

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Chapter Two

3 Iyar, 5784 – May 11, 2024

Compiled from the works of
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The Lubavitcher Rebbe

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

Likkutei Sichos Volume 4, Page 1200 ff.

פרק ב', משנה ט': חמשה תלמידים היו לו לרבן יוחנן בן זכאי, ואלו הן: רבי אליעזר בן הרקנוס, רבי יהושע בן חנני, 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, it is fortunate that she 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 forty years², meaning he taught them the Torah. Furthermore, the Sages said he³ "sat in the shade of the Holy Temple and taught Torah throughout the entire day." From this, it is clear that he had more than five students and many disciples. The commentaries to this Mishnah reconcile these two ideas as follows⁴. The Mishnah lists only those students who were the greatest. These five are the ones through whom he transmitted the chain of the Torah. As stated in the first chapter of Pirkei Avos⁵, Moshe received the Torah 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.

Rabban Yochanan praised each of these five for their individual qualities. He said that Rabbi

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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Shimon ben Nesanel fears sin. How did he express his fear of sin? Commentaries explain⁶ that he was highly stringent regarding the observance of all Mitzvos. 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 one is afraid of the punishment he would receive for his transgression. This 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. This serves as the deterrent which 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 served as a link in the chain of the transmission of the Torah down to ours.

We find it explained in the teachings of Chassidus that fear of sin means just that: one is afraid of the sin itself⁷. The Hebrew word for sin, which the Mishnah uses here, is "Chait - חַטָּא." This word also has the connotation of lacking or missing⁸. When a Jew sins (G-d forbid), he damages his connection with the Almighty. That is the true meaning of fear of sin, causing a lack of his relationship with Hashem by sinning.

A Practical Lesson

Fear of sin is a far more significant deterrent to transgressing than fear of punishment. We have an "Evil Inclination" who 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 his 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 right now. 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 and repent after sinning. In this manner, he can avoid the punishment altogether⁹.

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)."

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 to persuade the person to sin.

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In contrast, we fear the sin itself, not merely fear of the punishment. None of these claims can convince the individual to sin. Even though he derives pleasure from the transgression, he still separates himself from Hashem. Even if he does Teshuvah later, he is diminishing 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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