

RABBAN GAMLIEL, SON OF RABBI YEHUDAH HANASI:

*...Let all who work with the community work with them
for the sake of Heaven.*

*Then the merit of their ancestors will aid them, and
their righteousness will endure forever.*

*“And upon you, I will bestow a great reward,
as if you had accomplished it.” (2:2)*

רַבֵּן גַּמְלִיאֵל בֶּן רַבִּי יְהוּדָה הַנְּשִׂיא אָמַר: ... וְכָל הָעוֹסְקִים עִם הַצְּבוּר,
יְהִיו עוֹסְקִים עִמָּהֶם לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, שְׂזוּכוֹת אֲבוֹתָם מְסִיעֵתָם, וְצַדִּיקָתָם עוֹמֶדֶת
לְעַד, וְאַתֶּם מַעֲלָה אֲנִי עֲלֵיכֶם שָׂכָר הַרְבֵּה בְּאֵלוּ עֲשִׂיתֶם.

Let all who work. Scholars were community leaders, and this mishnah gives guidelines for leadership. Leaders should work “for the sake of Heaven”—that is, unselfishly serve the community. If they serve the community this way, their work will be aided by “the merit of their ancestors,” and God will reward them even if they cannot accomplish all they strive for.

MODERN LIFE

Let all who work with. This mishnah raises the issue of the best way to structure organized Jewish religion, and the proper activities of lay leadership. (On professional leadership, see *Avot* 4:7.) The ideal of working “for the sake of Heaven” means that individuals set aside their personal agendas, and work for the benefit of the whole community. But as Rabbi Edwin Friedman pointed out, people tend to see the synagogue as a quasi-family, and to bring in and act out issues that existed in their original family. How can lay leadership stay on track in acting “for the sake of Heaven,” while avoiding personal agendas and quarrels? Perhaps one key is in the first part of the mishnah: studying Torah and applying it to the issues that boards face.

HILLEL:

Do not separate yourself from the community. (2:5)

הִלֵּל אָמַר: אַל תִּפְרוֹשׁ מִן הַצְּבוּר. ...

Do not separate yourself. This saying is probably in opposition to the monastic cults that existed in Judaism in the days of Hillel, called “Essenes” by the ancient historian Josephus. The good and pious life is

to be lived in the family and the community, not as a religious hermit or monk or nun. *Tzibur*, translated here as “community,” can also be translated as “public,” and thus refers to civil society generally, not only to the Jewish community.

ON CONTROVERSY:

*Any controversy for the sake of Heaven
will in the end be preserved;*

*And that not for the sake of Heaven
will not in the end be preserved. (5:20)*

כָּל מַחְלֻקַּת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם סוּפָה לְהַתְקִים, וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם אֵין סוּפָה לְהַתְקִים, אֵיזוֹ הִיא מַחְלֻקַּת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם? זֶה מַחְלֻקַּת הַלֵּל וְשַׁמַּאי, וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם? זֶה מַחְלֻקַּת קֹרַח וְכָל עֲדָתוֹ.

RABBI YOḤANAN HASANDLAR:

*Every assembly which is for the sake of
Heaven will in the end be preserved;*

*And those not for the sake of Heaven
will not in the end be preserved. (4:14)*

רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן הַסַּנְדְּלָר אָמַר: כָּל בְּנֵי סִיָּה שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוּפָה לְהַתְקִים, וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוּפָה לְהַתְקִים.

THE HEBREW of the first of these *mishnayot* continues with this discussion: “Which is a controversy for the sake of Heaven? That of Hillel and Shammai. Which is a controversy not for the sake of Heaven? That of Korah and all his band [with Moses].”

Korah and his followers rebelled against Moses’ religious authority, and wanted to usurp it (NUM 16). Korah’s goal was personal power, rather than uncovering truths that would help the community at large. His rebellion also illustrates an assembly that is not “for the sake of Heaven.” He did not argue for a point of view, but just tried to grab power. In the end, he and his band were punished when the earth opened up and swallowed them alive. The story of Korah also illustrates that the critical tradition within Judaism was limited, as its starting point was an acceptance of the authority of Torah—even though the correct interpretation of Torah is left open to debate.

The example of Hillel and Shammai is not only an illustration, but also a historically important influence. The Talmud reports that there was a long running dispute between the followers of Hillel and Shammai. After three years a divine voice went forth saying:

☞ “These and these are indeed words of the living God, but *halakhah* follows the *Beit Hillel*.” . . . For the *Beit Hillel* were gentle and modest, and studied both their opinions and those of the other school, and humbly mentioned the words of the other school before their own. (ER 13b)

As Menachem Fisch points out in *Rational Rabbis* (pp. 210–11), in nearly half of the disputes where the *Beit Shammai* (school of Shammai) had the last word, the *Beit Hillel* (school of Hillel) accepted the views of the *Beit Shammai*. But where the *Beit Hillel* had the last word, the *Beit Shammai* was not willing to accept the views of the *Beit Hillel* on a single issue. This key difference between the *Beit Hillel* and *Beit Shammai* dramatically illustrates that, for a critical tradition to be successful, those disagreeing must have not only the humility to listen to differing viewpoints, but also a willingness to change. Only then is the commitment to openness real, and can the critical tradition be kept alive. Lacking critical dialogue and creative responses to it, traditions tend to become rigid, stale, and unproductive.

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