

CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 13: PART 1

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

He (RYB"Z) said to them (his five students): Go out and see which is a good path for a person to attach himself to. Rabbi Eliezer said "Ayin Tovah" (a good eye). Rabbi Yehoshua said "Chaver Tov" (a good friend). Rabbi Yossi said "Shachen Tov" (a good neighbor). Rabbi Shimon said "One who foresees the outcome (of his actions)." Rabbi Elazar said "Lev tov" (a good heart). He (RYB"Z) said: I "see" (prefer) the words (the opinion) of Rabbi Elazar be Arach, for included in his words are your words.

Why did each of these students choose the specific virtue that they did? Furthermore, what is the great virtue chosen by Rabbi Yehoshua, "chaver tov?" What is so elevated about being a good friend? If the value is in that of his **having** a good friend, certainly being good himself is a greater virtue! Even more difficult is the choice of Rabbi Yossi, for what place does "a good neighbor" have in this list of superior paths that a person should follow?

(As we have written numerous times before, the Maharal isn't questioning the fact that each of these lessons are nice ones. But the Rabbis aren't simply teaching us "nice things." They are teaching us fundamentals of reality. When someone has a chance to summarize the "correct path in life," one would expect -- on the surface -- something more profound than simply "be a good friend" or "be a good neighbor!")

Another question is why RYB"Z instructed his students to go out and see [for themselves] which is a good path. Why didn't he simply tell them the path which they should choose?!

We have explained in earlier Mishnayoth that man's character traits are a direct result of the foundation that he has prepared in his "nefesh" (human life-force). Good character traits develop from good foundations, and the specific foundations that man has laid in his personality development lead to his character traits.

RYB"Z had enumerated the virtues that each of his students possessed, with each virtue reflecting the unique foundations of the nefesh of that student. What he needed to clarify was if the character traits of each student were produced by those foundations, which would indicate that the virtues were of the purest quality, completely integrated within each student's personality. Therefore, he told each student to go out and ascertain which "path" -- character trait -- was the most appropriate for a person to follow. (He wanted to see which path each one would choose, and see if it related to

each one's foundation in his nefesh.)

"Rebbi Eliezer ben Horkonus said "Ayin Tovah" (a good eye)." At this point, the author of the Mishna calls them by the title "Rebbi" (teacher, rather than using only their first names, as he has done until now) for they are now teaching "halachoth," required behaviour.

Rebbi Eliezer's lesson was built on the foundation which he possessed. We have already pointed out (see Mishna 11, Pt. 1) that Rebbi Eliezer's superior quality was a perfection of his nefesh, which transcended the natural limitations of his material dimension. This gave him a "nefesh tov," a life force that can be considered "good." (We have explained in the first chapter that the word "tov," good, implies something which is aligned with its purpose of existence, and directed towards fulfilling that purpose.) One who possesses a "nefesh tov" has an "ayin tova," a good (generous) eye, just as one who possesses its opposite, a "nefesh rah," has an "ayin rah" (stingy). We find the Rabbis making the connection between "nefesh rah" and "ayin rah" a numerous times. We are taught (Bava Metzia 52a) about a selah coin which depreciated in value, but the depreciation was less than one sixth of the total original value: One who refuses to accept it is a "nefesh rah" (since it is relatively close to its original value). His refusal to accept it is based on a trait of stinginess, which emanates from his "nefesh rah."

In reality, the power of vision is rooted in the "nefesh" dimension (less materialistic) of the human being. We see that seeing is the most transcendent, non-physical, of the senses, closest to the spiritual/intellectual. There are also textual indications to this connection, both in Rabbinic as well as Biblical sources. The verb "to see" is used to describe the activity of the eye as well as the activity of the mind. "I see what ploni is saying." And we find (Koheleth 1:17) "My heart saw..." From all the above we can see (no pun intended! ;-)) that the power of sight is a transcendent force of the nefesh. Rebbi Eliezer, whose foundation was built on a transcendent nefesh, extolled the "ayin tova," which is the superior character trait that is generated from such a foundation.

Along these lines, Rebbe Yehoshua chose to extol the character trait of "chaver tov." We have explained earlier (Mishna 11) that Rebbe Yehoshua ben Chanania embodies perfection in his material dimension, which serves as a carrier of the transcendent dimension in the physical world and which is bound to it. (Elaborating on this, the Maharal will now introduce what is almost a play on words, yet the relationship of those words reflects the underlying meaning of Rebbe Yehoshua's choice.) When this quality material dimension is a "chaver tov," binds properly to a "nefesh" of equally high quality, the result is a human being that is considered "tov," good, one who would never inflict "rah," evil, on anyone.

The physical dimension of man's existence is a "chaver," a friend, to the more transcendent dimension. (The root of the word "chaver" is "chibbur" which means to bind or to attach. Saying that the material dimension is a chaver to the nefesh means that it is bound together with it.) As we explained in discussing the virtue of Rebbe Yehoshua, he had a purity of the "chomer," of the

material dimension. Rebbe Yehoshua's intention in extolling the "chaver tov" was that man, in his physical existence, should be a good friend to his "nefesh," creating the proper bond between the material and the spiritual. When the material dimension is a "chaver tov," properly bound to a pure "nefesh," it results in a human being that does good to others.

As a result of his unique character virtue, Rebbe Yehoshua was himself a good friend, always doing good for others, and always impacting on those around him in a positive way, causing them to be good themselves. This is the power of a "chaver tov" a good friend, in a social setting. And it is the result of physical man properly bonding, as a "chaver tov," with his spiritual dimension, becoming a person whose behaviour is always directed towards the positive and the good.

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