



Rav Aryeh Levin on Pirkei Avot (5:7): Making Space for Others

“No man ever said to his friend, ‘There is insufficient space for me to sleep in Yerushalayim.’” (Avot 5:7)

Rav Chaim Volozhin interpreted the above Mishnah to mean that people often feel that they are in competition with one another in their professional careers and in pursuit of financial gain. At times, enmity develops between people as a result of thinking that one’s fellow’s financial success is responsible for one’s own financial woes.

But a person of faith recognizes that the amount of money a man is destined to earn is fixed at the beginning of the year (*Beitzah* 16a). No man can even touch a hairsbreadth of what is prepared for his friend. Thus, when one was exposed to the sacred environs of Yerushalayim and entered the hallowed space of the Beit Hamikdash, a Jew was cognizant of this truth and therefore never felt that a friend was pushing him out or, God forbid, that a fellow Jew was the cause of his financial misery. (*Ruach Chaim* 5:7)

FINDING ROOM IN ONE’S HEART

The eminent Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau cited a beautiful insight offered by the Rebbe of

Kotzk, who interpreted this Mishnah homiletically. Those who feel that there is insufficient room are people who want everything for themselves and are not prepared to compromise with anyone else. One who feels that there isn’t adequate space is one who refuses to yield to others. In order to live together, people must make way for one another. They



Rabbi Aryeh Levin zt”l

must lower their heads in humility and make do with little. Then they will have breadth. (cf. *Emet MiKotzk Titzmach*) (Rav Lau on Pirkei Avos, vol. 3, p. 760)

In a similar vein, Rav Chaim Volozhin commented on the custom of taking three steps back at the conclusion of the daily Amidah: “Why do we take three steps back before mentioning the concept of peace? We step backwards to show that we are ready

to retreat from our seemingly intractable position for the sake of peace.” (ohr.edu, The Amidah, part 36)

NOT ENOUGH SEATS

In regard to the above Mishnah in Avot (5:7), Rav Aryeh Levin offered a novel insight by citing the well-known Talmudic passage that tells of the new policy adopted in the study hall of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah. Under his new

leadership, he accepted whoever wanted to study and allowed them to enter the beit midrash, even those whose “inner thoughts did not match his outer appearance.” The Talmud says that at least 400 benches were added that day, and some say 600 benches were newly installed. (Berachot 28a)

Rav Aryeh asked why there was a need for an enormous number of new benches to be placed in the study hall when not nearly that many new students entered. He answered that the change in policy meant that many of the students who now entered the study hall possessed unrefined character traits. Thus, the new students were less accommodating and tolerant of their fellow students. Although it had previously been crowded in the study hall, the students’ loving-kindness and compassion for one another meant that they never felt cramped. Regrettably, the new students had not yet developed the lofty character traits necessary to make space for others, both in a physical and spiritual sense. (*Rav Aryeh Haya Omer*, Raz, p. 326)

THE SHECHINAH RESTS IN THIS HOME

This teaching of Rav Aryeh was evident in the way he lived his life and how he and his wife literally found space for others in their tiny home. The following story captures this exceptional lesson. Professor Benzion Werbin, who served as the head of the Pediatric Department at Hadassah Hospital in the mid-1900s, shared the following moving recollection from his childhood:

“In 1923, when only a boy of ten, I fell and broke my leg. My dear mother rushed me from our home in Be’er Ya’akov to Hadassah Hospital, where I underwent a complicated operation.

“I was obliged to remain in Jerusalem under the doctors’ close supervision. My mother

took me to see Rav Aryeh, who was a cousin of my father, and when Rebbetzin Tzipporah Chanah, Rav Aryeh’s wife, heard about this medical requirement she insisted: ‘You must stay with us!’ So it came to be that I was privileged to stay for a time with the great Tzaddik and his wife.”

“I lived in their home for two whole months, and even though the Rebbetzin had her hands full with their six small children, a few of whom slept in the hallway, I felt at home there. Never have I encountered such a loving and hospitable family. Never did I hear a voice raised in anger, never a word of complaint or sign of irritation from either the Rav or the Rebbetzin.”

“When Rav Aryeh came home each evening after a long day of teaching and study, he would go straight to his wife and greet her, asking how she felt and how her day had been. Then he would turn to his children, caress them, and ask: ‘What did you learn in *cheder* today?’

“Once I had gained a reputation in the medical world and had ample means, I longed to do something for the Tzaddik in the way of financial support to repay him. He invariably replied, ‘I have everything I need, thank God, more than enough! What can I tell you? Money has never meant much to me’...”

In closing, Professor Werbin added, “Now,

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thank God, I have reached my elder years, but a memory I cherish above almost all others is that of those two months I spent in the presence of two saintly souls, Rav Aryeh and his wife, in a home where you could truly say: Here the *Shechinah* resides!" (A Tzaddik for Eternity, Raz, pp. 153–155)

**EXCEPTIONAL HACHNASAT ORCHIM
IN YERUSHALAYIM**

The simple meaning of the miracle of there being ample space enumerated in the Mishnah above (*Pirkei Avot* 5:7) is that everyone had sufficient room due to the generosity of the residents of Yerushalayim, who sought out guests and never expressed impatience, even if someone stayed for several weeks. We find a similar teaching in the Talmud, which states that when people love each other deeply, they can lie together on the edge of a sword, but if the love between them wanes, then even

a bed ten cubits wide is not large enough for them (*Sanhedrin* 7a).

This mishnah in *Avot* teaches us that when there is room in the heart, there is room in the home. When there is love and affection among people, then no one ever tells his fellow, "I have no place for you to stay." ■



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