

CHAPTER 3: MISHNA 4: PART 1

by Rabbi Shaya Karlinsky

Rebbe Shimon says: Three who ate at one table, without saying words of Torah while upon it, are considered to have eaten from sacrifices to the dead (idols) as it is written: "All their tables are full of vomit and excrement, without [a clean] place." But three who ate at one table and said upon it words of Torah are considered to have eaten from the table of the Omnipresent, as it is written: "And he said to me 'This is the table which is in the presence of G-d'."

Why should eating at a table without words of Torah be considered as eating from sacrifices to the dead? In the verse quoted, there is no mention of the sin being a lack of words of Torah!

How does saying words of Torah make it as if they ate from the Table of the Omnipresent?

Why is the failure to say words of Torah equated with sacrifices of the dead, when the verse mentions only vomit and excrement. And what source is there to say this law specifically when THREE people at a table? Why isn't it true for two people, in the same way that we were taught in the previous Mishna about two people who are sitting without words of Torah between them?

Everything that exists, including existence itself, belongs to the Almighty, as it is written "To G-d is the earth and all that fills it" (Tehillim 24:1). But G-d gave man the earth and all that it contains, as it is written "The heavens are heavens to G-d; but the earth, He has given to mankind" (Tehillim 115:16). It is not appropriate for man to have access to more than what is on the earth, the physical world (and not anything which is found in Heaven).

G-d provides sustenance to all that He created. But the table from which this sustenance is consumed is not considered a Divine table, since it sustains man on the earth, in his physical existence, which has been given to him. What can transform the table into a Divine table? Having it connected to G-d. When the table acquires that connection, then one who eats from it is eating from the table of the Divine. This is accomplished by words of Torah being said at the table, which elevates the table beyond one that simply provides sustenance to man's physical existence.

The idea can be illustrated with the metaphor of a king who feeds his servants. What the servants eat is not considered food belonging to them, but it is in fact the king's food, being provided from the

royal account to those who serve the king.

Since the Torah is considered a fundamental part of G-d, so to speak, the Torah being said at the table connects the table to G-d, making it His own. The food being provided by Him at such a table is really food belonging to the Divine, and one who eats at such a table is considered as being fed directly from the Divine. But without words of Torah, the food, although provided by G-d, is simply being used to feed man's physical needs. Since the physical world has been given over to man, food which nourishes only those needs is considered as having being given to man, with man then being the one to provide himself with his own sustenance.

(All life needs sustenance. "Food" ("lechem" is the word used in Biblical and Kabbalistic language) provides the sustenance to anything which has life. Physical life needs food which is of a physical nature to sustain it. Spiritual life needs food of a higher nature to sustain it. The Torah teaches us "lo al halechem l'vado yichyeh ha'adam," not by bread alone does man live, "ki al kol motzah phi Hashem yichyeh ha'adam" but on all that emanates from the mouth of G-d does man live (Devarim 8:3). The meaning is that the man, as the unique living creature that he is, who combines both a physical and a spiritual, divine, dimension, isn't sustained by physical food alone. He also needs nourishment of a transcendent nature. If man's eating feeds only his physical needs, then he is providing his own nourishment, even if the resources for that nourishment originally came from G-d. By connecting his eating to the transcendent sphere, through words of Torah at the time of eating, he has the nourishment coming to him directly from its Divine source.)

The principle that words of Torah can transform the table into a Divine one is illustrated in the following Talmudic section (Brachoth 64a). And Rebbe Avin Halevi says: All who derive enjoyment from the meal in which a Torah scholar participates is considered to have derived enjoyment from the Divine Glory, as it is written "And Aharon and the all elders of Israel came to eat bread with Moshe before G-d" (Shemoth 18:12). Did they eat before G-d? Didn't they eat before Moshe! But this [phrase is used] to teach you that all who derive enjoyment from the meal in which a Torah scholar participates is considered to have derived enjoyment from the Divine Glory,

(Rashi on the verse in Shemoth quotes this section. You should note that most older editions of Rashi that I have seen list the source as Brachot 24a instead of 64a. This obviously due to the letter samech, representing 60, having a line rubbed out or not legible in one source, making it look like a kaf, which was then replicated in many subsequent editions of Rashi.)

Due to his Torah knowledge, the Torah scholar's existence transcends the limitation of "The heavens are heavens to G-d; but the earth, He has given to mankind" (Tehillim 115:16). His existence in this world is connected to G-d in the heavens. Since it isn't limited by the system of "the earth He has given to man," a meal in which the Torah scholar participates is considered to be provided by G-d Himself, directly from the table of the Divine. Participating in a meal which is being served by G-d Himself is certainly basking in the Divine Glory and deriving enjoyment from It.

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