

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Chapter Two

16 Sivan, 5784 – June 22, 2024

Compiled from the works of
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The Lubavitcher Rebbe

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An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Pirkei Avos

Chapter II

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Chapter II

פרק ב', משנה א': רבי אומר:

איזוהי דרך ישרה שיבור לו האדם? כל שהיא תפארת לעושיה ותפארת לו מן האדם.

והוי זהיר במצווה קלה כבחמורה, שאין אתה יודע מתן שכרן של מצוות. והוי מחשב הפסד מצווה כנגד שכרה, ושכר עבירה כנגד הפסדה.

הסתכל בשלושה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי עבירה: דע מה למעלה ממך – עין רואה, ואוזן שומעת, וכל מעשיך בספר נכתבין.

Chapter 2, Mishnah 1: Rebbe would say:

- 1.) Which is the right path for man to choose for himself? Whatever is harmonious for the one who does and harmonious for humankind.
- 2.) Be as careful with a minor Mitzvah as with a major one, for you do not know the rewards of the Mitzvos. Consider the cost of a mitzvah against its rewards and the rewards of a transgression against its cost.
- 3.) Consider three things, and you will not come to the hands of transgression. Know what is above from you: a seeing eye, a listening ear, and that all of your deeds are inscribed in a book.

The Simple Explanation

This Mishnah contains a teaching that Rebbe often said. Whenever it is written "Rebbe" without specifying which rabbi, it refers to Rabbi Yehudah Hanossi¹. This is done out of deference to him. He was the one who edited and compiled all of the teachings of the Sages. This compilation formed the Mishnah, the Oral Law's foundation and basis.

This teaching of his consists of three different (though related) sections. The Rambam explains the second section of this Mishnah as follows². "Be as careful with a minor Mitzvah as with a major one, for you do not know the rewards of the Mitzvos." The Torah does not tell us the reward one receives for fulfilling the positive commandments³. This seeming "omission" is intentional (as is the case with everything in the Torah). It assures that we observe each Mitzvah equally; we are not told which has a greater or lesser reward.

Rebbe continues his teaching by telling us to "consider the cost of a mitzvah against its rewards ..." The Rambam explains this to mean that even though the Torah does not specify a reward for Mitzvos, we can

1. He was also referred to by the appellation Rabbeinu Hakadosh – Our Holy Rabbi.

2. See his Commentary to the Mishnah here.

3. This is unlike the Torah's prohibitions; the punishment for transgressing each prohibition is clearly stated.

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understand which Mitzvah has a greater reward. We must consider the severity of the punishment for a transgression ("the cost of a mitzvah"). Desecrating the Shabbos is a capital offense⁴. Neglecting the performance of circumcision is punishable by *Koreis* – Excision, which is less severe than the death penalty. In this manner, we can understand that the reward for keeping the Shabbos is more significant than that given for circumcision.

Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

Based on the Rambam's explanation, we would seem to have a significant difficulty in understanding Rabbi Yehudah Hanossi's teaching. Firstly, he tells us how important it is to fulfill each Mitzvah with the same enthusiasm. To accomplish this, the Torah refrains from telling us the reward for keeping positive commandments. He then teaches us what would appear to be a "workaround." If you would like to know the relative greatness of one Mitzvah's reward compared to another, look at the severity of its punishment. What does the Torah accomplish by withholding this information? It is readily available to us in any case.

The Answer

There are two types of rewards for the fulfillment of Mitzvos:

1. There is a particular reward for each Mitzvah. In terms of this reward, each Mitzvah is distinct from all other Mitzvos. In this regard, there is a difference between *minor* and *major* Mitzvos. The greatness of this type of reward can be calculated from the severity of the punishment for neglecting it.
2. There is another, more significant type of reward for the fulfillment of each Mitzvah. This reward is equal for all of the 248 positive commandments.

The Alter Rebbe explains⁵ the Mishnah⁶, "The reward of a Mitzvah is a Mitzvah," in the following manner. From the reward of a Mitzvah, it is possible to know its essence. This means there is a parallelism between the reward of a Mitzvah and its essence.

As we explained, Mitzvos have two types of rewards and distinct characteristics.

1. The performance of a Mitzvah *refines* the one who fulfills it⁷. Not only that, but this performance also refines the objects with which they are performed⁸. In this regard, there is a difference between every Mitzvah. The refinement that each Mitzvah performs is different.
2. By the performance of each Mitzvah, one is fulfilling Hashem's Will. That is the common denominator

4. Please note that a death penalty only applies to one who is aware of the severity of his actions. Furthermore, two witnesses must see him as he is about to perform this desecration. Moreover, they must warn him of the consequences for his actions within a short time prior to their commission.

5. See Tanya Chapter 39.

6. See further, Chapter 4, Mishnah 2.

7. See the Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis 44, a, "The Mitzvos were given to us in order to refine people."

8. See Likkutei Torah Parshas Bechukosai 45, c.

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between all of the Mitzvos.

Based on this we can understand the Mishnah's teaching. The difference between the reward for one Divine commandment and another only considers the amount and type of refinement it brings about in the world. Each Mitzvah accomplishes different things within the world. Rabbi Yehudah said to "consider the cost of a mitzvah against its rewards."

Contrast this with the reward for fulfilling G-d Almighty's Will. This is a far greater reward. For this sort of reward, there is no difference between one Mitzvah and another. Regarding this type of reward, Rebbe said, "You do not know the rewards of the Mitzvos." We must therefore apply ourselves equally to all Mitzvos without distinction.

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Bereishis, 5720)

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

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לזכות

מרת אסתר שתחי' שרבני

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ר' גרשון שי' בן טוב