

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Chapter Three

23 Sivan, 5784 – June 29, 2024

Compiled from the works of
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The Lubavitcher Rebbe

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PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Pirkei Avos

Chapter III

Likkutei Sichos, Volume 33, Page 191 ff.

פרק ג', משנה י"ג: רבי עקיבא אומר: שחוק וקלות ראש, מרגילין את האדם לערוה. מסרת סיג לתורה, מעשרות סיג לעושר, נדרים סיג לפרישות, סיג להכמה שתיקה.

Chapter 3, Mishnah 13: Rabbi Akiva would say: Jestng and frivolity accustom a person to promiscuity. Tradition is a fence to the Torah, tithing a fence to wealth, vows a fence to abstinence; a fence for wisdom is silence.

The Simple Explanation

We will focus on Rabbi Akiva's words that "vows are a fence to abstinence." The Rambam explains these words as follows¹. "If a person has made vows to adjust his character traits and improve his behavior, he is alert and praiseworthy. For example, a glutton forbade himself meat for a year or two, or one addicted to drinking forbade himself wine for a long time or vowed never to become intoxicated. So, too, one who ran after bribes, hastening to get rich, forbade himself the gifts or the favors coming from the residents of a particular town. So, too, one who became arrogant because of his good looks vowed to become a Nazir. Such vows are designed to serve God, and concerning them, the sages declared: "Vows are a fence around self-restraint."

Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

This sounds straightforward. However, the Sages also taught us², "What the Torah prohibited is not enough? Why do you need to accept additional prohibitions upon yourself?" This would seem to negate the idea of making vows.

This is even more difficult to understand based on Rambam's comments³. He writes, "One who follows this way (abstains from all worldly things) is called a sinner, for

1. See Mishnah Torah, Laws of Nedorim, Chapter 13, 23.

2. Talmud Yerushalmi, Nedorim Chapter 9, Halachah 1.

3. See Rambam, Hilchos De'os Chapter 3, 1.

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it is said of a Nazir⁴, 'And make an atonement for him because he sinned against the soul.' Regarding this, the Sages said⁵, 'If a Nazir, who only separate himself from wine must have atonement, he who deprives himself of each and everything how manifold must his atonement be!' The Torah commanded us to refrain *only* from that which the Torah prohibited. And in this rule, are those continuously fasting? This is not good. The Sages prohibited one from punishing himself with fasting days."

We need to reconcile the above seemingly contrary positions. Are we to only refrain from doing what the Torah explicitly prohibits, or are we to accept other prohibitions upon ourselves as well?

The Answer

The explanation is that we are discussing two different levels in the service of Hashem⁶. On a lower level of Divine service, one must prohibit even that which is permissible for himself. That is how he can keep himself on the *straight and narrow*. Otherwise, he will be drawn after permissible things he does not need. This can draw him down even lower in his G-dly service. One on this level cannot elevate the physical world around him. He will not refine and elevate the permissible and raise it to a G-dly, spiritual level. He is bound below; he cannot cause something to rise higher.

Therefore, it is proper for him to make vows and separate himself from this-worldly things, even those permitted. Regarding such a person, we say that "vows are a fence to abstinence."

Compare that with what the Torah asks one who is on a higher level in his G-dly service. "What the Torah prohibited is not enough? Why do you need to accept additional prohibitions upon yourself?" There is no concern that permissible worldly things will cause him to stumble regarding a person of this sort. His character traits and his behavior are in order.

The Torah tells this person that "what the Torah prohibited *is* enough," On the contrary, he must use everything in this world. By doing so, he elevates it and transforms

4. Parshas Naso, Bamidbar 6:11.

5. Bava Kamma, 91, b.

6. See Likkutei Torah Parshas Matos 82, b and 84, b.

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it into something holy. This is why the Rambam concludes his words by saying,⁷ "Concerning this Shlomoh Hamelech said in his wisdom⁸, 'In all of your ways you shall know him...'" This means you must know and serve Him with *your ways*, all of your permissible material possessions and actions.

"Your nation is entirely righteous." We must all make use of all of the worldly things surrounding us for holy purposes. In this manner, we will undoubtedly bring Moshiach Now!!

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Matos-Massei and Shabbos Devorim, 5748)

I hope you gained as much by reading this as I did by translating and adapting it.

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7. See footnote 3.

8. Mishlei 3:6.

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