

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Perek III

15 Menachem Av, 5781 – July 24, 2021

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 III**

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Chapter III

פרק ג', משנה א': עקביא בן מהללאל אומר, הסתכל בשלושה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי עבירה. דע מאין באת, ולאן אתה הולך, ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון.
מאין באת? מטפה סרוחה. ולאן אתה הולך? למקום עפר רמה ותולעה. ולפני מי אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון? לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא.

Chapter 3, Mishnah 1: Akavia the son of Mahalalel would say, "Reflect upon three things, and you will not come to the hands of sin. Know from where you came, where you are going and before whom you shall give a judgment and accounting. From where you came, from a putrid drop. Where you are going; to a place of dust, maggots, and worms, before whom you will give a judgment and accounting; before the supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He."

The Simple Explanation

This Mishnah teaches us methods for avoiding sin. It goes beyond that. By following the teachings of this Mishnah, one can even go beyond distancing oneself from sin. Even to avoid "the hands of sin," it is possible to remain distant from anything that can lead to sin.

By reflecting that one comes from a putrid drop, he will not succumb to arrogance. Dwelling on this removes the tendency to be vain; there is no cause to feel superior. Vanity is a common cause of sin. If one considers himself the "center of the universe," there is nothing to prevent him from doing whatever he wants.

Reflection upon the end of one's physical body, "a place of dust, maggots, and worms," helps to eliminate the traits of chasing physical desires and running after money. After all, what point is there to accumulating wealth¹?

Likewise, contemplating that one must ultimately give a "judgment and accounting" for all of his actions will help keep his actions in check².

1. It is obvious that the soul of a Jew, which is from where he really comes, is an actual part of Hashem (see Tanya Chapter 2, as we shall see further). Similarly, a Jewish soul ascends to the highest levels to bask in G-d's presence. However, for the purpose of distancing oneself from sin it is beneficial to reflect upon the beginning and the end (albeit a temporary end – there will be a resurrection of the dead) of the body.

2. This explanation of the Mishnah is based on the commentary of Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura.

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Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

The Mishnah teaches us to contemplate that we will ultimately need to give a "judgment and accounting" of our actions in this lifetime. This expression requires explanation. When an individual is facing trial, he must first offer an accounting of the actions for which he is being tried. Once his accounting is complete, the judge issues a verdict. The "accounting" comes before the "judgment." We need to understand why the Mishnah says "judgment and accounting." Accounting and judgment would appear to be the correct order.

The Answer

We can understand this based on the Baal Shem Tov's explanation³ of a different Mishnah in Pirkei Avos⁴. The Mishnah says that "... the collectors make their rounds every day and exact payment from man, (both) with his knowledge and without his knowledge ..." Hashem punishes a person for his actions (payment is exacted from him) based on a verdict which he renders (*with his knowledge*). He issues the ruling for his sin. How does this come about?

The Heavenly Court tells the person, that it is judging one who committed a similar infraction. They do not indicate that he is judging himself. In other words, he is being judged *without his knowledge*. They inflict the punishment upon which *he* decided. This explains the order of the phrase "judgment and accounting." First comes the individual's own "judgment" of his infraction. Only then is there the "accounting," demonstrating that he did commit the very same sin.

The order of the two parts of the expression is now clear. However, the reason for the necessity of concluding as to the person's verdict in this seemingly round-about manner is still challenging to understand. One would think that the angels who adjudicate in the Heavenly Court can reach a verdict on their own, without any help!

The explanation is that each Jewish soul is "an actual part of Hashem above⁵." G-d is a perfect unity; He is one essential being. The Baal Shem Tov taught that⁶ "when one grasps part of the essence, he is grasping the entire essence." This means that within each Jew, there is the essence of G-d Almighty Himself! Because of this, a creation has neither the right nor the ability to judge a Jew. This includes even the ministering angels! Since it is not possible to judge a Jew, he must issue the judgment upon himself.

3. This explanation is brought in Likkutei Maharar, Chapter 113.

4. Pirkei Avos Chapter 3, Mishnah 16.

5. The quotation is from Iyov 31:2. Tanya, at the beginning of Chapter 2 adds the word "actual."

6. This is quoted in the Chassidic discourse of 5666, Page 522.

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This teaches us several lessons. We see from this the greatness of every Jew. No matter what he looks like, he contains the essence of Hashem. Additionally, it teaches us how important it is to never judge any Jew in a less than favorable light. We may be casting aspersions upon ourselves (G-d forbid). Through this love of every fellow Jew, we will undoubtedly merit Moshiach now!

(Adapted from a talk given on Yud Shevat, 5720)

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

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