

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Perek I

14 Sivan, 5780 – June 6, 2020

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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Chapter I, Mishnah 1

פרק א', משנה א': משה קיבל תורה מסיני ומסרה ליהושע, ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים, ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה...
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 ...

The Simple Explanation

The first chapter of Pirkei Avos begins by telling us the order of the transmission of the Torah. “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 ...” Why did Rabbi Yehudah Hanossi¹ choose this particular tractate of the Mishnah to teach this to us? Commentaries explain² that Pirkei Avos does not contain laws or rituals. Instead, it teaches us ethics and good character traits. The fact is that the nations of the world have also composed works of ethics. The source of their ethics and character is based on what they understand. Therefore, the book of Avos begins by telling us that our ethics come directly from Sinai, from the Torah that Hashem taught Moshe at Sinai.

Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

We need to understand why the Mishnah says that Moshe received the Torah from Sinai. The important thing is that he received it from G-d. Furthermore, the language of the Mishnah is precise, concise, and consistent. It says that Moshe transmitted the Torah to Yehoshua, who gave it over to the Elders, etc. So too, it would seem that it should have stated that Moshe received it from Hashem. The Bartenura³ cites the words “from Sinai,” and explains that it means “from He Who revealed Himself at Sinai.” However, we still need to understand why the Mishnah did not explicitly write this.

The Explanation

This can be understood based upon what the Sages tell us in a Midrash⁴. When the Almighty was about

1. He was also known as “our Holy Rabbi.” He was the one who edited the Mishnah and decided what to include in it.

2. See the commentary of the Bartenura at the beginning of Pirkei Avos.

3. See his commentary to this Mishnah, Avos Chapter 1, Mishnah 1.

4. Midrash Tehillim (Buber Edition) 68, 17. See also Talmud Megillah 29, a.

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to give the Torah to the Jews, the mountains all assembled⁵. Each mountain declared why it was unique and requested that the Torah be given upon it. Hashem responded to them⁶, “Why do you look askance (at Mount Sinai), mountains with peaks (*Gavnunim* - גבנונים)?” Your haughtiness makes you “*Gavnunim*,” which is also related to the Hebrew word hunchback (*Gibain* – גיבן - hunchback). The above teaches us that despite how lofty they were, or instead *because* of their loftiness, they were considered blemished. This disqualified them from being the place from which Hashem would give the Torah. Only Sinai, which is the smallest of all mountains, is the place upon which Hashem gave us the Torah. As stated in Tehillim⁷, Hashem will dwell there forever.” That is why the Mishnah writes “from Sinai.” It is to teach us that a necessary pre-condition to receiving the Torah is humility.

However, this is also open to question. If the point of the Mishnah is to teach us that humility is needed to receive the Torah, why should it be given on a mountain at all, even the smallest mountain? Would it not seem that a valley or a plain would be more suitable? The explanation is that the Mishnah is teaching us that to receive the Torah, one must be a “short mountain.” Humility is an absolute necessity. However, simultaneously one must be strong when the situation demands it.

A Practical Lesson

The very beginning of the Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law, states that one must not be embarrassed before those that mock adherence to the Torah. There are times that we must take a firm stand against those who would try to interfere with our Torah observance.

From a different perspective, we can explain this as follows. The purpose of giving the Torah is, as taught by the Sages⁸, that “those who are above (spiritual, in Divine realms) should descend below (to our physical world), and those who are below should ascend above.” The meaning of this is that we must mesh the physical with the G-dly and transform this material world into a dwelling place for Hashem⁹.

Mount Sinai symbolizes this. On the one hand, it is a mountain, which is symbolic of that which is above, i.e., the spiritual. On the other hand, it is the lowest of all mountains. Its physical stature symbolizes that which is below, meaning the physical. At the time of the giving of the Torah, both were blended. So too, our job is to elevate the physical and transform it into something G-dly. How can we possibly have the ability

5. I find it worthwhile to explain this despite the fact that it is obvious. The Midrash is not saying that the physical mountains gathered together and spoke to Hashem. Rather, everything in this world has a spark of G-dliness, a soul, which maintains its existence. It was the spiritual *souls* of the mountains that assembled and requested that the Torah be given upon them.

6. Tehillim 68:17.

7. Ibid.

8. Shemos Rabbah Section 12.

9. See Tanya Chapter 36.

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to combine two such opposites as physical and spiritual? Each is opposed to the other! Our Mishnah teaches us the answer. “Moshe received the Torah from Sinai.” Hashem gave a mountain, an inanimate object, the ability to blend these two polar opposites together. How much more so is this true of every one of us.

(Adapted from talks given on Shabbos Parshas Behar 5718 and Shabbos Mevorchim Hachodesh Iyar, 5716)

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

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