

בס"ד

# PIRKEI AVOS OF THE WEEK

## Perek II

1 Iyar, 5780 – April 25, 2020

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 II**  
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**Chapter II**

**פרק ב', משנה א': רבי אומר:**

איזוהי דרך ישרה שיבור לו האדם? כל שהיא תפארת לעושיה ותפארת לו מן האדם.  
והוי זהיר במצווה קלה כבחמורה, שאין אתה יודע מתן שכרן של מצוות. והוי מחשב הפסד מצווה כנגד שכרה, ושכר עבירה כנגד הפסדה.  
הסתכל בשלושה דברים ואין אתה בא לידי עבירה: דע מה למעלה ממך – עין רואה, ואוזן שומעת, וכל מעשיך בספר נכתבין.

**Chapter 2, Mishnah 1:** Rebbe would say:

- 1.) Which is the right path for man to choose for himself? Whatever is harmonious for the one who does it, and harmonious for mankind.
- 2.) Be as careful with a minor Mitzvah as with a major one, for you do not know the rewards of the Mitzvos. Consider the cost of a mitzvah against its rewards, and the rewards of a transgression against its cost.
- 3.) Consider three things, and you will not come to the hands of transgression. Know what is above from you; a seeing eye, a listening ear, and that all of your deeds being inscribed in a book.

**The Simple Explanation**

This Mishnah contains a teaching which was often said by Rebbe. Whenever it is written “Rebbe” without specifying which rabbi, it is referring to Rabbi Yehudah Hanossi<sup>1</sup>. This is done out of deference to him. He was the one who edited and compiled all of the teachings of the Sages. This compilation formed the Mishnah, which is the foundation and the basis of the Oral Law.

This teaching of his actually consists of three different (though related) sections. The Rambam explains the second section of this Mishnah as follows<sup>2</sup>. “Be as careful with a minor Mitzvah as with a major one, for you do not know the rewards of the Mitzvos.” The Torah does not tell us the reward which one receives for fulfilling the positive commandments<sup>3</sup>. This seeming “omission” is intentional (as is the case with everything in the Torah). It assures that we observe each Mitzvah equally; we are not told which has a greater or lesser reward.

Rebbe continues his teaching by telling us to “consider the cost of a mitzvah against its rewards ...” The Rambam explains this to mean that even though the Torah does not specify a reward for Mitzvos, we can understand which Mitzvah has a greater reward. We must simply consider the severity of the punishment for a

1. He was also referred to by the appellation Rabbeinu Hakadosh – Our Holy Rabbi.

2. See his Commentary to the Mishnah here.

3. This is unlike the Torah's prohibitions; the punishment for transgressing each prohibition is clearly stated.

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transgression (“the cost of a mitzvah”). Desecrating the Shabbos is a capital offense<sup>4</sup>. Neglecting the performance of circumcision is punishable by Koreis – Excision; which is less severe than a death penalty. In this manner we can understand that the reward for keeping the Shabbos is greater than that which is given for circumcision.

### Difficulties in Understanding the Mishnah

Based on the Rambam’s explanation, we would seem to have a major difficulty in understanding Rabbi Yehudah Hanossi’s teaching. Firstly, he tells us how important it is for us to fulfill each Mitzvah with the same alacrity. In order to accomplish this the Torah refrains from telling us the reward for keeping positive commandments. He then teaches us what would appear to be a “workaround.” If you would really like to know the relative greatness of one Mitzvah’s reward as compared to another, simply look at the severity of its punishment. What does the Torah accomplish by withholding this information? It is readily available to us in any case.

### The Answer

There are two types of reward for the fulfillment of Mitzvos:

1. There is a particular reward for each Mitzvah. In terms of this reward, each Mitzvah is distinct from all other Mitzvos. In this regard there is a difference between *minor* and *major* Mitzvos. The greatness of this type of reward can be calculated from the severity of the punishment for neglecting it.
2. There is another, greater type of reward for the fulfillment of each Mitzvah. This reward is equal for all of the 248 positive commandments.

The Alter Rebbe explains<sup>5</sup> the Mishnah<sup>6</sup>, “The reward of a Mitzvah is a Mitzvah” in the following manner. From the reward of a Mitzvah it is possible to know its essence. This means to say that there is a parallelism between the reward of a Mitzvah and its essence.

Just as we explained that there are two types of rewards, likewise there are two distinct characteristics of Mitzvos.

1. The performance of a Mitzvah *refines* the one who fulfills it<sup>7</sup>. Not only that, but this performance also refines the objects with which they are performed<sup>8</sup>. In this regard, there is a difference between each and every Mitzvah. The refinement which each Mitzvah performs is different.
2. By the performance of each Mitzvah, one is fulfilling Hashem’s Will. That is the common denominator between all of the Mitzvos.

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4. Please note that a death penalty only applies to one who is aware of the severity of his actions. Furthermore, two witnesses must see him as he is about to perform this desecration. Moreover, they must warn him of the consequences for his actions within a short time prior to their commission.

5. See Tanya Chapter 39.

6. See further, Chapter 4, Mishnah 2.

7. See the Midrash Rabbah, Bereishis 44, a, “The Mitzvos were given to us in order to refine people.”

8. See Likkutei Torah Parshas Bechukosai 45, c.

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Based on this we can understand the Mishnah's teaching. The difference between the reward for one Divine commandment and another only takes into account the amount and type of refinement which it brings about in the world. Each Mitzvah accomplishes different things within the world. Regarding this Rabbi Yehudah said to "consider the cost of a mitzvah against its rewards."

Contrast this with the reward for fulfilling G-d Almighty's Will. This is a far greater reward. For this sort of reward there is no difference whatsoever between one Mitzvah and another. It is regarding this type of reward that Rebbe said that "you do not know the rewards of the Mitzvos." We must therefore apply ourselves equally to all Mitzvos without distinction.

*(Adapted from a talk given on Shabbos Parshas Bereishis, 5720)*

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

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