

Pirkei Avot - Introduction

A Portion in the World to Come

All of Israel have a portion in the World to Come, as it is stated, "And Your people are all righteous. They shall inherit the land forever. They are the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, in which I take pride."

It is customary to preface the learning of *Pirkei Avot* with this *mishnah*, which is from the tractate of *Sanhedrin*.¹ Although this is seemingly only a custom, "a custom of Israel is considered Torah," therefore, we take customs very seriously. A number of reasons have been given for the custom of prefacing *Pirkei Avot* with this particular *mishnah*,² we here will explore this topic.

The concept of "the World to Come," or *Olam Haba* as it is called in Hebrew, appears primarily in the Oral Torah but is not explicitly mentioned in the Written Torah. Ultimately, our goal is to connect our present reality, or "This World" (*Olam Hazeih*) to the World to Come. In many ways, *Pirkei Avot* is the gateway to the study of the Mishnah—the foundation of the Oral Torah. It is most appropriate, as we shall explain, to place this *mishnah* describing the World to Come as a gateway to *Pirkei Avot*—the gateway to the Oral Torah.

The holy Arizal (Rabbi Isaac Luria) explains that the World to Come is a connotation for the *sefirah* of understanding. In our service of God, engaging the *sefirah* of understanding is done through contemplation,³ or *hitbonenut*, as it is called in Hebrew. About this contemplation, King David said, "Know the God of your father and serve Him."⁴ This means to deeply contemplate on God's greatness and focus on God with strength and courage of the heart and mind."⁵

We may think that the service of contemplation is not relevant to everyone, after all not everyone is inclined to think deeply and contemplate God and the Torah. But the truth is that, "All of Israel have a share in the World to Come"—meaning that every Jew has an inner connection to the *sefirah* of understanding (the World to Come) and to contemplation. The Alter Rebbe explains this further in the Tanya. He says,

¹. *Sanhedrin* 10:1.

². See *Derech Chaim* and *Pirkei Moshe*.

³. At times the Hebrew word, *hitbonenut*, is translated as "meditation." Because meditation has been associated with practices originating in the Far East, this presents a certain problem. We therefore stress that whenever *hitbonenut* is translated as "meditation," the meaning is one of deep intellectual contemplation.

⁴. 1 Chronicles 28:9.

⁵. *Tanya* c. 42.

And this strength and this trait—to deeply consider God and to bind one’s consciousness with God—exists in every soul from the House of Israel, as it suckles from the soul of Moses our teacher, may he rest in peace.

Everyone is a *tzaddik* thanks to the Divine soul in them. This is what is known as the point of the *tzaddik* in every Jew. This is the meaning of the words, “And Your people are all *tzadikkim*.” They all have the point of a *tzaddik* in them. But this point may be concealed and needs to be revealed and illuminated. To accomplish this, the soul needs to suckle from the soul of Moses. How is this done?

Moses is considered the attribute of knowledge of the entire Congregation of Israel. In every generation there are sparks from Moses’ soul. Every Jew has a concealed spark of the soul of Moses, or, in the words of the Ba’al Shem Tov, every Jew has a spark of Mashiach in them. The sages in each particular generation possess revealed, large sparks from the soul of Moses. The sages are thus, the “eyes of the congregation” who have the tools and talent to teach knowledge of God to the people. In order to awaken this spark of Moses in himself, a person must invest his efforts in contemplation (“expending efforts with the spirit and expending efforts with the flesh”) and be strongly connected to and have faith in the true *tzaddikim*. (He must also believe in the point of the *tzaddik* within himself, “And Your people are all *tzadikkim*”).

When a person connects his heart and soul to the true *tzaddikim*, the spark of being a *tzaddik* inside him is awakened and is empowered to illuminate in a revealed manner.⁶

Feeling like a portion

There is a Chassidic teaching that explains another *mishnah*, “Who is wealthy? He who is happy with his lot,”⁷ as follows: He who is happy is one who is happy that he is only “a lot,” meaning a portion (of the whole). We can apply this understanding to our *mishnah*, “All of Israel have a portion [or “a lot”] in the World to Come.” Meaning, that a person’s lot in the World to Come is his happiness with the fact that he is only a portion—that he is incomplete.

Let’s look at the expression “a portion in the World to Come” (חלק לעולם הבא). The phrase’s complete value is 7 times 46, which divides neatly into the first word, “a portion” (חלק) whose value is 3 times 46 and the final two words, “in the World to Come” (לעולם הבא) whose value is 4 times 46. Likewise, the value of the first and last letters in all three words (חלק לעולם הבא) is 4 times 46 and the value of the remaining letters (חלק לעולם הבא) is 3 times 46! The common multiplicand, 46, is the value of “Levi” (לוי), the tribe described as especially related to the *sefirah* of understanding and the World to Come.

⁶. And the numerical allusion to this is that “spark” (נצוץ) equals “the heart of a *tzaddik*” (לב צדיק).

⁷. *Avot* 4:1.



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