

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

# Chapter One

9 Sivan, 5784 – June 15, 2024

Compiled from the works of  
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## PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

### An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Pirkei Avos Chapter I

Likkutei Sichos Volume 17, Pages 347 - 355

#### Chapter I

פרק א', משנה ט"ו: שמאי אומר: עשה תורתך קבע. אמור מעט ועשה הרבה, והוי מקבל את כל האדם בסבר פנים יפות:

**Chapter 1, Mishnah 15:** Shammai would say: "Make your Torah study a permanent fixture of your life; say little and do much; and receive every man with a pleasant countenance."

#### The Simple Explanation

We are focusing on the first teaching of Shammai in this Mishnah. Namely, what he says at the beginning of the Mishnah is to make Torah study *the* permanent fixture of his life. Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura explains this as follows. One is to make Torah study his primary occupation. Studying Torah is the main focus of his life. He should not be occupied with supporting himself and his family until he tires of his studies. Once the individual has completed what he must do to sustain himself, he has earned the necessary amount; he is to return to his studies.

The above is a loose translation of the Bartenura's words. Along these same lines, one must not define himself by the sort of work he does. He is not a tailor, a construction worker, or a businessman. Instead, he is a Jew who studies Torah. Torah is his occupation; the other things that he does are merely a means toward an end.

#### Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

We find in the Talmud that this tractate, Pirkei Avos, teaches us what is necessary for one to be a Chossid. For it is written that Rava says, "He who wishes to be a Chossid must fulfill the matters (dealt with) in Pirkei Avos<sup>1</sup>." What is the meaning of being a Chossid in Talmudic terms? The word refers to one who goes above and beyond the requirements of the strict Halachah<sup>2 3</sup>.

How is it possible to say that filling the bulk of one's time and energy is merely extra righteousness, which is not required by Jewish law? In the Tanach, it is written that<sup>4</sup> "This book of the law shall not depart

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1. See Talmud Bava Kama Folio 30, a.

2. See Talmud Bava Kama Folio 100, a.

3. The fact that the teachings of Avos express how to go beyond the letter of the law, is one premise upon which many of the Rebbe's explanations of Pirkei Avos are based.

4. Yehoshua 1:8.

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from your mouth." In the Talmud, we see the same thing: that the Torah must be our primary occupation<sup>5</sup>. We see the same in the works of those who codified Jewish law<sup>6</sup>. This makes it clear that Halachah requires it.

### The Explanation

The answer to this question can be explained as follows. Because of the above question, we must understand this Mishnah differently. When the Mishnah says to "make your Torah study a permanent fixture of your life," it does not mean to contrast Torah study with worldly occupations and pursuits. Otherwise, Shammai would have said that one must make Torah the primary fixture of his life rather than a worldly occupation.

Instead, our Mishnah continues to the beginning of this chapter<sup>7</sup>; "The world stands on three pillars: Torah, the service of G-d, and deeds of kindness." We find in the words of the Sages that a person is a small world<sup>8</sup>, i.e., "whatever Hashem formed in the world, He formed within man." Furthermore, the Midrash tells us that a person contains both parts of the higher and lower worlds<sup>9</sup>.

This being the case, it is understood that each of us "stands on three pillars: Torah, the service of Hashem, deeds of kindness." This poses a difficulty. What can one do if he cannot dedicate himself to all three pillars? The answer is that he must choose one to focus his efforts on. This is similar to Rav Yosef, who asked Rav Yosef ben Rabbah<sup>10</sup>, "In what (Mitzvah) was your father most careful?" The Talmud discusses a great Jew, a spiritual giant. He was meticulous in fulfilling all Mitzvos. Instead, the question was about which Mitzvah was his father's *most* particular.

The same is true of us. We cannot lack a pillar; otherwise, our foundation would not be stable. Instead, we must dedicate ourselves to one of the three pillars. When we need to rest from that particular pillar, we will occupy ourselves with one of the other two pillars<sup>11</sup>.

This is what Shammai is telling us. Torah is the preferred choice over and above the other two pillars.

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5. See the discussion on Berochos Folio 35, b.

6. See the Rambam, Laws of Torah Study Chapter 3, Paragraph 7. See also the Tur and the Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim, at the beginning of Chapter 156.

7. Pirkei Avos, Chapter 1, 2.

8. See Avos D'Rabbi Nosson, Chapter 31.

9. Koheles Rabbah 1, 4.

10. See Talmud Shabbos 118, b.

11. This is obviously true *unless* it is a time that there is a Halachic obligation to be occupied with a different pillar.

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Each of us, indeed, has the right to choose whichever pillar we want. There are Jews who are more focused on Torah study and those who are more focused on business. These people use their wealth to support Torah scholars. However, Shammai is teaching us that in terms of Chassidus, going beyond the letter of the law is concerned, the preferred choice is Torah.

As a result of our Torah study, may we merit the coming of Moshiach now!

*(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Shemini, 5735)*

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

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