

## The Floating Skull: Five Levels of Interpretation

### *Ethics of the Fathers – Pirkei Avot 2:6*

#### The Peshat

This *mishnah* is about Hillel. On the level of the simple meaning (the *peshat*), Hillel is teaching us about Divine Providence and what is known as “a measure for measure.” The skull of the murderer is floating on the water because he drowned someone else.<sup>[1]</sup> This follows Maimonides’ explanation that this is a self-evident reality. We commonly see how an individual who initiates an evil action will ultimately suffer from that same evil. Hillel, too, teaches that, “What goes around comes around”—bad things are rolled out by bad people (מגלגלין חובה על ידי חוב). The Hebrew word for “rolled out” (מגלגלין), shares a root with the word for “skull” (גלגלת). We also learn the phrase used by the Torah to describe liability for accidental killing (manslaughter), “God caused it to come to hand.”<sup>[2]</sup> Returning to the individual whose skull Hillel saw, though he was indeed liable to be punished by death because those who killed him did so without a court of law, Hillel said that they too would be killed for choosing to do this evil.<sup>[3]</sup>

#### The Remez

On the level of allusion (*remez*), we begin by noting that the two-letter root טר is repeated four times in this *mishnah* in the Aramaic words: אַטְפִּתָּ אַטְפִּוּהָ מְטִיפִיהָ יְטוּפוּן. This two-letter root alludes to God’s holy connotation טפטיפיה, which is related to thought, specifically with Divine Providence, which in the verse, “And He thought thoughts so no outcast would be banished”<sup>[4]</sup> is described as requiring thought. Just as the principle of measure for measure is used in order to thoughtfully punish the wicked, so God spends a great deal of thoughtful effort, as it were, to ensure that the lost and outcast souls are not forever lost. Indeed, these good thoughts are utilized to an even greater measure than thoughts about punishment, following the rabbinic principle that the measure of good is always greater than the of punishment<sup>[5]</sup> (ולעולם) (מדה טובה מרבה מרבה ממדת פּרענות). In keeping with this principle, Maimonides writes that it is also true that “a person who initiates a good action will enjoy the outcome of his action.”<sup>[6]</sup>

#### The Derash

The *Midrash Shmuel*<sup>[7]</sup> commentary on our *mishnah* challenges the end of the *mishnah*, “and those who drowned you, will themselves be drowned.” He writes that we know of many murderers who were not punished for their actions. In fact, they died peacefully in their beds. Furthermore, how can we claim that every person who is killed necessarily killed someone else? After all, the first person to be murdered was Abel, and he did not murder anyone! Thus, the *Midrash Shmuel* suggests that this *mishnah* is alluding to reincarnation, which in Hebrew is called “gilgul” (גלגול), cognate with “skull” (גלגלת) and Hillel was saying that the murderer will be killed in another life. As for Abel, he was killed because he “gazed at the supreme

holiness.”<sup>[8]</sup> Rabbi Yaakov Emden (known as the *Yaavetz*) in his commentary on the *mishnah*, *Lechem Shamayim*, further explains this concept, saying that the skull Hillel saw floating on the water was Cain’s. Cain was the first murderer, who killed his brother Abel. It is from him that we learn of the bitter end of all murderers, as he too was killed, and by his own great-great grandson, Lemech.<sup>[9]</sup>

### The Sod

Turning now to the inner dimension of Kabbalah, the “secrets” (*sod*) of the Torah, we find that the Arizal explains this *mishnah* as follows:<sup>[10]</sup> Hillel is a reincarnation of one of the sparks of Moses. The skull he saw was Pharaoh’s—just as Moses saw it, so Hillel saw it. Hillel said to Pharaoh: “Because you drowned others, you were drowned,” i.e. because you drowned Jewish children in the water, you too were drowned. But, according to the Arizal, the latter parts of Hillel’s words (with which the *Midrash Shmuel* had some difficulty ) are not directed at the skull, i.e., to Pharaoh, but to the Jewish People. Hillel thus says, “And those who will continue to drown you [the Jewish people] in the future, [they too will meet the same fate as Pharaoh and] will themselves be drowned.”

Elsewhere,<sup>[11]</sup> the Arizal offers an even deeper and more surprising explanation. He writes that it all began with Abel (the first murder victim) who reincarnated into Moses. The skull alludes to the Kabbalistic concept of the *gulgalta* (the crown of *Arich Anpin*, the origin of will in the Long Countenance). Abel did not murder anyone, but he did create a blemish when he gazed at the 370 lights in the *gulgalta* and thus separated them from the other super-conscious faculties that lie below it (causing them in a sense to float above the lower faculties). To rectify this separation, Moses, Abel’s incarnation, had to be placed in a basket floating on the water. So, the skull is now identified not with someone but with an abstract concept. Even though Moses’ floating in the basket rectified his previous incarnation’s mistake, in practice, it was the Egyptians whose decrees created the necessity to place Moses in a basket on the Nile. They are therefore the subject of the *mishnah*’s final phrase, “and those who drowned you” and for their decree to drown every male Jewish boy, they too were punished.

The Komarna Rebbe, in his commentary on tractate *Avot* known as *Notzer Chesed*, continues the Ari’s approach and explains that this *mishnah* can be interpreted in a positive light. According to him, the *mishnah* is about prophecy. The root of prophecy is in the *gulgalta* and the Aramaic word, “killed” (ܩܬܠ) shares a root with “preach” (ܩܬܠܐ). Whereas now the source of prophecy is concealed, says the Komarna Rebbe, in the future, it will be revealed in the “holy mouth” (אִשְׁׁרֵי קַדְׁשׁ).

### The Chassidic Interpretation

The Sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, explained this *mishnah* from a Chassidic perspective.<sup>[12]</sup> An individual could be learning Torah, but the learning is strictly limited to the skull, i.e., to the mind. It does not impact one’s body, one’s heart, arms, or legs. If a person is only understanding Torah intellectually, he is like a skull floating on the waters—the Torah learned is not affecting his emotional makeup nor his behavior. When there is no connection between the mind

and the heart, then when that individual walks about, he or she is like a person without a head.

The skull in the Lubavitcher Rebbe's explanation represents faith and faith must radiate throughout the body and expand throughout all the attributes of the soul. Although our faculty of faith is more specifically identified with the highest head of the crown, the Unknowable Head (*Radla*), which is higher than the skull, or *gulgalta* (as above, in the Arizal's explanation<sup>[13]</sup>), the Unknowable Head inspires the *gulgalta* (just as the *gulglata* itself "floats on the water"). Going back to the interpretation of our *mishnah* according to Kabbalah—the *sod*—Abel's blemish was that he separated faith from the other inner faculties of the soul, beginning with those in the crown. In effect, Abel made faith float above the waters alluding to the so-called concealed wisdom (מוֹחָא סְתִימָא), the lowest head of the crown. Because concealed wisdom, also known as the power of the intellect (כֹּחַ הַמְשִׁכִּיל), illuminates the mind and from there, all the powers of the soul, Abel had separated faith from them all.

The mitzvah that connects faith back with the other parts of the crown and inner faculties of the soul is *tefillin*. By donning *tefillin*, we subjugate our mind to God with the *head-tefillin*. In addition, we empower our minds to rule our hearts with the *arm-tefillin* and draw faith to illuminate our entire bodies, all the way down to our legs. The impact made by *tefillin* is alluded to in their Biblical name. In the Torah,<sup>[14]</sup> the head *tefillin* are called *totafot* (טֹטְפוֹת), a word whose 2-letter root is also טף, the two-letter root repeated four times in the final part of our *mishnah*.

[1]. Following the *Bartenura*.

[2]. Exodus 21:13.

[3]. This interpretation follows the *Bartenura* and the *Tosfot Yom Tov*.

[4]. 2 Samuel 14:14.

[5]. *Sotah* 11a.

[6]. Maimonides commentary on our *mishnah*.

[7]. Written by Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac de Uçeda (1545-1604) was a Kabbalist, born and lived in Tzfat in the two generations straddling Rabbi Moses Cordovero and the Arizal. Though he studied with both and continued to learn with Rabbi Chaim Vital, his own work focused on homiletics rather than Kabbalah. He is best known for his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers).

[8]. But see the *Tosafot Yom Tov*, who challenges this explanation and has a different solution.

[9]. Genesis 4:23 and *Rashi loc. cit.*

[10]. *Sha'ar Ma'amarei Razal*, Avot c. 2. And see the Lubavitcher Rebbe's explanation on *Pirkei Avot*.

[11]. *Sefer Haleekuteem*, Bereisheet, s.v. *Vayehee meekeitz yamim*.

[12]. *Sefer Hasichot* 5697, p. 240.

[13]. See also in length in our Hebrew volume *Sod Hashem liyerei'av* p. 118.

[14]. Deuteronomy 6:8.