

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Chapter One

21 Tammuz, 5784 – July 27, 2024

Compiled from the works of
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The Lubavitcher Rebbe

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PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

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

Likkutei Sichos Volume 27, Pages 164 - 166

פרק א', משנה ו': יהושע בן פרחיה ונתאי הארבלוי קיבלו מהם. יהושע בן פרחיה אומר: עשה לך רב, וקנה לך חבר, והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות.

Chapter 1, Mishnah 6: Yehoshua ben Perachia and Nitai Ho'arbeili received (the transmission of the Torah) from them. Yehoshua ben Perachia would (often) say, "Assume for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend (with whom to study), and judge every person favorably."

The Simple Explanation

Our explanation will focus on the third teaching of Yehoshua ben Perachia: to "judge every person favorably." Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura explains as follows. There are times when one performs an evil action. However, we cannot determine whether or not a particular person is a guilty party. Either that or suppose that we know who acted. However, we cannot determine whether or not the person's intentions were positive. Both sides of the balance scale seem to be equal. If we knew the person, we could base our conclusion on the sort of person he is¹. However, we are discussing one with whom we are not familiar. The Mishnah teaches us that a Chossid² must judge the person favorably.

Others explain judging one favorably differently. The Mishnah is discussing one who knows that his fellow committed a transgression. Nonetheless, the Mishnah tells us to assume that his action was accidental or unintentional. This is the approach that the Alter Rebbe takes³. He explains the Mishnah⁴, "Do not judge your fellow until you are in his place," in the following manner. "For it is his 'place' (his physical environment) that causes him to sin since his livelihood requires him to go about the marketplace all day. Whenever he is not busy in the marketplace, he is one of those who sits on the street corners. Hence, his eyes see all sorts of temptation, and 'what the eyes see, the heart desires'⁵." Additionally, it may

¹. See the commentary of the Rambam, Rabbeinu Yonah and others.

². In this context, the meaning of a Chossid is one who goes above and beyond the letter of the law. In fact, all of the teachings of Pirkei Avos teach us how to be a Chossid. This is in keeping with the teaching of the Talmud (Bava Kama 30, a) that "... one who wishes to be a Chossid ... should fulfill the teachings of Avos ..."

³. See Tanya Chapter 30, which we quote below.

⁴. Pirkei Avos Chapter 2, Mishnah 4.

⁵. See Rashi's comments to Bamidbar 15:39.

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be his spiritual' place,' the nature of his evil impulse, that leads him to sin: his evil nature burns like a baker's fiery oven, which is heated with greater frequency and intensity than a domestic oven, as it is written in Hoshea⁶, 'It burns like a flaming fire.'"

The Alter Rebbe says I must always give another the benefit of the doubt. Even if I know he did something wrong, I must realize he is not entirely responsible.

Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

Based on the various explanations offered above, we need to understand the language of the Mishnah. The Mishnah is extremely precise with its wording. It would appear that the Mishnah should have said not to judge anyone unfavorably. Why does the Mishnah write that we are to judge our fellow favorably? We must not jump to unwarranted conclusions.

The explanation we cited from the Alter Rebbe has nothing to do with my fellow's relationship with Hashem; he is writing about my relationship with him. I may not judge him *unfavorably*, for his challenges are more significant than mine. However, no matter how complex his challenges are, he is expected to control himself.

The Alter Rebbe continues in the same chapter, "In truth, even he whose nature is extremely passionate and whose livelihood obliges him to sit all day at the street corners has no excuse whatever for his sins." This being the case, how can the Torah demand that I judge him favorably?

The Explanation

As taught by the Baal Shem Tov, everything happens by Divine providence. My position in life is not of my own choice. G-d assigned different tasks to every one of us⁷. However, the same G-d that sets my place in life also creates me every moment⁸. Therefore, He only gave me a task of which I was capable. As the Sages write in the Midrash⁹, "He only demands of us that which we are capable of fulfilling."

Our thoughts and speech are compelling. How we judge someone can help "tilt the scale" and correct his behavior—however, there is something even more powerful that one can accomplish by judging favorably. He can reveal the hidden strengths that our fellow possesses; his strengths are proportionate to his challenges.

⁶. Hoshea 7:4,6.

⁷. This does not contradict the idea of free choice. Hashem placed me where I am. However, I am the one that chooses what to do there.

⁸. See Shaar Hayichud Vehoemunah Chapter 1.

⁹. Bamidbar Rabbah 12, 3.

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Not judging him unfavorably would not bring this out. However, favorably judging him has the power to reveal all of the latent powers Hashem gives him.

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Emor, 5742)

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

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