

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Perek I

28 Nissan, 5781 – April 10, 2021

Compiled from the works of
Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson
The Lubavitcher Rebbe

by
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An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Pirkei Avos

Chapter I

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Chapter I

פרק א', משנה א': משה קבל תורה מסיני ומסרה ליהושע, ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים, ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה. הם אמרו שלשה דברים: הווי מתונים בדין, והעמידו תלמידים הרבה, ועשו סניג לתורה.

Chapter 1, Mishnah 1: Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Yehoshua. Yehoshua gave it over to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it over to the Men of the Great Assembly. They would regularly say these three things: Be cautious in judgment. Establish many students. And make a safety fence around the Torah.

The Explanation

Pirkei Avos teaches us the order of the transmission of the Torah from Hashem to the later generations. Moshe received the Torah from Hashem, who gave it to Yehoshua. Yehoshua gave it to the Elders, who gave it to the Prophets, who then transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly.

Why does this one particular book of the Talmud describe this chain of transmission? The Bartenura explains that "this tractate does not explain any of the Torah's Mitzvos, like the other tractates. Rather it teaches morals and principles. The fact is that the sages of the nations of the world have also composed books according to the fabrication of their hearts, concerning moral paths, how a person should behave with his fellow. Therefore, this work begins by telling us that 'Moshe received Torah from Sinai.' The principles and morals discussed here were not fabricated by the hearts of the Mishna's sages; rather, they too were stated at Sinai."

After telling us that Hashem gave the *entire* Torah to Moshe at Mount Sinai, the Mishnah proceeds to describe the continuation of the Torah's transmission from generation to generation.

Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

First, the Mishnah states that Moshe gave over the Torah to his primary student Yehoshua. We can see that as Moshe's student, he served as a link in the chain. Yehoshua, in turn, transmitted the Torah to the elders. What is the meaning of an "elder?" The Talmud tells us that an elder (in Hebrew *Zakein* -

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

זקן) refers to one who has acquired wisdom (*Zeh Shekonoh Chochmah* – זיה שקנה חכמה)¹. Their understanding qualifies them as links in the chain.

Further on, the Mishnah tells us of the Torah's transmission to the Men of the Great Assembly. These great rabbis comprised the Sanhedrin, the Torah Supreme Court. They spread the Torah throughout the entire Jewish Nation. Their position in this chain is easy to understand.

We need to understand what role the Prophets play in transmitting the Torah. Prophets do play a significant role in Torah. A prophet can predict future events². Furthermore, a prophet must³ "command the people (to fulfill) the precepts of the Torah and to warn against its transgression." However, we may not decide the Torah law by prophecy. The Torah writes that⁴ "It (meaning the Torah) is not in the heavens." The Rambam explains this to mean that⁵ "a prophet can no longer add a new precept (to the Torah)." What sort of place can a group called "the Prophets" serve as a link in connecting the Torah to later generations?

The Rebbe's Explanation

The explanation is that Torah is Divine Wisdom; it exists on an infinite number of planes. However, we must study and understand it with our limited physical intellect. Nevertheless, the Mittler Rebbe writes⁶ that before deciding upon a particular law, the Talmudic Sages would *see* the concept as it exists in higher worlds. Only after seeing it in a higher realm would they draw it down and clothe it in their human understanding.

This does not contradict the rule that in formulating a Torah law, we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice⁷ or that the Torah⁸ "is not in the Heavens." *In a spiritual world, seeing the concept Above* was merely an *introduction* to drawing it down into one's physical mind and establishing the law there based on human understanding.

What does this teach those of us who are far from being Talmudic Sages or Prophets? We also need an *introduction*. Before understanding the Halachah, we must first approach it with fear of Heaven.

1. See Talmud Kiddushin 32, b.

2. Rambam, The Fundamental Principles of Torah, Chapter 10, Paragraph 1.

3. Ibid, Chapter 9, Paragraph 2.

4. Parshas Nitzovim, Devorim 30:12.

5. Ibid, ibid, Paragraph 1,

6. Biurei Hazohar Vayishlach 20, 2.

7. Talmud Bava Metzia 59, b.

8 See footnote 5.

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

This follows the teaching of the Sages. They tell us that the words⁹ "And the Lord is with him (meaning that he has fear of Heaven)" means that "the Halachah follows his opinion in all areas."

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Naso, 5723)

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

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9. Talmud Sanhedrin, 93, b.

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