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Shimon HaTzaddik was one of the last of the Great Assembly. He used to say, The world stands on three things: on the Torah, on Divine service, and on acts of loving-kindness.

MISHNAH 2

Consider the following questions:³³

1. The first Mishnah cited the Men of the Great Assembly collectively: *They said three things...* We would therefore expect the current Mishnah to cite the next link in the chain of transmission, namely the following generation. Instead, it cites an individual member of the same Great Assembly. Now, if the Mishnah's intent is to quote teachings of the various members of the Great Assembly, why does it cite only the teachings of one of them? Surely, the other members authored worthwhile teachings as well! And if the reason the Mishnah cites Shimon HaTzaddik is because he was the last living member of the Great Assembly,³⁴ the Mishnah should have referred to him not as *one of the last of the Great Assembly* but as "the last."
2. Why does the Mishnah state, *He used to say*, instead of the simple past tense, "He said" — which would parallel the first Mishnah's expression, *They said*?

33. The Alshich discusses this Mishnah in his commentary to *Vayikra* 9:23–24.

34. I.e., and therefore he indeed represented the next link in the chain of transmission.

שְׁמַעוֹן הַצְּדִיק הָיָה מְשִׁירֵי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר: עַל
שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד: עַל הַתּוֹרָה. וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה. וְעַל
גְּמִילוּת חֲסָדִים.

3. Why does the Mishnah have to tell us how many things (three) they said?
4. Why does the Mishnah use the word *on* (על) before each of the three things? It could have simply said, “on Torah, Divine service, and acts of loving-kindness.”
5. Why are the three things mentioned in the Mishnah arranged in this particular order? Indeed, the Rabbis point out elsewhere that loving-kindness actually precedes Torah and Divine service.³⁵

≡ *Three Pillars* ≡

LET US FIRST address Questions 1 and 2. R' Yehuda HaNasi, who compiled and edited the Six Orders of the Mishnah, noticed that the first Mishnah in this tractate gives the impression that the Men of the Great Assembly believed that Torah study **alone** is sufficient to sustain the world. For they do not speak of actions that *improve the world* (תִּיקוֹן עוֹלָם) but only of Torah: *Be deliberate in judgment, create many students, and make a fence for the Torah.*³⁶ He therefore placed our Mishnah after the first,

35. The Alshich will elaborate on this below.

36. According to the Alshich, although the directive to *make a fence for the Torah* means enacting legislation that will prevent transgression of the Torah's commandments (see footnote 31), this merely means formulating

citing Shimon HaTzaddik as teaching that this view is only part of the picture. Torah study is of critical importance. But the world stands on **three pillars** — and two of them, Divine service and acts of loving-kindness, relate to action rather than study.

The Mishnah therefore makes the point that Shimon HaTzaddik was not the very last of the Men of the Great Assembly, but *one of the last* — i.e., there were others who were also alive at the time. And it makes the point that his teaching was not an isolated statement (which would have fit with the expression, “He said”) but rather one that he would recite frequently (*He used to say*). So the other remaining men of the Great Assembly heard him say this repeatedly; and from the fact that our Mishnah does not quote them as arguing with his statement, it is evident that they agreed with him.³⁷ We thus learn what the true view of the Sages was. Indeed, the Gemara in *Kiddushin* 40b cites the Sages as teaching that Torah study is great because it leads to action. Clearly, if it did **not** lead to action, study by itself would be incomplete. As the Torah says (*Devarim* 28:13), God gave us the Torah *to guard and to fulfill*; both study and action are essential. [This answers Questions 1 and 2.]

Answer to
questions
1 and 2

We come now to the primary point of our Mishnah. The Midrash elsewhere states:³⁸ Before the Torah was given, the world existed through loving-kindness alone.³⁹ After the

Torah policies; it does not refer to the actual performance itself of any mitzvah.

37. In effect, then, the Mishnah is not citing the teaching of a single man (see Question 1) but rather of all the remaining men of the Great Assembly.

38. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 12:12.

39. It is not fully clear to whose loving-kindness the Alshich is referring. He seems to imply that it was the acts of loving-kindness performed by human

Torah was given, there were two factors that enabled the world to exist. The world then began to wobble, until the Tabernacle was built — at which point there were three pillars and the world consequently stabilized.

A number of obvious questions arise: If the world currently requires three pillars on which to stand, how was it able to stand for a time on two pillars, and even on one? Furthermore, why was the world shaky when there were two pillars and not when there was one? The opposite should have been the case!

The explanation is as follows: Before the Torah was given the world could exist without wobbling by being supported through the pillar of kindness alone, for in the absence of commandments, there were no “sins” to affect the world adversely. However, after *Matan Torah*, [the Torah became a second, and vital, pillar holding up the world. But there was a “down side” to having this second pillar, for] the Torah could only sustain the world if it was being fulfilled. If it was violated, then the effects of sin could put the world in danger of collapse. A third pillar thus became necessary: Divine service, i.e., the sacrifices offered in the Tabernacle, which atoned for sin.⁴⁰

The Torah’s role in the world is analogous to that of a soul in a body; it serves as the world’s life-force. There will always be some who choke that life-force by transgressing the Torah, either unintentionally or deliberately. Therefore, sacrifices bring

beings that sustained the world. However, *Bamidbar Rabbah* 12:12 states that it was God’s loving-kindness that sustained the world. See also *Midrash Pisoron Torah, Parashas Vayedaber* (pp. 110–111).

40. The Sages teach that after the Temple was destroyed, the substitute for the *avodah* (Divine service) of the sacrifices became *avodah she’balev* (Divine service of the heart), i.e., prayer.

3

Antignos Ish Socho received the Torah from Shimon HaTzadik. He used to say: Do not be like those servants who serve their master in order to receive a reward. Rather, be like those servants who serve their master not in order to receive a reward; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.

atonement for those who transgress unintentionally. For those who transgress intentionally, however, sacrifices will not help. It is then that acts of kindness become essential for the world to continue, for when we act compassionately to one another, it elicits a measure-for-measure response from Hashem. He will continue to sustain the world out of His kindness, even though by rights the world should cease to exist.

This, then, is why the Mishnah spells out that *the world stands on “three” things*: because there was a time when one thing was sufficient, and a time when two were sufficient. The word *stands* is in the present tense, making the point that it is **now**, after the Torah was given (and to this day), that all three are necessary, as explained above. [This answers question 3.]

Answer to question 3

The Mishnah does not begin with *acts of loving-kindness*, even though that pillar came first, because the study of Torah is the main reason for the world’s existence. As the Sages teach (*Avos* 2:5), an unlearned person cannot help but sin. The other two pillars, *Divine service* and *acts of loving-kindness*, are there to repair the damage done when people transgress the Torah. [This answers question 5.]

Answer to question 5

The Mishnah repeats the word *on* (על) before each of the three pillars because each of the three has its own independent function. Torah is the main one; and Divine service and acts of kindness each atone for a different type of contravention of

אֲנִטִּיגְנוֹס אִישׁ סוֹכּוֹ קִבֵּל מִשְׁמֵעוֹן הַצְּדִיק. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר: אַל
תְּהִי כְעֹבְדִים הַמְּשֻׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס, אֲלֵא
הֵו כְעֹבְדִים הַמְּשֻׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב שְׁלֵא עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס,
וְיֵה מוֹרָא שְׁמַיִם עֲלֵיכֶם.

the Torah — the former for unintentional violations, and the latter for intentional ones.

It is also possible that by first mentioning the *three things* together (as a group), and then separating them from each other with the word *על*, the Mishnah is hinting that although they are all connected, they can also stand independently. The world as a whole requires all three components, but any given individual may not require all three.⁴¹ [This answers question 4.]

Answer to
question 4

MISHNAH 3

Consider the following questions:⁴²

1. Why does the Mishnah begin with a negative instruction (*Do not be like those servants who serve their master in order to receive a reward*) instead of a positive one (*Be like those servants who serve their master not in order to receive a reward*)?

41. As the Alshich explained in the introductory Mishnah (footnote 6), a Jew may only need to perfect his performance of a single mitzvah.

42. The Alshich discusses this Mishnah in his commentary to *Vayikra* 9:23–24.