

The Dee Pirkei Avot Project

שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן שֶׁטַח אוֹמֵר, הָיִי מְרַבֵּה לַחֲקוֹר אֶת הָעֵדִים, וְהָיִי זָהִיר בְּדַבָּרְיָךְ, שֶׁמָּא מִתּוֹכְכֶם יִלְמְדוּ לְשַׁקֵּר:

Shimon ben Shetach used to say: be thorough in the interrogation of witnesses, and be careful with your words, lest from them they learn to lie.

Pirkei Avot is a fascinating text. I like to think of it as our greatest rabbinic leaders giving us the one piece of advice they want the world to hear. Ted Lasso wrote his "Believe" on a poster in his locker room and in the hearts of his viewers, and this was the opportunity for the Tannaim of the Mishna to do the same for us. In the 9th Mishna of the first chapter we find Shimon Ben Shetach dispensing advice that really is for rabbinic judges rather than the person on the street (and his *zug*, Yehuda Ben Tabbai does the same in the preceding Mishna). It is interesting that they chose to focus on this small elite group rather than take this opportunity to speak to a wider audience. Perhaps they were addressing a need of their times. But I firmly believe their advice is just as relevant to me and you today, as it was to the rabbinic leadership of the that generation.

In the Mishna Shimon Ben Shetach warns judges to be careful to thoroughly interrogate witnesses in court and to choose their language carefully when doing so. Rashi, inspired by Avot d'Rabbi Natan, the companion volume to Mishna Avot, explains that this is to ensure the witnesses won't deduce from the questions of the judges what they are looking to hear and calculate a way to influence their verdict in a dishonest way.

Shimon Ben Shetach understood the power of words. He implored judges, and I believe us as well, to choose our words very carefully. Because words can build worlds and words can destroy them. In the words of Rabbi Sacks zt"l, "Words create. Words communicate. Our relationships are shaped, for good or bad, by language. Much of Judaism is about the power of words to make or break worlds." In our digital age where our words have more reach than ever before, it feels like Shimon Ben Shetach was speaking directly to us.

Discussion Points:

Have you ever been the victim of destructive words? How did it feel?
In the context of this message, do you think social media can be used for the positive as well as the negative? Do you think the potential for good outweighs the bad?
How will you use words this week to heal and to build?

Idea by Rabbi Daniel Rose, friend and colleague of Rabbi Leo Dee

לעילוי נשמת:

לאה בת רפאל הכהן וציפורה
מאיה אסתר בת הרב אריה מרדכי ולאה
רינה מרים בת הרב אריה מרדכי ולאה



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