

פרקי אבות
PIRKEI
AVOT
ETHICS of the FATHERS

*With a New Commentary Anthologized
from the Works of the Classic Commentators
and the Chasidic Masters*



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All of Israel have a share in the World to Come, as it says (Isaiah 60:21), *Your people are all righteous; they will inherit the Land forever; they are the branch of My planting, the work of My hands in which I take pride.* (Sanhedrin 11:1)

1 The world was created with ten [Divine] utterances. What does this come to teach us? Surely it could have been created with one utterance! It was to exact payment from the wicked who destroy the world created by ten utterances, and to bestow ample reward upon the righteous who sustain the world created by ten utterances.

MISHNAH 1

The bulk of the chapter five is arranged by teachings that relate to numbers—specifically the numbers ten, seven, four, and three (*Midrash Shmuel*; see *Magen Avot*).

The chapter begins with a sequential list of historic events, all of which occurred in units of ten. Each event leads naturally into the next:

1) The Divine utterances with which the world was created, the last of which was the utterance that created Adam; 2) the generations from Adam to Noah and 3) Noah to Abraham; 4) Abraham's trials, one of which was when God told him about the Egyptian exile; 5) the Exodus from Egypt and 6) the splitting of the sea; 7) Israel's sojourn in the desert; and finally 8) the ten miracles in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

The Mishnah then returns to the twilight of the sixth day of creation, when ten supernatural phenomena were created.

In each case the number ten is significant, as explained below.

The Ten Commandments are not included in this list, since the Torah precedes and completely transcends the physical realm. Even the miracles described in the Mishnah relate ultimately to the physical. Similarly, even the Holy Temple relates to the physical, since its purpose is to house God's presence in the physical world (see *Likutei Sichot*, vol. 4, p. 1220).

בְּעִשְׂרֵה מְאֻמָּרוֹת TEN DIVINE UTTERANCES. The Ten Utterances refer to God's statements in the beginning of Genesis, such as "God said, 'Let there be light,'" "God said, 'Let there be a firmament,'" etc.

The commentators point out that the term "God said" only occurs nine times in the narrative of Creation. Whence, then, a tenth utterance?

Although not explicitly stated in Genesis, the events described in the first verse of Genesis—"In the beginning of God's creation of heaven and earth"—also occurred through an utterance (*Rambam*), as in the verse (Psalms 33:6), *By the word of God were the heavens made...* (*Bartenura*).

The world came into being by the power of those utterances and remains in existence through the spiritual power of the letters of the words of creation, as in the verse (Psalms 119:89), *Forever, O God, Your word stands firmly in the heavens*—i.e., the Divine energy embodied in the words *Let there be a firmament* must remain within the heavens to sustain their existence. Were that Divine energy to depart from the heavens for even a moment, the heavens would revert to nothingness as they were prior to their creation.

The same is true of all of creation (see *Shaar Hayichud VehaEmunah*).

בְּעִשְׂרֵה TEN. Every being is made up of ten facets. The number ten thus represents a complete unit (see above on 3:6 and below). By creating the world with ten separate statements, instead of one general statement, God granted meaning and significance to the individual features of reality. Consequently, one's deeds—wicked or righteous—become even more significant (see *Rambam* and *The Rebbe in Biurim*).

By giving credence to the disparate aspects of creation, God further concealed His being, which is epitomized by oneness, thereby increasing the challenge faced by human beings to act in a Godly way (see below).

כל ישראל יש להם חלק לעולם הבא, שנאמר: ועמדו כלם צדיקים, לעולם יירשו ארץ, נצור מטעי מעשה ידי להתפאר.

א בַּעֲשָׂרָה מֵאֲמֹרוֹת נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם, וּמָה תִּלְמוּד לֹמֵר, וְהֵלֵא בְּמֵאֲמֹר
אֶחָד יָכוֹל לְהַבְרִאות, אֲלֵא לְהַפְרֵעַ מִן הָרָשָׁעִים שְׂמֵאֲבָדִין אֶת הָעוֹלָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא
בַּעֲשָׂרָה מֵאֲמֹרוֹת, וְלִתֵּן שָׂכָר טוֹב לְצַדִּיקִים שְׂמֵקִימִין אֶת הָעוֹלָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא
בַּעֲשָׂרָה מֵאֲמֹרוֹת.

WHAT DOES THIS COME TO TEACH US. The Mishnah is asking two questions: (1) Why was the world created with ten utterances? (2) For what purpose does the Torah let us know that the world was created with ten utterances? (see *Midrash Shmuel*)

ONE UTTERANCE. A world created with one utterance would have reflected the oneness and unity of its Creator. Challenges and triumphs, failings and rebirths would have been less likely in this more spiritual world. God therefore created the world with ten utterances, a very material world of division and multiplicity, in order to create an arena for human challenge and achievement, reward and punishment (see *Midrash Shmuel* and Arizal cited in *Etz Chaim* 11:6).

TO EXACT PAYMENT. The Mishnah does not say “to punish” (*l’ha’anish*) but “to exact payment.” God punishes man—not for revenge, God forbid, but to set him on the path of return, so that he repays what he owes and redeems himself (see *Midrash Shmuel*).

☞ The commentators ask the obvious question: Would God, who is the epitome of kindness, create the world in a way that *increases* the punishment of the wicked? Furthermore, why does the Mishnah list this as God’s *primary* reason and the reward of the righteous as a *secondary* reason?

Through repentance one surpasses the level of a *tzaddik* who has never sinned. One who experiences spiritual darkness returns to God with an intensity much greater than that of the *tzaddik*. He thereby elevates the negative acts he committed, since they become fuel for his return. The *tzaddik*, by contrast, serves God only within the realm of the permitted.

Hence: God creates the world with ten utterances, a world of disparity and challenge, to “exact payment from the wicked,” i.e., for the return of those who have fallen,

and *secondarily*, for the straightforward service of the *tzaddikim* (see *The Rebbe in Biurim*).

לְצַדִּיקִים שְׂמֵקִימִין אֶת הָעוֹלָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בַּעֲשָׂרָה מֵאֲמֹרוֹת
THE RIGHTEOUS WHO SUSTAIN THE WORLD CREATED BY TEN UTTERANCES. *Sfat Emet* offers a homiletic interpretation: The word for “sustain” (*kiyum*) in its legal sense means “confirm,” such as confirming the validity of a legal document.

Accordingly, the Mishnah is insinuating that through their Godly ways the righteous confirm and testify that the world was created by God and that it is sustained through the energy of His ten utterances.



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Ethics of the fathers

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