

CHAPTER 6, MISHNA 7(A): TORAH AND THE THROAT

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Great is Torah, for it gives life to its doers in this world and in the next world, as it is written: 'For they [the teachings of the Torah] give life to those who find them and healing to all flesh' (Proverbs 4:22). It also says: 'Healing will it be for your flesh and marrow for your bones' (ibid., 3:8). It also says: 'It is a tree of life to those who take hold of it, and those who support it are fortunate' (3:18). And it says: 'They are a graceful garland for your head and necklaces for your throat' (1:9). And it says: 'It will give your head a graceful garland; it will provide you a crown of glory' (4:9). And it says: 'For in me [the Torah] will you lengthen days, and years of life will be added to you' (9:11). And it says: 'Length of days in its right hand; in its left are wealth and honor' (3:16). And it is written: 'For length of days, years of life, and peace will they [the Torah's teachings] increase for you' (3:2).

It has been well over six months since we studied a mishna other than the one on the 48 Ways. Well, back to work...

This week's mishna discusses the life-giving benefits Torah study brings. Our mishna is both lengthy and poetic, stringing together some of the many verses which laud the Torah's qualities. Our mishna also speaks in metaphor, describing the Torah as an ornament decorating its faithful student and as a tree of life. It further promises that the Torah will bring us just about everything we could reasonably want or ask for: not only a share in the World to Come, but life, health, length of days, wealth, honor, and peace in this world as well.

There are a number of important lessons contained in our mishna. The first is based on an observation made by some of the commentators (Ya'avetz, Midrash Shmuel). They note that our mishna does not contain the wording we might expect: "Great is Torah, for it gives life to its **studiers**..." Rather, it promises blessings to the "doers" of Torah. The implication is that it is not sufficient to merely study the Torah, to relate to it on the level of the intellect. We must "do" Torah as well -- live its lessons and apply them to our lives.

This is clearly a much higher level of devotion than simply studying the Torah. I cannot just intellectualize the Torah, standing in awestruck -- but passive -- admiration of its logical clarity and comprehensiveness. I must apply the Torah to myself as well. When I recognize the truth in a lesson I have studied, I must ask myself: "What does this mean to me? What can I personally take out of the Torah's messages? How will my life be different on account of the truths I now comprehend?" This is "doing" Torah, and it is as much an emotional as an intellectual undertaking, far more demanding than the mental effort required mastering the Torah alone.

To state it slightly differently, we "do" Torah when we not only study, but transform ourselves as well -- into a reflection of the Torah we have learned. The Torah's wisdom must penetrate our very beings. And at that point (to touch on a subject we'll get to G-d willing next week) G-d promises us the infinite blessings of our mishna. For only then have I truly brought myself in harmony with the Torah -- both intellectually and physically. And only then do Heaven and earth align, allowing heavenly blessings to be showered upon me in total and unobstructed abundance.

With this we can begin to understand the symbolisms alluded to in our mishna. Our mishna, quoting Scripture, tells us that the Torah adorns the scholar as a "graceful garland" upon his head and a necklace around his throat. (A garland is a wreath or circlet, usually worn as a crown -- like the decorative wreaths we associate with the Ancient Romans.)

As we might expect, the body parts identified by the verses are significant. The Torah decorates firstly our heads. The first organ affected -- and sublimated -- by Torah study is our brains. We study Torah, appreciate its wisdom, and begin to purify our minds and thoughts. The longer and more intensely we study, the more we think like G-d, so to speak. We appreciate good values and well-ordered societies. We recognize the superiority of the spirit over the body, of G-d's law over man's capriciousness. We become repulsed by cruel and unbridled behavior. We become, simply, more human. And the beauty of the Torah becomes manifest in our thoughts and deeds.

The next metaphor of our mishna is that the Torah will decorate our throats. Obviously, this part of the body is not ordinarily associated with jewelry. (A number of English translations read: "necklaces for your neck," but they do so more for aesthetic reasons. The precise translation of "gargeret" is throat or trachea. It relates to "garon", the Hebrew word for throat. "Tzavar" means neck.) Further, we might have expected our hearts to come into this. Didn't we just explain that "doing" Torah implies devoting our feelings and emotions to the Torah, integrating its lessons into our beings? Is not the heart (at least poetically speaking) the seat of our emotions? Where do our somewhat-less-poetic throats come into this?

The answer relates to yet another important lesson contained in our mishna. The throat is home to our vocal cords and is the source of our speech. Our speech is critical for transforming and sublimating ourselves through the Torah's teachings. After we reach the stage of sublimating our minds, the Torah's sanctity must permeate our bodies. How is this done? Through our throats -- and our speech.

When we study with our minds, we see the Torah as inspiring but abstract wisdom. We intellectualize its teachings, yet it is not truly **real** to us.

To make it real and relevant, alive and down-to-earth, we must use our voices. We must express the Torah's teachings ourselves, putting them into our own words. We must try out the Torah, attempting to take its general and sometimes abstract words and relate them to our own selves and life experiences. This is the same difficult task we discussed above -- "doing" Torah. And the bridge -

- the initial and primary means of taking Torah from "study" to "do" -- is our ability to speak. And so, when we have brought the Torah down to us in such personal and intimate fashion, it adorns our throats as well as our heads.

For this reason, speech plays such an important role in our relationship with G-d. We Jews talk a lot (if I'm any indication). If we want to understand the Torah, to comprehend and relate to its truths, we must express it for ourselves. If we want to concretize our relationship with G-d, we speak to Him directly -- in prayer. Each of us turns to G-d individually, with his or her own words and from his or her own perspective. This is because prayer, as study, is an intimate and personal manner of bringing our religious convictions from the realm of the intellect to that of the practical. When we talk to G-d, what was in our brains and hearts becomes our reality.

This is a significant year-round message, but especially now as the High Holidays are just beginning to approach. In general, our prayers are replete with pleas for blessings from G-d, as well as supplications that He forgive our past misdeeds. We do so not only in order to obtain G-d's blessings or pardon -- and certainly not to get the guilt off our chests. It is much deeper than this. We speak out our needs to G-d in order to make real to us that G-d is the source of all. And we enumerate our faults at least in part to make real our need to improve. We state ourselves what is wrong with us, what we need atonement for. And by so doing we transform vague feelings of guilt into real-life issues, into concrete but manageable personality flaws. When we put our faults into our own words -- even faults we know full well will not go away with one confession -- we have made a great stride towards returning to G-d, to making our need for spiritual growth a reality. We have taken that first great step: we have admitted we are alcoholics -- drunk on the luxuries, passions, greed or whatever else enslaves us throughout the year. And by so doing -- by knowing and expressing what our goals must be -- we have changed our realities just a little bit. And we have embarked on the path to self-improvement.

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