

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Pirkei Avot's Greatest Hits: Community is Number 1

One of my teachers, Rabbi Moshe Berger, posed to our class a hypothetical question: If Judaism was to lose either the Torah or the Talmud, which would be better to guarantee our survival? Rabbi Berger is a practicing Orthodox rabbi who had studied with one of the great modern Orthodox teachers, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. His answer surprised the class: while he would never want to give up the Torah, he claimed that Talmud was actually more important to Judaism.

For those who are less familiar, the Talmud includes both the *Mishnah*, a set of oral laws that were developed in the first few centuries of the Common Era, and the *Gemorrah*, the rabbinic discussions of these laws. Together, the Talmud is filled with volumes upon volumes of arguments and explanations, rules and exceptions, and words of wisdom. Its early stages were completely oral, and the teachings were reinforced by each generation teaching it to the next. To avoid losing these pearls of knowledge completely, Rabbi Judah HaNasi began to establish the written form of the Oral Law around the year 200.

Rabbi Berger made the point that the Torah teaches us the stories of how we first developed our relationship with God, but the Talmud teaches us how to live. Tradition teaches that both of these works are sacred and timeless. The Torah gives us God's teaching; the Talmud gives us the interpretations of people. In short, if the Torah tells us what to do, the Talmud tells us how to do it.

Among my favorite sections of the Talmud is Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of our Ancestors. Pirkei Avot is filled with slogans. Here are just a few of my personal favorites:

- *Run to pursue a mitzvah and flee from a transgression. A mitzvah brings another mitzvah and a transgression brings another transgression. The reward of a mitzvah a mitzvah and the reward of a transgression is a transgression. (Ben Azzai)*
- *Who is wise? One who learns from everyone. Who is strong? One who can control his urges. Who is rich? One who is satisfied with what he has. Who is honorable? One who honors others. (Ben Zoma)*
- *Say little and do much, and receive every person with a pleasant face. (Shammai)*
- *If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? and if not now, when? (Hillel)*

There is one saying that appears twice in Pirkei Avot and is attributed to two different Rabbis, Hillel and Tzaddok: ***“Do not separate yourself from community.”*** Whenever something is repeated in sacred writings, it is a sign that it is of utmost importance. I've often heard discussions about whether Judaism is a religion, a culture, or a people. Of course, it is all of that and more. A person can practice Judaism by fulfilling rituals and praying at home alone or with family. But most of the mitzvot involve being with others. Coming to a religious service is only in part about the praying. Attendance enables others to benefit from your prayers, help create a *minyan* (quorum) required for mourners to say Kaddish, and also to enjoy food and socializing.

In addition to standard Shabbat services, there are many ways to connect with the TBT community. Our Men's Club and Sisterhood are up and running again, thanks to Bart Myers and Barbara Heller stepping up to the leadership plate . . . A special 'thank you' to Susan Meinholz for keeping Sisterhood running for the last ten years. Our periodic Shabbat dinner programs provide a way to have a relaxing Shabbat experience. More members have been engaging in adult education than ever before, and our most popular adult education event, "The Jewish Night of Why," is coming up March 22.

Each different avenue of community participation enables each of our lives to be enriched by others and gives others the opportunity to be enriched by us.

A full English translation of Pirkei Avot can be found at www.chabad.org. What is your favorite saying?

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon