



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת יתרו תש"ע ∞ Parshas Yisro 5770

STRENGTH THROUGH STRUGGLE

The great *yeshivos* have played an integral role in safeguarding the Jewish people's existence throughout our history. Jewish life would thrive where these Torah institutions were established and supported. In places where Torah education was neglected, the Jewish identity would inevitably dissolve.

This should come as no surprise. The renowned sage R' Akiva already demonstrated that the Jewish people's existence is dependent on their connection to Torah. He was asked (*Berachos 61b*) why he persisted in teaching Torah to the masses, despite the Roman decree that forbade this practice under penalty of death. R' Akiva replied by comparing Yisrael's situation to a fish in water, which cannot survive long when removed from its natural habitat. Similarly, when removed from a Torah environment, the Jewish nation cannot continue (see the Chafetz Chaim's *Shemiras Halashon, Sha'ar Hatorah, ch. 10*).

What is noteworthy, however, is the almost universal struggle that *yeshivos* throughout the generations have had to face: a dire financial situation. For many of these premier institutions, huge amounts of time and energy are invested in an effort to simply stay afloat. At times, the situation appears almost deliberate, as if it has been Divinely ordained that financial stability remain an elusive dream for the *yeshivos* and their adherents.

As we shall see, this may very well be part of the Divine Plan... and for good reason.

ODD MAN OUT

In the Mishnah in Avos (4:10), R' Meir imparts certain

נדפס לזכות רפוי"ש של
מלכה בת זיסל דבורה
בתוך שאר חולי ישראל

valuable lessons:

רבי מאיר אומר, הוי ממעט בעסק, ועסוק בתורה. והוי שפל רוח בפני כל אדם. ואם בטלת מן התורה, יש לך בטלים הרבה פגוד. ואם עמלת בתורה, יש לך הרבה לתן לך.

“R’ Meir says: Minimize your involvement in business affairs, and (instead) busy yourself with Torah study. Be of humble spirit in the presence of others. If you neglect Torah study, there will be many causes of neglect before you. And if you have toiled in Torah study, Hashem stores up great reward to grant you.”

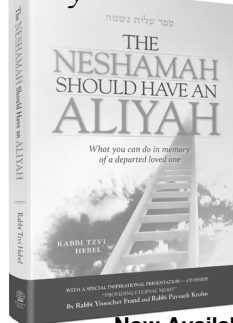
Each one of these maxims really deserves careful scrutiny by itself. But when taken as a whole, a particular peculiarity seems to jump out at us. The various statements in this Mishnah seem to revolve around a central theme – the importance of Torah study. That is, all except for one.

R’ Meir begins with an exhortation that one should devote a substantial portion of his time to Torah learning. Furthermore, he warns of the danger of *bittul* Torah (neglecting Torah study) and reassures the diligent student of the tremendous reward he accumulates. Yet, somehow, smack in the middle of this somewhat extensive *shiur* (lesson) outlining the preeminence of learning Torah, there appears an interlude of a (seemingly) unrelated topic: “Be of humble spirit.” While no doubt a true and vital instruction, the presence of this teaching in our Mishnah begs the obvious question: What exactly is it doing here?

The truth of the matter is that this teaching is entirely consistent with the flow and message of the rest of the Mishnah. The Abarbanel (*Nachalas Avos, ibid.*) notes

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משנת חיים

that at the root of the pursuit of material wealth is a desire for glory. Someone who craves to flaunt his status and “success” to others will actively engage in the accumulation of wealth. R’ Meir, in discouraging an over-involvement in this pursuit, aims right for the source. If one would cultivate humility, he would be liberated from the need to acquire great riches, and be freer to devote his efforts to Torah study.

TORAH AND THE LAW OF GRAVITY

While the Abarbanel seemed to view this statement as a type of pragmatic advice (explaining how to facilitate a reduction in business affairs), other commentators view these words as an essential component for true Torah acquisition. As the *Etz Yosef (Avos, ibid.)* explains, the trait of humility is an absolute prerequisite for the success of any aspiring *talmid chochom* (Torah scholar). It is for this reason that Torah is compared to water, as the Gemara states in Ta’anis (7a): Just as water flows from the high places and settles down below, so, too, Torah remains only with one who is “lowly” (humble) of spirit.

One of the sources for this idea is the central event of this week’s *parshah* – the giving of the Torah on Har Sinai. One would have thought that Hashem would choose the tallest and most majestic of peaks to serve as the venue for this extraordinary presentation. Instead, He forsook all other mountains and chose the smallest – Har Sinai (*Sotah 5a*). Why? “For I will dwell amongst the crushed and lowly spirit,” (*Yeshayah 57:15*). The Torah distances itself from the haughty and gravitates toward the humble soul.

The phenomenon mentioned above – the financial struggle that is the lot of many a *yeshivah* – can now be viewed in a totally new light. Quoting the legendary R’ Aharon Kotler – the founder and Rosh Yeshivah of Bais Medrash Govoha in Lakewood – R’ Yeruchem Olshin explains that the situation of *yeshivahs* is similar to that of the Kohanim and Leviim in Eretz Yisrael. The latter were supported through the agricultural gifts (*terumos u’ma’asros*) donated by the nation but had no land-holdings of their own. In effect, they could not accumulate wealth and were entirely dependent on the nation’s good-will. As a result, they were essentially

protected from feelings of arrogance and imbued with a great measure of humility.

This arrangement was quite purposeful, in fact. The Tribe of Levi was charged with the most awesome responsibility: they were the repository of *halachic* jurisprudence and served as the nation’s teachers and the guardians of Torah (*Devarim 33:10*). As such, they had to be infinitely precise in their attainment and understanding of Torah, something only achievable by the possessor of humility of spirit.

And so it has been with the Torah guardians and devotees throughout the ages. While the financial situation facing *yeshivos* is no insignificant struggle, it is also a vital component – ironically – for their ultimate success. The situation is a safeguard against arrogance, enabling the humble of spirit to achieve greatness in Torah.

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