

HILLEL:

Promote your name—lose your reputation. (1:13)

נְגִיד שְׂמָא אָבֵד שְׂמָה

If I am not for myself, who is for me? (1:14)

אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי מִי לִי

RABBI:

Which is the right path that you should choose for yourself?

One that is admirable in your eyes,

And admirable in the eyes of others. (2:1)

רַבִּי אוֹמֵר: אִיזוֹ הִיא דֶּרֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂבִיבֹר לֹא הָאָדָם? כָּל שֶׁהִיא תִּפְאָרֶת

לְעֵשִׂיהָ וְתִפְאָרֶת לֹא מִן הָאָדָם.

RABBI SHIMON:

There are three crowns:

The crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood,

and the crown of royalty;

But the crown of a good name is above them all. (4:17)

רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר: שְׁלֹשָׁה כְּתָרִים הֵן: כְּתֵר תּוֹרָה, וְכְתֵר כְּהֹנֵה, וְכְתֵר מַלְכוּת,

וְכְתֵר שֵׁם טוֹב עוֹלָה עַל גְּבִיהֶן.

Promote your name. This saying can mean simply that with fame comes critics who will spoil your reputation. But here “promote” seems also to imply that the person acting improperly tries to inflate his or her accomplishments in order to impress others and advance his or her own cause.

MODERN LIFE

AS THE next mishnah indicates, Hillel believed that some kind of self-assertion is legitimate, as opposed to the improper kind of self-promotion indicated in this mishnah. What kind of self-promotion is proper? What kind is wise? These are important questions in our age of mass media and social “networking” for career advancement. Obviously, being honest is necessary. But beyond that, these seem to be open questions.

If I am not for myself, who is for me? This question not only implies that it is legitimate to pursue your own interests, but also launches you

into thinking of the best way to carry out that pursuit. Your answer to, “If I am not for myself—if I have to rely totally on others—who is for me?” will also give you a shrewd idea of who your friends and allies are, and who is not with you, or may even be actively opposed to your efforts.

MODERN LIFE

Interpreted as a rhetorical question, this idea is supported by modern theories of “assertiveness.” The idea is that there is a way to express our needs and wants to others in a manner that is neither aggressive and attacking, nor passive and withdrawing, by simply stating openly what we want or don’t want. This is not a universally applicable method, because sometimes it is better to act without discussion. And sometimes it is wise not to be open about our wants and needs, particularly with people who are not trustworthy. But in many situations, this is a powerful technique, as it demonstrates respect for the other person, and opens the way to getting what you want, or to starting a discussion that can lead to a fair compromise. Interpreted instead as a question to be answered, “Who is for me?” is a question of who is an ally, and who an opponent. This is a key question in civil life, as gaining and keeping allies are usually the keys to winning.

One that is admirable. *Tiferet*, or “admirable,” comes from the root meaning “to decorate,” and is variously translated as “splendid,” “beautiful,” and by extension, “honorable.” As commentator Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemaḥ (c. 1400) points out, Yehudah haNasi has given us a two-part test here to help us judge whether a course of action is ethical; the action needs to pass both parts. For example, an action may seem appealing and admirable from one’s own point of view—making money on a certain venture and helping one’s family with it, for example. But if the story of the venture were made public, and people viewed it as unsavory or unethical, the venture would fail the second test.

The action may fail in the opposite way: it may appeal to other people, but violate one’s own conscience. A course of action by a politician, such as an appeal to fear and hatred, may be highly approved of by the majority of his or her constituents, yet the politician may know that in the long run it is bad for the country, and that it violates his or her own conscience. On a family level, a child may be very happy that a parent

indulges his or her bad behavior, but the parent knows on some level that such indulgence may teach the child to be selfish and inconsiderate.

Underlying Yehudah haNasi's saying is the idea that, although gaining a correct understanding of situations may often be difficult, the moral sense is the common heritage of all humanity. A similar idea is behind a later saying in *Avot* by Hanina ben Dosa:

☞ If the spirit of your fellow man finds you pleasing, the spirit of the Holy One finds you pleasing. If the spirit of your fellow man does not find you pleasing, the spirit of the Holy One does not find you pleasing. (*Avot* 3:13)

However, the idea that being popular or “cool” or pleasing to others is always right is not Jewish. Rabbi Joseph Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire in the early 20th century, pointed out that the prophets were quite willing to say what was not pleasing or popular, but was morally right. Hanina ben Dosa clearly indicates, though, that being crabby and disagreeable is not a sign of merit, and pleasing people in some respect is desirable. His phrase “the spirit of your fellow man” probably indicates that the aspect of other people that we should strive to please is their better nature—the *yetzer ha-tov*—and not their baser instincts—the *yetzer ha-ra* (avarice, lust, and the desire to dominate).

MODERN LIFE

Some have formulated a modern version of the second part of Rabbi's test this way: If your actions were on the front page of the newspaper tomorrow, how would you feel? And looking at more recent technologies, the question could be posed all too realistically: If you checked your social media account and found word of your actions being spread all over the Internet, how would you feel?

A good name is above them all. This phrase can be interpreted two ways. One interpretation is that having a good name is more valuable than being a king, priest, or Torah scholar. The second is that without a good name, one cannot be a good king, priest, or scholar. In order to be effective in any of these roles, one needs a reputation as a person who does good deeds.

MODERN LIFE

ONE OF the ways that those who gain a good name benefit personally is in their feelings about themselves. Research shows that our feelings

about ourselves are influenced by our expectations of how we will be treated by others. These feelings are actually quite complex, and some are more within our power to change than others.

One level of feelings about ourselves is our basic sense of *self-worth*, which is largely determined by our philosophy. If we believe that we are made “in the image of God” (GEN 1:27), we will believe in our personal worth largely independent of the outside world. On a second level, we have *self-respect* when we believe that we deserve respect from others. This feeling is won through ethical conduct: when we treat others with justice and kindness, we know we deserve respect in return. A third level, *self-esteem*, comes from being esteemed by others for our usefulness. It is garnered by developing our characters and acquiring work skills, thus strengthening our abilities to serve others.

All three of these levels are sustained by Jewish beliefs and values: being made in the image of God, treating others with respect, and serving others through skills we acquire.

A fourth level, not supported by Jewish values, is a feeling of *glory* or ego, in which we rejoice in being looked up to by others. This is won by gaining admiration from others for good looks, money, power, etc. As Mark Twain once said, “Man will do many things to get himself loved; he will do all things to get himself envied.” We have the least control over this last level, and it makes our personalities very tense and fragile. Any setback to the goal of personal superiority will be crushing because we have made our approval of ourselves dependent on it. This hazard of pursuing glory is recognized in the Talmud: Rabbi Alexandri says, “The least wind will trouble a man who has haughtiness of spirit” (SOT 5a).

Thus, having self-approval rooted in Jewish values provides a much stronger foundation for maintaining joy in life even in the face of disappointments.

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