PIRQE ABOT 1:1: On Justice and Education

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The first Mishna of Pirque Abot brings us back to the time of Anshe Keneset Hagedola, the Great Assembly, which was formed when the Jews returned from Babylon to Jerusalem around the 5th century before the common era.

With this Mishnah, the Great Assembly seems to have had three strategic goals. We will explain two of them:

First, issuing a wake-up call to the Jewish judges. The legal stature of a country, and the level of justice in any society, is measured by the moral level of its judges. If judges in a society are bribable, corrupt, or even negligent, that society will not succeed. In this regard, Anshe Keneset Hagedola did not need to mention the honesty expected from Jewish judges, a trait that had always been a given with the judges of 'Am Israel. Rather, their focus was on the level of care and diligence judges should have when issuing a verdict. They advised the judges to be measured in justice (□□□□□□ □□□ □□□□), which means that they should not rush, should examine all the evidence and testimony carefully and only then arrive at their final conclusion.

Rabbi Duran adds something very interesting in his commentary: the fact that we should not rush to a verdict does not mean that justice should be delayed unnecessarily. For example, if all the evidence is clear, decisive and evident, there is no need for undue delay. In fact, if a judge delays a verdict when the evidence is absolutely clear, it would be a corruption of justice. Deliberately slow justice is corrupt justice.

Second, the men of the Great Assembly discussed the issue of education. Rabbi Duran explains that this has always been debated among Jewish sages. A segment of Rabbis opined that only certain qualified persons should be accepted as students. For example, some centuries later, the great sage Shammai (50 BCE – 30 CE) said he would only accept an intelligent, humble student, from a good family and in good financial situation (this last requirement was meant to ensure

the student would not leave his studies prematurely needing to seek sustenance). Later on, Rabban Gamliel also argued for accepting as students only those persons who are honest and have integrity (□□□□ □□□□), because a dishonest person could use his knowledge of Torah to deceive people, which would be deemed a desecration of God's name. On the other hand, Hillel and, a little later, Ribbi El'azar ben 'Azariah, thought that Torah should be taught also to persons with imperfect past or those who did not have outstanding character traits, because what tends to happen is that the studying of Tora transforms the student for the better.

In brief, Jewish sages seem to always have had this debate between those who thought that the Tora (and the knowledge and prestige that come to those who study it) might be misused by students who lack the necessary moral prerequisites, while others believed that the possibility of abuse is remote given that the Tora is not informational but rather educational, it is knowledge that transforms us into better human beings. One could say that, eventually, the latter group won the day. As the Mishna says "…and raise numerous students…"

Rabbi Duran concludes from this Mishna an idea that reminds me of the concept of natural selection. Rabbi Duran said that an institution should generally accept 100 average students if it wants to produce 10 outstanding students. And from these 10 outstanding students, it should expect that only one or two will be truly prodigious, the rabbinic leaders of each generation. And, therefore, in order to produce the one or two leaders that each generation needs, it is necessary to not restrict too much the admission of students to rabbinical academies..