

HILLEL:

A NAME MADE GREAT IS A NAME DESTROYED. (1:13)

נגיד שמא אבד שמה.

IF NOT I FOR MYSELF, WHO THEN? (1:14)

אם אין אני לי מי לי?

RABBI:

WHICH IS THE RIGHT COURSE THAT A MAN OUGHT TO CHOOSE FOR HIMSELF? WHATEVER IS DEEMED PRAISEWORTHY BY THE ONE WHO ADOPTS IT AND [FOR WHICH] HE IS ALSO DEEMED PRAISEWORTHY BY MEN. (2:1)

רבי אומר: איזו היא דרך ישרה שיבור לו האדם? כל שהיא תפארת לעשייה ותפארת לו מן האדם.

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 MUST ACCOMPANY THEM ALL. (4:17)

רבי שמעון אומר: שלשה כתרין הן: כתר תורה, וכתר כהונה, וכתר מלכות, וכתר שם טוב עולה על גביהן.

A NAME MADE GREAT IS A NAME DESTROYED.

This teaches that one's name should not come to the attention of the Ruling Power. For once a man's name comes to the attention of the Ruling Power, the end is that it casts its eye upon him, slays him, and confiscates all his wealth (ARN).

If somebody's name becomes well known in the city— "So-and-so is handsome, So-and-so is strong"—you will go looking for him on the morrow and not find out even when he departed from the world (ARNB).

He who appropriates for himself the fame of the Torah, that is, he who studies Torah in order to be able to boast of it, not for the sake of the study, will not acquire a name for himself (Vitry).

If one does whatever he does not for the sake of Heaven, but only to get a reputation, his name will be cut off in the end (Aknin).

IF NOT I FOR MYSELF, WHO THEN?

If I do not acquire merit for myself in this world who will acquire merit for me in the life of the world to come, [where] I have no father, I have no mother, I have no brother, where Father Abraham cannot redeem Ishmael, Father Isaac cannot redeem Esau (ARNB).

If I do not lay up merit in my lifetime, acquire knowledge of the Torah and the doing of good works, who will acquire them for me? For these obligations have been turned over to me, and freedom of action has been granted me, as it is written, See 1 have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil (Deuteronomy 30:15). That is why one who does good is rewarded and one who transgresses is punished: for if our actions were determined by Heaven and not by ourselves, if man were compelled to do what he does, it would not be just to reward those who do good and to punish those who transgress (Aknin).

Every man should acquire merit for himself and not depend upon the merit of others being laid up in his behalf (Duran).

THE RIGHT COURSE.

Whatever course is proper and becoming to the man who adopts it and follows it, and is at the same time deemed becoming by other men—when all agree this course is praiseworthy and desirable—that is the right course: for example, the ways of truth, of justice, of peace, and others like these which are approved by everybody (Vitry).

By the right course is meant good actions, that is, actions in accord with the “golden-mean” ideal, for by means of these a man acquires for himself an important pattern of conduct and then his relationship with other human beings is a good one. And this is the meaning of “deemed praiseworthy by him who adopts it and for which he is also deemed praiseworthy by men” (Maimonides).

The Holy One, blessed be He, is glorified when the commandments are carried out; and this is also to the glory of those who carry them out. For such is the true glory one enjoys among men. This is the course a man should choose for himself; and he will enjoy the praises of men when he carries out the commandments at the proper time, as

it is said, How good is a thing in its proper season (Proverbs 15:23)—for it is possible to carry out the commandments at a time when it would be displeasing to other human beings; a person would then not be praised for his actions, and that would not be carrying out a commandment to perfection (Rabbi Jonah).

Two conditions are here laid down. The first is that the course should be deemed praiseworthy by him who adopts it, . . . that he himself regard it as praiseworthy, so that if some other person had adopted it, he would have praised him for it; and if that person had taken the opposite course he would have reproved him for it. But for such a course a man might still not be honored by other men. Moreover, it sometimes happens that others honor a man for the course he adopts, but he himself feels that it is not praiseworthy. That is why the conditions laid down are that the course must be deemed as praiseworthy by him who adopts it as by other people. . . . Some read this statement of our Mishna as follows: "The right course . . . whatever is deemed praiseworthy by his Creator will bring him praises from men" . . . that is to say, a man should choose a course which will bring glory and honor to the Holy One, blessed be He; in that way the man will win the praises of men (Duran).

THREE CROWNS.

The crown of priesthood: What is there to be said of it? Even if one were to offer all the silver and gold in the world he cannot be given the crown of priesthood, for it is said, And it shall be unto him, and to his seed after him, the covenant of an everlasting priesthood (Numbers 25:13).

The crown of royalty: Even if one were to offer all the silver and gold in the world, he cannot be given the crown of royalty, for it is said, And David My servant, shall be their prince for ever (Ezekiel 37:25).

Not so, however, the crown of Torah: the toil of Torah, anyone who wishes to take it on can come and do so, as it is said, Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye after water (Isaiah 55:1) (ARN).

Only by virtue of the Torah did Aaron win the crown of priesthood, as it is said, For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the Torah at his mouth (Malachi 2:7). Only by virtue of the Torah did David win the crown of royalty, as it is said, These I have had, because I have kept Thy precepts (Psalm 119:56) (ARNB).

As regards royalty and priesthood one uses the idiom “house.” Thus: “A house of royalty,” as it is said, O house of David, thus saith the Lord: Execute fustice in the morning (Jeremiah 21:12); “the house of priesthood,” as it is said, O house of Aaron, O house of Levi (Psalm 135: 19, 20). But as regards fear of the Lord, which is the crown of the Torah, there is no special “house.” Note the verse, Ye that fear the Lord, bless ye the Lord (Psalm 135:20). Or again, In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come unto thee and bless thee (Exodus 20:21) (Rabbi Jonah).

These three crowns are the counterparts of the three things on which the world stands, to wit: Torah, Temple service, and acts of lovingkindness. The Torah corresponds to the crown of the Torah; Temple service corresponds to the crown of priesthood; acts of lovingkindness correspond to the crown of royalty—because by means of his wealth one has the opportunity to practice acts of lovingkindness—and so too the kings of Israel were kings filled with lovingkindness (Duran).

THE CROWN OF A GOOD NAME MUST ACCOMPANY THEM ALL.

By means of the three crowns a man acquires a good name, if he treats them with the proper care, and if he behaves uprightly—since he has engaged in the study of Torah for the sake of Heaven, he creates for himself a good name, so that men say: “Happy the parent of such a one.” “Behold the man who studied, he has fulfilled the commandments!” ... This is an interpretation I have received. But it seems to me that the last clause of our Mishna means, “The crown of a good name excels them all.” For not one of these crowns can endure if a person does not behave uprightly; and if a person does not acquire a good name everybody despises him. Thus whatever crown he may have had, is useless. And so too it is written, A good name is better than precious oil (Ecclesiastes 7:1) (Vitry).

A man in whom there is found knowledge of the Torah and good works is greater than a king, than a high priest, than any of the wise who have no good works to their credit (Aknin).

All the crowns require along with them the crown of a good name, and this crown is dependent upon the crown of the Torah. For in what consists a man’s good name if not in study of the Torah and the carrying out of the commandments? (Rabbi Jonah).

The crown of a good name is superior to the crown of Torah. For if

a man is a scholar and behaves foully, one may despise him: as we are taught in the Talmud (Moed Katan 17a), If the teacher is like an angel of the Lord of Hosts then seek Torah at his mouth; but if his relationship to human beings is bad, he is guilty of profaning the Name of God, and if he is guilty of misconduct he is worse than an am ha-arez.

The crown of a good name is superior to the crown of Torah. For as the Sages of the Talmud (Baba Batra 4a) taught: It is written, A ruler of thy people thou shalt not curse (Exodus 22:27), that is to say, only when he acts as thy people act. ... The upright kings of Israel were praised only for doing what is right in the sight of the Lord; the wicked ones were disgraced only for doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord.

The crown of a good name is also superior to the crown of priesthood. We are told in the Talmud (Yoma 71b) of the High Priest to whom the Sages Shemaiah and Abtalyon, who were of proselytic descent, retorted: "Welcome to descendants of heathen who act the way Aaron acted, and let there be no welcome to descendants of Aaron who do not act as Aaron acted." The High Priest had insulted the Sages because they were proselytes (Duran).

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