



Shabbat Table Discussions

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PEER PRESSURE



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Sponsored by Lauren & David Lunzer in loving memory of J. Peter & Shoshana Lunzer z”l

Sampson Davis, George Jenkins and Rameck Hunt grew up in a poor neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. They lived in an environment where they were constantly exposed to crime and other negative influences and attended a school where "high marks could open you up to ridicule, to name-calling, to being made an outsider." The three of them decided to make a pact that they would stick together and positively influence each other to get good grades, attend college and medical school and become doctors. The success story of these doctors is documented in a book they wrote titled *We Beat the Street: How a Friendship Pact Led to Success*, (Puffin Press, 2006).

A survey on peer pressure by the Survelum Public Data Bank revealed that over 82% of those who responded, were influenced by peer pressure as adolescents. More than 56% of them felt that peer pressure worked both ways. It sometimes affected them positively and sometimes negatively, depending on the situation.¹ A number of studies have shown that people will think or behave differently in order to gain or maintain acceptance among a group of peers.² Pressure to conform differs among age groups and is most prominent among early and middle adolescents (7th to 9th grade).³ Our ability to influence others and to be influenced by them can present certain challenges and opportunities that we should keep in mind.

Let's look at the following scenarios:

CASE ONE	Ari and Ben have been best friends since they were two years old. Now that they are older, Ari often feels pressured to engage in mischievous activities when he is with Ben. While Ari wants to keep his best friend, he also wants to stay out of trouble. What should he do?
CASE TWO	Karen has only been driving for a year and while she may legally offer rides to her friends, she doesn't like to drive them out of fear that they will pressure her to drive more aggressively than what she is comfortable with. One day, as she is driving to an event, she sees friends who are going to the same event waiting for the city bus. Should she offer them a ride?
CASE THREE	The Friedmans have been living in a community for a number of years and are very happy with their community and their circle of friends. They were recently offered an opportunity to move to a different community and take a leadership role there. Moving to this community also provides financial benefits as it is much more affordable. While they are excited about the opportunity and the growth that may come with such an opportunity, they consider themselves blessed that their children chose to befriend positive influences in their current community and there is no guarantee that this may happen again. How should they weigh each of the factors?

Examining the sources

The *Mishnayot* (plural of *Mishna*) in *Pirkei Avot* discuss the role of friends and neighbors:

Yehoshua ben Perachiah states: Establish a teacher, acquire a friend, and judge all people favorably. Nitai Ha'Arbeli states: Distance yourself from a bad neighbor, don't befriend the wicked and don't despair from suffering.

Avot 1:-6-7

יהושע בן פרחיה אומר עשה לך רב וקנה לך חבר והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות. נתאי הארבלי אומר הרחק משכן רע ואל תתחבר לרשע ואל תתיאש מן הפורענות.

אבות א:ו-ז

Questions for the Table

- Why does the Mishna state "acquire a friend" and not 'find a friend'?
- Yehoshua ben Perachiah doesn't teach us what type of friend to acquire and Nitai Ha'Arbeli teaches to stay away from bad neighbors and people. Why is there no specific stress on finding good friends and neighbors?

Based on these *Mishnayot*, Rambam, in his *Mishneh Torah* discusses the influence that one's friends and community can have on a person:

A person's thoughts and actions are naturally influenced by friends, and they will adopt the ways of their neighbors. They should therefore consistently befriend the righteous and live among the wise, to learn from their ways. They should distance themselves from the wicked who walk in darkness to avoid learning from their ways ... Similarly, if one is in a place whose way of life is deplorable and whose people do not act righteously, one should go to a place whose people are righteous and whose deeds are commendable. If all of the known lands have a deplorable way of life, like in our times, or one cannot go to a place whose way of life is commendable, because of danger or illness, one should separate oneself from society as it states (Eicha 3:28) "He sits alone and remains silent."

Rambam, Hilchot Dei'ot 6:1

דרך ברייתו של אדם להיות נמשך בדעותיו ובמעשיו אחר ריעיו וחביריו ונוהג כמנהג אנשי מדינתו. לפיכך צריך אדם להתחבר לצדיקים ולישב אצל החכמים תמיד כדי שילמוד ממעשיהם. ויתרחק מן הרשעים ההולכים בחשך כדי שלא ילמוד ממעשיהם ... וכן אם היה במדינה שמנהגותיה רעים ואין אנשיה הולכים בדרך ישרה ילך למקום שאנשיה צדיקים ונוהגים בדרך טובים. ואם היו כל המדינות שהוא יודעם ושומע שמועתן נוהגים בדרך לא טובה כמו זמנינו. או שאינו יכול ללכת למדינה שמנהגותיה טובים מפני הגייסות או מפני החולי ישב לבדו יחידי כענין שנאמר ישב בדד וידום.

רמב"ם הל' דעות ו:א

Questions for the Table

- Why does Rambam only present two extremes in describing people with whom one should interact with? Most people, and societies, are neither absolutely righteous, nor absolutely evil. Would he recommend interacting with someone who is generally a good person with some negative traits or vice versa?
- Why is the option of isolating oneself only suggested in extenuating circumstances? It would seem to be the ultimate fail proof way of protecting oneself. Is there anything wrong with choosing such a lifestyle?

Rambam sheds more light on his opinion in his *Commentary on the Mishna*:

[The Rabbis] said "acquire a friend" using the language of purchase and not 'find yourself a friend' or 'befriend someone' or something similar. This is to emphasize that one should actively obtain a friend who will be a positive influence in all areas ... as the ethicists say "don't choose friends based on your character traits but rather on their character traits," and when every friend relies on this approach, each one will strive to complement the other's wishes.

Rambam, Commentary on the Mishna, Avot 1:6

ואמרו וקנה לך חבר הוציאו בלשון קנייה ולא אמר עשה לך חבר או התחבר לחברים וכיוצא בזה והכוונה שראוי לאדם שיקנה לעצמו חבר על כל פנים כדי שייתקנו בו כל עניניו ... כמו שיאמרו אנשי המוסר כאשר תתחבר אל תתחבר לפי מידותיך אלא התחבר לפי מידות חברך וכאשר יסמוך כל אחד משני החברים על זה הציווי תהיה כוונת כל אחד מהם להשלים רצון חברו.

פירוש המשנה להרמב"ם אבות א:ו

Question for the Table

- According to Rambam, the *Mishnayot* address the importance of finding good friends. How does this explain why isolating oneself is not an ideal option?

There is another comment on these *Mishnayot* that provides insight into the position of Rambam:

["Distance yourself from a bad neighbor"] means to say that even if the neighbor already lives near you and you can't move away, you should try to distance yourself as much as possible since he/she is a bad person and they are not interested in repentance or ethical teachings, there is no way to positively influence him/her ... and don't become close to a bad person who is not your neighbor, even if they are not extremely bad, one should not befriend them because you cannot constantly be with them, and it is unlikely that you can positively influence them and they might negatively influence you.

Commentary of R. Matityahu HaYitzhari, Avot 1:7

וביאור דבריו הם אע"פ שהוא כבר שוכן אצלך ואי אפשר לך להפרד ממנו, הרחק כפי מה שאיפשר כיון שהוא רע, כלומר שהוא בקצה האחרון שהתשובה ולמוד המוסר נמנעו ממנו, ולא יועילו לך להישירו אמריך הטובים ... ולרשע שאינו שכן אל תתחבר אליו ואע"פ שאינו בקצה האחרון מן הרוע, לפי שכיון שאינו תמיד שוכן אצלך לא תחזיריהו למוטב ושמא יזיק.

פירוש רבי מתתיהו היצהרי אבות א:ז

Questions for the Table

- What does R. Matityahu say about interacting with people who are not bad people but sometimes influence others negatively?
- When we decide who to be friendly with, how do we factor in our ability to positively influence them?

Case #1

In Case #1, Ari is confronted with the challenge of remaining friendly with Ben without being negatively influenced. While the previous sources indicate the concerns of being friendly with people who are negative influences, the Mishna states:

Hillel states: Be one of the students of Aharon; love peace, pursue peace. Love humanity and bring them closer to Torah.

Avot 1:12

הלל אומר הוי מתלמידיו של אהרן אוהב שלום ורודף שלום אוהב את הבריות ומקרבן לתורה.

אבות א:יב

Rabbeinu Yonah comments:

"Love people and bring them closer to Torah." When Aharon would sense that a person was violating a transgression privately, Aharon would befriend that person. The person would think 'If Aharon would only know what is in my heart, would he want me to be his friend? Rather, he assumes that I am a good person who performs good deeds and if he knew about my bad thoughts, he would distance himself from me because he wouldn't want to be friendly with an evil person like me.' The person would then regret their errant ways and repent.

Commentary of Rabbeinu Yonah, Avot 1:12

אוהב את הבריות ומקרבן לתורה כשהיה אהרן מרגיש באדם שהיה עושה עבירה בסתר הולך אליו ומתחבר עמו ועושה אותו אוהבו והחוטא מעלה על לבו אילו היה אהרן יודע מצפוני לבו כלום היה רוצה בחברתי אלא שאני מוחזק בעיניו כאדם כשר ובעל מצות אך אם יודע מחשבתי הרעה יתרחק ממני מהתחברו לרשע כמוני היום ויתנחם על רעתו ויזהר בתשובה.

פירוש רבינו יונה לאבות א:יב

Questions for the Table

- Why does Rabbeinu Yonah suggest that we befriend sinners in order to positively influence them when there is another Mishna that states that we should not befriend them?
- When considering this situation, should one factor in who is going to influence whom?
- Is there a way for Ari to remain friends with Ben while avoiding the pressure of misbehaving?

Case #2

In Case #2, Karen established for herself a personal safeguard to prevent being pressured into driving unsafely. However, that safeguard now conflicts with another value: being kind to her friends. R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto cautions that sometimes setting up personal safeguards can be detrimental:

One must understand that one cannot judge an act of piety (or personal safeguard) by its initial appearance. Rather one must investigate and contemplate all possible outcomes of the act.

Sometimes an act appears positive and has a negative outcome, [and in that situation,] one must refrain from it and if one performs the act, is considered a sinner, not a pious person.

Mesillat Yesharim Chapter 20

והנה מה שצריך להבין הוא, כי אין לדון דברי החסידות על מראהו הראשון, אלא צריך לעיין ולהתבונן עד היכן תולדות המעשה מגיעות, כי לפעמים המעשה בעצמו יראה טוב ולפי שהתולדות רעות יתחייב להניחו ואם יעשה אותו יהיה חוטא ולא חסיד.

מסילת ישירים פרק כ'

Questions for the Table

- If Karen would ignore her friends, would that produce a positive or negative outcome? Does it make a difference if her friends know that she doesn't generally like to drive other people?
- Is it reasonable to expect Karen to offer her friends a ride and drive the way she is accustomed to driving without feeling pressured?

Case #3

Case #3 involves finding a place to live. What do the following sources contribute to this discussion?

R. Yosi ben Kisma said: I was once travelling on the road and an individual approached me ... he said "Rabbi, would you like to live in our community, and I will give you a million gold dinars (coins), precious stones and pearls?" I told him "My son, if you offer me all of the silver, gold, precious stones and pearls in world, I will only live in a place of Torah.'

Avot 6:9

[The verse (Shemot 18;27) states] "Moshe sent his father in law (Yitro)" ... [Moshe] said "You have given us good and sound advice to which God agreed, so please don't leave us." [Yitro] responded "A candle only benefits a dark place. What good is it where the sun and moon shine? You are like the sun and Aharon your brother is like the moon. What is a candle going to contribute in your company?

Rather, I will return to my land and I will convert the people of my land, introduce them to Torah study and bring them close to God."

Mechilta, Masechet Amalek no. 2

אמר רבי יוסי בן קיסמא פעם אחת הייתי מהלך בדרך ופגע בי אדם ... אמר לי רבי רצונך שתדור עמנו במקומנו ואני אתן לך אלף אלפים דינרי זהב ואבנים טובות ומרגליות אמרתי לו בני אם אתה נותן לי כל כסף וזהב ואבנים טובות ומרגליות שבעולם איני דר אלא במקום תורה.

אבות ו:ט

וישלח משה את חותנו ... אמר לו, אתה נתת לנו עצה טובה ועצה יפה והמקום הודה לדברך, אל נא תעזוב אותנו. אמר לו, כלום הנר מהנה אלא במקום החושך, וכי מה הנר מהנה בין חמה ולבנה, אתה חמה, ואהרן אחיך לבנה, מה יעשה הנר ביניכם; אלא הרני הולך לארצי ואגייר לכל בני מדינתי ואביאם לתלמוד תורה ואקרבם תחת כנפי השכינה.

מכילתא מסכתא דעמלק פרשה ב

Questions for the Table

- What does R. Yosi ben Kisma teach about choosing a less than ideal place to live so that one can live a more luxurious lifestyle? Does the same apply if it is not a question of luxury but affordability?
- Why didn't R. Yosi ben Kisma take the money (today, one million small gold coins are worth more than a billion dollars!) and pay a group righteous people to move there?
- In considering a community, how does one balance the influence that a community can have on one's family and the influence that one's family can have on a community? How does this factor in to case# 3?
- Case #1 involves an individual and his interaction with a friend. Case #3 involves a family and its interaction with a community. How would you compare and contrast the considerations relating to an individual as opposed to a family and a friend as opposed to a community?

We are often provided with opportunities to positively influence family members, our community, the Jewish people and the entire world. When we take advantage of these opportunities, we might find that they have an equally positive influence on us.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Matityahu HaYitzhari was a Spanish scholar who lived around the turn of the fifteenth century. He was a participant in the disputation of Tortosa in 1413 and authored a number of works on Jewish law.

R. Moshe ben Maimon (also known as Rambam and Maimonides, 1138-1204) is one of the most famous rabbis in Jewish history. His works on Jewish law and Jewish philosophy are extremely influential and are studied regularly by students of Jewish law and philosophy. He began his life in Cordoba, Spain but eventually settled in Egypt.

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (also known as Ramchal, 1707-1746) was an Italian scholar who wrote numerous works on Jewish thought and mysticism. His *Mesillat Yesharim* is considered one of the most important Jewish works on ethics. He settled in the Land of Israel in 1743.

R. Yonah of Gerona (d. 1263) was a Spanish scholar. He is most well known for his ethical works such as *Sha'arei Teshuva* and his *Commentary on Pirkei Avot*. He originally opposed the philosophical works of Rambam, but he viewed the burning of the Talmud in 1242 as a sign that he was incorrect in opposing Rambam's philosophical works.

¹ <http://www.surveum.com/survey-results/PeerPressure/>. Accessed on October 26, 2011.

² See Alice Eagly, "Conformity," *Encyclopedia of Psychology, Vol. II*, Alan E. Kazdin (Ed.); pp. 263-265 (Oxford, 2000).

Alice Eagly is a Professor of Social Psychology at Northwestern University.

³ Leslie Gavin and Wyndol Furman, "Age differences in adolescents' perceptions of their peer groups," *Developmental Psychology*, 25(5), 827-834. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.25.5.827.

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