

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Chapter II

4 Menachem Av, 5786 – July 18, 2026

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

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

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Chapter II

פרק ב', משנה ט': חמשה תלמידים היו לו לרבן יוחנן בן זכאי, ואלו הן: רבי אליעזר בן הרקנוס, ורבי יהושע בן חנניה, 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 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 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 40 years², meaning he taught them Torah. Furthermore, the Sages said³, "Sat in the shade of the Holy Temple and taught Torah throughout the entire day." This makes it clear that he had more than five students; in fact, he had many disciples. The commentaries to this Mishnah reconcile these two ideas as follows⁴. The Mishnah lists only those students who were the greatest, and these five are the ones to whom he transmitted the chain of Torah. As stated in the first chapter of Pirkei Avos⁵, Moshe received 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 over to these five students.

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.

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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 explain ⁶ that he was highly stringent regarding the observance of all Mitzvos, and 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 he would receive for his transgression, which would help to deter him from sin. The other way to understand this phrase is that one is not afraid of punishment but fearful of sinning. One weakens his connection with Hashem by not heeding the words of G-d Almighty Himself, which serves as the deterrent that prevents him from sinning. We need to understand the meaning of "fear of sin" 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 was one of the links in the chain of the transmission of the Torah to all generations. This includes our own.

We find in the teachings of Chassidus that fear of sin means one is afraid of the sin itself.⁷ The Hebrew word for sin, which the Mishnah uses here, is "Chait - חַטָּא." This word also conveys the connotation of lacking or missing ⁸. When a Jew sins (G-d forbid), he damages his connection with the Almighty. That is the true meaning of fear of sin, fear of causing a lack in his connection with Hashem by sinning.

A Practical Lesson

Fear of sin is a far greater deterrent from transgressing than fear of punishment. We all have an "Evil Inclination" that knows how to tempt us to sin. When it comes to fear of punishment, the Evil Inclination can persuade one to weigh the punishment against one's enjoyment of the sin. He can convince the Jew that it's alright to sin despite the punishment because he is having a good time now, and he is willing to tolerate whatever punishment he will receive to enjoy the sin now. Furthermore, the Evil Inclination can convince the Jew that he can always do Teshuvah (repent)

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)."

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after sinning and, in this manner, avoid the punishment altogether ⁹.

Conversely, we have a fear of the sin itself, not merely a fear of the punishment. None of these claims can convince the individual to sin. Although he derives pleasure from the transgression, he still separates himself from Hashem. Even if he does Teshuvah later, he diminishes 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 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 in order to persuade the person to sin.

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THE LUBAVITCHER REBBE**

* * *

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The Soldiers of "Tzivos Hashem"

Chaim, Aiden Oded, Zachariah Matan, and Noach Arieli שיחיו Morris

May they merit to be a source of Chassidic pride
to their family and a Torah light to their community

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May she go from strength to strength
in health, happiness, Torah, and mitzvot

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Mr. Gershon (Geri) שי Bentov

מוקדש לזכות

כ"ק אדמו"ר נשיא דורנו מליובאוויטש

*** * ***

לזכות

חיילי "צבאות השם"

חיים, עדן עודד, זכרי' מתן, ונח אריאל שיחיו מאריס

נדפס ע"י הוריהם

הרה"ת ר' מנחם מענדל וזוגתו מרת חי' מושקא שיחיו מאריס

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ר' אליעזר ברוך וזוגתו מרת חי' שיחיו סאלינס

לאריכות ימים ושנים טובות עד ביאת גואל צדק

ומתוך בריאות הנכונה ולשנת ברכה והצלחה בגו"ר

נדפס ע"י הוריהם

ר' יוסף וזוגתו מרת מרים שיחיו גולדשטיין

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ר' גרשון שי' בן טוב