



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS
Pirkei Avos - Perek 5 Mishna 7

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Harav Y. Reuven Rubin Shlita

“Do you remember me?” This was the umpteenth time that question had been posed in the last few hours. I was at a simcha in New York City, and this question was tossed at me throughout the evening. It wasn’t such a strange question when you think of it, because I hadn’t seen any of this group in over thirty years.

There is a wise saying: “Wherever you are now and wherever you may be in the future, nothing alters the point you started from.” For a long time, I had not been able to retouch that place from whence I had started out, and with all the old faces came many memories. We all change through life. You look at an old friend that you haven't seen in a long time and think, “My, how he has changed.” But it’s more than the whiter beard or the greater girth; people change because of the experience’s life has dealt them. Some grow wiser, others not, but one thing is certain - they all started from someplace. It is that starting place that defines what you will do with what life brings, and it was that place I revisited at that simcha.

I found friends who reminisced with me about the “good old days” (funny, they didn't always seem so good then), and we all wallowed in a sweet fit of nostalgia. Those long-forgotten days built a platform that allowed each of us to spring into the future that was our destiny.

So, what was this beginning, this starting point? It was how our teachers taught us. We were blessed to have rebbes who were true teachers, people who really cared about who we actually were, not who they perceived they would like us to be.

בס"ד



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This Mishna tells us, “Seven qualities characterise the uncultured man, and seven the wise man.” We start with a negative, the uncultured man, or as some translate, the fool, and then we speak of one who is wise. In Hebrew, the word for fool is golem. This means something unfinished, raw, incomplete. When we start off in life, we all are unfinished and raw, needing cultivation. To become wise one needs help, someone who will provide direction.

The mishna then goes on: “The wise man does not speak before one who is greater than him in wisdom and experience.” Notice that the Tanna started the mishna by saying that there are seven characteristics of the uncultured person, but when he begins enumerating the qualities he starts with the wise man. We see from this that a teacher (the mishna) should always identify with the positive and what one should do.

There are those who build a Yiddishkeit based on the negative. They tell our young all the things they aren’t, everything they can’t do or ever be. This is a major mistake. Yiddishkeit must always be given through the wonderment of its positive light.

This was how we were taught. It was the beginning point of everything. A teacher would never say, “This is wrong”; rather, “This is the right way to do it.”

As one who was blessed to learn under such great teachers, I look back and realise how special they made each of us feel. A bochur was never a “bad person.” Rather, he was told that what he did was wrong, and such actions didn't *pas* (weren't appropriate) for a ben Torah. We were encouraged to reach our utmost, without feeling that our utmost would be seen as less worthy than that of others. There was an accenting of the positive, without losing sight of the harm the negative could bring.

The teaching of the young creates the world that they will inhabit. The number seven used here reminds us of this. Chazal teach us that every individual is an entire world, and just as the world around us was created in seven days, so too, through these seven steps we can create a wise man from the unfinished one we started off with.

There is one thread that binds all these seven attributes together. Let’s look at them and see what that strong cord is.

- 1) “The wise man does not speak before one who is greater than him in wisdom and experience.”
- 2) “He does not interrupt the speech of his friend.”
- 3) “He is not hasty to reply.”
- 4) “He asks what is relevant and answers to the point.”
- 5) “He speaks of first things first and of last things last.”
- 6) “Regarding that which he has not heard, he says, ‘I have not heard.’”
- 7) “He acknowledges the truth.”

The aspect that is present in each of these steps is that of patience. Becoming a *mentsch* needs forbearance, and teaching the young needs this all the more. The rashness that typifies the young has to be tempered by example. The wise man doesn't think that his words are all that

matter, or that he must reply quickly with arrogance, or that he is an expert on every subject. The mishna shows us that in order to grow, one must be able to accept others, and accept that one can learn if he but listens. It is always hard to admit that you are wrong, or that someone else's truth is true as well, but that is what is required if the pangs of growth are to achieve anything.

Let me return to the simcha in New York. One fellow came over to me with a wide smile. I recognised him immediately, but before I could open my mouth, he beamed at me and asked, "Who am I?"

"If you don't know who you are, how should I?" I quipped before we joined hands in rekindled friendship. It got me thinking. If we are to know who we really are, we must first obtain the strategy the Mishna spoke of. Without patience and the ability to learn from others we will always be doomed to being golems.

We are living in strenuous times. The pressures of community standards are hard for many. There are those who believe that communal bodies can rule by pronouncements and pressure everyone into acting in a certain manner. To think like this is to forget that this mishna speaks to all. We can do so much for each other if we only have patience and empathy. Listening and realising others' needs is all part and parcel of true wisdom. No, we need never be fools.

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