

True Superstars: Living Examples

Category: Bamidbar, Pinchas

Who are Jewish superstars and what makes them unique?

Be Nice: No Dissent

Good Shabbos!

Did you know that Judaism superstars—but stars of a different sort.

They don't have endorsement deals with sneakers. They don't make 150-million-dollar deals. None of them even wear shirts with their names on them. They are stars, alright—but for totally different reasons.

During the summer months, between Passover and Rosh Hashanah, the age-old Jewish custom is to study one chapter of Ethics of the Fathers every Shabbos. The reason we study Pirkei Avos during the summer months is because this tractate deals with ethics and morals—good character, respect and so on. And during the summer, when people generally loosen up a bit, it is incumbent upon us to repeatedly study how we should behave.

But in Pirkei Avos, there is something special that might deserve to be described as a “supernatural phenomenon”: it's the only tractate in the entire Talmud that contains no arguments.

In every other tractate, you'll find disagreements and arguments galore—as the old and well-known saying goes, “Two Jews, three opinions.” But in Pirkei Avos, however, everyone agrees with everyone—everyone has their say, but without negating what anyone else said.

For example, nobody argues with the words of Hillel, who says in Pirkei Avos (1:12) that one needs to be “a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace.” At the same time, everyone agrees with the words of Shammai, who says in Pirkei Avos (1:15), “Speak little, do much, and receive every person with a pleasant countenance.” It's the same with the moral law postulated by Ben Zoma (Pirkei Avos 4:1): “Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot.” There are no dissenters there.

Why The Sources

That brings us to the next question. If there are no differences of opinion in Pirkei Avos, why does each saying or teaching quote the name or names of its source?

In halachic arguments between one Sage and another, it's vitally important to know who said what—because the names will influence the bottom-line halachah. For example, there are over 300 disputes between the School of Hillel and School of Shammai. However, the halachah (virtually) always goes according to the School of Hillel. There is also the Talmudic principle, “With an individual and a majority, the law follows the majority”—and so it's important to know if the opinion at hand was rendered by several Sages or is merely a solitary opinion, and it is important to know who said what.

However, in Pirkei Avos, there are no such disagreements. What difference does it make if it were Hillel or Shammai who said that you need to love everyone—after all, they'd both agree with the premise! The Sages themselves were certainly not seeking publicity or respect—so why does every saying here include the person who said it?

Living Personifications

The Rebbe explains that the reason is not just because “Anyone who says something in its sayer's name brings redemption to the world” (Pirkei Avos 6:6) but also because a saying has a connection to the person who said it and to that person's life story. (See Sichos Kodesh 5740, Vol. III, pg. 332 et al.) Those Sages were also living embodiments and examples of those pearls of wisdom they shared.

Hillel—who said, “Love peace and pursue peace”—personally embodied the love and pursuit of peace. A Jewish man once made a deal with a friend that he'd succeed in getting Hillel to lose his temper. One fine Friday afternoon, as it was getting late and Shabbos was approaching, the man approached Hillel and began pestering him with ridiculous questions—but despite considerably delaying Hillel with his foolishness, Hillel stayed patient, the very symbol of loving peace. We also all know the famous story of the gentiles who came to Hillel and he converted them to Judaism and brought them under the wings of the Shechina (Divine

Presence)—in his behavior, he personified what he demanded with his saying, “Love the creations and bring them close to the Torah.”

The Mishna says, “Be prayerful for the welfare of the government, for if not for fear of it, a man would swallow his fellow alive” (Pirkei Avos 3:2). Now, who said that? Rabbi Chanina, who was dubbed “Sgan HaKohanim, the “Vice President” of the Kohanim.

What does this title mean? Didn’t every Kohein Gadol have a “Sgan,” a “Vice Kohein Gadol” who could step in and serve in case the Kohein Gadol was temporarily rendered unfit to serve? And so, it would only make sense to say that the Sgan only served one Kohein (namely, the Kohein Gadol)—not all the Kohanim! So what does “Sgan HaKohanim” mean?

The answer is that Rabbi Chanina lived in the late Second Temple Era, when the Roman Empire controlled the appointments of Kohanim Gedolim in the Bais Hamikdash. Obviously, it was political—they only appointed High Priests who would be loyal to the Empire, with the majority of those belonging to the Sadducees too. As far as they were concerned, Rabbi Chanina was not suitable to serve as Kohein Gadol because he was a tzadik and would therefore not collaborate with the Romans. But still, they needed him as a “Vice Kohein” because every year, there was a new Kohein Gadol, and they needed somebody who really knew the order of services in the Beis Hamikdash; so Rabbi Chanina ended up being the one who conducted the majority of services.

It would be natural for such a person to develop feelings of bitterness towards the regime over the fact that he is constantly the No. 2 man and is never promoted to No. 1. He, of all people, should be the guy who would support any rebellion against the government.

But despite that, we find that it is that same Rabbi Chanina, the career No. 2 man, who says, “Be prayerful for the welfare of the government”—the very same Rabbi Chanina who suffered personally at the hands of the Roman Empire. Such words broadcast authenticity and influence others (Yachel Yisrael, Vol. 6, pg. 9)—and the Rebbe notes that ultimately, Rabbi Chanina himself became one of the Ten Martyrs executed by the Roman Empire, but still personally believed in what he said (Hisvaduyos 5744, Vol. 3, pg. 2050).

For another example, in Pirkei Avos Chap. 6, Mishna 2, Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi

says, “Every day, an echo resounds from Mount Choreiv [Sinai] proclaiming and saying: ‘Woe is to the creatures who insult the Torah’; for one who does not occupy himself in Torah is considered an outcast.” The Rebbe explains that Rabbi Yehoshua is saying that you need to look at the Torah as your business—and a real businessman does not sit at home and wait for customers but rather, goes out into the world to sell his products and services. Similarly, a Jew who believes that the Torah has a relevant message for everyone will bring it to everyone.

But Rabbi Yehoshua did not just demand that view from others, but lived it himself. We are told that Rabbi Yehoshua would place himself among people with infectious diseases, whom no one else wanted to approach, and would teach them Torah. He was a living example of what he demanded from others (Toras Menachem Vol. 34, pg. 169 et al).

My friends, the purpose of quoting all these names is to prove that the quotes are executable—the great Sages of Israel only told others to do what they personally did. And we even see that in the original Hebrew wording of “He would say”—Hu haya omeir; first you have the “hu haya,” the “he would” (or, “he was”) and only then, “omeir,” or “say,” to others.

Be A Living Example

And that brings us back to this week’s Torah portion.

In the Parshah of Pinchas (Bamidbar 27), we read how Moshe Rabbeinu approaches G-d of his own volition for the first time: “And Moshe spoke to G-d.” Throughout the entire Torah, we always read, “And G-d spoke to Moshe”—but here, for the first time, Moshe comes to G-d with the expression, “Vayidaber,” he “spoke.”

And what did he speak? Moshe asked G-d to appoint a leader for the Jewish People after him, stressing that such a leader will need to be one “who will go out before them and who will come before them.” And Rashi comments: “Not like the kings of the nations, who sit at home and send their armies to war, but as I did, for I fought against Sichon and Og.” Moshe was not looking for a leader who would tell others what to do but rather, one who would serve as a living example and be the first to go out to battle.”

When a Jew looks for a rabbi, he doesn't look for an interesting teacher who can give him a great class—he looks for someone who lives in his personal life what he demands from others, a person who personifies a living example.

And as the Rebbe once answered one Chasid who asked, “How do I implant fear of Heaven in my students?”—be a living example!

Good Shabbos!