



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

Rabbi Yaakov Hillel

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Kol Yisrael Part 1

All of Israel have a share in the World to Come, as it says (*Yeshayahu* 60:21), “And Your Nation, all of them are righteous, they will inherit a portion in the World to Come forever, the shoot of My planting, My Handiwork to be proud of” (*Sanhedrin* 10:1).

All of Us

This *mishnah*, the introduction to *Pirke Avot*, teaches a fundamental principle: every Jew has a **share in the World to Come**. We are all **righteous** and we will **inherit** that **share** for all eternity. However, this statement demands some explanation. For one thing, the continuation of the *Mishnah* itself contradicts it.

If every single Jew is guaranteed a **share in the World to Come**, no matter how he lived his life and what sort of sins he committed, why does the very next *mishnah* in *Sanhedrin* go on to provide an extensive list of those Jews who do *not* have a share in the World to Come, among them heretics who deny the Divine origin of the Torah and the Resurrection of the Dead, Korah’s followers, and more?

Let us try to understand what this *mishnah* teaches us. Every Jew, simply by virtue of his birth as a Jew, has a share in the World to Come reserved especially for him. Our job in this world is to earn this **share** with Torah and *mitzvot*. It is there, it is ours, and it is waiting for us to claim it, but we can lose it through foolishness and neglect. It is frightening to realize that we can be the ones to deprive ourselves of our eternal inheritance.



If we cannot be bothered to work for it, we will find ourselves empty-handed, much like the slothful property owner described by King Shlomo: “I passed by the field of a lazy man, and by the vineyard of a heartless person, and behold, it was all overgrown with thistles, its face was covered with nettles, and its stone fence was destroyed” (*Mishle* 24:30-31).

The serious farmer sweats as he digs and plows to grow his beautiful plants, but after the harvest he has the pleasure of marketing and consuming prime grade produce. The idler may own land with the same potential, but his lackadaisical attitude and sloppy habits leave him with little or nothing to show. The same is true of us. We have a beautiful field awaiting cultivation – our **share in the World to Come**. We can work hard to enhance the quantity and quality of our harvest, or we can sit back and allow matters to take their own course, only to be left with a barren, worthless plot. Even worse, we may be sent directly to the punishment of *gehinom*, and lose the opportunity to claim our portion of *Gan Eden* for a long time.

Have and Have Not

We can explain this *mishnah* on a more profound level as well. The Ben Ish Hai discusses the apparent contradiction between the statement that **all of Israel have a share in the World to Come** and the subsequent listing of those who do not have such a share (*Ben Yehoyada, Sanhedrin* 90a, citing the Arizal in *Shaar HaGilgulim*).

Put very briefly, a soul is born into this world inside a human body. During his sojourn on earth, man, the combined body and soul, is expected to do G-d's Will and obey His commandments. If he fails in his assignment, his soul must unfortunately return to our world once more to complete what he omitted the first time around. This return is known as *gilgul* (reincarnation).

Every soul will ultimately reach the World to Come. The Arizal explains the verse “So that no one will be banished from Him” (*Il Shmuel* 14:14) as a reference to the soul. No Jewish soul will ever be entirely, permanently rejected and pushed away. This is true even of those unfortunate souls of whom it is said, “and the soul will be cut off” for the commission of certain transgressions (see *Shmot* 12:15, 31:14, *Vayikra* 18:29, et al).

The Ben Ish Hai points out that this is a contradiction. The Torah clearly states that the punishment for certain specific sins is *karet*, excision. *Karet* means “cut off,” severed from any spiritual future in the World to Come. The Rambam as well is most explicit concerning this point: “And they will be cut off and lost... forever and for all



eternity” (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:6). How, then, can it be that “no one will be banished from Him”?

The Arizal explains that every single part of a Jewish soul must ultimately achieve its final rectification, fully accomplishing that for which it was intended. It follows, then, that no soul can be permanently removed from spirituality, even those of whom the *Mishnah* says that they have no share in the World to Come. They will get there... eventually. But they must first undergo an exacting process of purification in order to be worthy of admission to *olam haba*, including some very severe Divine corrective measures for their unspeakable sins. Part of their punishment, writes the Ben Ish Hai, is the disgrace of being condemned by the *Mishnah*, in a statement preserved for all eternity. The *Mishnah* castigates these corrupt, immoral transgressors, who are so utterly wicked that they will *never* make it to the World to Come. We learn these words, the sinners cringe in undying spiritual humiliation, and the misery accrues to their course of atonement.

Din and Heshbon

The process of Divine judgment and the attendant rectification and purification of the soul involve many, many stages, and there is no way to escape them. If we think that “G-d is forgiving and kind so we need not worry,” we are foolish and misinformed. As our Sages teach, “One who says ‘G-d is lenient’, his life will be forfeit” (*Baba Kama* 50a), and “One who says Hashem is lax, his intestines will cease to function” (Jerusalem Talmud, *Betzah* 3:8). Ours is a religion firmly anchored in the knowledge that there is both *din* and *heshbon*. The Vilna Gaon explains the difference between the two terms (*Shnot Eliyahu, Likutim*).

Din is straightforward judgment: we have committed a sin and we will receive the punishment mandated by the Torah for those who transgress in this fashion. However, it does not end there. There is also the matter of *heshbon*, literally accounting, or phrased differently, what might have been.

Imagine that we have stolen a wallet, G-d forbid. If only on a strictly *din* level, we are in serious trouble and will be punished accordingly, but that is not all. During the time we spent thieving, we could have been doing something else. We might have taken a quiet afternoon nap, a harmless enough activity. We might also have gone beyond merely “harmless” and used the time profitably, perhaps doing *hesed* by helping a friend or neighbor. Better than that, we might have been learning in that time slot, which would have been truly meritorious. We could even have given a Torah lecture, teaching others and helping them learn. We could have... and we



could have... and we might have... to the point where we could have been engaged in studying profound Kabbalistic concepts.

When we face the inevitable truth of Divine judgment, our soul will first have to atone for the basic infraction. As it progresses spiritually, it will have to answer for these more advanced computations as well.

The Arizal cites a frightening example of this type of ongoing judgment. On one occasion, the Arizal and his disciples passed a hill which served as a burial ground. He pointed out a specific grave and commented, "A great Torah scholar is buried there. His soul is now being elevated to a very high level in the World to Come, and in keeping with that level, he is being punished."

For which sin was he being punished?

Once, when this Torah scholar said the prayer "*U'va Letzion*," he achieved a very intense level of concentration as he recited the words "that we not labor in vain nor give birth for futility." *Halachah* requires that while wearing *tefillin*, we maintain constant awareness of their presence. At that moment, however, this scholar was so caught up in his single-minded focus on the meaning of these words of his prayer that he became oblivious to the fact that he was wearing *tefillin*.

At an earlier level, he had received great reward for his total concentration on the meaning of the prayers. But now, at the immensely high spiritual standing which his soul had just achieved, the incident was subjected to new scrutiny. Had he tried harder, he could have kept his mind on his *tefillin* even while engrossed in his profound deliberation on the words of the prayer. Now, at his new, loftier level, this was considered a sin for which he was punished (*Shaar HaKavanot*, p. 74d, *Shaar HaGilgulim*, *Hakdamah Chaf-bet*, p. 22a).

Taking a Beating

It is important for us to understand the role of punishment in rectifying our souls and bringing them to ultimate perfection. We may perceive punishment as simple revenge: Hashem issued a commandment and we did not obey Him, so He strikes back at us. However, as Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin explains, Divine punishment is not revenge. It is the purification which Hashem has us undergo because He loves us and seeks our ultimate good. It is difficult, yet it is *hesed*, and it is exactly what we need (*Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Bet*, Chapter 8).

We can understand this by picturing a conscientious homemaker cleaning a dusty carpet. She drapes it over a rail and begins beating it and pounding it with all



her might. Is she attacking the carpet in order to punish it? Obviously not. She only wants to clean it properly, to restore it to its maximum beauty. Every thump and blow is intended strictly for the carpet's good, so to speak.

The same is true of our souls. We receive them pure and clean, but during our years on this earth we coat them heavily with dirt and dust. Hashem in His great love for us wishes to restore us to perfection, so he hits us again and again, to remove the ground-in dirt from our souls. The suffering and hardship we experience, both in this world and the next, are a vitally necessary spiritual cleaning.

The Response

The analogy is clear, but there is one critical difference. The carpet need not understand the purpose of the pounding for it to achieve a good effect. We, on the other hand, must accept life's travails in the right spirit if they are to accomplish their spiritual cleanup.

For example, even the minor mishaps that are part of our days, and our lives, should be viewed in proper perspective. Nothing is a chance occurrence. Our Sages tell us that if we reach into our pocket for a quarter and pull out a dime, that is also considered suffering, and it also provides a measure of atonement (*Erchin* 16b). However, our great teachers of Jewish ethics explain that we may suffer a much greater loss, and squander its priceless atonement value by responding incorrectly.

Rabbi Eliezer Papo, the author of *Pele Yoetz*, describes how this can happen. Picture an elegant gentleman who has recently acquired a magnificent set of fine china. Guests come by for a visit, and he is pleased with the opportunity to show off his prized possession. His wife carefully arranges appropriate fare on the beautiful set and carries it into the dining room. Unfortunately, a corner of the dining room rug has worked loose and the well-meaning woman briefly loses her balance. In one terrible moment, the entire set of china goes crashing to the floor, instantly reduced to useless white and silver shards. The husband is furious. "You clumsy fool!" he bursts out, in full view (and earshot) of the uncomfortable guests. "Can't you watch where you're going? Look what you've done!"

The poor woman is ready to sink into the floor. The company shifts uncomfortably in their chairs and the host stops to catch his breath. His anger spent, he now turns pious. "Ah, well," he says. "It's only money, isn't it? Let it be an atonement for our sins."



It could have been, had he remembered a little sooner. To achieve atonement through suffering, we must accept that suffering graciously. But our acceptance of the punishment must be from the very beginning, not after we rage and rampage, and only then remember to be “religious” about it all (see *Orot Elim, Megillah*).

If we can do this, if we can understand that Hashem deals with us lovingly for our own benefit, our suffering will elevate us to a higher spiritual plane and enable us to reach our designated place in the World to Come. Viewed from this standpoint, suffering is not bad; it is for our ultimate good.

This is what the Ben Ish Hai explains concerning those who do (or do not) have a portion in the World to Come. During their lifetime they were indeed truly wicked sinners, as described by the *Mishnah*. Yet **all of Israel do have a share in the World to Come**, these sinners included. They will not get there quickly and they will not get there easily. They will undergo many stages of intense suffering, and one of these stages is the anguish and humiliation of being categorized by the *Mishnah* as those who are debarred from the World to Come. The question, then, is not “will we have *olam haba*”; the *Mishnah* tells us that we will. The question is, how long and how hard our path will be until we are worthy of arriving there.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.