

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Perek II

18 Sivan, 5781 – May 29, 2021

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

by
Rabbi Shmuel Mendelsohn

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An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Pirkei Avos

Chapter II

Likkutei Sichos Volume 4, Page 1200 ff.

Chapter II

פרק ב', משנה ט': חמשה תלמידים היו לו לרבן יוחנן בן זכאי, ואלו הן: רבי אליעזר בן הרקנוס, ורבי יהושע בן חנני, ורבי יוסי הכהן, ורבי שמעון בן נתנאל, ורבי אלעזר בן ערך.

הוא היה מונה שבחן: רבי אליעזר בן הרקנוס, בור סוד שאינו מאבד טיפה; רבי יהושע בן חנניה, אשרי יולדתו; רבי יוסי הכהן, חסיד; רבי שמעון בן נתנאל, ירא חטא; ורבי אלעזר בן ערך, מעין המתגבר...

Chapter 2, Mishnah 9: Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had five disciples: Rabbi Eliezer ben Hurkenus, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yossi the Kohen, Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel, and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach. He would recount their praises. Rabbi Eliezer ben of Hurkenus is a cemented cistern that does not lose a drop. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya - fortunate is she who gave birth to him. Rabbi Yossi the Kohen is a *Chossid*¹. Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel fears sin. And Rabbi Elazar ben Arach is just as an ever-increasing wellspring.

The Simple Explanation

The second chapter of Pirkei Avos tells us of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and his five students. He would recount the special praise of each of his students. The Sages tell us that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai "supported" the Jewish nation for forty years², meaning that he taught them Torah. Furthermore, the Sages said that he³ "sat in the shade of the Holy Temple and taught Torah throughout the entire day." From this, it is clear that he had many more than five students; he had a vast number of disciples. The commentaries to this Mishnah reconcile these two ideas as follows⁴. The Mishnah is listing only those students who were the greatest. These five are the ones through whom he transmitted the chain of the Torah. As stated in the first chapter of Pirkei Avos⁵, Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to his student Yehoshua, who passed it on to the Elders. When this chain of transmission reached Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, he gave the Torah

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1. The meaning of a Chossid in this context is one who goes beyond what the law requires.
 2. See the Sifri on the Parshah V'zos Haberochoh, Section 357.
 3. See Talmud Pesachim Page 26, a.
 4. See the commentary of the Tosfos Yom Tov to this Mishnah.
 5. See Pirkei Avos, Chapter 1, Mishnah 1.

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

over to these five students.

Rabban Yochanan praised each of these five for their individual qualities. Of Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel, he said that he fears sin. How did he express his fear of sin? Commentaries explain⁶ that he was highly stringent with himself regarding the observance of all Mitzvos. He would prohibit for himself permissible things. Why did he do this? Out of fear that he might otherwise come to sin.

Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

It is possible to understand the phrase "fear of sin" in two different ways. It can mean that one is afraid of the punishment which he would receive for his transgression. This would help to deter him from sin. The other manner of understanding this phrase is that one is not afraid of the punishment; he is fearful of sinning. By not heeding the words of G-d Almighty Himself, one weakens his connection with Hashem. This serves as the deterrent which prevents him from sinning. We need to understand what the meaning of fear of sin is in our Mishnah.

The Explanation

Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel was afraid of sin rather than punishment. After all, he was one of the five most outstanding students of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai. He served as a link in the chain of the transmission of the Torah down to ours.

We find it explained in the teachings of Chassidus that fear of sin means just that; one is afraid of the sin itself⁷. The Hebrew word for sin which the Mishnah uses here is "Chait - חַיִּית." This word also has the connotation of lacking or missing⁸. When a Jew sins (G-d forbid), he damages his connection with the Almighty. That is the true meaning of fear of sin, causing a lack of his relationship with Hashem by sinning.

A Practical Lesson

Fear of sin is a far greater deterrent of transgressing than fear of punishment. Each of us has an "Evil Inclination," who knows just how to tempt us to sin. When it comes to fear of punishment, the Evil Inclination can persuade one that he must weigh the punishment against the enjoyment he has from the sin. He can convince the Jew that it's alright to sin despite the punishment because he is having a good time right now. He is willing to tolerate whatever punishment he will receive to enjoy

6. See the commentary of the Bartenura to this Mishnah.

7. See Likkutei Torah to Bamidbar, Page 82, a.

8. See I Melochim, Chapter 1, Verse 21; "... I and my son Shlomo will be missing (חַטָּאִים)."

THE RASHI OF THE WEEK

the sin now. Furthermore, the Evil Inclination can convince the Jew that he can always do Teshuvah and repent after sinning. In this manner, he can avoid the punishment altogether⁹.

In contrast to this, we fear the sin itself, not merely fear of the punishment. None of these claims can convince the individual to sin. Even though he derives pleasure from the transgression, he would still be separating himself from Hashem. Even if he does Teshuvah later, right now, he is diminishing his connection with G-d. This is something that a Jew would not find tolerable, even for a moment. That is because each Jew has an eternal light of Hashem within his soul.

(Adapted from the Maamor (Chassidic discourse) Ki Siso, 5713)

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

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9. This is not at all true, The Sages said (Mishnah Yoma, Chapter 8, Mishnah 9) that “one who says that he will sin ... and will do Teshuvah, is not given the opportunity to do Teshuvah. However, the Evil Inclination can use this as an argument to persuade the person to sin.

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