

CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 1: PART 1

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

Rebbe says: Which is a straight path that a person should choose? One that is both praiseworthy for the doer and praiseworthy from other people. And be careful with a "light" Mitzvah as with a weighty one, for you don't know the reward given for Mitzvoth. And calculate the cost of a Mitzvah against its reward; and the reward of a sin against its cost. And look at (scrutinize) three things, and you will not come to the hands of sin. Know what is above you: An eye which sees, an ear which hears, and all your actions are written in a book.

Why does the chapter open with a lesson from Rebbe (Rebbe Yehuda HaNasi), rather than including his lesson together with that of his father, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, in the previous chapter?

Rebbe was a unique leader of the Jewish people, combining Torah greatness along with great wealth, something that was never found together in one person. (See Gittin 59a.) As such, it is fitting to open a new chapter with his lessons.

Additionally, his lesson instructing man in the choosing of a proper path encompasses all of man's actions, and as such is appropriate for the opening of a new chapter. It is for this same reason that the lesson of Akavia ben Mehallalel opens Chapter Three, and Ben Zoma's opens Chapter Four, as we will explain.

The following questions need to be asked in analyzing this Mishna.

1. Once we have been taught that the proper path is one which is praiseworthy for the doer, why does it need to add that it also must be praiseworthy in the eyes of others? (Isn't this either obvious or unnecessary?)
2. What is the difference between Rebbe's lesson teaching about a STRAIGHT path (derech y'shara) and the lesson of Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai (Mishna 9) which teaches about a GOOD path (derech tova)? (Please note that different verbs are also used. "Choose" is used by Rebbe in relation to the straight path, while "attach" is used by Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai in relation to the good path.)
3. The Mishna begins discussing the path to choose, and concludes with instructions given directly to the person "Be careful...". Why?

There are things that a person may do which are good in and of themselves, but they are not praiseworthy from others, meaning an observer may denounce him for that action. We are being taught that a path which is praiseworthy for the individual, but appears suspect to the observer, is not a path to be chosen, for a person must discharge his obligation both in relation to G-d as well as in relation to other people. (See what we wrote about this in the Maharal's introduction to Derech Chaim.) All the more so is this true for a Torah scholar's actions, which can cause a desecration of G-d's name if they are not acceptable and pleasing. Therefore we are taught that the action must be praiseworthy from others who observe it, and not just praiseworthy by the person himself.

In that case, why not just teach that the actions should be praiseworthy from other people? Because sometimes people praise a person for an act which appears good, yet the doer lacked the proper intention, or did it for ulterior motives, and it can't be said that this is a straight path for a person to choose. Rather we are taught that the path should be praiseworthy for the individual, which is not true when the actions that are intended for self-aggrandizement or for ulterior motives. In addition, people who see the actions should also find them praiseworthy.

Rebbe's fundamental point is that a person should not ignore the perception of people even when doing something which is good, in and of itself. In many places the Rabbis make the point that a person is not allowed to do something which even gives the appearances of an improper action. (See Shabbath 64b, Bava Metzia 90a, Bechoroth 43b-44a, Beitzah 9a and other places relating to "mar'ith ayin.") Even more so is he not allowed to do something which is in fact an improper action.

In referring to the perceptions of OTHERS, Rebbe didn't use the word "briyoth," which implies all people, for not all people are qualified to judge what is a praiseworthy act. Many times an act can appear praiseworthy in the eyes of a person who doesn't understand that in truth the act is not at all a praiseworthy one. Rather, the word "adam" is used, which implies an elevated person, in contrast to someone who could more properly be compared to a donkey due to his lack of true understanding. (The Maharal uses this comparison frequently. A person's true humanity is a function of his spiritual/intellectual component. The physical/materialistic side of the human being is what he shares in common with animals, and the animal with the greatest dimension of physicality is the donkey.)

Another reason why a person should take the perception of others into account is because "The ways of a man are always pure in his (own) eyes" (see Mishlei 16:2). If the only criterion was the perception and conviction of the doer, he would judge his path proper due to his own lack of objectivity. Therefore, we are taught that the path must also be praiseworthy in the eyes of the (knowledgeable) observer.

(It should be noted that Rebbe is speaking not about specific actions, but about a "DERECH yeshara," a straight road or path. A "derech" requires three things: A starting point, an end point or goal, and a way to get from the beginning to the end. We have to know where we are, where we are going, and

how we are going to get there.

(A straight line is "the set of all points between point 'a' and point 'b'." This requires that the points be contiguous, where each point is the continuation of the previous point. A STRAIGHT path is one in which every step is a continuation of the preceding step, related to both the preceding step as well as the coming step. The step I take now is a natural outgrowth of the step I took previously, and itself is leading to the step that follows. That is a path which can be termed "straight," having integrity, where the coming steps are continuations of the earlier steps. This in contrast to a path which zigs and zags all over the place, with no step having any connection with any other step. At any point, I could go in any direction, and each step stands on its own. When people look for a "derech," an approach, whether it be to life or to Judaism, it must have integrity. If a person's behavior at 9 AM has no connection with his or her behavior at 10 AM; if a person's behavior in the home has no relationship with his or her behavior in the office or in the supermarket or in the synagogue, then one lacks a "derech," an integrated approach. Rebbe is teaching us about a "straight path," the overall approach one takes in Judaism. While there are many different legitimate approaches in Torah Judaism, Rebbe is teaching us that we are to choose one that has integrity, being both proper for the individual as well as for the (knowledgeable) people with whom one is interacting. This goes beyond how one would make a choice about a specific action. More on this in the coming classes.)

The class is taught by [Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky](#), Dean of [Darche Noam Institutions](#), Yeshivat Darche Noam/Shapell's and Midreshet Rachel for Women.
