

CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 21: PART 1

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

He used to say: It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task; and you are not free to desist from it. If you have learned a great amount of Torah, you are given a great amount of reward. And your Employer is reliable to pay the wages of your labor. And know that the payment of reward to righteous people is done in the World to Come.

(The first half of the Mishna is oft-quoted and well-known, and at first glance, it seems to make perfect sense. But is a prime example of a Mishna that is really very difficult to understand when subjected to a deeper and more precise analysis.

(Looking at the Mishna -- certainly without knowing the introduction we provided in the previous Mishna -- the following obvious questions should trouble us very deeply. 1) What Halacha is being taught to us? This is a Mishna, which is supposed to be teaching us laws of behavior. What practical implication is there in the Tanna's lesson? 2) What kind of task is the Tanna dealing with in the Mishna? If you ARE able to finish the task, then why SHOULDN'T it be incumbent upon you to finish it?! And if it is a task that is IMPOSSIBLE for you to finish, then OF COURSE you aren't required to finish it! G-d never demands the impossible, and I don't need the Tanna to tell me something which I can figure out for myself!)

(Let's see how the Maharal deals with this very important Mishna.)

This Mishna presents a very difficult problem. "If you have learned a great amount of Torah, you are given a great amount of reward" implies that your reward is in direct proportion to the amount of Torah that you learn. Yet in Berachoth (5a) we are taught as follows. Rebbe Elazar became very sick. Rebbe Yochanan went to visit him and saw that he was crying. "Why are you crying?" he asked. "If it is over the Torah that you are not able to learn (due to your illness) we have been taught "One who does more and one who does less -- [they are equal] as long as their intentions are for the sake of Heaven." (This implies that the amount of reward is independent of the amount of Torah learned! A seeming contradiction to our Mishna.)

How do we reconcile the apparent contradiction about whether reward is dependent on accomplishments or not?

It is possible that our Mishna is referring to the EFFORT EXPENDED and DIFFICULTY OVERCOME in the study of Torah. One who studies Torah despite great difficulties receives reward commensurate with the effort invested, as we explained earlier in the chapter (Mishna 1). But certainly, if we compare one person who masters a large quantity of Torah over the course of a year, with another person who masters less Torah while having devoted the same amount of effort over the same amount of time, they will both receive equal reward.

This approach (that our Mishna deals with the reward for effort and overcoming difficulty) enables us to understand the Mishna which served as the source for Rebbe Yochanan's consolation to Rebbe Elazar.

We are taught (Menachoth 110a): It is written by the Olah offering of an animal (Vayikra 1:9) "A burnt offering [providing] a satisfying aroma to G-d." And it is written by the Olah offering of a bird "...a satisfying aroma to G-d." And it is written by the Olah offering of meal "...a satisfying aroma to G-d." (Despite the large difference in the value of the different sacrifices, the Torah uses identical language to describe the Divine satisfaction each of them created.) This is to teach you that one who does more and one who does less -- [they are equal before G-d] as long as their intentions are for the sake of Heaven.

It doesn't mean that the reward for bringing any one of the three sacrifices is identical to any other one. For if this were true, why would anyone bring an (expensive) animal when less expensive sacrifices can create identical results! What it means is that the rich person who brings an expensive animal sacrifice doesn't receive more reward than a poor person who brought a less expensive bird sacrifice or meal offering. Since it was as difficult (if not more so!) for the poor person to bring a meal offering as it was for the rich person to bring an animal sacrifice, both offerings are considered equal (despite the greater absolute cost of the animal). But if the poor person brings an animal sacrifice (a VERY difficult thing for him to do) his act is certainly considered superior to the rich person who brought that same sacrifice, since it required much greater effort and cost on the part of the poor person. The equality is between the rich person who brings an animal sacrifice and the poor person who brings a bird or a meal offering, since each is judged according to the level of difficulty and effort expended in performing the Mitzvah.

Therefore, one who wasn't able to master a large quantity of Torah, but he invested tremendous time, effort and sacrifice in the little that he did master, will receive the same great reward as one who mastered great amounts of Torah with an identical investment of time and effort.

(The lesson of the Mishna is clear. G-d doesn't judge an act simply on absolute terms. It is judged by how difficult it is for you to do it. Giving an \$18 check to charity could be much more difficult for one person than giving \$180 is for another person. Without a doubt, G-d views the \$18 of charity as a bigger Mitzvah, deserving of greater reward, than the \$180. One who observes the laws of Kashruth in an environment where Kosher food is not readily available receives greater reward than one

would get for observing those laws, even with a higher level of stringency, in a time and place where every delicacy is available in "glatt Kosher" form. A person who must resist his upbringing and social pressure to keep a Mitzvah receives greater reward than a person whose family acceptance and social status are enhanced by keeping that Mitzvah.)

According to this understanding, the language of the Mishna means "If you studied Torah very much," rather than "If you studied much Torah." (The "much" is an adverb, modifying the verb of studying, rather than an adjective modifying the noun of Torah.)

However, this implication isn't compelling, since it would have been better had the Tanna chosen the phrase "If you STRUGGLED greatly in Torah" rather "STUDIED." Additionally, this phrase seems to be built on the previous lesson which taught "It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task." Why does the Tanna follow this lesson, which tells us that we aren't required to finish the task, with a lesson telling us that we receive great reward for studying the Torah? It seems as if the Tanna is teaching that you receive reward for what you accomplish, even though you aren't required to complete the task. What is the connection between receiving great reward and NOT being required to finish the task?! (The answer to this question is not clearly answered now, but will become apparent further on.)

Despite the above textual difficulties, it appears clear that the Tanna's intention is to teach us that we receive great reward commensurate with the effort invested in the study of Torah, and since the usual way that people toil in Torah is (usually) through its STUDY, the Tanna used the language of studying Torah to refer to the toil.

According to what we explained earlier (Ch. 2, Mishna 1, parts 2 and 3) that there are two different system of reward, one for the effort and for the action itself, things become very clear.

Rebbe Yochanan was telling Rebbe Elazar that since one who does more and one who does less are equal before G-d if there intentions were equally for the sake of Heaven, the fact that you weren't able to learn Torah shouldn't depress you, since you are given reward commensurate with the effort invested and the difficulty overcome to study whatever small amount of Torah you were able to in your present condition.

However, this perspective could lead one to think that there is no reward for the actual Torah studied (Heaven forbid). For let us imagine the following example of a man who hired a contractor to build him a house, and the contractor built him only the frame of a house. If there would be no other contractor available to complete the work according to the needs of the owner, he would not be required to pay any compensation to the contractor, for he received nothing of value. (A partially built house, with no way of completing it, is worthless, at best.) On this basis, one might think that there was no reward for the study of only part of the Torah, since the task which G-d had "contracted for," that of "studying the [entire] Torah," wasn't completed. In response to this possibility, the Tanna taught "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task." The Torah was given for man to struggle

and toil over it. But it is not within man's capabilities to complete the entire Torah, due to the infinite nature of the Torah and the finite nature of man. (This was explained in the previous Mishna.) "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task" is presenting an insight into the nature of both Torah and of man.

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