

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Perek I

Compiled from the works of
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The Lubavitcher Rebbe

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

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פרק א', משנה ו': יהושע בן פרחיה ונתאי הארבלי 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 that 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 is teaching 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 is telling us to assume that his action was either accidental or unintentional. This is the approach which 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 literally his 'place' (meaning, 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 of those who sit at the street corners. Hence, his eyes see all sorts of temptation,

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

2. In this contest, 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.

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and 'what the eyes see, the heart desires'⁵.' Additionally, it may 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.'"

What the Alter Rebbe is saying is that I must always give another the benefit of the doubt. Even if I know that he did something wrong, I must realize that 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.

We find that the Alter Rebbe continues in the very 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 is also creating me every moment⁸. Therefore, He only gives me a task of which I am 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

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

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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correct his behavior—however, there something even more powerful which one can accomplish by judging favorably. We can reveal the hidden strengths that our fellow possesses; his strengths are proportionate to his challenges.

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

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

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

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