



Volume 3. Issue 41

Social Class System

One of the main themes of the *Mishnayot* that we learnt this week is the apparent class system in Jewish society. For example, the *Mishnah* (4:1) lists ten genealogical classes of people who returned to *Eretz Yisrael* after the Babylonian exile and explains which of those classes are allowed to intermarry and which are not. The *Mishnah* (3:12) lists those women which are forbidden to marry *Kohanim* and the *Kohen Gadol*. The *Mishnayot* (3:13 and 4:8) deal with *Mamzerim* – who, despite being the children of two Jewish parents, are excluded from marrying into the congregation. In almost all of these cases, one's status follows directly from the status of one's mother or father (3:12).

Some of these restrictions on marriage still apply today. *Kohanim* are still prohibited from marrying divorcees. There are many sad cases of *Mamzerim*, who, through no fault of their own, are severely limited in who they can marry. It seems we are locked into a social class due to accident of birth.

This theme is also evident in this week's *parsha*, *Bamidbar*, which describes the encampment of the tribes of *Bnei Yisrael* around the *Mishkan* in the desert¹. There is a great rigidity about the encampment – each individual's distance and direction from the *Mishkan* was purely a function of their lineage. Those who were lucky enough to be born a *Kohen* or a *Levi* would camp closest to the *Mishkan* and would be privileged to serve in the *Mishkan*.

This seems quite foreign to our 'modern' notions of equality. Western society believes in the idea that everyone should have equal opportunities. There is almost a consensus that in an ideal world, there will be an egalitarian society based on merit and that no-one's opportunities in life should be limited by their status.

However lets take a closer look at the justice of this notion of equal opportunity. People are born with different talents and skills which limit their ultimate

status. While we can learn new skills and improve ourselves, many of our attributes are ours from birth, just like our lineage.

How can we reconcile our Western notions of equality with Judaism's apparent class system. One answer is highlighted by the *Gemara*. The *Rabbanim* teach us that honours are to be bestowed according to a person's accomplishments in life and nothing else - "The *Mamzer* who is a *Talmid Chacham* takes priority over the *Kohen Gadol* who is ignorant" (*Horayot* 13a). *Hashem* takes into consideration one's circumstances when assessing one's achievements and ultimately one's merit. We are ultimately assessed based on the extent to which we have reached our potential.

R' Moshe Feinstein touches on this issue in a comment on the *Rashi* to *Shmot* (6:26). In this *passuk* Aaron's name is mentioned before Moshe's name. *Rashi* notes that sometimes in the *Torah* Moshe's name precedes Aharon's name and sometimes Aharon's name precedes Moshe's name. *Rashi* comments that this shows that *Moshe* and *Aharon* were equally great. R' Moshe Feinstein asks how this can possibly be true. The *Torah* itself testifies that Moshe was the greatest prophet of all time (*Bamidbar* 12:7). R' Moshe Feinstein answers that just like *Moshe*, *Aharon* achieved the absolute maximum of his potential. *Hashem* measures our merit based purely on how well we achieve our potential taking into account our unique circumstances.

On the one hand, this is quite a reassuring idea. We will not be judged based on how we compare to other people because we all have different circumstances. On the other hand, this can be quite daunting. We are only judged based on how we measure up compared to our own potential. However we can never know what our potential is and when we have reached it. No matter what we have achieved, there is always more that can be done.

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¹ Some of these ideas are based on 'Jewish Meritocracy' - an article by Rabbi Noson Weisz, *parsha Bamidbar* 2006. (see: www.aish.com/torahportion/mayanot/Jewish_Meritocracy.asp)

Revision Questions

קידושין ג' י' – ד' י'

- What is the law regarding a case where a man say to a woman “I was *mekadesh* you!” and:
 - She denies it?
 - She say it was not her but her daughter that he was *mekadesh*? (ג' י')
- What is the law regarding a case where a man say to a woman “I was *mekadesh* your daughter” and she say it was not her daughter but herself that he was *mekadesh*? (ג' י"א)
- Complete the following rules and explain: (ג' י"ב)
 - _____ כל מקום שיש קידושין ואין עבירה
 - _____ כל מקום שיש קידושין ויש עבירה
 - _____ כל מקום שאין קידושין ויש עבירה
- According to *R' Tarfon*, how can one “*metaher*” a *mamzer*? (ג' י"ג)
- What were the ten categories of family that returned from *Bavel*? (ד' י"א)
- Who can *charurei* marry? (ד' י"א)
- What are *shtukei*? (ד' י"ב)
- What are *asufei*? (ד' י"ב)
- Regarding which relationship does the *Tana Kama* and *R' Yehuda* argue? (ד' י"ג)
- How many generation back does a *kohen* need to check in his fiancé’s past when marrying a *kohenet*? Or marrying an *yisraelit*? (ד' י"ד)
- Regarding the previous question to which case is marrying a *leviya* compared? (ד' י"ד)
- When checking the lineage, if an ancestor had one of which five professions is it then not necessary to continue checking further back? (ד' י"ה)
- Which of a *bat chalal* or a *bat chalalah* can marry a *kohen*? (ד' י"ו)
- According to *R' Eliezer ben Ya'akov* when is the daughter of a *ger* forbidden from marrying a *kohen*? (ד' י"ז)
- Is a parent believed when they say that their child is a *mamzer*? (ד' י"ח)
- If a man sent a *shaliach* to marry off his (minor) daughter, but then went and decided to marry of his daughter himself, what is the law if the *shaliach* married off the daughter first? (ד' י"ט)
- What is the law regarding a case where a couple went overseas, yet the man returned with children claiming that his wife that he left with bore these children and then passed away? (ד' י"י)

Local Shiurim

Sunday -Thursday
Between mincha & ma'ariv
Mizrachi Shul

Friday & Shabbat
10 minutes before mincha
Mizrachi Shul

Audio Shiurim on-line!

- 613.org/mishnah.html
- www.shemayisrael.com/mishna/

www.mishnahyomit.com

Next Week's Mishnayot...

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	שבת קודש
20 th May כ"ה אייר	21 st May כ"ו אייר	22 nd May כ"ז אייר	23 rd May כ"ח אייר	24 th May כ"ט אייר	25 th May א' סיון	26 th May ב' סיון
Kidushin 4:11-12	Kidushin 4:13-14	Bava Kama 1:1-2	Bava Kama 1:3-4	Bava Kama 2:1-2	Bava Kama 2:3-4	Bava Kama 2:5-6

