

CHAPTER 4, MISHNA 8: SELLING OURSELVES SHORT

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Yossi said, whoever honors the Torah will himself be honored before others. But whoever disgraces the Torah will himself be disgraced before others.

This week's mishna discusses the importance of honoring the Torah and its bearers, promising us that that honor will reflect on ourselves as well. The commentators understand honoring the Torah to refer to showing small signs of respect for sacred books and Torah scholars. Some examples are: not placing a sacred book on the floor or on a bench upon which people are seated; listening intently to the Torah reading at the synagogue and not walking out when the Torah is open; honoring and speaking highly of Torah scholars; and finally (of course) studying the Torah meticulously and observing its commandments. It is often the small acts of faith -- rather than the once-in-a-lifetime acts of heroism -- which truly indicate the inner quality of a person and what is truly valuable to him or to her.

As our mishna continues, the result of such deeds will be that the person himself will receive honor. He will become the recipient of that honor he has shown the Torah. By his worthy association, he will become a reflection of the Torah's glory and honor. The Talmud advises: "Go near an anointed person and you will become anointed" (Shavuos 47b). Modestly accepting to serve and honor the Torah will cause a person to bask in the Torah's glow -- and reflect some of its radiance himself.

In this light, we may draw an interesting distinction between this mishna and the previous (see commentary of Tiferes Yisrael). We learned last week that one must not attempt to use his Torah knowledge as a "crown" -- as a means of increasing his own honor. If he does, his ruse will ultimately fail. The Torah is not ours to use towards our own selfish ends. Here we learn that one who forgoes his own considerations and honors the Torah will, in fact, become recipient of that elusive animal known as honor. By **not** coveting honor for ourselves, by making ourselves humble and inconspicuous vehicles for honoring the Torah, the Torah's light will shine right through us. As the Sages put it, "One who pursues greatness, greatness will flee from him; one who flees from greatness, greatness will pursue him" (Talmud Eiruvim 13b). (And I don't think fleeing from honor in the hope it will run after you helps either. There just ain't no shortcuts...)

An additional insight into our mishna is offered by the commentator Rabbeinu Yonah. As above, one manner of honoring the Torah is speaking highly of Torah scholars. R. Yonah derives this from a verse in Proverbs (27:21): "The refining pot is for silver, the furnace is for gold, and a man is according to his praise." The simple meaning of the verse (and the interpretation of most commentators) is that

just as the worth of silver and gold is determined by the processes which refine them, so too may a man be judged by what others say about him. If you want to **really** find out what a person is like (for legitimate reason, that is), don't allow him to sweet-talk you. Go behind his back; ask his friends and his not-such-good friends for the real story.

R. Yonah, however, interprets the verse differently: A man can be judged according to his praise doesn't mean according to how he **is** praised but according to what **he** praises ("**his** praise"). What a person speaks highly about (and badly about) tells us a lot about his or her value system. We often find people who are nominally observant -- or at least who are too scared for open rebellion or too ingrained to change their behavior -- but who rarely have a good word for Torah and tradition. Their form of rebellion is verbal. They always have a critical word for the rabbi's sermon, the Torah teacher's manners, or the positions and behavior of the "ultra-orthodox" (I think that term was invented by the American media). Some remarks may be entirely valid and even justified, but the objective observer can easily spot the pattern in the speaker's words. Someone who is always seeing the bad in all things Jewish cannot be said to be honoring the Torah -- even if he is quite observant in his outward behavior. At a point, his criticisms tell us more about himself than about the person or institution he is maligning.

Someone, however, who always finds the good in rabbis, Torah institutions, and the like is conveying an entirely different message about himself. He sees the favorable where it ought to be seen. And that tells us where his own heart lies. I may not be the greatest and most learned Jew myself, but I respect and admire people who stand up for their convictions. Sure, everyone has his faults -- rabbis and yeshiva students are no exception -- but far better to learn from the positive than to let a few quibbling issues obscure the overall greatness of G-d's Torah. And here too, such an attitude tells us as much about the speaker as about the speakee. (Hmm... Well, would have been nice if there were such a word.) And the honor he exhibits for the Torah will reflect equally upon him.

The above I feel is clear enough, yet in a way it is not so obvious. We have a tendency to allow ourselves be deceived into settling for short-term, easily-acquired gains rather than long-term growth and accomplishment. Putting others down -- especially others more righteous than we -- is what we'd call the quick and dirty method of self-satisfaction. If someone else truly is a Torah scholar and a role model, I can learn from his qualities and attempt to live up to them, or I can find stupid little faults in order to dismiss him entirely. And as I wrote, we have a tendency -- at least a subconscious one -- of taking the latter approach. If I lower him, I need not raise myself. Psychologically, this is very effective, but it is self-deceptive -- and ultimately, a tragic failing. I harm myself far more than the Torah scholar when I put him down. I may pump myself up in the immediate, but it will be with nothing more than hot air. And ultimately, I will transform the possibility of tremendous gain into pitiful failure.

Tragically, we practice the art of self-deception in many other ways. A fellow who does not control his temper -- who yells at his wife, kids or employees, may feel he is in control of his surroundings.

The immediate result of his tantrum is a dutiful, obedient family or office. But he is allowing himself to be fooled: He has not earned anyone's respect but quite the opposite. His "importance" will last until his back is turned, not a moment longer.

Perhaps a more "feminine" example of the same phenomenon is modest dress. A young woman may feel more "important" if she dresses in a way which will make guys turn their heads. But has she truly made herself more popular or well-liked? Is it really her -- the person -- the others are interested in, or are they interested in themselves?

(You'll excuse the gender-role-assigning. These illustrations clearly apply to both genders -- and in infinite ways.)

Nevertheless, far too often we allow ourselves to be fooled in our quest for honor and fulfillment -- settling for what we know deep down to be a mirage in place of the real thing. If I would be rash enough to sum up the message of Judaism in a single line, it might just be: "Don't sell yourselves short." Don't trade in this world for the next. If you strive for the next, you may end up with this one as well. The honor of the Torah will reflect on you. But if you look for the easy way down here, you will have nothing to show for yourself after all is said and done.

Human beings have an innate drive for fulfillment and accomplishment. We need meaning, a purpose to live for, and goals to strive for. Nobody could vacation the entire year. (Hmm... It's probably spring break right now. Lousy timing...) And in our need for fulfillment, G-d provides us with the ultimatum, the ultimate challenge: the glitzy, the pleasurable -- goals which require little effort or discomfort, or the slower, arduous path towards true fulfillment. The first path beckons: it proffers quick solutions and instant results -- weight loss without eating restrictions, campaign promises of painless solutions to national problems. The second is never so popular. It requires patience and effort. Developing ourselves as human beings, improving our personalities, understanding G-d's Torah, building true and lasting relationships: lifelong efforts which one never truly completes. Yet this is G-d's challenge for us, one we can run from but can never fully ignore. "I call heaven and earth to witness today before you, life and death have I set before you, the blessing and the curse; and you shall choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19).

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