



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

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Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

Perek Alef, Mishnah Yud (Part 2)

1:10 Shemayah and Avtalyon received from them. Shemayah says, love work and despise positions of authority, and do not become close to the government.

Taking Charge

The three parts of this *mishnah* are not a series of unrelated statements; they describe a sequence. The *Tanna* first tells us to **love work** in the plainest sense. If we feel that that it is beneath our dignity to support ourselves through humble labor, and that we really belong in a more respected and lucrative **position of authority**, we will seek out other options. Unfortunately, the most readily available options are likely to be unethical. Once we are prepared to compromise principles, the world of politics and **government** becomes attractive as an obvious way to achieve money and status.

Love work and despise positions of authority.

With this in mind, we can understand our Sages' advice to **despise positions of authority** on several levels.

We may say that it is directly related to loving **work** – we should not be too proud or conceited to take care of ourselves and earn our own living, if necessary with ordinary labor (see *Peshaim* 113a).¹ If we are only willing to consider **positions of**

¹ See *Insights into Pirke Avot* 1:10, Part 1, for a fuller discussion of this topic.



authority, where we see to it that others are doing their jobs, we will earn these others' deep-seated, and perhaps well deserved, dislike.

There is another point to consider as well. Even if we are the model supervisor, our subordinates may still be unhappy with us. But what happens if we are tempted to misuse our **authority**? What if we actually enjoy lording it over those in our charge, overseeing them with a vengeance? Our Sages caution us not to “step on the heads of the holy nation” (*Yevamot* 105b), trampling others underfoot in our ruthless march to career advancement. The risks inherent in **authority** can be great.

This teaching refers as well to positions of leadership and power in the community. Our Sages castigate a community leader who terrorizes people unnecessarily (*Rosh Hashanah* 17a), and one who is arrogant in his dealings with them (*Hagigah* 5b). They tell us that there are three things which shorten man's life. One of them is “conducting oneself *b'rabbanut*” – adopting a lordly position of power and authority. They cite the case of Yosef as proof of this frightening principle. Yosef, as the eleventh of Yaakov's twelve sons, was next to the youngest, but he was the first to die (see *Shmot* 1:6). Yosef was a *tzaddik* who overcame nearly insurmountable trials alone in a corrupt foreign land. He saved his family from starvation and guaranteed their safety in Egypt. And yet, he was the first among them to leave the world, because as viceroy of Egypt, he was in an extremely powerful **position of authority** (*Berachot* 55b, Rashi; see *Yoma* 86b, Rashi).

As we see, the *Tanna* gives us excellent practical advice. **Love work**: support yourself quietly as a private individual, preferably with a job which allows you to keep your mind on Torah even while working (see *Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, Chapter 8).² At the same time, **despise positions of authority**, which may at first appear advantageous, but are actually dangerous minefields which can dispatch their bearer to an untimely end, G-d forbid.

The Rabbinate

And despise the *rabbanut*.

The word *rabbanut*, here explained as “positions of authority,” is related to the word *hitraurevut*, the domineering arrogance which may go to our heads if we acquire power and control. We may also understand the word *rabbanut* in its more literal sense, as the **rabbinate**. We should not necessarily aim for a living in the **rabbinate**, because ideally, Torah knowledge should not be used as a source of

² See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:10, Part 1, for a fuller discussion of this topic.



income (*Avot* 4:5). There are other problems involved as well. A rabbinical position may engender unwonted pride. If our innocent, admiring flock reveres us for our great piety and learning, we may begin to assess ourselves at quite a bit more than our real value, looking down on those who are not as holy as we. If at first we are uncomfortable with the flattery, we may eventually come to demand and depend on it, a craving which will ultimately end in downfall and disgrace.

Such behavior has nothing to do with the real meaning of serving in any branch of the **rabbinate**, be it as a rabbi, *dayan*, halachic authority, or *rosh yeshivah*. Our Sages say of such positions, “Do you imagine that I am giving you power? I am giving you slavery!” (*Horiyot* 10a). A rabbi’s job is to guide his people and help them in any way he can. He is not a master, he is a slave to the community and/or his students. His days and nights, his comforts and his personal life, are all subordinate to their needs.

“All those who work on behalf of the community should work with them in Hashem’s honor” (*Avot* 2:2). A rabbi or lay leader must be exceedingly careful in his approach to the community he tends. They are not his subjects – if anything, he is *their* servant. Community service is not merely a prestigious way to make a nice living, it is a profound commitment to the welfare of one’s fellow Jews. Only one who realizes that **positions of authority**, whether as a lay leader or in a rabbinical capacity, are not a means to wield power, may consider taking them on.

These cautions apply to one who holds an official, salaried position, which lends itself to misuse. A Torah scholar who teaches students who wish to learn from him, or answers questions for those who seek his advice or halachic rulings, is certainly not trampling “on the heads of the holy nation.” He does a *mitzvah* by extending himself voluntarily to those who need him, and is not using their respect for his knowledge and wisdom as a means to influence or financial gain. Obviously, he cannot dedicate himself fully to his flock if he must find other means of support. But beyond the necessity of meeting his family’s needs, his primary interest should be serving the community.

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin provides a novel explanation of our *Tanna*’s words.

He writes that we should **love** a rabbi’s **work**: we should take pleasure in studying and teaching Torah, answering halachic questions, and imparting guidance and advice. At the same time, we should **despise** the official aspect of **the rabbinate**, with its honors and dignities (*Ruah Hayyim* on *Avot* 1:10).



Caretakers

However, the *Tanna*'s words mean even more. Not only should we **love work and despise positions of authority** in the sense of being self-sufficient. If circumstances allow, we should donate our time to the community free of charge, as our Sages teach: "All those who work on behalf of the community should work for them in Hashem's honor" (*Avot* 2:2), or in other words, without expecting any compensation. We should also refrain from receiving any type of benefit, service, or honor at all from others. Many of our greatest Torah scholars were inordinately careful to remain modestly in the background, knowing that humility is an essential prerequisite for Torah knowledge.³ For example, the renowned *Mekubal* Rabbi Shalom Sharabi, known as the Rashash, began his career as a lowly attendant to the scholars studying *Kabbalah* in the famous Yeshivat Bet El, making tea, sweeping up, and performing similar humble duties. Unassuming though he was, he went on to become the greatest scholar in this most distinguished *yeshivah*.

In our own times, I personally remember the extraordinary care taken by the great *Mekubal* Hacham Salman Mutzafi to avoid the slightest brush with honor. This exceptional Torah scholar and saintly *tzaddik* chose to earn a modest living by serving as caretaker in the Ohel Rahel synagogue in Jerusalem. One Rosh Hashanah, as a young *yeshivah* student, I prayed in Ohel Rahel. There was a break between *Musaf* and *Minhah*, and I stayed behind in the synagogue to recite *Tehillim*. I noticed the elderly "caretaker" pulling out folding chairs from under the benches placed around the room, and jumped up to help him. He did not thank me for saving him trouble – he refused my help in no uncertain terms, saying that he "did not want to take advantage of a Torah scholar." I was only a youngster; he was a great *talmid hacham* more than three times my age. And yet, as far as he was concerned, a young student was a "Torah scholar" to be respected, while he was merely the janitor.

On another occasion, I was on my way out of the *mikveh* and saw Hacham Mutzafi about to enter. I had opened the door to leave, and naturally, I held it open for him to step inside. I was wasting my time – even this courtesy was more than he was willing to accept. He waited until I let the door close, and then opened it himself.

Honoring Torah

The *Tanna* teaches us to **despise positions of authority** and the honor and power they bring. This is essential in relation to our own honor, which we are

³ See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:1 for a fuller discussion of this topic.



permitted to minimize. However, Torah scholars must be accorded due respect. What is more, a Torah scholar who holds an official position in which he represents Torah may not shun the honor bestowed upon him in that capacity. He is obligated to teach his students to show the proper respect for Torah scholars, and if he completely foregoes his own dignity, he will not be able to impart this lesson. It is not that he personally needs the honor, but that *his students need to give it*. It is worth noting that those Torah scholars who fled honor under any circumstances were usually private individuals who held no official position in the community, and could allow themselves to behave in this manner.

For example, on very hot summer days, the Hazon Ish would receive visitors very casually, without his outer garb. He would excuse himself by saying that since he held no official position as a rabbi or *rosh yeshivah* and did not represent the dignity of an institution, he could allow himself the more informal attire.

Honoring a Torah scholar relates not only to courtesies and polite forms of speech. Our Sages teach that “serving a Torah scholar is greater than studying Torah” (*Berachot* 7b). They cite the verse, “Elisha ben Shafat, who poured water on the hands of Eliyahu” (*II Melachim* 3:11). When Yehoshafat, the king of Israel, sought a prophet to tell him the word of G-d, an advisor recommended Elisha, the prophet Eliyahu’s disciple and successor. As our Sages point out, the verse does not say that Elisha had learned from Eliyahu, but that he had served him by pouring water over his hands. Serving a Torah scholar in this sense is not merely a way to acquire humility – it is a *segulah* for success in Torah study. If we serve him as our Sages teach, we will be granted greater comprehension of the true depths of his wisdom.

Beware

Do not seek connections with the *rashut*.

Rashut, translated as **government**, refers to a king or any other ruler. Our Sages tell us that “If all the oceans were ink, and all the reeds were pens, and the skies were sheets of parchment, and all men were scribes, they still would not be able to commit to writing the depths of the heart of the *rashut* (a ruler). Rashi explains that a king’s heart must cope with the needs and affairs of several provinces simultaneously (*Shabbat* 11a). The Bartenura writes that *rashut* is derived from the word *reshut*, permission. A ruler has the permission and authority to govern and institute legislation as he sees fit.

Both in this *mishnah* and later in *Avot*, our Sages’ attitude towards the governing body is clearly one of distrust: “Do not seek connections with the government,” and



“beware of the government” (2:3). And yet, they also tell us to “pray for the welfare of the kingdom” (3:2), which suggests a positive approach towards the ruling powers.

The commentary of *Bet Avot* explains that this distrustful attitude towards “the *rashut*” refers to a government which does not rule justly, and is corrupted by personal and political interests. A Jewish king such as Shaul or David, who is appointed by a prophet of G-d and rules in keeping with the laws of the Torah, is not “*rashut*” in the negative sense of the term; his policies and personal life are guided by the Torah (see *Devarim* 17:16). In addition, a strong government, which operates honest courts and enforces the law, is not an evil – it is essential for an orderly society. Without it, anarchy will reign, G-d forbid. If only for our own good, we must pray that the king or the government will have the ability to maintain law and order.

However, personal contact with rulers, governors or politicians in the hope of receiving benefits or favors is another story altogether.

Connected

If we wish to avoid hard work and seek comfortable avenues to money and influence, we are likely to find that the easiest route to pursue is that of government and politics. The men in power may have many tempting benefits to offer, but even so, the *Tanna* warns us, **do not seek connections with the government**. Rather than finding ways to enter their orbit, we are best off if they do not even know we exist.

Why are **connections with the government** such a bad idea? Isn't it nice to have powerful friends and good contacts?

We should not deceive ourselves as to the nature of such relationships; they will end in bitter disappointment. Our Sages tell us, “Beware of the government, for they only come close to a person for their own needs. They appear to be friends at the time when they benefit, but they do not stand by one in his time of need” (*Avot* 2:3). Politicians are friendly and charming and helpful and concerned – when they need us, and our vote or support or endorsement. They would do anything for us then, or will at least promise to do anything for us, until the returns are in. Once they are appointed or elected they are safe. They no longer need us and can afford to forget us. They are cunning and calculated, but not necessarily worthy and refined. We should **not seek connections** with them, as it will do us little good.



Compromise

Politics – and politicians – are problematic, because the essence of politics is compromise, or give and take. We find this interplay at its most obvious in a coalition government, composed of representatives of parties with different interests. One party states its position: they want x amount of funding for projects and programs which are of interest to their constituents. The other party, no less than their competitor, wants at least as much funding to promote their own agenda.

Torah is truth, and there can be no compromising on truth. When the spoils of government include the truths of Torah, what room is there for discussion? At times we are in a position where we can only choose the lesser evil. But even then, we must know that there is a difference. The choice is not ideal, it is indeed only the better of two bad choices.

Our Sages tell us that a true *dayan* is one who judges *emet l'amito*, with absolute truth (see *Sanhedrin* 7a). Why do they specify “absolute truth”? Is there truth (level one) and absolute truth (level two)? Apparently, there is. Choosing the lesser evil under the circumstances is *emet* which is not *l'amito*; it is not absolute. A compromise solution can never be *emet l'amito*. Politics and government cannot function on the principle of *emet l'amito*, because they must always compromise, and compromise is not *daat Torah*. *Daat Torah* is more accurately described by our Sages' statement, “let judgment pierce the mountain” (*Yevamot* 92a). The absolute truth embodied in *daat Torah* moves forward in a single straight line, with no sidetracking for circumstances.

A wise rabbi once said that politics is the child of an illegitimate union between lies and flattery. Its name is the same in any language. Connections with this hazy world and those who inhabit it will pull us down and lead us to sin. They will use us and discard us at will, and we will lose on all fronts. The only other option is no better: we eventually become one of them, losing our integrity as we happily learn to take advantage of the prerogatives of position.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.