

CHAPTER 6 INTRODUCTION: LEAVING THIS WORLD

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

The Sages have taught [the following] in the language of the Mishna, blessed be He who has chosen them and their teachings.

The above line forms the introduction to Pirkei Avos Chapter 6. As we mentioned last week, Chapter 6 is technically not a part of Pirkei Avos. It consists of a collection of writings from the period of the Mishna but not incorporated into the Mishna proper. It is not clear precisely when it became associated with Pirkei Avos -- though not less than 1000 years ago (the day before yesterday by Jewish standards). Today, however, it is universally studied as a part of Pirkei Avos. (Many of the earlier commentators on Pirkei Avos do not comment on this chapter.)

Some commentators suggest that this chapter was added in support of a widespread Jewish custom. There is a six week period from the end of Passover until the holiday of Shavuot. Many have the custom to study Pirkei Avos during this period, reviewing a single chapter every Sabbath afternoon. In order to "fill" the six Sabbaths, this additional chapter -- somewhat resembling Pirkei Avos in content and style -- was appended.

The appropriateness of this custom is readily understood. Shavuot commemorates our receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. We review Pirkei Avos as a form of spiritual preparation for this holiday -- just as we count the days in anticipation of Shavuot. Pirkei Avos forces us to examine our ethical conduct: Are we spiritually ready to receive the Torah again this year and live up to its standards? Are we still the sort G-d would **want** as His Chosen Nation? Would He select us again today? Or do we refuse to stand out as Jews, a nation apart, preferring instead to lose ourselves within our host nations (or to become a nation like all the nations, if we live in the Holy Land)?

Shavuot challenges us to again recognize our special relationship with G-d, and to reaccept the mission G-d has set before us -- to serve as spiritual guides and role models for all mankind.

Then enters the sixth chapter. The first five chapters -- Pirkei Avos proper -- dealt with general ethics and values -- setting us, to some degree, apart from the nations of the world. But Chapter 6 goes infinitely beyond. It focuses almost entirely on the grandness of the Torah -- and what is in store for those who devote themselves to it. It thus tells us -- in the week immediately preceding Shavuot -- what **really** makes us unique as Jews and members of the Chosen Nation: our connection to the Torah.

This progression -- from general ethics to the majesty of Torah -- cannot be overemphasized. (This

chapter is also known as the "chapter of the possession of the Torah" (*"perek kinyan hatorah"*.) We discussed last week how Judaism in a way almost tells us to think small when it comes to ethics. It does not say that a truly holy person eschews food and marriage and lives in a cave in Tibet. It says the path to being a good person consists of small, simple steps. Greet your neighbor cheerfully, walk humbly, honor the elderly, judge others favorably, etc. Many of the varied subjects of Pirkei Avos addressed such small, often overlooked, aspects of life. Of course, many mishnas dealt with the unanswerable philosophical questions of life -- or prompted us to ask them. That too is a part of being a believing, understanding Jew. But bottom line, Judaism does not ask us to go about contemplating our navels (I think I used that one last week -- well, you get the idea). It tells us that the path to spirituality -- and saving the world -- consists of small, simple acts of kindness and compassion. As the environmentalists put it, think globally; act locally.

But Chapter 6 delivers an entirely different message. It does not tell us to be "normal" people -- to live plain, wholesome, ethical lives. It tells us to be great. Torah study is not just another mitzvah (commandment). As I've heard R. Yitzchak Berkovits of Jerusalem put it, all the mitzvos basically tell us to be normal people (although calling traditional Judaism "normal" sounds almost strange nowadays) -- to live lives of honesty and integrity, of morality, fair play, health, and discipline. Further, the mitzvos enhance the world around us -- developing us as individuals, creating ordered and civilized societies, and "fixing" the spiritual spheres above. The mitzvos tell us to be great but basically to be creatures of this world.

Torah study is something altogether different. It tells us to leave this world. Through Torah study we transcend the ordinary and physical and develop a relationship with the infinite -- with G-d Himself. We understand G-d's knowledge and develop a true relationship with Him.

When G-d first instructed Joshua at the beginning of the Book of Joshua, He adjured him: "And you shall meditate in it [the Torah] day and night" (Joshua 1:8). People who study Torah -- who become obsessed with knowing G-d -- know neither day nor night. It matters not what time of day or hour of the night it is -- or how little time they set aside for sleep. They are searching -- searching for G-d. And in their search for the infinite, they are longer shackled by day, night, or any of the physical constraints known to the creatures of this world.

This is the threshold we cross as we complete Pirkei Avos proper and enter Chapter 6. Up until now we have been told to be good, ethical human beings, to care about G-d and about humanity. Now we are ready to blast off. We have seen what "ethical Judaism" has to offer: wholesome, decent living, but not fundamentally different from the ethics known to mankind. Now we enter a new domain altogether -- that special gift G-d has granted His nation and His nation alone: the gift of Torah.

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