Practice What You Preach

Category: Shmini

> *What is unique about the teachings and teachers in Ethics of our Fathers?*

When They All Agree

"Two Jews, three opinions." So goes the old Jewish saying—and a very true saying, too. Two Jews will never agree on the same issue at the same time.

When I was a child, there were always arguments among the older men in my synagogue. The subject matter didn't matter. They simply always argued. I remember how one old man once asked the other, "Why do you think otherwise? What is your reasoning?" The old man was trying to understand what the other guy meant.

I'll never forget the other guy's response: "Just to disagree with you!"

Now, in Israel, not only does this sort of Jewish arguing constantly go on, but there are thousands of synagogues

too—because when a Jew doesn't like the policy of his nearest synagogue, he builds his own synagogue.

Why am I telling you this? Because between Pesach and Shavuos, there is an ancient Jewish custom of studying Ethics of the Fathers, a special tractate of the Mishnah. We'll get to the connection soon.

There are six chapters in Ethics of the Fathers and six weeks between Pesach and Shavuos. Thus, on each Shabbos, one of the six chapters is studied on Shabbos afternoon after minchah.

Now, why do we study Ethics of the Fathers? Why not any other tractate of the Mishnah?

I once heard that there's something special about Ethics of the Fathers that is not found anywhere else in the Talmud. Every other tractate you open is filled with arguments—you won't find a single thing on which every Sage agrees: The School of Shammai holds that it's forbidden while the School of Hillel holds that it's permitted; Rabbi Meir says this and Rabbi Yehudah says that. There's virtually no such thing as a Mishnah in the Talmud in which all the Sages are of one opinion.

Ethics of the Fathers, on the other hand, is the one tractate in the entire Talmud in which there are no disputes, no arguments between the Sages, and in which they all agree to what is being said.

That's why, in the days in which we mourn the deaths of Rabbi Akiva's students who did not respect one another, we study that part of the Torah which emphasizes unity—by studying the

tractate in which there are no disputes.

What's So Special?

Now, while we are on the subject of Ethics of the Fathers, allow me to note that many times when I teach Ethics of the Fathers, people feel deceived. Here they were expecting to hear novel ideas that they never before heard—only to discover that the tractate merely says the simplest things!

For example, people ask me, "Did I need to study Pirkei Avot to know that I should 'Greet every individual with a pleasant face'? Or how about the concept, 'If I am not for me, who is for me'? Any beginner psychologist could tell me that!"

Another thing they bring up is: "Don't judge your friend until you're in his place"—is this why we needed our Sages? There are plenty of wise men from all the nations in the world who said similar things!

One particular Mishnah in Chapter 4 reads, "Shmuel the Small says, 'Don't be happy when your enemy falls.'" And again we ask the question: Did we need the Mishnah to teach us this?! Everyone knows that you don't gloat and rub it in when a man is down!

But in one of his talks, the Rebbe quotes an even bigger question asked by the commentators: In the Mishnah, Shmuel the Small is saying nothing new! He is only quoting part of a verse from Mishlei, the Book of Proverbs written by King Solomon, the wisest of all men—and he adds nothing of his own! So what is Shmuel the Small saying here? And why is this

quoted in Ethics in the Fathers in the first place, when it was already said in Proverbs itself?

In Ethics of the Fathers, quotes are frequently introduced with the phrase hu haya omer—"he would say." This simply means that Rabbi so-and-so would constantly say such-and-such.

But various commentators explain this phrase as follows: Any Sage who heard words of wisdom did not pass them on to others before they first internalized them and lived by them. Thus, "he would say" means that first he would do what he heard and only then would he tell others to do as he did.

Furthermore, the Sage would not really need to actually say anything: His very behavior spoke volumes—more than anything that could be said by any words. He taught by example. And this role modeling was a solid foundation for every saying that he said to others.

The Sages did not establish a single rule or offer a single explanation of anything before first testing it on themselves. When they stood up to the test of life, then and only then would they pass these words of wisdom on to others.

Shmuel's Act of Sacrifice

This explains why the Mishnah quotes an excerpt from Proverbs in the name of Shmuel the Small.

Shmuel the Small is a very strange name, now, isn't it? Why did they give him this name? The Jerusalem Talmud (Tractate Sotah 9:13) explains that it was "because he made himself small"—Shmuel the Small acted with great humility. He never

considered himself an important person.

In the regular Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 11:1), there is mentioned a fact that illustrates just how humble Shmuel the Small really was.

In the Jewish calendar, an extra month is added every two or three years. This is called a leap year. Nowadays, everything is laid out neatly on the yearly calendar. But in the Talmudic Era, it was customary for the leader of the Jewish people to convene a special gathering of Jewish leaders which would decide whether to make the year a leap year or not.

The Talmud tells us that Rabban Gamliel, who was the Nasi, or the leader, at that time, gathered seven prominent people for a special meeting to make the leap year. And the rule was that you only participated in the meeting if you were invited in advance.

But the next morning, when Rabban Gamliel entered the conference room, he was astonished to find not seven but eight men there! So he declared, “Whoever came up here without permission, leave now!”

The Talmud tells us that Shmuel the Small got up and said, “I’m the one who came up here without permission.”

Now, the truth was that he indeed had been invited. However, he did not want to embarrass whichever scholar it was who was there without permission, forcing him to publicly admit that he didn’t belong there and leave the gathering in shame. So he took the blame upon himself and was prepared to take the

humiliation just to save another from the same humiliation.

That was why he earned the title “Shmuel the Small.”

So when this same Shmuel the Small comes along and says, “Don’t be happy when your enemy falls,” it has an entirely different meaning.

Yes, it’s really just a verse from Proverbs. But when there comes a person who is a living example of this teaching, then the verse has an entirely different meaning.

And this is the lesson for us. In Judaism, before you demand any specific behavior or code of conduct from someone else, you first need to be living with that behavior or code of conduct yourself. And if you’re not prepared to do it, don’t expect someone else to do it.

In Judaism, there is absolutely no such thing as “Do as I say, not as I do.”

And this is doubly true when it comes to the education of children: I cannot demand something from the child that I am not personally prepared to constantly stand by.

Bottom line? In Judaism, you first ensure your own integrity. Then, and only then, do you ensure the integrity of others.