

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 3: DOES G-D MAKE MISTAKES?

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

He [the son of Azzai] used to say: Do not be disrespectful of any person and do not be dismissing of any thing, for there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is no thing which does not have its place.

At its simplest level, our mishna is expressing the wise old adage: Every dog has its day. It is not in our best interests to get on anyone's bad side or to discard any items which may one day be of value. Any person may one day be in position to help or harm us. We should never underestimate the importance of one more friendship -- as well as man's capacity to harbor a grudge. What is not worthy of our attention today may tomorrow come back to haunt us.

(The commentators differ regarding the precise definition of our mishna's second point -- "do not be dismissing of any 'thing'" (Hebrew: "davar"). Rabbeinu Yonah understands "davar" to mean "words" -- as the Hebrew word often connotes. He explains that one should not think it so unlikely that his words, uttered in private (against the person he disregarded), will cause him harm. Words spread quickly and are eventually heard by the wrong people, placing the onus of their utterance on their utterer (I think that made sense...).

Rashi offers two explanations. (1) No information we are told should be entirely disregarded, for even remote dangers may one day strike. (2) Any opportunity we have to learn words of Torah should not be passed up or delayed. Study now when the opportunity arises, for who knows what the future will bring?)

As we so often find in Pirkei Avos, the simple yet poignant words of our Sages can be understood on a far deeper level as well. I don't believe the intention of our Sages is simply that we must value others for self-serving reasons -- because they may one day benefit us. As we'll see, "every person has his hour" is far more profound.

We should appreciate others creations -- both animate and inanimate -- because every object in creation is special, and has some unique role to fulfill in G-d's Master Plan. Every person has his hour; every object has its place. There is nothing G-d created for no purpose. Every person has his or her own unique contribution to make -- and at one time will be indispensable to the perfection of the world. Every object will in some way and at some time be used to glorify G-d's Name.

And if we look down on any human being (including ourselves) or are neglectful of any part of G-d's world, we miss this crucial message. There will be a time when each of us will have to do his or her

part -- or the world will be that less sanctified. Nothing G-d placed in this world is without purpose: G-d makes no mistakes. And when we realize this, no one and nothing is insignificant.

The Mishna (Sanhedrin 4:5) states that one reason G-d created all mankind from a single set of parents is to indicate G-d's greatness, "for a person mints many coins from the same mold and they all resemble one another. But the King of kings, the Holy One blessed be He, forms each person in the image of Adam and not one of them resembles his fellow. Therefore, each and every person must say, 'For me was the world created.'"

The implication of this mishna is clear. G-d, in His infinite wisdom and concealed in His wonders of DNA and heterosexual reproduction, willed it that no two people are exactly alike (possibly excepting identical twins). G-d made each of us different because we all have different, unique missions to fulfill in this world. G-d wants each of us to serve Him in his or her own special way, using the unique set of talents and capabilities only he or she possesses. There is something Dovid Rosenfeld can contribute to the world that no one else can do quite the same. If he recognizes and fulfills his role, the world is one step closer to its perfection. If he fails -- if he refuses to see his own uniqueness and ask himself what exactly G-d wants of him -- the world will lack something no one else can replace. And so, in our own special way, for each and every one of us was the world created.

There is a well known (though hard-to-find) midrash (Midrash Alpha Beta Acheres d'Ben Sira 9) which states that King David felt he understood the purpose of everything in creation except for a very few things, one of them being the spider. Then on one occasion, while fleeing from King Saul, David ran into a cave. A spider quickly came along and wove a web over the entrance. Saul, seeing an undisturbed web, concluded that no one had entered the cave and went off. David, after realizing what had happened, humbly corrected his misconception.

I don't believe the message of this midrash is that King David had so thorough an understanding of the ecosystems of the Near East. (David's complaint was that spiders spend all their time weaving webs too flimsy to be of any use to man.) Yet King David had the keen instinct that everything must play a role in G-d's Master Plan. In his world -- a world in which G-d's existence was ever-present throughout his travails -- everything must be purposeful. He expected to experience firsthand the usefulness of all G-d's creatures: the strength of his convictions would have them play a role in his very own life. And G-d saw David's wishes fulfilled.

We further find King David to be a man for whom every aspect of creation was purposeful and combined into a magnificent whole. Nothing was mundane in David's universe. The same David who stood inspired before G-d and His Torah ("The L-rd is my shepherd; I shall not lack" (Psalms 23:1); "The L-rd is my light and salvation" (27:1); "G-d's Torah is complete, restoring the soul... G-d's commandments are clear, enlightening the eyes" (19:8-9); "If not for Your Torah, my delight, I would have perished in my affliction" (119:92)), saw the same beauty in every aspect of the cosmos, both

great and small. In Psalms 104 he reflects on the natural world:

"G-d waters the mountains from His upper chambers, from the fruit of Your works the land is sated.... The trees of the L-rd are sated, the cedars of Lebanon which He planted; there where the birds nest, the stork with its home in the cypresses. The high mountains for the wild goats, rocks as refuge for the rabbits.... The young lions roar after their prey, and to ask the L-rd for their food.... Man goes forth to his work, and to his labor until evening. How great are Your works, L-rd, You have made all of them with wisdom.... All of them look to You to give their food in its time. You give to them; they gather it in. You open Your hands; they are satisfied with good. You hide Your face; they are frightened. You gather their spirits; they expire and to their dust they return. You send out Your spirit; they are created, and You renew the face of the earth. May the glory of G-d be forever. May G-d rejoice in His works." (104:13-31).

Nature, in its harmony, complexity and precision, speaks of sanctity and godliness no less than the Torah itself. The starry heavens fulfill a purpose in G-d's master plan, not least so that man may gaze upwards and see vastness and grandeur in perfect motion -- bespeaking an even greater Creator. Each person and every object in this world contains a spark of holiness and has an individual mission to fulfill. In unison -- the galaxies, the planets, the earth and its ecosystems, as well as the societies, communities and families of man in which each member lovingly accepts and fulfills his role -- are nothing less than a reflection of G-d Himself.

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