

“In a place where there is no person, strive to be one”. The Talmud

It’s 18 years ago. I am a new attending physician, finding my way in the field of Developmental Pediatrics. Depending on the situation, I must function as a pediatrician, psychiatrist, psychologist, teacher, social worker, coach, advisor, or counselor. I am in my office in The Children’s Hospital in Philadelphia, reading the journal, Pediatrics. In this journal, quotes or interesting facts are added at the end of an article to fill the page.

“In a place where there is no person, strive to be one”. From the Talmud. This quote makes me stop. I re-read it. I cut it out and tack it to the bulletin board over my desk. The Talmud – it is an important Jewish text – not the Bible but somehow related. That is all I know.

It’s 10 years ago. I have been an attending for 8 years. I love my work with children and families who face the challenge of developmental differences. It is interesting, frustrating, satisfying, heart-wrenching, and heart-warming. My work has stretched every facet of my character and intellect, and in many situations, decisions about what to do have been difficult or controversial. Over the years, this quote has remained above my desk. It reminds me that I needn’t do what someone else can do better, but if I can help when no one else available, I must do so.

It’s 5 years ago. There is a new rabbi at the synagogue, and we are chatting at the summer picnic. He is friendly and approachable. He makes it clear that he is here to help us on our Jewish journeys, regardless of where they begin. I tell him about this quote from the Talmud and ask that if he should come across it in his reading, I would really like to know more about it. I

guess I knew about as much about rabbis as I did about the Talmud. I assumed they sat around reading Jewish texts all day and congregants like me did not.

It's 1 year ago. I am on the synagogue Board of Directors, attending a strategic planning retreat. As part of an "ice-breaking" activity we are each given a ring of index cards with quotes from Jewish texts. We are asked to pick out the one that is most meaningful to us, and explain our choice to the group.

"In a place where there is no leader – strive to be a leader" Talmud Berachot 63a . This time there is more to go on, and this time, I know it is my job, not the Rabbi's, to find out more.

With apologies to those of you who know this, here is what I've learned. There are 24 books of Hebrew scripture. The 5 books of Moses make up the Torah. The next 19 books, made up of 8 books of the Prophets and 11 books of Ketuvim or writings, make up the rest of the Bible. For centuries, Judaism's leading Rabbis passed down their interpretations and teachings from the Torah in oral form from teacher to student, from generation to generation. Around 200 CE, Rabbi Y'hudah Ha-Nasi compiled the interpretation of all of the laws from the Torah into a text called the Mishna ("teachings") to prevent the "Oral Law" from being lost over time. The Mishna re-organizes the laws of the Torah by topics or categories, called sedarim (orders). The 6 orders of the Mishna include Zeraim (seeds), Moed (holidays), Nashim (women), Nezikin (damages), Kodashim (hallowed things) and Toharot (ritual purity). These 6 orders are further divided into 63 sections or tractates. Over the ensuing centuries, Rabbinic commentary

about the laws in the Mishna continued to accumulate. The commentary itself is known as the Gemara. However, most Jews know the Gemara as The Talmud, a text that is organized in the form of a law from the Mishna, followed by the related Rabbinic commentary. The first Talmud was the Jerusalem Talmud, from about the year 400 CE. The Talmud was rewritten to include the commentary of later Rabbis. The revised version, known as the Babylonian Talmud, was completed around 700 CE, and this is the Talmud we use today.

The quote “In a place where there is no person” first appears in the Mishna, near the end of the order Nezikin (damages), in the tractate called Pirkei Avot. Pikei Avot means wisdom or words of the fathers or sages. It contains the sayings of the first “fathers” of Judaism, the rabbis who became the central teachers of Judaism after the destruction of the second temple. Unlike every other tractate of the Mishna, Pirkei Avot does not relate to the order in which it appears. In fact, it doesn’t contain any laws at all, just wise advice. This makes it unique. Pirkei Avot is also unique in that it has no Gemara. How to apply the wisdom of Pirkei Avot is left to each of us.

In chapter 2, verse 6 of Pirke Avot, Rabbi Hillel says “Where there are no worthy persons, strive to be a worthy person”. A very similar statement appears in the order Zeraim (seeds), in the gemara of the tractate called Berachot (Blessings). I guess the later Rabbis couldn’t help but discuss this gem of wisdom. There it reads slightly differently - “Where there is no man, strive to be a man” or “In a place where there is no leader, strive to be a leader”. Abaye (a great Rabbi of the later Talmudic period) says that it must also mean that where there already is a leader, do not try to be one. Rashi, a

famous Biblical commentator of the Middle Ages, further interprets the quote to mean that if there are no other persons available to respond to the needs of the community, then you must do it. But, if there are others, then you should devote yourself to study.

In Bamidbar, G-d asks individuals to be leaders, and these leaders ask their tribesmen to line up, fall into place, and be counted. A massive organizational undertaking has to happen if the Israelites are going to get beyond the far shore of the Red Sea, let alone to the Promised Land. Leaders have to be leaders and the rest have to line up and follow the plan. When I think of this quote in relation to this Parasha, it seems almost miraculous that everyone accepts their roles without discussion. No one says, “Are you kidding ? Count all of these people ? Hey, how come he gets to be a Levite ? I want to be a Levite, too. What, no land ? How come I don’t get any land ? Lets face it – we would be shocked if a modern-day group of this size worked together without controversy.

This quote reminds us of the need to recognize when leadership is called for, but also to recognize when it’s best to quietly be one of the team. Even after 18 years, I know that I have room to improve at making this distinction, in my profession, and in other aspects of my life as well.

Maimonides says that Pirke Avot is instruction given to mankind to stimulate moral and intellectual virtues. It is certainly a Jewish literary classic. In fact, it is the only tractate of the Talmud which appears in our Siddur. Coincidentally, Pirke Avot is typically read from Pesach until

Shavuot. I hope I've given you enough reasons to read Pirke Avot if you have not, or to look at it again, for a new insight, if you have.

Worthiness, study, leadership, humanity, humility and caring for the needs of the community. So much guidance for a profession, and for a life, in one simple sentence !

“In a place where there are no human beings, try to be one”. As Rabbi Hillel *also* said, “The rest is commentary. Now go and learn”.