

CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 15: PART 2

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

Then Rebbe Eliezer taught "Repent one day before your death." The Talmud (Shabbat 153a) explains that his real meaning was that a person should be in a process of Tshuva (repentance) every day, since he never knows which will be the day he will die. This perfects a person in his relation to the Almighty, for if he has sinned against G-d, he is repenting with his full heart and soul [returning closer to G-d].

(The analysis of Rebbe Eliezer's words in the Talmud goes as follows: "Rebbe Eliezer's students asked him: Does a person know the day of his death? Rebbe Eliezer replied: All the more so should he repent today, lest he die tomorrow. The result is that all of his days are spent in the process of repentance." On this the Maharal raises a serious question.)

However, there is a difficulty with this understanding of Rebbe Eliezer's lesson. For if his intention was to teach that a person should repent every day, why didn't he simply say so?! (The Maharal has a basic expectation from the Rabbis. They say what they mean. And they mean what they say. If their words are explained to mean something different than what they actually say, there must be a good reason why they phrased it in the way that they did.) Furthermore, why is it so obvious to Rebbe Eliezer that a person will spend all his days in the process of repentance? If he repented in his youth for his sins (and didn't sin after that) why would he need to spend all his days in repentance?!

The essence of tshuva is to repent right before death, so the person leaves the world from within the process of tshuva. Therefore, even if a person repented from his sins at an early age, he still must continue with tshuva for his entire life, so that he will die from within the tshuva process. Tshuva is man returning closer to G-d, from whom he has become distanced. (Sin distances man from G-d, the source of his existence. But every aspect of man's physical existence carries with it a certain distancing from G-d, whose existence is purely transcendent and spiritual. Tshuva, which literally means "return", implies man returning closer to the source of his existence, to G-d.) Death is man returning his soul, his essence, to G-d. This is the ultimate return to his source. Dying from within the tshuva process is the purest and most complete way for man to return his soul to G-d, which binds it to the source of eternity. [This is the meaning of the phrase "nishmato tzruarah b'tzror ha'chaim."] This explanation is elaborated upon more fully in Netiv HaTshuva (Ch. 2).

So, Rebbe Eliezer has given us mussar on how one should perfect himself in relation to others, on how one should avoid deficiency in his own essence, and on how he should have perfection in

relation to G-d. With these three lessons, man is complete in every aspect of his existence.

Then Rebbe Eliezer taught three more things, all relating to the "sechel" (man's spiritual/intellectual dimension). What was meant when the Mishna wrote "They taught three things" was that lessons were taught in groups of threes, which each of the elements of the trio having a connection between them. So Rebbe Eliezer first taught three things that were connected with each other (man perfecting himself in the three necessary dimensions) then he taught three other things, relating to the "sechel" that were connected to each other, although not necessarily connected to the first three things he taught. (The fact that all these lessons are built on a structure of "three" will be further developed in the coming Mishnayoth.)

The first of this trio is "warm yourself from the fire of the chachaim" which means to attach yourself to them. When one warms oneself by a fire, one receives benefit from it, which creates a connection and a bond with it, without actually touching it. This is the relationship a person should have with chachamim [as was taught in Ch. 1, Mishna 4], creating an attachment to Torah scholars by benefitting from the light and warmth of their Torah.

Then we are taught to be careful about being burned by their embers. In other words, as we draw closer to them, we must take care not to become too familiar and disrespectful, which can easily be the outcome of closeness. (Familiarity breeds contempt. The closer our relationship with Torah scholars, the easier it is to take them for granted.) Coming TOO close to warm ourselves can lead to our getting burned.

So far, we have two lessons in this group: 1) Warm yourself from the fire of the chachamim and 2) take care about being burned from the heat of the embers. The Mishna then concludes with the final directive of our relationship with chachaim. "All their words are like fiery coals" warning us not to violate their teachings (Rabbinic commands), for one who violates the teachings of the Rabbis is liable for death.

(This last idea will be explained shortly, along with the three reasons given of why one must be careful of his interactions with chachamim.)

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