

CHAPTER 5, MISHNA 15: ARE ALL MEN CREATED EQUAL?

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

There are four types of students. One who is quick to understand and quick to forget -- his gain is outweighed by his loss. One who is slow to understand and slow to forget -- his loss is outweighed by his gain. One who is quick to understand and slow to forget -- this is a good portion. One who is slow to understand and quick to forget -- this is a bad portion.

This week's mishna, as previous ones (and coming ones), categorizes people based upon their natures or abilities. This mishna discusses intellectual capability.

People who are quick to understand but quick to forget lose more than they gain. Their initial comprehension is outweighed by their forgetfulness -- leaving them little better off than when they started. Conversely, someone who is slow to understand but retains well gains more in the long run than he loses. In addition, as R. Samson Raphael Hirsch notes, often the very quality of being slow to absorb will aid in a person's retention. He will be satisfied with a subject only after he has fully thought it through and absorbed its significance. When a person spends such quality time on a topic, it will naturally become a part of him and penetrate his being. In contrast, the person who spends little effort in the initial comprehension will have put little investment into the material. As a result, it will be lost as quickly as it was acquired.

Finally, one who is slow to understand and quick to forget has a "bad portion", while one who is quick to understand and slow to forget has a good one. The commentators (Maimonides, Rabbeinu Yonah) point out that as opposed to the other mishnas of this series, this mishna does not characterize such people as pious or wicked. Obviously, we are dealing with natural, G-d-given abilities rather than human accomplishment. One who is not as intellectually capable or inclined as his fellow is obviously not an inferior person -- nor is someone born smart necessarily righteous. Even so, it will be more difficult for the less scholarly to achieve in many of the important tasks of life, and for this our mishna states that his portion is inferior.

This brings up what I consider one of the very bothersome philosophical questions of life. Say a person is born not as intellectually capable as the next fellow. Does this mean he simply does not have the potential to get as close to G-d? We know that Torah study is the greatest mitzvah (good deed) and a unique means of forming a relationship with G-d. Further, there are many Talmudic and Midrashic statements to the effect that our very relationship with G-d in the World to Come will be built upon our understanding of His Torah in this world. Well, if it's so very important and I can't do it so well, doesn't that seem to say G-d created me as a person less able to become close to Him?

Can I truly develop the same relationship with G-d without the benefit of a deep and profound understanding of His Torah?

And let's face it further. The scholar is probably the one who is teaching students, deciding Jewish law, offering his highly-sought advice, influencing others for the better, and no doubt performing all sorts of other wonderful services for G-d and Israel which others just cannot do. And further, with his more profound understanding of Judaism he's likely fulfilling the commandments with much more precision and reflection. In fact, Jewish law dictates that we rise in a Torah scholar's presence and show him various signs of honor. But the other guy was just not blessed with the ability to be a scholar no matter how hard he tries. Can we really say -- **does** Judaism say -- "all men are created equal?" Or must we say the scholar just simply has more to offer G-d, so to speak, and can be a greater and closer servant of G-d, while the ignoramus is sadly resigned to the life of a "bad portion"?

(I remember over 35 years back when I was in yeshiva (rabbinical college), a good friend of mine at the time was one of the rising stars. He was already mastering and committing to memory entire areas of Jewish law. (His forte was Jewish law rather than Talmudical jurisprudence.) And I recognized at the time to my frustration that there were works on Jewish law which I had reviewed more **times** than he, yet which he **knew** better than I. Not to imply I have nothing to be thankful for myself, but I realized long ago that the ones who are **honored** as great Torah scholar might not necessarily be the ones who put in the most effort. So, again, is life just not fair?)

Let us begin by addressing this issue at its most fundamental level: Yes, "all men are created equal" (women too for that matter), and, as eloquently as Thomas Jefferson put it, this comes directly from our own Torah. Maimonides (Mishne Torah, Hil' Teshuva 5:2) writes that unlike the belief of foolish Gentiles and unlearned Jews that each person is predestined to good or evil, it is within the ability of each person to determine his or her own fate. Each of us can be as righteous as Moses or as wicked as Jeroboam. (Note that Jeroboam himself was an enormously accomplished Torah scholar, but it spurred him to wickedness rather than goodness.) In this vein does Jeremiah write, "From the mouth of the Most High evil and good do not emanate" (Eichah 3:38).

Thus, it is within our ability to be infinitely good or wicked, and to forge a relationship with G-d regardless of intellectual capability, personal background, or any other extraneous factor. This in fact is the true meaning of "all men are created equal" (I've heard R. Noah Weinberg explain it so). We are certainly not equal when it comes to talents, predilections, or natural abilities. But in this one regard we **are** all equal: we all possess souls. We all have the potential to develop ourselves, whether in goodness or wickedness, and we all possess the free will to determine which path we will follow. Goodness and closeness to G-d are not reserved for the intellectual, the scholarly, or the well-pedigreed. It is the inherent right of all mankind and the simple fact of our humanity.

If so, what is the bad lot which the ignoramus is burdened with? Doesn't it at least seem harder for him to get close to G-d? Well, yes and no. You see, it's "easy" to get close to G-d spending one's life

in "religious" pursuits -- studying, teaching, spreading G-d's word. Such acts are clearly sacred in nature and bring their doer, as well as the entire world, closer to G-d.

However, there is more to the world and to life than religious duty alone. G-d created a world replete with mundane and physical activities which too are a part of Jewish life and which are a necessary ingredient towards bringing the world to its fruition. The ultimate purpose of the world is that all of creation, both physical and spiritual, become a reflection of G-d. This requires infusing sanctity and divinity not only into religious service but into mundane matters as well. One who cleaves to G-d while working with his hands, raising children, or acting with honesty and integrity in the workplace is fulfilling a unique function within the world and is bringing his own little corner of the universe to its fulfillment. He is sanctifying and devoting to G-d a life which might otherwise be devoid of religious content. If such worldly involvement is the task this person is cut out for -- if this is his personal mission to the world -- then he too is fulfilling his purpose and achieving his perfection -- and is following his own special path to G-d.

At the same time, such a person has a more difficult portion. In a way, his job is tougher than that of the scholar. He must infuse sanctity into the otherwise mundane. And this requires a much more conscious and concerted effort. In addition, he is less equipped with knowledge of the Torah to guide him (although, of course, regular daily Torah study sessions are a must wherever one's life mission leads him). His path is longer and more perilous. It involves temptations and pitfalls, whether in patience, workplace ethics, involvement with others less believing, etc. -- which one would not be exposed to within the four cubits of the study hall. But if followed properly and honorably, it is an equally great act of godly service and in a way, does even more towards sanctifying the world and bringing it to its fulfillment.

So, why do we accord greater honor to the scholar? Aren't we -- or can't we all become -- equally precious servants of G-d? The answer is that we do so not so much because of an inherent superiority, but because of what such people represent. Showing respect to a scholar is our way of honoring the Torah. The scholar speaks and represents G-d's word in this world. When we honor him we express our allegiance to the Torah and all it stands for.

But that is in this world alone. The World to Come will be a place not only of reward and punishment but of truth as well. In the World to Come all of G-d's true servants will be equally close to Him, and all those whose lives were ones of sanctity and dedication to G-d will come forward and receive their due.

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