

Acharei Mot/ Kedoshim

The Decline of Loyalty

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It is literally impossible to reduce Judaism to one saying or one quick maxim. The study of G-d's will is too intricate, while mitzvot are too sweeping to be condensed into one proverb. Yet, Hillel the scholar found a way to summarize all religion within one succinct statement. He was visited by a Gentile who desired an "express conversion". As the gemara in Shabbat (31) describes, he sought a "drive-thru" conversion lasting no longer than the duration he could stand on one foot (presumably he wasn't even a yoga master). He had been previously rebuffed by Shammai who dismissed this offensive and ridiculous proposal. Embracing this potential Jew, Hillel condensed all of religion into one famous line: "don't treat others in a manner in which you, yourself, would not want to be treated". Effectively reworking the Torah's dictum of "Love your neighbor like yourself", Hillel instructed this potential convert that excellence in interpersonal relationships can serve as a portal to overall religious success.

This well-known story reminds us that moral life should be very simple. If we treat people with respect and afford them the dignity we sense in ourselves, ethical behavior should feel natural. You can divide the world into two groups: those who respect others and those who disrespect others. Those who respect others generally enjoy deeper relationships and greater emotional well-being. Hillel pivoted the entire Torah upon this

rather simple ability to treat others with dignity and worthiness.

As comprehensive as this doctrine may be, it only covers half of Judaism. Treating others with respect certainly enables the broader world of relationships and interpersonal duties known as *bein adam lachaveiro*. What is unclear is how, exactly, this value facilitates the ritual aspects of religion or *bein adam la'Makom*. How was this convert expected to expand Hillel's one-sentence program about respecting others into tefillin, Temple ceremony or the dietary laws? Hillel's convert was searching for one unitary idea which would encompass the entirety of religion. Hillel only provided partial coverage.

Rashi (in his comments to the Talmud) already sensed this problem and quoted a source from Mishlei 27 which refers to G-d as a friend. By implication, if G-d isn't merely a Creator or a Redeemer but also a friend, excellence at friendship should inspire both interpersonal sensitivity but also obedience to Divine will. Excelling at friendship will encourage greater subservience to the desires of our "Heavenly friend".

In what way is G-d considered our friend and how does this propel religious experience? So many aspects of friendship are uniquely human and have little bearing upon our religious compliance. Viewing G-d as a friend certainly expands our expectations from Him: friends empathize, are generally good listeners, are honest with us, and support us unconditionally during difficult times. It is reassuring to expect these benefits from G-d as a friend. However, how can our friendship with G-d drive our own religious behavior? How does this relationship of friendship with G-d serve as a portal for our own religious expression?

At the core of human friendship lies the trait of loyalty. Friends are loyal to one another based on past allegiances and past shared experiences. Interacting with, or even assisting those with whom we share common interest isn't an expression of loyalty. It is natural and reasonable to share experiences and resources with people whose interests overlap with our own. Loyalty compels dedication to people whose interests are discrepant with our own. We may not share common interests or similar lifestyles, but do share past experiences and a previous relationship. Though we may no longer share interests, loyalty demands commitment to one another and dedication to each other's needs.

Ideally, religious experience should not be based principally upon loyalty, but primarily upon passion, enthusiasm and inspiration. Ideally, our own interest to serve G-d should overlap with His interest in us serving Him. This overlapping of "wills" represents the high point of religion. However, everyone experiences barren moments of spiritual emptiness during which it is difficult to generate an inner religious spark. During those blank moments we serve out of loyalty rather than out of passion. We may not feel inspired to serve G-d, but we can certainly feel loyal to a G-d who has breathed life into us and supported us since we entered this world. Though we feel spiritually hollow, we can feel morally obligated to the G-d of our fathers who has shielded Jews throughout our tumultuous history. In the absence of passion, we can fall back upon friendship and loyalty.

Loyalty doesn't only brace our religious experience, it also enriches us as human beings. Loyal people conduct noble lives of commitment, duty and responsibility. Loyalty helps us live beyond the moment and its immediate conveniences. It bridges us to our past, to the relationships which shaped us, and to the

people with whom we have shared the voyage of our life. Loyalty showers our otherwise momentary lives with the dignity of purpose, past and of shared journey.

Sadly, loyalty is in steep decline in the modern world. Institutions which, in past generations fostered loyalty, are themselves undergoing rapid transformations. Loyalty to the workplace is vanishing in a world in which workers change their jobs, upon average, once every four years. Loyalty to political policies has become extinct in the modern circus of "personality politics". Democracies which showcase personalities rather than policies, render party loyalty pointless. In the past, adults were loyal to their "backgrounds"- the communities and local institutions of their youth. Our modern world is too portable for these loyalties. We move too quickly and too far away to maintain "local loyalties". Ideally, marriage and family are each founded upon loyalty, but each of these institutions has become dismembered in a world of reconfigured spousal and family identities. Traditional institutions of loyalty have become modern turnstiles of transience. Modern Man inhabits a world of constantly shifting quicksand.

In place of actual loyalties, society offers us counterfeit loyalties- the type of loyalty which doesn't carry genuine commitment or constant obligation. Some people are loyal to sports teams which they have followed for years. This mock loyalty is purely recreational and doesn't carry any substantive obligation or responsibility. Consumer loyalty entices customers to repeatedly purchase similar brands. This bogus form of loyalty isn't moral but transactional- we continue to purchase a brand because we sense greater value or even greater psychological benefit. In a world of vanishing loyalty, society has substituted hoaxes for actual loyalty.

We all stand in the shoes of that original convert. We know more about religion than he did, and have performed mitzvot more routinely than he did. However, regarding Hillel's lesson of loyalty, we are all converts who require education in the values of trust and loyalty. In a world of dwindling faith, loyalty can teach us trust. In a spiritually hollow society loyalty to G-d offers religious durability. In a world of loneliness, loyalty to G-d can germinate into loyalty to people and to past. Loyalty can provide connectedness.