be them physical, financial or emotional. However, everything must be done in its proper time. King Solomon wrote, "[There is] a time to remain silent and a time to speak" (Koheles 3:7). People are not always ready to hear our wise or moralistic words. We must have an awareness of what our friend can and cannot handle. Well intentioned words delivered to ill-prepared ears may do more harm than good and may cause reactions and returned words which both parties will live to regret.

Furthermore, quite often silence does more good than words. If a person is mourning the loss of a loved one, words of explanation and consolation are usually inadequate -- and often gratuitous. The mourner may not be prepared to "size up" his or her loss by putting it into words. The time will come for that -- but certainly not when "his dead lies before him."

(Jewish Law provides guidelines for the proper comforting of mourners. We find laws such as that the mourner rather than the comforter be the one to initiate discussions, and that the mourner has the prerogative to send away comforters -- if he's just not in the mood to talk. I know of one awful case where parents lost a teenage son to cancer. They were hardly in the mood to entertain the huge throngs of people who came to call during the mourning period (everyone feels that they have to do **something** in such a situation -- that's why mourners are so inundated with food) -- but politeness and social rearing forced them to put up with it.)

Rather, as our mishna implies, sometimes a silent show of support -- especially the support of close friends -- may be far more beneficial. The silent presence of comforters delivers an equally strong message of consolation: "We are here for you. We share in your loss and suffering. We realize nothing we could possibly say or do would fully take away your hurt. But realize that with our

presence we stand together with you and are with you in your sorrow." Comfort and solace are not always found in lengthy dissertations on faith and religion. The Talmud states it succinctly but with its characteristic precision: "The main reward one receives for attending the house of a mourner is for the silence" (Brachos 6b). Often, such silence speaks far louder than words.

In Genesis 29, Jacob, in flight from his brother Esau, arrives at Charan, the city of his uncle Laban. He will stay at Laban's house for the next 20 years. Upon his arrival he approaches shepherds near the city and inquires about Laban: "Do you know Laban son of Nachor?" "Is he at peace?" The Seforno (philosopher and Bible commentator of 16th Century Italy) explains that Jacob recognized the importance of knowing another person's status and mood before approaching him. One does not greet a successful person in the same manner as one suffering setback. We must always consider a person's situation -- financial, social, personal -- before addressing him or her. There are things one just must not say to a person bereaved or lonely, someone unemployed, a childless couple, or any person suffering and sensitive. (Often that which should not be said would never dawn on the sayer as being hurtful.) The Torah many times warns us to treat widows and orphans with extra patience and sensitivity. And today we would certainly extend that to children of broken marriages. And we certainly cannot size up our fellow based on our own fleeting first impressions. Anyone is capable of momentarily putting on a good face. Jacob, the embodiment of truth and compassion, recognized this and took pains to see that his initial meeting with his uncle would be a comfortable and proper one.

(For that matter, I always find it amusing maintaining e-mail correspondences with students, often knowing nothing about the person's age, background, nationality, religious beliefs, and often gender (though I'm often able to glean a few facts from the person's writing -- if not his/her handwriting). It's interesting to see how differently we communicate with others depending on such factors. It's certainly better to know one's audience and to be aware of needs and sensitivities, yet it is undeniable that our style of communication is based to a great degree upon decidedly less-than-scientific pre-existing assumptions and stereotypes.)

As is always the case in such areas, however, the Sages do not provide us with clearly-defined rules. R. Shimon here provides powerful illustration, but there are no hard and fast rules -- when do we speak and how, and when do we remain silent. No two people are the same and no two situations alike. As we've discussed in the past, in spite of myriad volumes of Jewish literature, the guidelines for interpersonal relationships can never be fully defined or put into writing. They require a keen understanding of the needs and natures of others and of the Torah's requirements of us. Applying the Torah's truths to relationships requires as much an understanding of human nature as the mastering of Jewish texts.

Nevertheless, our Sages here provide us with one single life principle and rule of thumb, one which goes to the innermost heart of the matter: Only give others what they can handle. Try to help, instruct and comfort, but only to the extent your fellow is willing to accept. If he is not ready, leave

him in his sorrow or anger. Don't lecture others for the sake of stating your moral convictions and certainly not as a way of saying "I told you so" (which is the reason most people lecture). What will most benefit our friend must be paramount on our minds. And this is divine behavior: it is exactly the manner G-d treats us. G-d warns, rebukes, and punishes but only to the extent we are able to bear. He makes our lives challenging and sometimes harsh, but only in order to make us grow and never more than we are ready for. G-d sometimes deals most harshly with the strongest among us who will grow the most. And we too are instructed to follow this Divine precedent, and through this, the love and concern we must harbor for our fellow man will truly become in the spirit of the Divine.

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