

PIRKEI AVOT 2-3

Translation:

Be cautious with the ruling authorities, for they draw near to a person solely for their own needs. They appear like friends when it is to their advantage, but they do not stand for a person at the time of her/his distress.

Maimonides

We have explained that the ruling authorities refers to the governing (in former times). He speaks about their virtues and warns against them.

Rav Chaim of Volozhin

(As Read by Chanoch Levi in “*Ruach Chaim*”)

They appear like friends. “I love those who love me and those who seek me will find me” (*Mishlei 8:17*). This verse is a reference to Torah, a Torah which truly loves those who study it. Unlike human

rulers that only show favor when they require a favor, Torah is always available to those who seek it: those who have once studied it and now require a favor. Torah saves them from suffering (*Sotah 21a*) and makes itself available even to those who have abandoned it. Although these people do not deserve Divine aid in their repentance, the Torah still makes itself available as an act of altruism.

Rabbi Pinchas Kehati

Our Mishnah continues to quote Rabban Gamliel, the son of Rabbi Yehudah haNasi. Midrash Sh’muel links Rabban Gamliel’s opinions to Shemayah’s statement (1:10): “Love labor and hate mastery; and do not seek familiarity with the ruling authorities.” Concerning the *love of work*, Rabban Gamliel adds that it must go hand in hand with Torah, as it is good to combine the study of Torah

with a worldly occupation. Shemayah’s admonition to *hate prominence*, is qualified by Rabban Gamliel who says that it is not necessary to reject the reins of power as long as they are used for the sake of Heaven and not for one’s own benefit. And Shemayah’s warning against *seeking familiarity with the authorities*, is modified by Rabban Gamliel from total withdrawal, an impossible demand from those involved in public affairs who must often be in touch with the authorities, to the need of exercising great caution, as stated in this Mishnah. **Be cautious with the ruling**

הוּוּ זְהִירִין בְּרִשׁוֹת, שְׂאִין
מְקַרְבִּין לוֹ לְאָדָם אֶלָּא לְצַרָּה
עֲצָמוֹ. נִרְאִין כְּאוֹהֲבִין בְּשַׁעַת
הַנְּאֻתָּו. וְאִין עוֹמְדִין לוֹ לְאָדָם
בְּשַׁעַת דְּחִקּוֹ:

authorities- when dealing with the ruling powers, do not reveal to its agents too much of your affairs, and do not rely on their promises, **for they draw near to a person solely for their own needs** – even when

they seem to welcome you, know that they do so only in their own self interest. **They appear like friends when it is to their advantage** – e.g., when they receive gifts from you, **but they do not stand for a person at the time of her/his distress** – ignoring all the favors they enjoyed in the past, they fail to come to you aid.

Reuven Bulka

As a general rule, authority figures *appear* as friends. Appearance hides the true feeling in most instances. There are times when the friendship may be genuine, but it is hard to tell. Caution seems to be in the best interests of the person involved and the community. To rely on the flimsy hopes of a dubious friend is to invite possible disaster; to subordinate communal needs to the developments of a superficial friendship is to betray the community. The ruling authority is primarily interested in self, while the communal servant should at all times be interested in the welfare of the community.