

CHAPTER 6, MISHNA 5(A): THE PRIMORDIAL SIN - PART I

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Do not seek greatness for yourself and do not crave honor. Do more than you have studied and do not desire the 'table' of kings. For your table is greater than their table, and your crown is greater than their crown. And your Employer can be trusted to pay you the reward for your efforts.

I'd like to begin our study of this mishna by pointing out the progression from last week. (Some editions of Pirkei Avos combine this and the previous mishna.) Last week we learned that the "way of the Torah" is a life of utter deprivation. The true Torah scholar eats bread and water, sleeps on the ground, lives a life of suffering, and delves into Torah study. As we explained, this is hardly Judaism's recommended approach to life -- which neither encourages nor idealizes physical hardship. In our daily prayers, we constantly ask G-d for sustenance and physical well-being, seeing this as likely the only path to spiritual fulfillment. One who is preoccupied with his aches and pains or his financial worries will have neither time nor mindset for spiritual development. Yet, last week's mishna concluded that one who lives such an existence is fortunate in both this world and the next. As we explained, the mishna was observing that one who is wholly consumed with a passion for truth and knowledge of G-d will be so infatuated with the next world he will hardly notice this one, let alone be drawn after it. And he will experience a pleasure in life neither known nor imagined by the creatures of this world.

Yet, as we will see from this mishna, there are new and possibly greater dangers facing such a person. The person of last week was so sated with closeness to G-d he was not bothered by his physical circumstances. His baser urges were subdued; they were hardly a factor drawing him away from spirituality. If so, what is left to challenge him? Why would such a person -- who sees through the emptiness of this world -- want anything other than spirituality and closeness to G-d? Is his life devoid of challenge?

Let us back up a little. We need to understand the true message and challenge of the Torah. There are two separate and distinct levels on which we are challenged as human beings. The first is the level of spiritual versus physical. We don't want to get up on time in the morning, we don't feel like studying, we want to eat non-kosher, eat on Yom Kippur, etc. A great deal of our daily efforts must be expended on resisting our innate sluggishness and physical urges. Religion reminds us that we are human beings and not animals. We cannot do whatever we want whenever we want. We are rather here to develop our souls and intellects. This for most of us is a great deal of what Judaism has to say to us. Our bodies want anything but, but if we want to get anywhere in life, we must work

very hard indeed.

The truth is, this is a very shallow view of what religion -- and Judaism in particular -- asks of us. The Torah does not simply tell us to crush our physical desires. As I've written many times in the past, Judaism does not give us some kind of ultimatum: this world or the next. The Talmud writes that there is nothing forbidden in this world for which G-d did not provide a permissible equivalent (Hullin 109b). (I've always found those imitation bacon bits pretty good (some Jews are frightened by the concept) -- though I'd be easy enough to fool.) ;-) The Torah does not go around forbidding everything we might possibly want. It limits and restrains, but never outright opposes our natural physical drives. If anything, Judaism sees a sense of harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds, promising that a Torah lifestyle offers fulfillment in this world as well as the next. So personal discipline aside, the Torah cannot be viewed as forcing upon us some kind of drab and pleasure-free existence -- in a battle of physical vs. spiritual.

The true manner Judaism challenges us -- once we wean ourselves from our baser desires -- is perhaps far deeper and more profound. There is a much stronger spiritual battle raging within a human being. Let us back up a little -- in fact a lot -- to understand. We are all familiar with the story of Adam and Eve and their sin with the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 3). As the story goes, the Serpent, most "cunning" of all the animals, comes along and tempts Eve to taste of the fruit, promising that it would open the eyes of man, making her and Adam "as gods knowing good and evil" (v. 5). Eve decides that the Tree is tempting to behold and both eats of the fruit and gives her husband to eat.

Well, the story seems almost childish at this level (which is unfortunately the level most of us were introduced to it) -- and we won't examine it further this week. However, I'd like to leave off with one final issue. The Tree gave the one who ate of it knowledge of good and evil -- which the Sages understand to mean an intimate knowledge of and desire for evil. Before the sin, Adam and Eve had no evil inclination. (As we'll explain, that is why initially they had no need for clothing (ibid., 2:25).) The Serpent, representing man's evil inclination, existed as an external force -- whose mission was to tempt humanity to sin.

This, however, presents a difficulty. If Adam and Eve themselves had no evil inclination, how could they have **wanted** to sin? How could they -- entirely spiritual beings -- desire anything other than goodness and closeness to G-d? Where could a desire to rebel against G-d stem from? Well, the direction we are heading -- slowly but surely -- is that there is a concept of challenge and temptation in the spiritual realm as well -- one the Serpent was able to play upon. Next week, G-d willing, we'll pick this up.

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