



## *Insights into Pirke Avot*

by

**Rabbi Yaakov Hillel**

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### *Perek Alef, Mishnah Gimel (Part 2)*

**1:3 Antigonus of Socho received from Shimon HaTzaddik. He would say, do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive reward. Instead, be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive reward. And may the fear of Heaven be upon you.**

#### *Awaiting Reward*

**Instead, be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive reward.**

Antigonus of Socho teaches that we should not do *mitzvot* for the sake of reward. However, it would be a grave error with tragic consequences to suggest that there is no reward for *mitzvot*; Tzadok and Beitus, two disciples of Antigonus, misunderstood this teaching and as a result, left Torah entirely. The principle of reward in the World to Come is a fundamental of Jewish belief. It is the eleventh of the Thirteen Articles of Faith listed by the Rambam: “I believe with complete faith that the Creator, may His Name be blessed, bestows good on those who keep His commandments, and punishes those who transgress His commandments” (*Perush HaMishnayot, Sanhedrin, Perek Helek*).

The Ramhal as well speaks of the reward of the World to Come as a basic principle in Judaism. He opens his classical work *Mesillat Yesharim* with the famous words, “The foundation of saintliness and the source of perfection in the service [of Hashem] is that it becomes very clear to man what his duties are in this world, and towards what objective he should set his sights and goals in all his labors, for all the days of his life. And behold, what our Sages, of blessed memory, have taught us is that man was only created to take pleasure in Hashem and enjoy the light of His Divine Presence, which is the true pleasure and the greatest of all enjoyments which are to be found. And the place for this enjoyment is truly the World to Come, for it is



[the place] which was created with what is necessary for this” (*Mesillat Yesharim*, Chapter 1). In other words, writes the Ramchal, man was created specifically to enjoy the reward of the World to Come.

The Ramchal seems to be saying the exact opposite of our *Tanna’s* teaching. Antigonus tells us not to serve Hashem with the aim of reward, while the Ramchal writes that our every deed and thought should be geared to eternal reward. As we will explain, this is not a contradiction.

Clearly, the concept of Divine reward is not to be dismissed lightly.

Let us understand what Antigonus of Socho is telling us. His wording is very precise: **Do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive reward.** He speaks here of the desire for reward as the sole motivating force for the servant’s devotion – and this is not the way to serve Hashem. He does not say that there is no reward, or that we will not receive reward, or even that we should forgo reward. In fact, nowhere does he suggest that we should not strive to earn eternal reward. Reward is there, and it is forthcoming. His teaching is not about what Hashem will give us and do for us, but rather, about how we should serve Hashem.

There is no question that a vast eternity of reward and unending bliss await every loyal servant of G-d in the World to Come. Even so, our service should be *lishmah*, strictly for the honor of Hashem, or in other words, because we love Him, like a son who gladly serves his father with no thought of personal gain.

The Rambam writes that one who seeks to achieve perfection in the service of Hashem should be motivated by sheer love for the Al-mighty (Introduction to *Perek Helek*). He should not serve Hashem for a Divine paycheck – and this includes even the spiritual reward of the World to Come. The Rambam compares this to a child who is too immature to value learning, and can only be cajoled into studying by the promise of a prize. Does the trinket he receives reflect the real value of his learning? Surely not. But since he does not appreciate the true worth of learning, he will only exert himself for a tangible payoff. We, as adults, should be capable of a higher level of service. Our Sages cite the verse, “His commandments he desires greatly” (*Tehillim* 112:1). His commandments, and not the reward for His commandments” (*Avodah Zarah* 19a). We should love the *mitzvot* themselves, not merely the generous compensation they bring. Otherwise, our *mitzvot* will be blemished by ulterior motives, lacking the priceless element of *lishmah*.



## ***What is Reward?***

**Reward** is a broad term which includes the everlasting delight of the World to Come as well as the many forms of Divine blessing granted here in this world. The Torah itself promises us material reward if we obey Hashem: “And it will be that if you listen carefully to My commandments which I command you today, to love Hashem your G-d and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul, I will provide your land’s rain at the right time, the early rain and late rain, and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. I will provide grass in your field for your animals, and you will eat and be satiated” (*Devarim* 11:13-15). In other words, if we keep the Torah, Hashem will give us everything we need, right here and now. These verses describe the reward for *mitzvot* in highly material terms.

Those who are more spiritually inclined may scorn the idea of receiving livestock and bumper crops in return for their *mitzvot*. They want only to come close to Hashem and bask in His Divine Presence in the World to Come. And yet, this too is service motivated by a desire for reward, albeit of a lofty and spiritual nature. It is still servant mentality and a servant’s service.

## ***The Price of the Palace***

Let us consider also another aspect of **reward** for *mitzvot*. Our Sages teach us that there is no reward for the fulfillment of *mitzvot* in this world (*Kiddushin* 39b). There is not, because there cannot be. The reward for even the smallest of *mitzvot* is so immense that our entire material world is too small to provide it – there simply is not enough currency to cover the bill. It would be like trying to pay for Buckingham Palace with a roll of pennies. The pennies are fine for what they are worth, but what have they to do with the price of a palace?

And yet, we see that the Torah does promise earthly payment for *mitzvot*, be it good harvests and well-fed cattle (*Devarim* 11:13-15), or wealth, security, military supremacy, abundance, freedom, and Divine protection (*Vayikra* 26:3-13). Why do the Sages say that there is no reward for *mitzvot* in our world if the Torah promises exactly that?

The Rambam offers an interesting answer (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 9:1). He writes that Hashem does not reward us for our *mitzvot* in this world. The reward described in the Torah for “listening to Hashem’s *mitzvot*” and “following His laws” is not the payment for the actual fulfillment of the commandment itself. It is merely Divine assistance granted when we are clearly doing our utmost to serve Hashem. To enable us to serve Him in comfort and good health, Hashem blesses us with success



and wellbeing in this world. This may in fact be one explanation of our Sages' teaching, "One who comes to purify himself is granted assistance" (*Shabbat* 104a).

Another answer offered is that any reward given in this world obviously is not the payment for the *mitzvah* itself, for the simple reason that only the World to Come can suffice to reward us for our *mitzvot*. What the Torah describes is something else. We know that *mitzvot* should be performed joyfully (*Tehillim* 100:2), rather than discharged to unload a rather oppressive burden, G-d forbid. Unfortunately, we are often rather lazy by nature, and it can be a struggle for us to exert ourselves for our religious obligations. If we rise above these tendencies and serve Hashem with joy, He will reward us lavishly in this world for keeping His Torah happily. These material comforts are the reward not for our *mitzvot*, but specifically for the joy with which we fulfill them.

If we carry out the halachic requirements of a *mitzvah*, even if the element of joy is lacking, we have fulfilled the *mitzvah* and will receive due reward in the World to Come. However, if we do that same *mitzvah* with joyous enthusiasm, we have added an extra bonus, so to speak, in Hashem's honor. Our "extra bonus" is rewarded in kind with an "extra bonus" from the Al-mighty, namely comfort and blessing in the physical world (see *Hidda, Devarim Ahadim, Derush* 27, p. 508).

In the *parashah* of the *Tochahah*, the Torah lists a series of terrifying curses, and then tells us why they come about: "Because you did not serve Hashem your G-d with joy and with a glad heart, when you had everything in abundance" (*Devarim* 28:47). These ninety-eight curses befell our ancestors as a punishment for not serving Hashem happily. It follows that if the punishment for lack of joy in *mitzvot* is meted out in this world, the reward for fulfilling *mitzvot* with joy is also given in this world.

The Arizal discusses the great importance of serving Hashem joyfully (*Shaar HaGilgulim, Hakdamah* 11 and *Hakdamat Shaar HaMitzvot*). He explains that every *mitzvah* has five components on ascending levels, which together, comprise its perfect fulfillment. On the highest level of all is *re'uta d'liba*, literally "the will of the heart," which means the *simhah shel mitzvah* (the joy of the *mitzvah*). The Arizal calls the *simhah shel mitzvah* "the peak of the *mitzvah*."

## ***For Nothing***

An utterly devoted son of the Al-mighty willingly waives even spiritual reward, as we learn from an incident in the life of the Vilna Gaon. During a year of severe drought, the supply of *etrogim* for Sukkot was next to nil. It was unthinkable that the



Gaon should not have an *etrog*, so his students went out to comb the cities and the markets. They had no luck – there were just no *etrogim* available.

Then they found it: a single beautiful *etrog*, the treasured prize of a wealthy man. There was a problem, however; he refused to sell his *mitzvah*. After all, did he not have the same obligation as the Gaon to fulfill the commandment?

They tried to explain to him why it was so important that the Gaon have the *etrog*, pointing out that with his knowledge of the profound esoteric meaning of the commandment and its Kabbalistic intents, his *mitzvah* would be of incomparably greater value than any ordinary layman's. Eventually the owner of the *etrog* was willing to make a deal, but for a disturbing price: he wanted the reward for the Gaon's *mitzvah*.

Frightened and uncertain, they accepted, and brought the precious *etrog* to Vilna. When they told the Gaon what the *etrog* had cost, they expected shock, anger, displeasure – anything but what actually happened. The Gaon was pleased, even elated. They could not understand it. They had given away the reward for his *mitzvah*, and he was overjoyed!

The Gaon explained. For the first time in his life, he had the opportunity to do a *mitzvah* solely in order to fulfill the Will of his Creator, with no thought of recompense at all. What greater way was there to express the true depths of his love and submission to the Al-mighty? This was not cause for anger, it was cause for great joy.

A similar story is told of the Baal Shem Tov, whose teachings had aroused the furious objections of a certain great Torah scholar. This distinguished rabbi told him that if he was capable of spreading such ideas, he could be sure that he had no share in the World to Come!

The Baal Shem Tov's reaction was surprising. He did not respond to this terrible pronouncement with counterattacks and recriminations. Instead, he was deeply and profoundly happy. One of the leading Torah scholars of the time had just ruled that he had no share in the World to Come, so surely it was the truth, as the Heavenly Courts abide by the rulings of the earthly *bet din*. Now he could serve the Creator solely for His sake, from love and devotion alone, without the underlying desire for reward. For a *tzaddik* of his stature, this could only be reason to rejoice.

We are not the Gaon and we are not the Baal Shem Tov, but at least on our own level, we can try to be less focused on the eternal market value of our *mitzvot*. We need not calculate Divine payoff at every turn. There is no point in keeping records



of our good deeds, to make sure we get back the very last penny we ever invested in the service of G-d. We are not petty vendors in our dealings with the Al-mighty, and we should not work with an eye to profit. Our motivations and calculations should revolve around one factor – *K'vod Shamayim*, Hashem's Honor. What can we do to bring greater glory to the Creator? That is what counts, not our bank balance in the World to Come.

## *Today and Tomorrow*

Hashem is perfect in essence. It follows that His reward must also be perfect and complete, in keeping with the nature of its Divine Giver (*Derech Hashem*, Part 1, Chapter 2). As we explained, our world is too small to provide reward on the grand scale Hashem wishes to bestow; it does not contain enough to pay the reward of even a single *mitzvah*. We can understand this with a simple analogy. A brave soldier has risked his life to save the king from mortal danger. With due ceremony, he is presented with the royal reward for his great deed: a chocolate covered doughnut. Is this all his majesty has to offer in return for a noble act of dedicated, courageous sacrifice? Surely it can only be a poor joke.

In this world we are completely physical beings, incapable of coping with the enormous outpouring of spiritual bounty which is the reward for a *mitzvah*. The only possible place with enough to offer, and where we will be capable of receiving the vast influx, is the World to Come. We fulfill the commandments here, but we can only receive their true reward in the World to Come. We find this concept in numerous teachings of our Sages, among them:

- “Today to do them, tomorrow to receive their reward” (*Erwin 22a*).
- “This world is like a corridor leading to the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the corridor so that you can enter the banquet hall (*Avot 4:16*).
- “One moment of pleasure in the World to Come is better than the entire life of this world” (*Avot 4:17*).

## *On the Platform*

This attitude is evident in the lives of our great Torah scholars. One example is the story of the Hafetz Hayyim's trip to the first *Kenessiah Gedolah* (Agudath Israel Convention) in 1923. Eager crowds gathered at every train station, hoping for at least a brief, priceless peak at the Hafetz Hayyim. Other great rabbis and hassidic leaders stepped out to greet and bless the people, but they still longed to see the elderly *tzaddik* of Radin, truly an experience never to be forgotten. They called for



him to step outside to the platform, but the Hafetz Hayyim remained huddled quietly in his seat.

Rabbi Meir Shapiro, famous as the founder and *rosh yeshivah* of Yeshivat Hachme Lublin and the originator of the *Daf Yomi*, was with him on the train. He approached the Hafetz Hayyim and asked, "Why doesn't the *Rav* go out? The people want to see the Hafetz Hayyim."

"What?" shuddered the Hafetz Hayyim. "If I go out there now they will taint my soul with miserable honor. Do you want me to burn in Hell for despicable pride?"

Rabbi Shapiro's answer was surprising. "A whole crowd of Jews is waiting, and it will mean a great deal to them if the *Rav* comes outside to greet them. Isn't it worth a twinge of hellfire to bring a great deal of pleasure to fellow Jews?"

The Hafetz Hayyim heard the words and stepped out to the platform.

### *Shares for Sale*

Another story with a similar message concerns Rabbi Meir Shapiro himself. The construction of the magnificent building of Yeshivat Hachme Lublin turned out to be unbelievably costly, and Rabbi Shapiro was forced into a draining grind of constant fundraising. Accompanied by a distinguished delegation of rabbis, he asked for a substantial contribution from a very affluent Jew. The wealthy man had no great desire to give anywhere near that sum. He knew that he could not claim poverty, but he hit upon another idea: he agreed to give the money on the condition that he would receive Rabbi Shapiro's share in the World to Come. The *Rav* immediately agreed. The wealthy man insisted on a signed document with witnesses. Rabbi Shapiro had the papers drawn up on the spot, and an incredibly valuable share in the World to Come changed hands in an instant.

Rabbi Shapiro later explained his actions to his colleagues. "Why do you think he asked for my share in the World to Come and not yours? Because he knows that I serve Hashem with such devotion that I'm even ready to give up my share in the World to Come for Him. That is why this man was willing to pay millions to get it. Now that I relinquished that share in the World to Come for Hashem's sake, it has become infinitely more valuable. Hashem's capacity to give reward has no limit. He does not have a piece for you and a piece for me, and if I give you mine there's nothing left. The World to Come is endless, and everyone will get his share."

There is no need for us to remind Hashem of what He owes us, or to calculate the worth of our *mitzvot* to make sure we will not be shortchanged. Hashem's love and generosity are far beyond anything we could ever imagine, and we will not be





the losers. Rather than allowing worry over our precise share in the World to Come to dominate our thoughts and actions, we can confidently leave the entire issue in Hashem's Hands, so to speak. Our consideration, above all, should be the extent to which our actions will contribute to Hashem's honor.

**Antigonus of Socho... would say, do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive reward. Instead, be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive reward.**

As Jews, we "believe with complete faith that the Creator, may His Name be blessed, bestows good on those who keep His commandments, and punishes those who transgress His commandments." That reward is vast beyond our capacity to receive and even to comprehend, and it lasts forever.

Our service of Hashem should bring together the elements of love and fear, accompanied by great joy at the privilege of fulfilling the Torah's sacred commandments. If we link our fulfillment of *mitzvot* to the expectation of reward, we pull our service down from the lofty level of loving sons to the more humble status of servants. What a tragic, colossal loss!

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