

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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KEHOT PUBLICATION SOCIETY
770 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, New York 11213

2. Ben Azzai said: Run to [perform even] an easy mitzvah, and flee from transgression; for one mitzvah brings about another, and one transgression brings about another; for the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the recompense of a transgression is a transgression.



MISHNAH 2



☞ BEN AZZAI ☞

Like Ben Zoma (see previous Mishnah), Ben Azzai died at a young age and never received ordination (*Bartenura*; *Rashi*).

A student and colleague of Rabbi Akiva (see *Bava Batra* 158b), Ben Azzai's brilliance and passion for Torah was legendary. No sage "uprooted mountains"—i.e., displayed incisive, profound insight—like Ben Azzai. All sages of Israel were "like the skin of garlic" in comparison to him—aside from Rabbi Akiva (see *Rashi* on *Eruvin* 29a, s.v. *Hareni*, and *Sotah* 45a).

When he taught Torah, he was surrounded by flames, akin to the original revelation of the Torah at Sinai when the mountain was aflame with fire (Deuteronomy 4:11) (*Vayikra Rabbah* 16:4).

Ben Azzai would sit in the markets of Tiberias and teach Torah. When later sages wanted to convey that they were feeling particularly sharp, they would

say, "I am [ready to answer questions with sharpness and profundity] like Ben Azzai in the markets of Tiberias" (*Sotah* 45a and *Rashi* there.).

He was so immersed in Torah study, including its esoteric teachings (see below), that he did not wish to be distracted from it by marriage and raising a family. Although betrothed to Rabbi Akiva's daughter, he either never married her (see *Ketuvot* 63a), or married but soon separated from her (see *Sotah* 4b).

When he was questioned about this by the Sages, his reply was, "But what should I do? My soul thirsts for Torah. The world can exist through others" (*Yevamot* 63b). Although Ben Azzai was halachically justified in his behavior, he was obviously the exception to the rule. See *Hilchot Talmud Torah l'Admor Hazaken* 3:1, and *Kuntres Acharon* there.

It was said of him, "When Ben Azzai passed away, the assiduous students [of Torah] ceased" (*Sotah* 49a).

רץ RUN. Ben Azzai speaks not only of physical running—which is not appropriate for many *mitzvot*—but of an emotional yearning and joy in the fulfillment of a mitzvah, even a "minor" one. This pleasure and joy stems from an awareness that a mitzvah, even a minor one, connects us with the Infinite One. This awareness causes one to shed all restraint and "run" to the mitzvah (see *Rambam*, *Hilchot Lulav* 8:15).

A person who is limited by ego and self-centeredness, cannot truly "run" to a mitzvah with all of his being, since he is held back by his finiteness.

Even so, this person should still run to a mitzvah, since the act of running will bring him closer to running naturally (see *Chinuch*, 15) (*The Rebbe in Biurim*).

לְמִצְוָה קְלָה TO A "MINOR" MITZVAH. Or "easy" mitzvah. Hence the absence of a parallel "easy sin," since all sins are easy (*Tosfot Yom Tov*). According to *Machzor Vitri*, however, "mitzvah" refers to sin as well—i.e., flee from a sin, even one that seems minor.

ב בֶּן עֲזַאי אוֹמֵר: הָיִי רֵץ לְמִצְוָה קְלָה, וּבֹרֵחַ מִן הָעֲבֵרָה, שְׂמִצְוָה גּוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה, וְעֲבֵרָה גּוֹרֶרֶת עֲבֵרָה, שְׂשֹׁכֵר מִצְוָה מִצְוָה, וְשֹׁכֵר עֲבֵרָה עֲבֵרָה.

שְׂמִצְוָה גּוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה ONE MITZVAH BRINGS ABOUT ANOTHER. A person is conditioned by his actions. If he accustoms himself to *mitzvot*, *mitzvot* will come naturally to him. The same is true of sin (*Bartenura*).

punishment for sin than sin itself—the fact that through sin one becomes separated and distant from the Creator (see *HaChasid*).

שְׂשֹׁכֵר מִצְוָה THE REWARD OF A MITZVAH. In addition to the natural conditioning caused by one's actions, God rewards the performer of a mitzvah with the opportunity and assistance to do other *mitzvot*. This is true of sin as well (*Bartenura*).

In the case of sin, however, God merely allows the person to follow his sinful path, but He does not assist him—“One who comes to be purified is assisted; one who comes to be defiled is allowed” (*Yoma* 38b) (*R. Yonah*).

Alternatively, the “reward”—i.e., the enjoyment that is experienced in performing the mitzvah, which is expressed in running to do the mitzvah—is also a mitzvah (*Bartenura*).

☞ THE ULTIMATE REWARD ☞

Midrash Shmuel explains that the greatest reward for a mitzvah is “*mitzvah*,” meaning “bond,” referring to the bond that is created between finite man and infinite God through man's fulfillment of His will (see *Tanya*, ch. 37).

The Maggid of Mezritch applies this thought to the previous phrase as well: the performance of “a mitzvah brings about a ‘*mitzvah*’”—a bond with God.

The thrust of Ben Azzai's Divine service was a yearning for transcendence, to cleave to God. He therefore distanced himself from marriage, saying, “What shall I do? My soul yearns for Torah” (see biography, above).

This yearning eventually led to his death during a meditative experience in which he “entered” the celestial spheres (*Chagigah* 14b). His performance of *mitzvot* therefore emphasized the exhilaration, sweetness, and joy of a mitzvah, the awareness that a mitzvah connects the finite human being with the infinite God (*The Rebbe in Biurim*; see above on 2:1).

וְשֹׁכֵר עֲבֵרָה עֲבֵרָה THE RECOMPENSE OF A TRANSGRESSION IS A TRANSGRESSION. There is no greater



PIRKEI AVOT

Ethics of the fathers

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