

CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 1: PART 2

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 [as] careful with a "light" Mitzvah as with a weighty one, for you don't know the reward given for each of the 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 did Rebbe use the adjective "straight" while Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai (Mishna 9) used the adjective "good?" In discussing the perception of people, "straight" is the appropriate adjective. This is reflected in Rashi's commentary of the phrase (Devaraim 12:28) "...the good and the straight" where he writes: "Good -- in the eyes of heaven; straight -- in the eyes of man." And it is the opinion of Rebbe Akiva (in the Sifrei, Devarim 12) who explains the verse in this way. This is because straight and crooked can be perceived by the human being (see our explanation of "straight" at the end of last week's shiur) through the human power of perception and vision. "Good," however, is not something always apparent through human perception. It may appear to be good, when in fact it is bad. (See our explanation of "tov" and "rah" in Ch. 1, Mishna 2, pt. 2; DC1_022.) Therefore, Rebbe speaks of a **Straight** path as being one that is judged by the perception of people, and is **Chosen**, on the basis of those perceptions, distinguished by man from the warped path. Rebbe Yochanan ben Zakkai speaks of a GOOD path, to which a person **Attaches** himself, since it exists as an objective reality outside of man.

The next part of the Mishna shifts from third person ("which is the path A **Person** should choose") to second person ("**You** should be careful...") in order to communicate a significant distinction between the two lessons being taught. Choosing a path is legitimate in character traits (and one's general approach to Judaism) for in this area there is no single objective standard. The individual **Chooses** the path, and the criteria are that the path should be appropriate both for the doer and for those around him. But this does not extend to the area of Mitzvah observance, and being equally meticulous about all Mitzvoth is not simply the choice of a straight path. It is an objective Torah requirement that a person be as careful with a "light" Mitzvah as with a "heavy" one. Hence, the instruction addressed directly to the individual.

Yet Rebbe did juxtapose the two lessons, for he was teaching comprehensive behavior in both the area of "midoth" (perfection of personality traits) and "Mitzvoth." First, we are taught the proper approach to character development, for "derech erez kadma la'Torah," the requirement for proper worldly behavior preceded the Torah (as we discussed in the Introduction). This is the lesson of choosing a straight path, which encompasses man's character traits. Then we are taught a lesson about keeping the Torah and its commandments, with the instruction to be as careful with "light" Mitzvoth as with "heavy" ones.

There are those that raise the following question on this Mishna. How can Rebbe teach us that all the Mitzvoth are to be treated equally when we see that the Torah itself has a hierarchy in the performance of Mitzvoth! There are times when one Mitzvah pushes off another!? For example, the commandment to ensure the proper burial of a corpse overrides even the commandments of Brith Milah or the Pesach sacrifice (the most severe positive commands, whose non-performance brings with it "kareth") when only one can be performed. But this question is not in place, for our Mishna is discussing the reward received for each Mitzvah (and in this area we have no accurate knowledge of the reward hierarchy). It is possible that in comparing a person who attended to the burial of corpse with a person who brought a Pesach sacrifice, the latter will receive a greater reward than the former. The Torah did not have the burial override the sacrifice due to the greater reward of the burial, for the preference in performance is not based on maximizing man's reward. Rather, the will of the Torah (the decree of G-d) is that when only one of the two can be performed, there is a preference for the burial over the Pesach sacrifice. G-d's primary desire is that the corpse should be brought to a proper burial under all circumstances. Under circumstances where only one of the two Mitzvoth could be performed, a person who abandoned the burial to sacrifice the Pesach or to perform circumcision (in the quest for the greater reward, even if it would be known that this brought greater reward) would be **violating** the Divine will in his act of sacrificing the Pesach (since G-d wanted that person under those circumstances to be involved in burial) and in fact he would get **no** reward.

(This is anticipating a famous saying of the Rebbe from Kotzk: A person is supposed to view every situation with the realization that there is only one Jew, one time, and one Mitzvah. The person is that individual, the time is now, and the Mitzvah is precisely what G-d wants from that individual at that time.)

In fact, the language of the Tanna itself demonstrates that there is a hierarchy in the performance of Mitzvoth, with one having the ability to override another. Calling one Mitzvah "kala" (light) indicates that it can be pushed off by a heavier ("chamura") one! But this known relativity is only in relation to the ability of one to override the other, in a situation where there is a simultaneous conflict. (Only one can be performed, and the other must be forfeited.) This choice of one over the other reflects the will of G-d as to which Mitzvah should be performed when both can't be done, but has nothing to do with the relative rewards of the two Mitzvoth.

From this foundation, Rebbe teaches that a person should not be lax in the "light" Mitzvah which could get pushed off, thinking that it has little reward, so he is better off saving his energy and greater resources for the "heavy" Mitzvah, which carries with it more reward. (A kind of "cost/benefit" analysis...) This calculation would be flawed, since it is possible for the lighter Mitzvah to have a reward equal to the heavier one. Therefore, one should be equally careful with each and every Mitzvah that presents itself.

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