

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Perek III

25 Sivan, 5781 – June 5, 2021

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 III

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Chapter III

פרק ג', משנה ח': רבי דוסתאי ברבי ינאי משום רבי מאיר אומר: כל השוכח דבר אחד ממשנתו מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו מתחייב בנפשו, שנאמר (דברים ד, ט) "רק השמר לך ושמר נפשך מאד פן תשכח את הדברים אשר ראו עיניך." יכול אפילו תקפה עליו משנתו, תלמוד לומר (שם) "ופן יסורו מלבבך כל ימי חיך", הא אינו מתחייב בנפשו עד שישיב ויסירם מלבו. Rabbi Dusta'i, the son of Rabbi Yannai, would (frequently) say in the name of Rabbi Meir, "Anyone who forgets even a single word of this learning, the Torah considers it as if he had forfeited his life. As the Torah says¹, 'Just be careful, and verily guard your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen.' One might think that this also applies to one who (forgot because) his studies proved too difficult for him. (This is not the case.) The verse goes on to tell us² 'and lest they be removed from your heart, throughout the days of your life.' Hence, one does not forfeit his life unless he deliberately removes them from his heart."

The Simple Explanation

This Mishnah's lesson seems simple enough. If one studies Torah and forgets what he learned³, it is as if he has forfeited his life. We need to understand why "forgetting even a single word of one's learning" is such a grave sin. Why should the punishment be that severe?

The explanation is that being "as if he has forfeited his life" is not a punishment at all. Instead, it is cause and effect. Torah is "our life and the length of our days⁴." A direct result of forgetting even one word of his learning is losing a part of his life. There is no actual physical death. However, he has lost a part of his life. This is in keeping with the Sages' saying⁵, "what difference is there whether

1. Parshas Vo'eschanan, Devorim 4:9.

2. Ibid.

3. The Mishnah clarifies that we it is discussing a Torah lesson which the individual understood. The reason for his "forgetfulness," was because he did not review the lesson as he should have.

4. Quoted from the Berochoh Ahavas Olam which is recited before Shema in the evening service. This is also in keeping with Rabbi Akiva's analogy to fish (Talmud Berochos 61, b). The water is the place of their life. If they cannot live within the water, they certainly cannot live outside of it. The same is true of Jews and Torah; Torah is the place of our life. We cannot survive without it.

5. See Talmud Bava Kama 65, a.

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one completely murders another, or only partially murders him."

Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

This Mishnah seems to contradict a story that the Sages tell us in the Talmud⁶. To understand this story, we must first give a brief introduction. Rav Zeira was among the third generation of Amora'im. These Sages' words make up the Gemorah. There were two primary centers of learning for the Amora'im; in Israel and Babylonia, where the Jews were exiled after the destruction of the Second Temple. As a young man, Rav Zeira lived and studied in Babylonia; he later moved to Israel and studied in the Yeshivos. The study in Israel was considered superior to that in Babylonia because of the land's holiness. Therefore, the Sages say that the verse in Eichoh – Lamentations⁷, "He has made me dwell in darkness ..." refers to the Babylonian Talmud⁸.

The entire flow of the Babylonian Talmud is as if one is in darkness and must struggle to find his way. The Gemorah will make a statement. The Sages will then question this statement; after an attempt to answer the question, the Sages will then prove that it does not answer the question at all, and so on.

The Jerusalem Talmud has a different style. After quoting a Mishnah, a teaching from earlier Sages, it will usually make a statement to clarify what the Mishnah said, and so on.

Before beginning the study of the Jerusalem Talmud, Rav Zeira fasted for one hundred days to forget the entire Babylonian Talmud. He wanted to forget all of his earlier studies. He was afraid that the manner and style of his learning would interfere with his study of the Torah of Israel. Based on our Mishnah, how was he permitted to do such a thing? One may not forget even a single word of his studies. How much more so is this true of the entire Talmud!

According to the Ramban, the prohibition applies only to forgetting our standing at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah⁹. Our Mishnah's ruling is not the law. Instead, it is, as is the rest of Pirkei Avos, extra piety, Chassidus. It is telling us how to go above the letter of the law. Therefore, forgoing piety to grasp the Torah of Israel better is certainly no problem.

However, many of the Halachic codifiers rule that one may not forget a single word of Torah according to the law. Among those who judge as such is the Alter Rebbe. He writes that¹⁰ "whoever forgets even one word of his studies because he did not review properly is as if he had forfeited his life. Not only that, but he is also transgressing a negative commandment, as the Torah says, 'Just be careful, and verily guard

6. Talmud Bava Metzia 85, a.

7. Eichoh 3:6.

8. See Talmud Sanhedrin 24, a.

9. See the Sefer Hamitzvos, Negative Commandment 2.

10. See the Laws of Torah Study Chapter 2, Paragraph 4.

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your soul, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen.' "We must indeed understand how Rav Zeira was permitted to forget *the entire Talmud!*

The Explanation

The reason for the prohibition of forgetting the Torah¹¹ is to assure that one does not "separate himself from the Torah." It is, therefore, evident that Rav Zeira was not doing anything wrong, quite to the contrary. Forgetting the words of the Torah causes one to become separate from Torah. Here, however, his sole intention was obviously to absorb to "Torah of Israel" in the best possible way. The Midrash tells us clearly that the "Torah of Israel"¹² is superior.

(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Terumah and Shabbos Parshas Vayakhel Pekudei, 5740)

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

To dedicate a week, a month, or a year of

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11. See Sefer Mitzvos Gadol, Negative Commandments 13. The Sefer Mitzvos Kotton makes a similar statement.

12. See Vayikroh Rabbah Section 13, "there is no Torah comparable to that of Israel."

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