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Building a Holy Congregation

Perek Dalet, chapter 4, of Pirkei Avot, in particular the first four mishnayot, presents a primer for building a holy society, a Kehila kedosha. The main point of these mishnayot is that a kehila kedosha begins with the development of individuals who are kedoshim.

How can we do this?

An answer to this question is given in the first Mishna. Set up clear goals. Most people toil and strive for wisdom, wealth, power and honor. Ben Zoma teaches that this is correct behavior, but we must understand these goals correctly.

Who is wise? He who learns from every man. That is, a person who keeps an open mind at all times.

Who is wealthy? He who rejoices in what he has. Note: Not one who accepts what he has, but actually rejoices in it.

Who is powerful, and who is truly honorable? The truly strong man is he who conquers his yetzer hara, and the honorable one is he who honors his fellow man. Ben Zoma's guidelines place

the individual on a proper path.

But this is not quite enough. As Jews, we have been given guidelines in the form of mitzvot, commandments, both positive and negative, that keep our feet firmly on that proper path. So, in Mishna two of this perek, Ben Azzai advises: Run to do what may seem to be a minor mitzva, and flee from transgression. He is following a distinguished model here, David Hamelech himself, who states in Tehillim, 119:32, "derech mishpatecha arutz", I will run on the path of Your mitzvot. Remember, says Ben Azzai, a mitzva is something HKBH Himself bids us to do, or desist from doing. What can be of greater benefit to us than to hurry to fulfill the Divine will.

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Ben Azzai adds more advice, in Mishna gimmel, "Al tehi baz lechol adam", do not belittle, or reject any man, or any object. This may be understood as an enhancement of Ben Zoma's question and answer, "Who is deserving of honor? He who honors his fellow man". We

add here – one must honor no matter who that person happens to be. This is a mitzva in the Torah, Vayikra, 19:17. If you see your enemy's donkey fallen under its burden, do not pass him by, but rather help him to unload it. The Gemara Pesachim asks, who is this enemy? The answer, one who has rejected the Torah. Yet HKBH commands us to help him. You see, we may accomplish two things: by helping him with his problem, the overloaded donkey, we are showing him the values by which the man of faith lives. Hopefully, it may bring him back to Torah as well.

Another very important piece of advice follows in Mishna four. Rav Levitas of Yavneh says, “meod meod hevai shfal ruach”, a person must always be very very humble. If a person is indeed humble, he will be able to achieve all the above-mentioned positive qualities. Rav Levitas was actually called “man of Yavneh” because he embodied the principle of humility which was strongly emphasized at that great academy of learning.

The letters of the word, “meod”, mem, alef, dalet begin the names of Moshe, Avraham and David. These three giants of our history embodied the characteristic of humility, and we have a subliminal message here. If you really want to follow the advice given in these four mishnayot of Perek Dalet in Pirke Avot, it is helpful to study the actions and accomplishments of our heroes in TaNaCh. Emulating a strong role model is one of the best ways to learn behavior that leads to kedusha. ■

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