



THE NEW OLD PATH

BY RABBI BENJI LEVY
CEO Of Mosaic United

Ideals and Reality - Two Strands of One Thread

As we near the closing section of the Torah, *Parashat Ha'azinu* begins, 'Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and may the earth hear the words of my mouth' (*Deut. 32:1*). According to Rashi, when issuing warnings to Israel, Moses needs two witnesses, just like for any other warning in Jewish Law, and he appoints the heavens and the earth, as they will continue to bear testimony forever. Using a similar phrase, Isaiah, one of the later prophets, calls on the same two witnesses when exhorting the Jewish people, 'Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth...' (*Isaiah 1:2*).

Midrash Tanchuma picks up on a subtle difference between these two almost identical verses: Moses uses the term 'Give ear [*ha'azinu*],' listen, when addressing the heavens, and 'Hear [*tishma*],' when addressing the earth. Isaiah reverses the verbs, saying 'Hear' to the heavens, and 'Give ear' to the earth (*Tanchuma, Ha'azinu 32:2*).

Rabbi Akiva explains that Moses is comfortable dwelling in the heavens. He ascends twice to receive Torah directly

from God. The Torah refers to him as one who saw God's face. He lives at the time when the Jewish people are at their highest state of spirituality, the giving of the Torah. Isaiah, by contrast, lives during an epoch of rebellion. His main experiences are those acquired from the physical world, in which he toils day and night.

This midrash teaches that *ha'azinu* is a term of closeness and familiarity, as listening is an active way of receiving someone else's words. *Tishma* (hear) is more distant, a more passive act. Moses has a closer connection to the heavens, and Isaiah has a closer connection to the earth. When living a life of Torah, one must strive for a balance between these two spheres. Both Moses and Isaiah exemplify this, addressing both entities despite each being more familiar with one of them.

Perhaps the greatest Talmudic paradigm for this tug between the ideal and the more blurred reality is the ongoing debate between the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel.

When greeting a bride, the House of Shammai will directly let her know if she

has presented herself well. The House of Shammai upholds truth as an absolute value, regardless of the impact it has on a person's feelings, and this represents a life of unqualified ideals. The House of Hillel employs a softer, more real-world approach. Hillel teaches ways that the truth can be shaded in order to minimise embarrassment (BT, Tractate *Ketubbot* 17b).

When a man approaches the House of Shammai and asks to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one leg, the House of Shammai is appalled by the question, for to learn even a part of the Torah takes years of hard work. The House of Hillel, however, recognises the opportunity at hand. Not everyone has the valour to devote extensive periods of time to study Torah. All people, however, deserve to learn whatever Torah they have time for. The House of Hillel seizes the moment and teaches that individual one of the fundamental tenets of the Torah – do not do unto others as you would not want done to yourself, the rest is commentary, go and learn (BT, Tractate *Shabbat* 31a).

The Mishna in Tractate *Avot* teaches that one should 'Raise many disciples' in the realm of Torah (Mishna, Tractate *Avot* 1:1). The House of Shammai believes that due to the greatness of the Torah, disciples should be worthy, and thus only people of great integrity, humility and wisdom are included in this statement. The House of Hillel, however, acknowledges that reality is not always black and white (*Avot DeRabbi Natan* 2:9). Hillel's view is that Torah should be accessible to every Jew.

Though a contemporary person may be shocked by the opinions of the House of Shammai, the Talmud nevertheless always includes this opinion when presenting debates of Jewish law and thought. The House of Shammai reminds us of the ideal towards which we should strive and warns us to take caution against allowing standards to degenerate.

According to tradition, when the Messiah comes halachic rulings will be made according to the House of Shammai, because at that time the world will be on a higher level (Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman, *Kovetz Shiurim*, part 2, p. 112). Rabbi Maurice Lamm states, 'It will not be a new world, a qualitatively different world; rather, it will be this world brought to perfection.'

Though each individual's personality may have a natural leaning towards either idealism or realism, we must each attempt to maintain equilibrium. Some act upon a 'Shammai' approach, ignoring the nuances of reality. However, in order to live in reality, some situations dictate concessions, departures from the ideal. Nevertheless, it is crucial to make sure that yesterday's concessions do not become tomorrow's standards.

The aim is to strike a balance between ideals and reality and to live a full and fulfilling life in the real world, while at the same time always maintaining the focus on Torah and Godly pursuits. ■

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