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Chapter 1

MISHNAH 1

מֹשֶׁה קָבַל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, וּמִסָּרָה לְיְהוֹשֻׁעַ, וְיְהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים, וְזִקְנִים
לְנָבִיאִים, וְנָבִיאִים מִסָּרוּהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה
דְּבָרִים, הָיוּ מְתוּנִים בְּדִין, וְהֵעֲמִידוּ תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה, וַעֲשׂוּ סִיג לַתּוֹרָה:

Moshe received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the Chachamim, and the Chachamim to the Neviim, and the Neviim transmitted it to the Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many students, and make a fence for the Torah.

And the Neviim transmitted it to the Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah.

The Gemara in *Maseches Megillah* 17b describes the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* (the Men of the Great Assembly) as consisting of “One hundred and twenty elders [i.e., sages], among them several Neviim [prophets].” However, although the assembly did have several Neviim as members, this Mishnah describes the chain of tradition as being passed from the Neviim to the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah*. This is because the majority of its members were not Neviim.

The period of transmission from the Neviim to the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* was of deep significance. Neviim, who hear the pure word of Hashem are unlike Chachamim (Sages) who must derive it from the Torah. The end of the era of Neviim brought a close to *Torah She'bichsav* (with the sealing of the Tanach) and a shift in emphasis to *Torah She'baal Peh*.

Since this was a moment of transition between two eras, there was a necessity for some overlap. Those continuing the *mesorah* and deriving the *Torah She'baal Peh* were accompanied by several *Neviim* from the previous era so that the two eras and two elements of Torah would be united—two sides of the same coin.

Elsewhere, I have elaborated on this subject.¹ I cite the *Seder Olam Rabbasi*,² which describes the era of Alexander the Great:

One mighty king...that is Alexander of Macedonia who ruled for twelve years. Until that point they were prophesying with ruach hakodesh. From that point on, bend your ear and listen to the words of the Chachamim.

There, I explain that the only shield against the culture and wisdom of Yavan is the wisdom of Torah, its beauty and splendor, which is of infinitely more value than all other wisdoms. However, even during the era of the beauty and splendor of *Torah She'baal Peh*, the element of *Torah She'bichsav* is still needed. This is why several *Neviim* were part of the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah*.

They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many students, and make a fence for the Torah.

In this Mishnah, the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* provide us with three exhortations:

- *Dayanim* should be deliberate in judgment: Perhaps this is also a message to communal leaders to not simply apply strict and forceful judgment but to act with patience and prudence.
- Raise up many students: The *Rishonim* explain³ that the Mishnah seeks to reject the view of *Rabban Gamliel*,⁴ who held that if a person is not “*tocho k'baro*” (his outer behavior is not entirely

1 *Minchas Asher, Sichos Al Hamo'adim* 2:13.

2 5715 version, p. 98.

3 See *Bartenura*.

4 *Berachos* 28a.

consistent with his real self), he should not be permitted to enter the study hall. The *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* agreed with Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, who said that anybody who wishes to come in to learn, may do so.

- Make a fence for the Torah: This means that enactments and decrees should be made to distance a person from sin. The Gemara⁵ derives this obligation from the words, “You shall safeguard My charge [this means] make a safeguard for My charge.”

It appears that the Mishnah wishes to emphasize a certain point. Usually, a person who acts in a patient and moderate fashion and who also embraces even those who are not so mitzvah observant would not naturally be that meticulous in protecting and maintaining the standards of his religion. To this end, the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* warn him, “Though you should be patient in judgment and establish many students, you should nevertheless make a fence for the Torah in order to distance people from sin.”

The *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* inaugurated the era of the Mishnah and established the basic principles of *Torah She'baal Peh*. The original Tannaim came from their ranks. They made decrees and enactments to ensure adherence to the Torah and to distance people from sin even though they acted in a patient and moderate manner, drawing people close and developing many students.

It would further appear that these three instructions—“Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many students, and make a fence for the Torah”—represent three major principles upon which the future of Judaism rests. Moreover, the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* were precisely the right people to outline them, and they did so at precisely the right moment in history.

The Neviim passed the *mesorah* of Torah to the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah*; however, as we have seen, this was a time of great change. Previously, the Neviim would hear the words of Hashem and give a response to every person's question and query. Their words were clear, illuminated with

5 Yevamos 21a.

the light of Hashem; doubts could not reign among the people. However, when prophecy was discontinued, doubts increased. In the place of the Neviim stood the Chachamim—the Torah Sages who took up the yoke of leadership. Not long afterward, in the days of Hillel and Shammai, great disagreements broke out among them.

In order to safeguard the future of the nation and the purity of the *mesorah*, these Chachamim said three things:

1. Be considered in judgment: Unlike the Neviim—who received wisdom from Heaven and passed it on to the people, whose words were expressions of *ruach hakodesh*, and whose messages were clear-cut and did not leave any room for doubt—the Chachamim had to act entirely differently. They were commanded to weigh their words carefully, to act in a considered and thoughtful manner, both when they judged people in *beis din* and when teaching them Hashem’s ways and His Torah.
2. Raise up many students: During the times of the Neviim, the people who were loyal to Hashem would accept His word from the Neviim without any reservation. However, when prophecy was discontinued, the only guarantee for the *mesorah* to be upheld was if the number of people studying Torah would increase and the Chachamim would disseminate Torah to their students, who could spread it among all the people. This is why when the Second Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai only asked Vespasian to spare “Yavneh and its Sages.” In his great wisdom and with his *ruach hakodesh*, he knew that there could be no guarantee of the future of the nation unless the yeshivos and Chachamim would remain. Thus, the *Anshei K’nesses Hagedolah* said to “establish many students.”
3. Make a fence for the Torah: Making a fence for the Torah was the primary and most important task of the *Anshei K’nesses Hagedolah*. When the Beis Hamikdash still stood and the people would come three times a year to receive Hashem’s Presence, they would witness the Kohanim performing the *avodah* and the Leviim singing songs of praise to Hashem. The holiness would be

palpable; all those who were present would absorb *yiras Shamayim* (fear of Heaven) and commit to learning Torah.⁶ The Neviim would circle among the people to examine their conduct and to strengthen them. During this era there was not a great need for decrees and “fences.”

However, this would not be the case once the Beis Hamikdash was destroyed, prophecy discontinued, and the people could no longer witness the Kohanim and Leviim performing their service. The *Anshei K’nesses Hagedolah* who arose in the era of the Second Beis Hamikdash knew that the Beis Hamikdash would eventually be destroyed, and the people would be exiled from their land. They therefore established the “cure before the illness” and urged people to make a fence for the Torah.

Elsewhere, I have cited a wonderful idea in the name of my father, *zt”l*, concerning the enormous and profound wisdom evident in two particular enactments of the *Anshei K’nesses Hagedolah*.⁷ One was active in nature, the other passive, and both became part of the bedrock of Judaism:

- The order of *tefillah* and thereby, the notion of shuls and *batei midrash*.
- “*Shevusim*” (the Rabbinic enactments) of Shabbos and thereby, the enhancement of holiness and restfulness of Shabbos.

We can scarcely imagine Judaism without these two enactments; today, they are among the most basic aspects of Jewish practice. Before the *Anshei K’nesses Hagedolah* established the *Amidah*, *Kaddish*, and *Kedushah*, each person would say a short *tefillah* in his home—not in a fixed place and not at a fixed time. The *Rambam* states that while a person is obligated to daven once each day, the *nusach* of the *tefillah* and the time it should be said are not prescribed by the Torah; thus, one *tefillah* at home each day

6 *Tosafos, Bava Basra 21a.*

7 *Minchas Asher, Sichos Al Hamo’adim 2:66:7.*

would be fully in keeping with the Torah’s command.⁸ (According to the *Ramban*, there is in fact no obligation *min haTorah* to daven each day.)

In other words, prior to the *Anshei K’nesses Hagedolah’s* enactment there was no such thing as a *beis k’nesses*. Places of study existed for those learning Torah, as mentioned by Chazal: “Avraham was an elder who would sit in yeshiva, Yitzchak was an elder who would sit in yeshiva, Yaakov was an elder who would sit in yeshiva—from the days of our forefathers, yeshiva was never discontinued.”⁹ *Rashi* also mentions the concept of a yeshiva: “And he sent Yehudah before him—to arrange a *beis talmud*.”¹⁰ In other words, the Jewish People always had yeshivos and *batei talmud*, but they did not always have *batei k’nesses*.

It was only when the *Anshei K’nesses Hagedolah* established the order of the *tefillos* and required a minyan for the recitation of *Kaddish* and *Kedushah* that every town and every place set aside a *beis k’nesses* for the *tefillos* that would take place there morning, afternoon, and evening.

The same was true of the mitzvah of Shabbos. The Torah only forbade thirty-nine *melachos*; it did not forbid a person from moving *muktzeh* items, conducting business, and carrying within a *karmelis*.¹¹

We may speculate that in earlier times, Jewish People would conduct all their transactions and any business affairs on Shabbos. Since most people would perform arduous farm or building work, which is forbidden on Shabbos, they would likely wait until Shabbos to go to the marketplaces (that were not situated in a *reshus ha’rabim*, a public domain) in order to purchase supplies for the week ahead.

8 *Hilchos Tefillah* 1:1.

9 *Yoma* 28b.

10 *Bereishis* 46:28, based on *Bereishis Rabbah*, *Vayigash* 95:3.

11 A semi-public area that is not classified as public domain on a Torah level.

However, the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* put a stop to all of this by establishing the *shevusim*. They forbade conducting business, moving *muktzeh* items, and carrying in a *karmelis* or in a courtyard without an *eiruv*. They thus transformed Shabbos into a day of rest and holiness, a day of delight for both the soul and the body. This was the impact of the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* who made fences for the Torah.

Rav Yonasan Eibeschitz describes a similar idea.¹² He first asks the following question: During the seventy years in which the Jewish People were exiled in Bavel, their spiritual level dropped enormously, to the extent that they even married non-Jewish women and desecrated Shabbos. By contrast, we have been in exile for thousands of years, yet we remain loyal to the mitzvos. Given that the generation that was exiled to Bavel was certainly greater than ours, it is difficult to understand why we have succeeded where they did not. The answer, he explains, is that the fences for the Torah erected by the *Anshei K'nesses Hagedolah* and the generations that followed guard us and preserve our attachment to Torah.

**Moshe received the Torah at Sinai
and transmitted it to Yehoshua.**

A JEWISH LEADER

*May Hashem, God of spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the assembly.*¹³

*Why is this stated? Moshe said to Hashem, "Master of the World. The personality of each individual is revealed before you. They do not resemble each other. Appoint a leader who can bear with each individual according to his personality."*¹⁴

12 *Yaaros Devash* 1, *d'rush* 6.

13 *Bamidbar* 27:16.

14 *Rashi* *ibid.*, from *Midrash Tanchuma*.

We see that Chazal expressed Moshe's request that Hashem appoint a leader "who can bear with each individual according to his personality."

However, elsewhere, the Midrash states that Moshe requested that the leader have a different trait: "That he can go act in response to the spirit of others."¹⁵

It would seem that these two Midrashim actually represent two separate traits, although they are two sides of the same coin.

A Jewish leader must be a person who can put up with others and who can relate to each and every person in terms of their makeup and disposition. In this regard, Chazal explain that "a man of spirit" means "that he can go with those who are particular, according to their nature, and also with those who are milder, according to their nature."¹⁶ On the one hand, he must lead with love and compassion. But on the other hand, he must also work to ensure that Torah is adhered to, leading without fear and, where necessary, "go counter to the spirit of others," be they particular or mild in nature.

15 *Yalkut Shimoni, Pinchas 776.*

16 *Ibid.*

MISHNAH 2

שְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הָיָה מְשִׁירֵי כְּנֻסֵת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה
דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חֲסִדִּים:

*Shimon Hatzaddik was among the remnants of the [Anshei
K'nesses Hagedolah]. He would say: The world stands on three
things: Torah, avodah, and gemilus chassidim*

There are three basic pillars for the soul and for service of the Creator. Two relate to *bein adam laMakom* (the service between man and his Creator) and the third to *bein adam l'chaveiro* (the duty of man to his fellow). They are as follows: the intellect within the mind, the emotions within the heart, and a person's character traits. And corresponding to these are the three things upon which the world stands.

A person exerts his intellect to understand Torah, and through this, he sanctifies the *neshamah* (soul) of his intellect.

Avodah (service) is chiefly performed by the heart. In the words of the Gemara: "To serve Him with all your heart: Which is the service that is performed in the heart? It is *tefillah*."¹ When a person serves Hashem with love and fear he sanctifies his heart.

Corresponding to these two, we wear tefillin on the head and arm. The *tefillin shel rosh* serve to ensure that "the *neshamah* in my intellect and my other senses and strengths shall all be subject to His service."²

1 *Taanis* 2a.

2 From the prayer before donning tefillin.

The *tefillin shel yad* serves “to subjugate the desires and thoughts of our hearts to His service.”³

Gemilus chassadim (acts of kindness) are the means by which a person attaches himself to the traits of Hashem: “Just as He is gracious and merciful, so should you be gracious and merciful.”⁴ “Just as He clothes the unclothed...so should you clothe the unclothed. Hashem visits the sick...so should you visit the sick. Hashem comforts mourners...so should you comfort mourners...Hashem buries the dead...so should you bury the dead.”⁵

The three central vessels of the Beis Hamikdash—the *Menorah*, the *Mizbechos*, and the *Shulchan*—correspond to these three domains. They were the center of the *avodah* in the Beis Hamikdash—the twice-daily *Tamid* offering was offered on the outer *Mizbeiach*, the twice daily *Ketores* on the inner *Mizbeiach*, the preparing of the wicks and kindling of the *Menorah* was performed each day, and the *Lechem Hapanim* were replaced each Shabbos and remained on the *Shulchan* throughout the week.

- The *Menorah* corresponds to Torah, as the verse states, “A mitzvah is like a lamp and the Torah is like light.”⁶ The Gemara states, “One who is accustomed to [lighting] a candle will have sons who are Torah scholars.”⁷ *Rashi* explains, “As the verse states, ‘A mitzvah is like a lamp and the Torah is like light.’ Chazal also say, ‘One who wishes to become wise should turn to the south...the way to recall this...the *Menorah* was in the south.’⁸ There are many other sources to this effect.
- The *Mizbechos* correspond to *avodah*. Rabbeinu Yonah states explicitly that the *avodah* mentioned in our Mishnah refers to the service of the *korbanos* and to the service of *tefillah*, which was instituted in place of the *korbanos*, as stated in the Gemara

3 Ibid.

4 *Shabbos* 133b.

5 *Sotah* 14a.

6 *Mishlei* 6:23.

7 *Shabbos* 23b.

8 *Bava Basra* 25b.

in *Berachos* 26b. *Tefillah* also takes the place of the *Ketores*, as the verse says, “Let my prayer stand like incense before You, the lifting of my hands like an afternoon offering.”⁹

- The *Shulchan* represents *gemilus chassadim*, as evident from the Gemara:

*“The Mizbeiach was three amos high...this is the Shulchan which was before Hashem.” [The verse] began by referencing the Mizbeiach but ended by referencing the Shulchan! Rabbi Yochanan and Reish Lakish both said [in explanation]: When the Beis Hamikdash was in existence the Mizbeiach would atone for a person. Now a person’s Shulchan atones for him [Rashi and Tosafos explain that a person’s table (shulchan) atones for him through the mitzvah of hachnasas orchim].*¹⁰

We see that the three major vessels of the Beis Hamikdash correspond to Torah, *avodah*, and *gemilus chassadim*.

I have explained elsewhere that the three *Avos* represented these three concepts.¹¹ Avraham was the pillar of *chessed*, as the verse says, “Give truth to Yaakov, kindness to Avraham.”¹² The Torah records that he established an “*eishel*,” which the Gemara explains refers to an inn that provided food, drink, and accommodation.¹³ Yitzchak was the symbol of *avodah*, for he was bound up as an actual *korban* at *Akeidas Yitzchak*. Yaakov, who was a “wholesome man, one who sat in tents,” was the pillar of Torah.¹⁴

9 *Tehillim* 141:2.

10 *Chagigah* 27a and *Zevachim* 97a.

11 *Minchas Asher, Sichos Al HaTorah, Parashas Vayechi*.

12 *Michah* 7:20.

13 *Kesubos* 8b, with *Rashi*.

14 See *Minchas Asher, Sichos Al HaTorah, Parashas Terumah*, “*V’talmud Torah k’neged kulam*,” and *Parashas Balak*, “*Ohev Hashem shaarei Tzion*,” that all of the above only applies to the revealed and visible service that took place in the *Heichal*. However, inside the *Kodesh Hakodashim* there was only the *Aron* containing the *Luchos* and no other vessel, corresponding to Torah alone.