

The Dee

Pirkei Avot Project

הוּ זְהִירֵין בְּרִשּׁוֹת, שְׂאִין מְקַרְבִּין לוֹ לְאָדָם אֲלָא לְצַרְךָ עֲצֻמָּן.
 נִרְאִין כְּאוֹהֲבֵין בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּאֻתָן, וְאִין עוֹמְדִין לוֹ לְאָדָם בְּשַׁעַת דְּחֻקוֹ:
 Be careful [in your dealings] with the ruling authorities for they do not befriend a person except for their own needs; they seem like friends when it is to their own interest, but they do not stand by anyone else in the hour of their distress.

What does the word 'reshut', mean? On the face of it and as Rashi says, it means the ruling power. This can be taken as an important political statement that one should not trust politicians because they are only interested in their careers and positions in power. But who were the ruling powers about the time of Rabban Gamliel? He was the Nasi, the head of the community in Israel in the Second Century, but he came under incredible pressure from the Roman emperors Trajan and Hadrian who were both enemies of Judaism. Some commentators think he was referring to the political divisions that divided the Jewish community in Israel at the time.

But there is another way of looking at the meaning of 'reshut', which can also mean an option. The Midrash Shmuel says that this applies to those mitzvot that are optional. In addition to those commandments, we are obliged to keep in the Torah, there are other ones that are either optional, like "if you come across a mother bird sitting on a nest and you want to take the fledglings, you should send the mother bird away first." Some people argue that you do not have to go looking for a bird on a nest to fulfil the mitzvah. But others argue that you should not lose any opportunity to do a mitzvah. We should be as careful with those that are options as with those that are clear obvious obligations. In other words, we shouldn't always be looking for the easy way out.

Discussion Points:

Have you witnessed ruling authorities befriend people only for their interest? How can you stand by people in their hour of distress? Have you seen examples of this?

What are differences in your observance of mitzvot that are obligatory vs optional and how can you take all seriously?

Idea by Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

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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