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Pirkei Avot: Staying Connected

*...Hillel would say: **Do not separate yourself from the community.** Do not believe in yourself until the day you die. Do not judge your fellow until you have stood in his place...*

Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 2:4

Connect to Yourself

“Do not separate yourself from the community.” Beyond the simple meaning of this *mishnah*, which prohibits a person from separating himself from others in his community in times of sorrow, there is an inner-dimension explanation that makes this statement relevant within the individual. Within his soul, every person has an entire community that he cannot abandon. Even Adam, who was alone in the world, had the choice of separating himself from this “inner” community or joining it. What is this inner-dimension community?

In the psyche, every person has a conscious plane and a deeper plane of which he is not conscious. Psychology calls this plane the subconscious. This can be, for example, a series of previous experiences that were suppressed in the depths of the soul and forgotten. Chassidut relates to an unconscious plane that lies above the conscious plane and is therefore known as the *super-consciousness*. These are spiritual experiences that have not yet manifested in our consciousness. Like the subconscious, it is possible to reach the superconscious through inner contemplation in the soul, for it is simply above us.

There are three main powers in the super-conscious: Faith, Pleasure, and Will. Faith is the highest, followed by Pleasure and then Will, which also serves as a medium between the superconscious and the conscious powers of the soul—the intellect and emotions.

A person who is immersed in the experiences of his superconscious can easily ignore the conscious part of his soul. Experiencing the superconscious faculties of the soul like Faith or Pleasure without regard for the conscious faculties can be detrimental. For example, a person who believes (Faith) that he is the most talented artist in the world, may continue to cling to this faith even when it has been proven to him that this is not the case. A person on a diet, who suddenly craves something sweet (Pleasure), may suppress his intellect to allow himself to enjoy his sweets without distraction.

Don't Separate from your Consciousness

When living alone, an individual tends to feel that he does not owe anyone anything. This is not true, however, when living in a community. Every action taken by one member of the community influences others and one must take the needs of others

into account. The same is true for the soul: A person immersed in the experiences of his superconscious, living only for himself, is like a person alone in this world. On the other hand, a person who connects his Faith, Pleasure, and Will to his conscious faculties—intellect and emotions—is likened to an individual living in a community.^[1]

This is true in general, and is especially pertinent to the service of God. Many religious people have a propensity to detach matters of religion from their daily lives. But in truth, the will to connect to God by means of Torah and mitzvah-performance is embedded deep in every Jew and must be given the attention it deserves. Just as special psychological terms have been developed over the years to define the needs of the natural soul and discuss them, so we must create special terms that connect the intellect to the emotions so that we can define and discuss the Jewish nature found in the needs of the Divine soul—prayer, Torah and mitzvah-performance—in order to connect spiritual faith to grounded reality.

Participate in the Hardships of the Community

“Do not separate yourself from the community.” In his explanation of this *mishnah*, Rashi writes, “Do not separate yourself from the community, but rather, participate in their hardships so that you will rejoice with them.” From this, we learn that the main expression of participating with the community is in times of hardship, and from this participation in the hardship, one will merit to rejoice along with the community in times of joy.

There is something deeper about sorrow than joy. The Talmud reveals that God is happy in His outer realms, but in His innermost realm, He allows Himself to cry for “the pride of Israel that was taken from them and given to the nations of the world.”^[2] We learn from this that God’s participation in our sorrow requires the revelation of a much deeper place in Him than His participation in our joy. Accordingly, in times of trouble, we see who our true friends—those deeply connected to us—really are.

Rashi continues his explanation as follows: “All those who do not participate with the community do not witness the comforting of the community and will never see a sign of blessing.” Thus, those who do participate in the sorrow of the community do merit “a sign of blessing.” This sign of blessing is the same as, “Blessing dwells only upon that which is concealed from the eye.”^[3] Just as our participation in the community’s sorrow emanated from a deep, concealed place in our heart, so, as a reward, we merit blessing in a deep, concealed place.

Every person has external assets and internal, concealed assets—his character traits. We do not see them externally, but they certainly exist and are the main means by which he or she will acquire external assets.

By participating in the sorrow of others, our internal assets are blessed. Some people are afraid of getting involved in the sorrows of others. They fear that it will drain them emotionally, feeling that they are not strong enough to be exposed to the weaknesses of others. One of the characteristics of the tzaddik is his ability to fully

participate in the sorrow of others as if it was his own—and even more than if it was his own sorrow. It is upon us to practice more and more participation and involvement in the sorrows of those around us. By doing so, we will be blessed with heightened, deep, and even super-natural spiritual awareness.

[1] The inner explanation directly dovetails with the simple explanation. A person connected to the conscious levels of his soul, a person whose intellect leads his emotions, will succeed in connecting to his surroundings with relative ease. On the other hand, a person sunk in the experiences of his superconscious will find it difficult to connect to others. This is the danger of drug use—even mild drugs. One is liable to sink into himself and disconnect from his surroundings.

[2] *Chagigah* 5b.

[3] *Baba Metzia* 42a.