

CHAPTER 2: MISHNA 8: PART 1

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

He (Hillel) used to say: A surplus of meat causes an increase in worms. A surplus of possessions causes an increase in worry. A surplus of wives causes an increase in "keshafim" (witchcraft). A surplus of maidservants causes an increase in promiscuity. A surplus of slaves causes an increase in thievery. A surplus of Torah causes an increase in life. A surplus of "yeshiva" (sitting together with peers studying Torah) increases wisdom. A surplus of "eitzah" (seeking advice and insights from more experienced people) increases understanding. A surplus of charity increases peace. One who acquires a good name acquires it for himself; one who acquires words of Torah for himself has acquired the World to Come for himself.

Why did the Tanna choose the specific elements mentioned in the Mishna? There are many things about which it can be said that excess causes damage, and many others about which a surplus can lead to extra achievements!?

Man is composed of a physical body created from the earth, and a soul that emanates from the heavens. The "distance" from the earth until the heaven is considered to be embodied in the number "ten." (See Sukkah 5a about Moshe and Eliyahu ascending to heaven. These lines of the Maharal are rooted in Kabbalah, and, as has been our practice, we will not elaborate on matters about which we lack understanding and access.) So there are ten distinct elements related to man's creation, five of which are material matters that are part of man's physical dimension, and five of which are spiritual matters that are part of man's transcendent dimension.

There are ten major parts of man's body which parallel this division. The two eyes, the two ears and the tongue are considered the more spiritual parts of man. The two feet, the two hands and the sexual organ are the five that are closer to the physical side of man. (See the Gemara in Nedarim 32b for an elaboration of this. We will summarize the basic principle of this dichotomy as explained by the Maharal.)

The activities of the eyes (sight) ears (hearing) and tongue (speech) do not need any physical contact with the material in order for them to function. Sight is a perception of things which are distant from man, and with which he has no tangible interaction. Hearing is also a perception of things with which man does not have direct contact, although it is not as abstract as sight. (Man needs to be closer to

an object to hear it than to see it; sound waves travel more slowly, are more tangible and physically accessible, and more easily measurable than light waves/particles.) Speech is also an activity connected to the spiritual and intellectual dimension of man. The hands, feet and the sexual organ are connected to the more physical activities of man, and they are considered closer to the earth.

We also find in the Ten Commandments that five of them are connected to the heaven and five are connected to the earth. The first five are activities which relate to G-d. [This includes "Honor your father and mother," whose honoring is equated with that of G-d, as we are taught in Kiddushin (30b). When a person honors their parents, G-d considers it as if He lived among them and also received honor.] The last five are activities between fellow human beings who dwell on the earth. This encompasses the entire human being whose spiritual side emanates from the heaven and whose body derives from the earth, with the distance between these two locations represented by the number ten.

This human being, belonging to both the heaven and the earth is connected to five material elements of his existence and five spiritual elements of his existence.

In each of the material elements, a surplus is actually destructive, where anything which deviates from the proper measure is in fact considered a deficiency. But in the non- material elements which are connected to the spiritual dimension, a surplus is a virtue.

First we are taught about a surplus of something which represents the essence of man's physical body, meat (flesh). A surplus of meat causes an increase in worms. Worms represents disintegration and absence, for worms eat away at the meat until it doesn't exist. One who is attached to the physical dimension of his existence is subject to the disintegration that befalls all physical matter. The lesson of the Tanna is not limited specifically to worms eating meat, but refers to all deterioration that befalls material objects. A person who is overly connected to the physical dimension of existence (with the hope that this will ensure his existence) is subject to the inevitable deterioration that is the nature of all physical matter (leading to the opposite result of his intention).

An embodiment of this principle is the lesson that "lust drives a person from the world" which will be elaborated upon in its place (Avoth Ch. 4, Mishna 28).

After a person's own body, the next closest thing to which a person is an owner and has an attachment is ones material possessions. These are necessary for him to support himself in this world, and they precede creating an attachment with a spouse. About these material possessions we are taught that "a surplus of possessions causes an increase in worry," that here, too, the surplus actually causes a deficiency. A person involves himself in his protecting his possessions so that they should not be lost or destroyed. A surplus of these possessions makes it impossible for him to avoid this undesirable result, thus increasing his worry. This is in line with our principle that an excessive attachment to the material leads inescapably to greater deficiency.

(In preparation for the next part of the Mishna, I recommend studying the Dvar Torah for Pesach

which provides background information on the principle of gender differences. Our shiurim on Ch. 1, Mishna 5, especially parts 2 and 3, will also help in understanding what the Maharal writes in a very abbreviated form in this Mishna.)

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