

בס"ד

PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

Perek IV

20 Iyar, 5779 – May 25, 2019

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

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

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Chapter IV

פרק ד', משנה י': רבי מאיר אומר: הוי ממעט בעסק, ועסוק בתורה. והוי שפל רוח בפני כל אדם ...

Chapter 4, Mishnah 10: Rabbi Mayer would say, “Engage minimally in business, and occupy yourself with Torah. Be humble before every man ...

The Simple Explanation

The Bartenura explains this Mishnah in the following manner. One must limit the time he spends engaged in making a living; this applies whether he is involved in a business, a profession or the like. One's primary occupation must be in Torah study. The Mishnah continues by teaching that one must be humble before every man. This means that one must endeavor to learn Torah from all people, including one who does not appear to be up to his standard in Torah study or in Torah knowledge.

The Rambam explains the second part of this Mishnah differently. According to his explanation, being humble before each person is not limited to Torah study. Rather, it refers to all aspects of life. One must humble himself before everyone without exception. The reason for this is in order to distance oneself from even a trace of haughtiness.

This is in keeping with the Rambam's teaching that “the midpoint is the proper path for each and every temperament¹.” However, he points out that there are exceptions to this rule. There are characteristics which one must take to an extreme. He writes that² “among these is arrogance. If a man is only humble, he is not following a good path. Rather, he must be extremely humble, holding himself lowly and his spirit very unassuming.”

Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

We see that according to the Bartenura, “being humble before every man,” refers specifically to of Torah study. This being the case, this teaching is very similar to the teaching of Ben Zoma at the beginning of this chapter³, “Who is wise? One who learns from every man.” This

1. See Hilchos De'os, Chapter 2, Paragraph 2.

2. Ibid., Paragraph 3.

3. Pirkei Avos, Chapter 4, Mishnah 1.

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being the case, we seem to require an explanation. Why is it that Rabbi Mayer in our Mishnah did not use the same syntax as Ben Zoma? It would seemingly have been more appropriate to have said “learn Torah from each man,” rather than saying to be “humble before each man.” This would be a better fit with the Bartenura’s explanation.

Conversely, the Rambam’s comments also seem to require explanation. According to him, the Mishnah’s statement to “be humble before each man” has no direct connection with Torah study. It is simply teaching us that we must be humble before each and every person without exception. This being the case, what is the connection between humility and occupying oneself with the Torah? The two are written together in the Mishnah, yet there seems to be no connection whatsoever between them.

The Explanation

This can be explained as follows. There are many paths in serving Hashem. There are those whose Divine service focuses primarily on Torah study, for example teachers of Torah or rabbis. Conversely, there are Jews who focus more on the performance of Mitzvos⁴. These people have a greater involvement with this world. They are working people, who serve G-d by conducting their occupation strictly according to Torah⁵, and using their earnings in order to carry out Hashem’s Will⁶.

It would appear that those whose lives are focused on Torah study are on a much higher level. Their entire existence is based on the spiritual, i.e. the Holy Torah. Contrast that with those who are occupied with this world, and with its concealment of Hashem’s presence.

However, this is not necessarily so⁷. One who is occupied with making a living is constantly witnessing Hashem’s providence. Additionally, he is on the front lines, carrying out the mission to transform this world into a dwelling place for Hashem⁸. In other words, there are advantages to each way of life.

4. It goes without saying, that all Jews, without exception, must study Torah and perform Mitzvos. The difference is where the focus lies.

5. This includes, but is not limited to, conducting business without even a *hint* of stealing, trickery, or unfairly damaging another’s business or reputation.

6. Examples of this would be giving Tzedokoh, paying tuition for one’s children to learn Torah, and spending money in order to perform Mitzvos (such as Tefillin, Tzitzis, Esrog, Matzos, etc.).

7. See Likkutei Torah Shir Hashirim, 44, d. There the Alter Rebbe the advantage of working people over those who study Torah full-time.

8. See Midrash Tanchumah Parshas Naso, Chapter 16. See also Tanya Chapter 36.

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It is clear that our Mishnah is addressing a working person. Were it to be addressing a full-time Torah scholar, why would the Mishnah need to tell him to “engage minimally in business, and occupy himself with Torah?” For one whose *business* is Torah study, that is the normal state of affairs. Torah is his constant occupation.

Rather the Mishnah is telling a “working man,” that despite the fact that he is out in the world earning a living, nevertheless, Torah must be his primary occupation. One who follows this teaching has the advantage of devotion to both Torah *and* Mitzvos. This could very well bring him to arrogance. Therefore, the Mishnah tells him to “be humble before each man.”

We are now preparing ourselves for the festival of Shavuot when we receive the Torah. As we read at the beginning of Pirkei Avos⁹, “Moshe (the humblest of all people) received the Torah from Sinai (the humblest, i.e. smallest of all mountains). By learning the trait of humility, may we merit the coming of Moshiach now!

(Adapted from the Sichah of Shabbos Parshas Aikev, 5728)

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9. Chapter 1, Mishnah 1.

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