

COMMUNITY - THEN, NOW, AND FOREVER

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

There is a widespread custom to study Pirkei Avos during the weeks between Pesach and Shavuos. The lessons in Pirkei Avos, known also as the Ethics of the Fathers, are contained for the most part in the tractate Avos, one of the books of the Mishna. What distinguishes Avos from other tractates is the topic and focus of the book. Instead of dealing with legal precepts, it deals with how one should lead his or her life. These lessons from our Sages, the ethics of our Fathers, are lessons for all time.

In the second chapter, we find references to the importance of community and communal participation. Hillel said "Do not separate yourselves from the community." The Talmud in the tractate of Ta'anis elaborates on this lesson. The Talmud writes that when an entire community is beset with troubles, each and every community member must feel the pain. When Hillel writes that we should not separate ourselves from the community, he means that when the community hurts, we should hurt as well. If we feel the pain of the community, the Talmud tells us that we will also feel the comfort that eventually comes the way of the community. Individuals are important as they make up a community. When the community is happy, we are to be happy. When the community is sad, we are to be sad. We are the community.

Another teaching in the second chapter of Avos expands this definition of community. Rabban Gamliel said "All who exert themselves for the sake of the community should exert themselves for the sake of Heaven, for then the merit of the community's forefathers aids them and their righteousness endures forever." When we engage in communal involvement, we should do so not because we want to receive an award at next year's dinner, nor because we get satisfaction out of knowing that the community "owes us," so to speak. We must act with pure intentions, with no ulterior motives. Why must this be the case? As long as we are benefiting everyone, what difference does it make why we are involving ourselves in communal activity?

The latter half of Rabban Gamliel's lesson provides us with the answer. Those who devote time to community oriented service are often stymied by problems which crop up: There is no money in the budget for x, y and z; there is too much communal apathy; there is no cohesiveness in the community; there is much to be done and no time in which to do it. These problems are enough to discourage anyone who sincerely wants to help. However, Rabban Gamliel tells us about an important guarantee. If we act with no ulterior motives, our fathers' and their merits will assist us. Our fathers will help us succeed in our communal efforts, so long as these efforts are done to truly aid the community. Furthermore, the righteousness of our fathers is eternal - it lasts for all time, and will

be there to come to our rescue when it is needed. The memories of our righteous parents are perpetuated when we act to benefit the community. Hence, it is true that we are the community. However, when we selflessly involve ourselves in communal workings, as we should if we truly feel part of a community, our fathers and mothers become part of our community as well.

Yom HaShoah, a day on which those who perished during the Holocaust are remembered, was last week. A mere week later, the calendar brings us to Yom HaZikaron, when those who fell in the Israeli wars are memorialized. The next day, we come to Yom HaAtzma'ut, Israel Independence Day. As we learn in Avos, involvement in the community is a guaranteed way to bring those who are no longer with us closer to us. When we act to better the community, our parents are there next to us, helping us with any problems we may encounter. What better way, then, to remember those who have perished by involving ourselves with our communities? Let us build our communities, strengthen our schools, establish social service organizations, so that we can have our parents working with us on a project that has immeasurable effect. Let us involve ourselves in the strengthening of the land which G-d chose as the land of our people. Let us spread our acts of kindness, chessed, to the greater Jewish community, so that next year, we can truly be one united community living together in the land of Israel.