

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Perek IV

19 Iyar, 5781 – May 1, 2021

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

by
Rabbi Shmuel Mendelsohn

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PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

An Outline of the Rebbe's Explanation of Pirkei Avos

Chapter IV

Likkutei Sichos, Volume 4, Page 1217 ff.

Chapter IV

פרק ד', משנה כ"ב: ... שְׁעַל פְּרִקְהָא אַתְהָ נּוֹצֵר, וְעַל פְּרִקְהָא אַתְהָ נּוֹלֵד, וְעַל פְּרִקְהָא אַתְהָ חַי, וְעַל פְּרִקְהָא אַתְהָ מֵת, וְעַל פְּרִקְהָא אַתְהָ עֲתִיד לְתַן דִּין וְתִשְׁבּוֹן לְפָנֵי מֶלֶךְ מְלָכֵי הַמְּלָכִים, הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

Chapter 4, Mishnah 22: ...for it is against your will that you are formed, against your will that you are born. It is against your will that you live and against your will that you die. It is against your will you are destined to give a judgment and accounting before the king, king of all kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

The Simple Explanation

The last part of this Mishnah tells us that "it is against your will that you are formed, against your will that you are born. It is against your will that you live and against your will that you die. It is against your will you are destined to give a judgment and accounting before the king, king of all kings, the Holy One, blessed be He."

The Rambam explains that¹ regarding these "natural matters about which a man has no choice; about which the rabbis, may their memory be blessed, said², "Everything is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven." He did not say, "Against your will, you sin," or "pass" or "go" or "stand." He did not say anything similar to this. All of these matters, i.e., sinning, are in the control of man. There is no compulsion with them."

Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

This Mishnah appears to contradict itself. It says that one lives against his will. The Neshomah preferred its life before birth. It constantly cleaved to Hashem. It resided in Gan Eden, a spiritual, G-dly place, where it basked in Hashem's holy presence. Contrast that with life after birth. It is clothed within an animal soul in a physical body. Hashem's presence is not at all apparent.

After birth, the soul wishes to remain within the animal soul, within the physical body, in this

1. See his commentary to this Mishnah.

2. Talmud Berochos 33, b.

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physically dark world. What changes after the moment of birth?

The Answer

The Alter Rebbe explains³ that each Jew must serve Hashem in a manner of "*advance* and *retreat*".⁴ Both are a necessary part of our Divine service.

An excellent example of this is our waking up in the morning. The first thing we do is say Modeh Ani, thanking Hashem for restoring our soul. We then Daven. Thus, we begin our day by advancing. After prayers, we eat breakfast and go to work. That is our *retreat* back into this world. Another example is Shabbos and the weekdays. To *retreat* and fulfill our purpose during the mundane weekdays, we must *advance* on Shabbos.

There is a time for each form of service. At times, each of us must feel like our soul is in prison in our coarse body. We must then feel the need to free ourselves from this limitation, i.e., escape the body and cling to G-d. That is the *advance*.

However, this cannot be our permanent state. Hashem created this world to have a dwelling place below. The word "below" means a physical world that does not recognize Hashem on its own. Therefore, there comes a time that we must *retreat* within the confines of this world.

This is what the Mishnah means by living against one's will. The soul feels pain from the need to give up living in Gan Eden and "move to" this physical world. However, the Mishnah goes on to say that one must die against his will. Each of us must understand the need to remain in this world as a soul within a body. Only in this manner can we carry out *Hashem's* will, His purpose for creating the world. By understanding this, we can transform our desire to G-d's will. This is our job; we must change this world through performing Torah and Mitzvos in a physical world with a physical body. Only in this way can we create the "dwelling place" which Hashem wants. Our pleasure is to remain in Gan Eden. Hashem's pleasure is for us to be here in this world.

The two appear to be mutually exclusive. But the fact is that the two complete each other. It is only by having the *advance*, keeping Shabbos, Yom Tov, and davening, that he can have the *retreat*, appreciate life in this world carrying out the mission given to us by G-d. One must first have the *advance*, the desire

3. See Tanya Chapter 50.

4. Yechezkel 1:14. In Yechezkel's famous vision of the Divine Chariot, he saw that "the living beings (a certain type of angel) would run (*advance*) and return (*retreat*), like the appearance of the sparks." This vision was a prophetic metaphor for our service of G-d.

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to be one with Hashem. Then he can have the *retreat* and fulfill his mission in this world. By combining these two, we will finally merit the day that will be entirely Shabbat and rest for everlasting life.

Adapted from a talk given on the Second Night of Pesach, 5714)

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

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