

OUR QUESTIONS

- 1** Our Mishna shifts its focus from the previous Mishnayot about judges and the integrity of the Judicial System. Is there a connection between the content of those teachings with our current Mishna, dealing with work and being involved with the government?
- 2** Our Mishna tells us to “love work.” Love is a pretty high bar. Is it not good or virtuous enough merely to work hard? Why do we have to love work?
- 3** There are two words for work in Hebrew: “avodah” and “melachah.” Avodah is the more common expression, while melachah is the term the Torah uses when describing the kind of work which we need to desist from on Shabbos. What do you think the Mishna is trying to convey by using the term “melachah”?
- 4** The next statement of the Mishna instructs us to “hate the rabbanut” — which is usually translated as positions of authority or public office. Firstly, why hate? That is a pretty strong term. Secondly, why are positions of authority so bad? Aren’t we supposed to strive to become leaders?
- 5** The beginning of our Mishna says to “love” work, yet working as a public official is viewed with utmost disdain. What is the difference between these two categories of work?
- 6** The last statement of the Mishna cautions us from becoming “intimate” with the Authorities. Why is this a bad thing? Wouldn’t it actually be very helpful for the Jewish People, for some of us at least, to be very close with powerful people in the government?
- 7** What do three things stressed in the Mishna have to do with one another? Is there a progression being outlined here?
- 8** One last question to ponder: Shmaya and Avtalion were either converts or the descendants of converts to Judaism. Do you think their background informed their teaching here in the Mishna? In what way?

COMMENTARY BY RABBI MORDECHAI ROTTMAN

“ Shmaya and Avtalion received the Torah from them (the Sages mentioned previously). Shmaya says, “Love labor, detest appointments of power, and do not become well-acquainted (intimate) with the Government.” ”

SYNOPSIS:

In this Mishna, Shmaya is speaking about the Torah’s attitude toward different types of professions. Shmaya is saying that simple labor is more conducive to spiritual growth than positions that give one power over other people. Why? Because positions that give one power often lead to arrogance, and arrogance is the greatest detriment to spiritual growth.

A Deeper Look:

Notice that Shmaya is not saying that one should not assume positions of leadership. On the contrary! One who can be a leader and does not do so is shirking his responsibility to the Nation. Shmaya is telling us that we should not savor the power these positions afford us. He is telling us of the potential dangers of such positions. The Jewish Nation has always needed leaders, and anyone who can be one must become one; still, the leader requires special practice in the area of humility.

It is said that the great philanthropist and leader of resettlement in Israel, Sir Moses Montefiore, a man who was admired by Jews all over the world, used to lie in a coffin every day to remember his own mortality and keep a humble perspective on himself. He knew the dangers of arrogance and wished to insulate himself from them, yet at the same time he continued to be a great leader who commanded tremendous power and respect.

“And do not make yourself known to the government.” What is Shmaya trying to tell us with this last bit of advice?

It is well known that the Jewish People always need, and have always needed, good

representatives in the government who can put forth Jewish interest before the authorities. Sometimes they were responsible for saving entire communities as a result of their intervention. According to Shmaya, would these champions of Jewish rights have been better off had they stayed away?

The answer is that there are two types of people who try to get “in” with the government. One type tries to become well-known in governmental circles in an attempt to gain prestige for himself, while there are others who do so for the sake of the Jewish People. For the man who seeks prestige, Shmaya is saying, the prestige they give you now will be used against you in the future. However, for the man who seeks to help the Jewish People, and the only way to do so is to become close to the authorities, then by all means, it is something which is necessary and must be done.

SUMMARY

Although a man must choose a profession which will sustain him physically, he should try to avoid positions which will be detrimental to his spiritual growth. At the same time, one must not shirk his responsibility toward the Jewish People. Despite the fact that positions of power can lead one to arrogance, the response should not be an avoidance of these positions due to the potential spiritual crisis they may incur, but rather a meeting of the challenge with courage, influence, and humility.