

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Chapter One

26 Nissan, 5784 – May 4, 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 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. הם אמרו שלושה דברים, "הווי מתונים בדין, והעמידו תלמידים הרבה, ועשו סיג לתורה."

Chapter 1, Mishnah 1: Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and gave it 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. They said these three things, "Be cautious in judgment. Establish many pupils. And make a fence around the Torah."

The Simple Explanation

The first chapter of Pirkei Avos begins by telling us the order of the transmission of the Torah; the Torah was received by Moshe, who transmitted it to Yehoshua, and so on. This description of the Torah's transmission continues until it reaches the "men of the Great Assembly - Anshei Knesses Hagedolah." Why did Rabbi Yehudah Hanossi² choose to delineate the order of the Torah's transmission here³? Commentaries explain⁴ 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 book of Avos begins by telling us that *our* ethics come directly from Sinai, from the Torah, which Hashem taught Moshe.

Whenever the Mishnah says that "they said" or "he said," it does not mean that the particular lesson (or lessons) is *everything* the particular rabbi taught; instead, it is a teaching that the Sages would often repeat. The men of the Great Assembly would frequently admonish judges, teachers, and all of us to "(1) be cautious in judgment, (2) establish many pupils, and (3) make a fence around the Torah."

Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

As we have discussed many times, the teachings of Avos help one become Chossid⁵. Being a

1. The entire contents of this explanation are contained within footnote 48, there.

2. He was the one who edited the Mishnah; he decided what to include, and where to place it.

3. For a more complete list of the chain of transmission, see the Rambam's introduction to his Mishnah Torah.

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

5. See Talmud Bava Kamma 30, a.

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Chossid means attaining an extra degree of piety and involves going beyond the Torah's requirements. Due to one's zealousness in fulfilling what Hashem demands of us, a pious individual is not satisfied with the minimum requirements of the law. The righteous individual will strive to go above and beyond the minimum requirements of Torah law. Not only that, but he will also place "fences" around the Torah's laws. He will take upon himself additional restrictions to ensure he does not stumble.

Had any of the Sages listed earlier in the Mishnah said something that could add to our righteousness, the Mishnah would have said so. It seems strange that until the time of the Knesses Hagedolah, not one Sage said anything that could help one attain additional piety. We're discussing a period of approximately one millennium and talking about people who were among the greatest Tzaddikim and Chassidim in history. Nevertheless, we found no such teaching until the Great Assembly.

The Explanation

This can be understood based on the teachings of the Alter Rebbe⁶. He writes that in the earlier generations, the Torah's commandments were enough for one to maintain a high spiritual level because of their holiness and great spiritual stature. They did not need additional fences or stringencies. Unlike the earlier generations, now we need the lessons of Pirkei Avos.

It was not until the later generations, when the darkness and concealment of G-d's presence became greater, and our hearts became weaker, that we needed something extra. We lacked the same ability to deal with spiritual darkness, so the need arose for Pirkei Avos; there was a need for more substantial ammunition to help us in the battle against the concealment of Hashem's presence within the world. After the time of the biblical prophets, when the world became spiritually weaker, we needed to struggle to serve Hashem with love. There was a need for extra stringencies, over and above those commanded by the Torah.

It is true that even in the time of Moshe Rabbeinu, there were wicked people; not everyone was a Tzaddik. However, as is also explained by the Alter Rebbe⁷, it was not the same as it is at present. Everything, for the most part, was much more extreme. In the earlier days, one who was righteous was a great Tzaddik. One who was not a good person was wicked; he intentionally allowed himself to be led astray. The righteous had total control over themselves. Immediately upon contemplating Hashem's greatness, they would be gripped by a feeling of total awe of G-d. In other words, the righteous who were complete Tzaddikim did not need the teachings of Avos. On the other hand, wicked people would not be

6. See Likkutei Torah Parshas Matos, 85, a.

7. See Torah Ohr Parshas Mikeitz, 41, a.

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helped by the piety taught in Pirkei Avos.

Currently, for the most part, there are no people with the level of righteousness that existed in the earlier generations. However, by and large, there are also not those who are completely wicked, as in the previous generations. We all need reinforcement to serve G-d truly. Our all-knowing G-d supplied us with the proper tool at the appropriate time, which can be used to reach the true love of Hashem.

May we all use the tools given and be Chassidim in the truest sense. In this merit, we will undoubtedly greet Moshiach now!

(Adapted from the Sichah of Shabbos Matos-Masei, 5746)

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

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