



## *Insights into Pirke Avot*

by

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*Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom*

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

1:7 Nitai HaArbeli says, distance yourself from a bad neighbor and do not associate with a wicked person. And do not despair of punishment.

#### *Headed for Trouble*

##### **Do not despair of punishment**

The final part of the *mishnah* is a continuation of the *Tanna's* warning against keeping bad company. *Puranut*, translated here as “punishment,” also means “calamity.” Perhaps we have been living with a **bad neighbor** and associating with a **wicked person** for quite some time. As far as we can see, there has been no detrimental influence; we are entirely untainted, fully as righteous as the day we first met. Even if our rather flattering assessment of ourselves is accurate, the *Tanna* tells us, **do not despair of calamity**. The impact of bad company does not necessarily bring about an overnight transformation – it can be a lengthy, gradual process. While at present we may feel that our dealings with sinful comrades and other evil associates have not had a negative spiritual effect, we have no guarantees for the future. Bad company wields a bad influence which inevitably makes its mark, even if the damage is not immediately apparent.

#### *No Exceptions*

These words may also refer to the sinners themselves.

As we explained, if we have contact with wicked individuals, we must be especially mindful not to **despair of punishment**. We look around us and are tempted to ask, “Why is the path of the wicked successful?” (*Yirmiyahu* 12:1). They



have it all – good health, money, status, family – the perfect setup. The long-suffering righteous, on the other hand, seem to be doing just that: suffering, for almost their entire lives. We cannot help but think that maybe there is something to living the life of the wicked.... The *mishnah* teaches us not to imagine for a moment that punishment due will never be delivered: “For Hashem will judge every deed, even all that is hidden” (*Kohelet* 12:14).

It is true that the Al-mighty is exceedingly patient. Rather than punishing sinners at once as they so truly deserve, He allows them plenty of time to repent and change their ways. The extension can last for years because He awaits man’s repentance, and allows him ample opportunity.

We read the *Tanna*’s words, and at least on an intellectual level, we understand. However, being what we are, we are lulled into a dangerous apathy. We observe sinners enjoying themselves for years, even lifetimes, and are tempted to think that maybe they really do just get away with it all – forever. Might it not be that Hashem never does actually mete out punishment? As for our own misdemeanors, we would like to believe that they are part of a very distant past, forgotten even by the Al-mighty, just as He seems to have forgotten the sins of the wicked. Maybe we too will never have to pay our Heavenly bills after all.

This attitude is dangerous. Even if we would prefer to forget our transgressions, the Heavenly Court keeps excellent, perfectly documented records. We will be reminded of the old offenses in painfully minute detail, including stopwatch time and precise location, and we will have to answer for every last misdeed. Divine punishment is an inevitable reality, kept on hold only because Hashem is patient and merciful, and not because He has forgotten, G-d forbid. He is “patient [but eventually], He demands payment” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 67:4).

We should never delude ourselves that the irreligious can do as they please, while we who are religious must agonize over every move we make. Our Sages teach that “One who says ‘G-d is lenient’, his life will be forfeit” (*Baba Kama* 50a). No one will escape punishment, even if we personally do not watch it happen. If we abuse Hashem’s kindness and do not bother to repent despite the many extensions He grants us, our punishment will ultimately be all the more severe.

Let us try to understand more about this profound concept.

### ***Here or There***

We know that Hashem loves the righteous, and bestows lavish reward upon those who obey His Will. We know also that He despises evil and punishes the



wicked. Why, then, are we so often witness to the phenomenon our Sages describe as “a righteous person who has it bad, a wicked person who has it good” (*Berachot* 7a)?

The simplest answer is that it is because “There is no person in the world so righteous that he does only good and does not sin” (*Kohelet* 7:20). No one – *no one* – is so perfect that he has never done any wrong at all. Even a sincerely righteous individual has some sins on his ledger, and he too must atone for them. However, because Hashem truly loves the righteous, He grants them easy terms, so to speak. “Those whom Hashem loves, He chastises” (*Mishle* 3:12), allowing them to pay off their debts in the worthless, devalued currency of suffering in this world, rather than with the infinitely higher priced punishment of the World to Come. They clean their slates here, in a transitory world, and go on to eternity cleansed, ready to enjoy endless, blissful reward. However it may look from here, we should realize that the righteous sufferers are actually the ones who are getting the better deal!

The supposedly carefree offenders, on the other hand, are also settling their accounts in this world. Our Sages cite the verse, “And He rewards His enemies in his lifetime” (*Devarim* 7:10). The wicked enjoy wealth and tranquility here in this world, in order to reward them for the few good deeds they have managed to perform (*Tanhuma Mishpatim* 9).

Our Sages teach that “The sinners of Israel are as full of *mitzvot* as a pomegranate [is full of seeds]” (*Eruvin* 19a). Even our wicked members have managed to accumulate a number of *mitzvot* over the years, and they too, no less than the pious and the righteous, will be rewarded for whatever they have done; “The Holy One, blessed be He, does not withhold the reward of any creature” (*Baba Kama* 38b et al). We know that “He is a faithful G-d and there is no injustice. He is righteous and fair” (*Devarim* 32:4). Sinners will receive the reward they deserve and not an iota less. However, sinners they are, and their values are not those of the righteous. The potential glories of the World to Come matter little to them. They would rather to have it all right here and now, so that is when, where, and what they get. As a result, the reward for their *mitzvot* is squandered on cars, bank accounts, and good times. They are pleased with the deal, but they will arrive at the World to Come with their credit coupons consumed and a pile of active debts for a lifetime of sin. The righteous prefer to have it the other way around. The currency of this world and its trinkets mean little to them. They would rather pay their debts here and save up their credit for the real delights of the World to Come.

In addition, our Sages teach that the suffering of a *tzaddik* may not even be related exclusively to his own need for atonement. He really does not deserve it, but endures it nonetheless because a *tzaddik*’s suffering has the power to atone for his



entire generation. They cite the example of Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi's thirteen years of excruciating tooth pain and internal illness. During that entire time, there was no shortage of rain (*Baba Metzia* 85a), and Jewish mothers were spared miscarriage and pain in childbirth (*Bereshit Rabbah* 33:3).

### *Paying for the Ticket*

I heard an interesting analogy which helps us understand the concept of “a righteous person who has it bad, a wicked person who has it good.” When an airplane takes off for a distant destination, it is loaded with passengers and crew. The passengers have paid a heavy price for their seats. The crew members, on the other hand, have paid nothing, and in fact, will be compensated for the time they spend on the plane. Is this not unfair? They are all there together, on the same flight. Why must some pay, while others not only travel for free, they actually draw a salary?

The difference lies in the purpose of their trip. The passengers are there to reach a predetermined destination, and eventually they will arrive and disembark. It is only right that they pay for their tickets. The crew, on the other hand, merely shuttle back and forth, providing services for the paying passengers, so it makes sense that that they are reimbursed for their work.

We are here in this world to reach a destination – the World to Come. Like the airline passengers, it is proper that we pay our way; we are not traveling for free. The trials and difficulties we encounter in life are the price we pay to reach the World to Come, the ultimate destination. The nations around us are not part of the journey – they are going nowhere. Viewed from this perspective, they are here to fill a role and provide services for the passengers, so to speak. They contribute to the development of the world in fields such as science, commerce, medicine, and technology, services which the “passengers” can utilize. On another level, they also supply the endless flow of trials, temptations, and often agonizingly difficult tests through which we exercise our Free Will and earn our place in the World to Come. In addition, when necessary they serve as the stick which chastises our people, may G-d spare us.

### *Overcoming Despair*

With this in mind, we may understand the words of the *mishnah* to mean **do not despair because of punishment and calamity**. We may feel that we are doing our utmost to live a life dedicated to Torah and *mitzvot*. And yet, no matter how hard we try, we are plagued by so much suffering and so many problems – financial, family,



medical, and more – that we feel that we are drowning. Why is Hashem punishing us like this, we wonder? We begin to **despair** because of the **calamities** we face.

And yet, we should not despair; as painful as it is, our suffering is for our benefit, and in fact an indication of the Al-mighty's love for us. Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin explains that far from being a tool of Divine vengeance, suffering is a gift. It cleanses us of the sins which taint our souls, so that we can go on to enjoy our eternal reward in full, without suffering the much harsher punishment of the World to Come (*Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Bet*, Chapter 8). The good life of the wicked, as compared to our own hardships, should not be the cause of **despair**. They may be enjoying some appealing luxuries which we lack, but Hashem has not given them what He has given us: the means to pay our debts and purify our souls in this world. If we can learn to take this attitude, we will come to view suffering in this world not as a source of despair, but as a gift from a loving Father.

Suffering is never "for nothing." The Arizal explains that when we sin, the Forces of Impurity created by our sin consume the influx of spiritual bounty brought into being by our *mitzvot*. When these same impure forces then inflict us with suffering, they emit that spiritual bounty in the process, thus losing their life force, much as a bee dies when it stings its victim. It is in this way that suffering atones for sin, by bringing about the end of the impure forces generated by the sin (*Sefer HaLikutim* on *Devarim* 21:10; see *Beni Aharon* by Rabbi Shimon Agassi, *Hakdamah Gimel*, *Ot Kaf-alef*, and *Nefesh HaHayyim*, *Shaar Alef*, Chapter 12, note).

### *The Element of Choice*

There is another important element to consider as well. The Al-mighty relates to our world with *hester panim*, literally "concealment of [Hashem's] face." In other words, His involvement in our affairs is concealed, for a very distinct purpose. Hashem created the world to bestow good upon His created beings.<sup>1</sup> In order for us to fully enjoy this good, He has structured a system of reward and punishment. To this end, our lives in this world are an ongoing series of trials and temptations, which we must struggle to overcome. It is up to us to decide: we can choose to overcome temptation and do good, or we can choose to yield and do evil, G-d forbid. In keeping with our choices, we are granted an eternity of Divine reward or punishment. In essence, this is the fundamental principle of man's Free Will.

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<sup>1</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot*, *Kol Yisrael* Part 2, and *Parashah* Insights on *Beresheet* for a fuller discussion of this topic.



Now let us imagine that every time a sinner transgressed, he was immediately stricken with horrible punishment from Heaven, and that every time a *tzaddik* did a good deed, he was showered with Divine bounty. How could there be any element of choice left as to whether we should do good or bad? The results would be too obvious to ignore, making it almost impossible to sin, and equally impossible to refrain from doing good.

The good life apparently enjoyed by the wicked in this world is an integral part of this system. If all sinners endured a life of wretched misery in this world, their suffering deepening with every sin they commit, who would be foolish enough to sin? As it is, we are not privy to the workings of reward and punishment in this world, and our choices are based not on fear of immediate retribution or the desire for instant compensation, but solely on our love and fear of the Al-mighty.

### ***Facing Judgment***

It is frightening to realize that when we sin, G-d forbid, we arouse the Divine Attribute of Strict Justice, causing our case to be reviewed in the Heavenly Court. Every new transgression swells the existing tally. What is more, when the time comes for the reckoning, it will be our very own sins which clamor for our punishment: "Your evil will punish you" (*Yirmiyahu* 2:19), spurring the Heavenly Court on against us. These sins blemished our soul, and it must undergo a process of purification. This can take place in one of two ways; the choice is ours. We can be inspired to repent because we love the Al-mighty, rectifying and purifying our soul through sincere *teshuvah*. The other option is far more difficult. If we ignore the need to repent, our soul can only be cleansed through the intense suffering of Divine punishment.

We find the concept of Divine justice in a later *mishnah* as well: "He would say, those who were born will die, and the dead will live, and the living will be judged, to know and teach and understand that he is G-d, He is the One Who forms, He is the Creator, He is the One Who comprehends, He is the Judge, He is the witness, He is the plaintiff, He will judge. Blessed is He before Whom there is no injustice, and no forgetfulness, and no favoritism, and no acceptance of bribery, for everything is His" (*Avot* 4:22).

Do we think that we or anyone else can escape Heavenly judgment? "The living will be judged," and "He is the Judge and witness and plaintiff," all in one. We cannot bluff our way through and we cannot rely on connections, because there is neither "injustice nor forgetfulness nor favoritism" – in short, no *protektzia*. We cannot bribe Him because everything is in any case His.



The *mishnah* continues, “And know that everything is in keeping with the calculation. And do not let your [evil] inclination promise you that the grave will be a refuge for you, for you were formed against your will, and you were born against your will, and you live against your will, and against your will you will give judgment and accounting before the King of all kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.”

Do we hope that we will somehow manage to slip by and that our sins won't really count? “Everything is in keeping with the calculation,” and we will be horrified to find ourselves with an enormous bill to pay in Heaven. We should not imagine that the afterlife will be a relief from the stresses of life in this world; it is neither a refuge nor a resort, but a courtroom. We will *all* have to give an accounting, no matter what we thought here in this world.

### *The Repercussions of Sin*

We discussed the Vilna Gaon's explanation of the difference between the two terms “*din*” and “*heshbon*” (*Shnot Eliyahu, Likutim*).<sup>2</sup> *Din*, or judgment, is simple and direct: we sin, we receive due punishment. *Heshbon* is more complex. It is an accounting of what we could have done instead of our negative deed. For example, sleeping quietly is better than going to the beach, but saying *Tehillim* is better than napping through an afternoon's study session.

The *Mekubalim* explain the difference between *din* and *heshbon* on a more profound level. As we said, *din* is straightforward and direct. The Torah tells us that a certain act is forbidden, and outlines the punishment for transgressors. One who commits the sin receives the corresponding punishment. But the impact of a sin does not end there. It affects the four corners of our world as well as the higher spiritual worlds, so that many people suffer from one man's transgression. Contrary to what we would like to believe, what we do is *not* “nobody's business but our own.” *Heshbon* is the far-reaching calculation of all the repercussions of the sin, including the suffering of others worldwide in its wake, its effect on the angels, and the blemish it has caused in the Higher Worlds. This, chilling as it is, is *heshbon*. This is the accounting we will have to make for our sins.

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, known as the Netziv, the *rosh yeshivah* of Volozhin, gave a vivid example of this type of chain reaction. A *yeshivah* student in Volozhin is learning a *Tosfot* but somehow, he is not in the mood to work too hard. He settles for a very superficial understanding of the words and moves on, whether to the next line, or to supper and bed. So he was lazy today... big deal.

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<sup>2</sup> See Insights into *Pirke Avot*, *Kol Yisrael* Part 1.





The boy does not realize what a frighteningly “big deal” it truly is. He has started a downward spiral of spiritual descent which at its end will send an assimilated Jew in Paris to apostasy. It began when he personally did not exert himself to learn well. One step below, a scholarly layman who maintained a daily in-depth learning session decided that for once he could allow himself to relax and skim. Another degree down, a regular at a local *Daf Yomi* lecture decided that nothing would happen if he skipped the class for just one day, getting by instead with some *Mishnayot*. A man who always learned *Mishnayot* and *Hok L'Yisrael*<sup>3</sup> and recited *Tehillim* was impatient that morning and just said the basic prayers, minus his usual extras.

The ball kept rolling downhill, with a gentleman who always prayed the entire morning service word for word suddenly allowing himself to do some careful skipping, figuring that there was no real harm done. The man who always got up on time for prayers slept in, and the man who would sleep in but at least come to the synagogue late prayed at home... Rung after rung, sinking lower and lower, people who always ate kosher were tempted to take a forbidden taste, until at last, a Parisian gentleman snapped the last fine thread connecting him to his people and converted to Christianity.

We should keep in mind, however, that it works both ways. Our Sages tell us that the Divine Attribute of benevolence is five hundred-fold greater than the Attribute of retribution (*Sotah* 11a). If the principle of *din v'heshbon* operates for Divine punishment, it operates exponentially more so for Divine reward. The Torah instructs us to fulfill a commandment, for which there is a specific reward. If we do so, we receive the reward. But our *mitzvah* as well, no less than our sin, goes beyond our own backyard, affecting the Higher Worlds and bringing greater good into the world.

The Netziv described what happens when a *yeshivah* boy slacks off. Can we possibly imagine the gains when a Torah student does learn as he should? His positive behavior impacts in multiples of five hundred. Instead of dragging his fellow Jews farther and farther down with him, he pulls them all up, bringing them ever closer to our Father in Heaven.

### ***Top to Bottom***

Our Sages describe a rare glimpse of the World to Come by one who returned to tell the tale. Rav Yosef, the son of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, fell ill. His soul

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<sup>3</sup>*Hok LeYisrael* is compendium of Scripture, *Mishnah*, *Gemara*, and *Zohar*, arranged for daily study based on the weekly Torah reading.





departed, but he was afterwards restored to life. His father asked him, "What did you see?" He told him, "I saw an upside-down world. Those who are on top [here] were below [there], and those who are on the bottom [here] were on top [there]" (*Pesahim* 50a).

In other words, he told his father, those who were considered powerful and important in this world are nobodies in the World to Come, while the nobodies of our world are the ones who count in the World to Come. The picture we see here is not a reflection of the truths of the World to Come.

In this world, the wicked seem to be at the summit. They have everything: wealth, power, and position. In the next world, however, they languish at the bottom; they have nothing. The righteous, who seem so unfortunate here, are at the height of bliss there, where they have everything and more. We should never **despair of punishment**, because in this world, we see neither the whole picture nor the end of the story. The fact that Hashem is patient does not mean that He forgets. The Almighty's **punishment** awaits, whether sooner or later, in this world or the next. At the same time, His reward for those who overcame hardship and obeyed his Word awaits as well, on a scale far beyond our dreams.

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