

TorahFax: Devarim

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Monday, Tammuz 28, 5783 (Hakhel Year) July 17, 2023

This Shabbat (in the Diaspora) we will recite the second chapter of Pirkei Avot (Chapters of our Fathers).

Although written two thousand years ago, these lessons are valid today as they were then. The following is one of the lessons from this chapter:

“Be as careful in the performance of a [seemingly] minor mitzvah as that of a major one, for you do not know the reward given for mitzvot.”

Q. Why can't we judge which mitzvot are minor and which are important ones?

A. What we see from our perspective may not be exactly the way mitzvahs are in reality from G-d's perspective. We humans with our limited vision and knowledge from our vantage point, cannot correctly evaluate the real value and effect of individual mitzvot.

A mitzvah which may seem minor to us or a transgression which may seem insignificant to us, may in fact be very major. The following story illustrates the point.

A poor man once came to the home of a wealthy person and asked for some old clothing. The people in the house had pity on the man and told him to go to the attic and choose some clothing.

The poor man went to the attic, found some old clothing, which he decided to take. Looking around for rope to tie his bundle, he saw some rope wrapped around a nail on the wall. Without thinking much of it, he took out his pocketknife and cut a piece of rope.

Instantly he heard a tremendous crash down below. Before long, everyone came racing to the attic, "You broke our beautiful chandelier!" they screamed.

"But I only took a small piece of rope!" the poor man tried to defend himself. "How could I have broken your chandelier?"

They answered bitterly: "This small rope was holding the chandelier to the ceiling. By cutting this small piece of the rope, the chandelier fell to the ground and smashed to pieces!"

It is the same with mitzvot. Some mitzvot may seem insignificant to us, but in truth, just as the small piece of rope holding up the chandelier, they may be very significant.

This is why our sages tell us not to judge the value of mitzvot. What may seem small and insignificant to us, may indeed be very great and valuable with much depending on it.

Wednesday, Menachem Av 1, 5783 (Hakhel Year) July 19, 2023

Today (Wednesday) is Rosh Chodesh Menachem Av. Like every other Rosh Chodesh, additional prayers are recited, and the special Rosh Chodesh Torah reading is read.

Today begins the special nine-day mourning period for the destruction of our Holy Temples. Certain restrictions apply during these nine days, which ends with the fast day of Tisha B'Av – the ninth of Av when the Temples were actually destroyed.

Today is the yartzeit (day of passing) of Aaron the High Priest. Aaron's day of passing is the only date mentioned in the Torah associated with someone's passing. The Torah doesn't even give us the exact day when Moshe or their sister, Miriam passed away. Aaron was special that the Torah writes the exact day of his passing.

Aaron was three years older than his brother Moshe (Moses). Aaron accompanied Moshe when he went to Pharaoh to command him to let the Jewish people go. Together with Moshe he led the Jewish people through the forty years of their desert journey. Just like Moshe, Aaron was not permitted to go into The Promised Land. He passed away at the age of one hundred and twenty-three.

Our sages tell us that Aaron had a unique quality; He loved peace and went out of his way to restore peace between husband and wife and between one person and another. In his unique, non-judgmental and peaceful way he would make people realize when they sinned against G-d, thus restoring peace between man and G-d.

Aaron accomplished this through his genuine love for people. When two people were angry at each other, Aaron would go to one of them and say, "I met the other person and he very much wants to be your friend again, but he is afraid to approach you because you may reject him. After convincing the person that the

other one sincerely seeks his friendship, Aaron would approach the other one and tell him the same. Eventually both of them made peace with each other.

If Aaron heard that a person sinned, instead of rejecting him, as many did, he would go out of his way and befriend him. The person thought to himself, "If Aaron only knew the sin I committed, he would surely not have become my friend." Aaron didn't reveal that he knew, but, the sinner, ashamed of what he did, repented.

Our sages say that although we cannot attain the spiritual level of Aaron the High Priest, yet, this particular quality of loving peace and promoting peace, is something we must all seek. In Pirkei Avot, our sages tell us, "Be of the disciples of Aaron; loving peace, pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them to Torah." It is something we can and must strive to attain.

Over 150 years ago, rabbis and Russian government officials met to try to nullify some of the harsh decrees of the Russian Czar against Jews, which deprived Jews from earning a decent and respectable livelihood. During the meeting, Rabbi Menachem Mendel (known by his writings as the Tzemach Tzedek), spoke out strongly against the Czar for his heartless treatment of Russian Jews.

One of the rabbis turned to him and said, "You know very well that for this kind of talk you place your life in danger and our sages say, "One who willingly places his life in danger will lose his share in the World-to-Come!"

Rabbi Menachem Mendel, whose love for his people was boundless, replied, "If my fellow Jews cannot have their share in this world, of what value is to me my share in the World-to-Come!"

Thursday, Menachem Av 2, 5783 (Hakhel Year) July 20, 2023

This Shabbat we begin the last Book of the Torah, the Book of Devarim (Deuteronomy).

The Book of Devarim begins with, "These are the words which Moshe spoke to all of Israel." The entire Book of Devarim are the words which Moshe spoke to the Jewish people before his passing. Moshe began the last Book of the Torah on Rosh Chodesh Shevat and finished one month and one week later, when he passed away on the seventh of Adar.

In this last Book of the Torah, Moshe reprimands the Jewish people for all the past mistakes, reminding them that when they enter the Promised Land, they shouldn't make the mistakes their parents made. As a result of those mistakes, they stayed in the desert forty years and didn't come into the Land of Israel.

Our sages say that the difference between the Book of Devarim and the rest of the Torah is that previously Moshe spoke to them whatever G-d told him to say. But now much of what he spoke to them were, "his own words." As a true shepherd, he wanted to make sure that when he is gone, they should continue following the ways of the Torah.

The Midrash asks, "How is it that here the Torah says, "These are the words that Moshe spoke," But in the Book of Exodus, when G-d tells Moshe to go speak to

Pharaoh and to the Jewish people in Egypt, Moshe replies, "Oh G-d, I am not a man of words..." Moshe claims that he cannot speak!

The Midrash replies: "Rabbi Tanchuma said, this is compared to a peddler who was going around selling material. Wherever he went he would call out, 'I have special wool to sell.'"

Once he passed by the palace. The king called him over and asked him, "What are you selling?" The peddler replied, "I have nothing to sell." "But I just heard you announce that you have special wool to sell," asked the king.

The peddler replied: "It is true that I announced I have good wool to sell. But this is for the ordinary person. For you, my king, who is so mighty and who has the most expensive materials that can be found, for you I have nothing to sell and nothing that you would buy!"

The same says Rabbi Tanchuma was with Moshe. At The Burning Bush, in the presence of G-d, Moshe claimed that he was not a man of words. But now in front of the Jewish people, he was indeed a man of words. Thus, the Torah says, "These are the words which Moshe spoke to all of Israel."

Parshat Devarim is read on the Shabbat before the fast of the 9th of Av, when we mourn the destruction of the Holy Temples. The very first words of the Parsha, "These are the words which Moshe spoke to all of Israel," emphasize an important point, which is very appropriate for this time.

The destruction of the Second Temple came as a result of strife amongst Jews. It is important at this time to correct this and strive for unity amongst us. The

words "to all of Israel," alludes to this point. It reminds us that at this time we especially need to emphasize and practice unity amongst us.