

## CHAPTER 5, MISHNA 19: TRUE LOVE

*by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld*

***Any love which is dependent on something, when the 'something' ceases, the love ceases. Any love which is not dependent on anything will never cease. What is a love which is dependent? The love of Amnon for Tamar. And which is not dependent? The love of David and Yehonasan.***

As always, the words of the Sages are so clear and obvious, yet they shed light on that which we just plain fail (or refuse) to see in our own life experiences.

A love which is dependent on an external factor will not endure. In II Samuel 13, we read of Amnon, son of King David, who fell in "love" with his beautiful half-sister Tamar. His wise but wily friend Yonadav advised him to feign illness in order that Tamar serve him in private, so that he would be able to force himself upon her. After the sin was committed, Scripture states that Amnon hated Tamar more than he initially loved her (v. 15), thus precisely illustrating our mishna's thesis.

As a result of this tragedy in the royal family (once upon a time such behavior was considered aberrant), the Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b) records that King David's court decreed that a man may not be in seclusion with an unmarried woman. (Scripture forbids seclusion with a married woman alone.) (Two years later, Tamar's full-brother Absalom, no saint himself, had Amnon murdered in vengeance.)

Our mishna chose Amnon and Tamar as a classic example of its principle. Amnon's love for Tamar was not just dependent; it did not exist at all. The object of Amnon's love was not Tamar; it was himself. He wanted to satisfy his own physical lusts. And, as the commentator Rabbeinu Yonah points out, once that was taken care of, his attraction instantly evaporated -- into hatred and disgust, revealing itself as the nothingness it had always been.

Love based upon external factors, whether lust, money or prestige, is ultimately selfish rather than selfless. I love this person because I feel I will get from him or her. This is not love -- in the Jewish sense. It is self-interest. When the self-interest is no longer present, the love will be exposed as the empty act of selfishness it was all along.

For an example of true love, our mishna refers us to one generation earlier -- to the young David and Yehonasan, son of King Saul. I Samuel 18-20 discusses the deep bond of love and friendship between these two men. King Saul, although righteous, became a depressant and saw David's existence as a threat to his own kingship and dynasty. Yehonasan risked his own life to save David -- even though David's eventual kingship would mean Yehonasan himself would never reign.

As Rabbeinu Yonah explains, Yehonasan thereby displayed a true and selfless love for David -- caring more for David than he cared for himself. The bond of friendship these two young men had for each other infinitely exceeded the physical bond of desire a man could have for a woman. David likewise later eulogizes Yehonasan: "Your love for me was more wondrous than the love of women" (II Samuel 1:26).

My teacher R. Yochanan Zweig posed a very obvious question on our mishna. What does love which depends upon nothing **mean**? If so, why do these two people love each other? What brought about their attachment in the first place? Is the ideal that we somehow love others for no reason? What kind of love is that?

R. Zweig explained that to be sure, initially people form a bond because of some attraction. Love is at first always dependent upon something -- whether common interests, common experiences, or even physical attraction. But true love transcends this. True love occurs -- again in the Jewish sense albeit wholly at odds with the secular, sensational image -- when the two parties have grown so close to one another, have shared so much together, that their love no longer needs external prodding or stimulation. In fact it may become strongest when their physical urges are least dominant in their feelings for one another -- when their feelings for each other become entirely selfless. By sharing their lives and experiences with each other, by giving to each other and growing together, a couple merges into a single entity, caring more about the other -- and about the whole -- than the individual.

Ruchoma Shain, in her moving biography of her father R. Yaakov Yosef Herman, All for the Boss, recalls that when she was engaged, she and her fiance were together somewhere with her parents. (I can't remember the exact setting -- I'm quoting from a memory, going roughly 30 years back -- and my memory is hardly reliable for yesterday.) She commented with amusement that she and her fiance were not yet married yet were sitting next to each other, while her parents, married for many years, were sitting farther apart.

Her father responded: Just the opposite. She and her fiance had not yet become so close and so needed physical closeness to reinforce their sense of unity. They had to be reminded that they were close and in love. He and her mother, however, who had lived and shared so many years together and had bonded so much more deeply, did not need physical proximity to feel united. Distance could in no way interfere with their closeness. Mrs. Shain writes how she saw her parents exchange a knowing glance at that moment -- the type only husband and wife can share. And she wrote that she experienced a deep longing that she and her future husband would too one day feel that same closeness and oneness her elderly parents had merited.

This is the bond we must aspire to in our marriages -- as well as in all our meaningful friendships. Relationships take many years and much effort. They begin with great investments of time and energy -- and for long years they will have that element of the "something" -- of being dependent on

shared interests, mutual need, or possibly even physical attraction. Ultimately, however, we strive for true closeness -- selfless, independent, and possessing a life of its own. And when we reach -- or even sense -- this type of bond, we begin to appreciate the ultimate and infinite closeness a relationship may have -- and the closeness that we, as human beings in G-d's image, one day hope to share with the Almighty.

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