

## *Pirkei Avot 4:2*

### *Staying on the Mitzvah Track*

*Ben Azzai would say: Run to pursue a minor mitzvah and flee from a transgression, for a mitzvah causes another mitzvah after it and a transgression causes another transgression after it. For the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the reward of transgression is transgression.*

Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura explained this *mishnah* as follows, “The way of the world is that when a person performs one *mitzvah*, it is easy for him to perform another. Likewise, if a person begins to sin, it is difficult to break free from sinning.”

From the Bartenura’s words, we might think that both *mitzvah* and sins are equally persistent. Both can become a never-ending chain of actions, from one *mitzvah* to the next or from one sin to the next. But in reality, we see that even if a person performs a *mitzvah*, it is common to subsequently sin. On a simple level, we can say that the first *mitzvah* promotes the performance of an additional *mitzvah* (as the Bartenura explains) but does not provide a *mitzvah*-insurance policy for persistence. That being so, we must understand what Ben Azzai meant in his teaching that “a *mitzvah* causes another *mitzvah* after it.” Furthermore, how can we avoid dragging a trail of transgressions behind us?

Restore the Mitzvah to God

In truth, an infinite amount of Divine energy is imbued in every *mitzvah*—this is Divine goodness that expands endlessly. But we must know how to properly relate to the *mitzvah* in order to reveal that Divine energy within it. This is the secret of the curse God gave the snake, “You shall strike his [Adam’s] heel.” The Ba’al Shem Tov explains that the snake, i.e., the evil inclination, or in the language of Chassidic thought, the animal soul wants to empty the Divine energy from every good deed we do. It does this metaphorically with the bite of the snake at the heel, which represents the culmination of a good deed. After finishing the deed, we feel a sense of accomplishment which leads in most cases to us attributing the *mitzvah* to ourselves and not to its Divine source. When we take credit for the good deed, the infinite energy intrinsic to the *mitzvah* dissipates and becomes finite and limited. In effect, if we feel that it is God that deserves the credit for the *mitzvah*, then the *mitzvah* like God is infinite in its influence on ourselves and on reality, but if we take the credit for ourselves, then like us, the *mitzvah*’s reach and energy become limited.

The solution is to employ the attribute of lowliness and not to think too highly of ourselves. Lowliness means coming to terms with the fact that there is nobody—not even a *tzaddik*—who does not sin, as in the verse, “there is not a righteous person on

earth who does good and does not sin.”<sup>1</sup> Even when a person performs a good deed, there is a trace of sin or blemish if he or she does not attribute the good deed completely to God. For, it is God alone who gives us our Divine soul and creates the conditions necessary for the performance of the *mitzvah*. By recognizing our inherent lowliness, it is easier to acknowledge and admit that it is God who deserves the credit for our good deeds. By recognizing this, we return the *mitzvah* to God, rendering it infinite, creating a never-ending trail of more and more *mitzvot* after it.

In physics, the principle of inertia says that a body in motion will maintain its motion unless there is a force opposing it, such as friction. The same is true for the movement of the soul when we perform a *mitzvah*. The more we remove ourselves from the equation and allow the Divine *mitzvah* to work—unencumbered by our ego—the more it will propagate its affect through the world and impact our lives and the lives of those around us.

This is the meaning of the words, “Run to pursue a minor *mitzvah*... for the reward of a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*.” We should run to the inner dimension of the *mitzvah*, which means that we should embrace the consciousness that, “Give Him [God] what is His, for you and yours are His [including your *mitzvot*].” With this approach, one *mitzvah* causes the next.

#### Take Responsibility for Transgression

“A transgression causes another transgression after it.” If this is so, how can we ever break out of the vicious cycle of sin?

Just as we have to attribute the *mitzvah* to God (perhaps counter-intuitively, at first), so we have to attribute the transgression to ourselves. We might think, who else should be blamed for our sins? But, in fact, most of the time, normative people tend to blame everyone but themselves for their transgressions. We might blame the people around us, we might blame our upbringing (i.e., our parents—blaming them for our misdeeds is very common), or our circumstances, or whatever else plays a role in our life. This is nothing more than an elegant way to blame God, who creates all of these circumstances. “The foolishness of man perverts his way, and his heart frets against God.”<sup>2</sup> If we choose this way of dealing with our sins, it will truly be impossible to break the vicious cycle.

Instead, we must confess and admit to our sins, like King David who, when he had to face up to his sin, did not try to make excuses. Instead, he said, “I have sinned.”<sup>3</sup> The transgression and the shortcomings are in me. I, and only I, am to blame for my situation. This is the power of *teshuvah* (return to God), which brings the ongoing chain of transgression to a complete stop. The Hebrew word for “transgression” is *aveirah*, and its root is *avar*, which means “past.” As soon as we cast the transgression into the

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:20.

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 19:3.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Samuel 12:13.

past and admit that this is bygone, the future is released, and everything becomes possible.

This is the meaning of, “Flee from a transgression.” Flee from the trap of the transgression by means of taking responsibility for it and thereby preventing the chain reaction. The value of “a minor *mitzvah*” (מצוה קלה) with the *kollel*—the additional inclusive 1—is the same as “transgression” (עברה), suggesting that by rushing to perform even a minor *mitzvah*, you are saving yourself from a transgression.

Further considerations

Our *mishnah* can be understood at another level by analyzing how each of its statements corresponds to one of the letters of God’s essential, four-letter Name, *Havayah*.

Pursuing a *mitzvah* and creating an endless chain of *mitzvot* corresponds to the letter *vav* in *Havayah*. Fleeing transgression so as to avoid creating an endless chain of transgressions corresponds to the *sefirah* of kingdom—the final *hei* in *Havayah*. These two letters, *vav* and *hei*, are considered the revealed dimension of *Havayah*.

“The reward of a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*” corresponds to the *sefirah* of wisdom, represented by the letter *yud* in *Havayah*, because the reward of a *mitzvah* is the “togetherness” created by the *mitzvah* itself. In the words of the *Tanya*, “For it is the *mitzvah* itself that causes i.e., creates its reward. By performing [the *mitzvah*], man draws the revelation of the blessed light of the Infinite from above to below.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, “the reward of a transgression is a transgression” parallels the *sefirah* of understanding, represented by the first *hei* in *Havayah*, specifically the experience of distance one can sense with one’s faculty of understanding. It is this distance (caused by our transgressions) that awakens us to do *teshuvah*, as the prophet says, “And his heart will understand and he will return.”<sup>5</sup>

According to this correspondence, the order of the letters as alluded to by our *mishnah* is *vav-hei-yud-hei* (והיה), which spells “it will be” (והיה). *Vehayah* always indicates joy.<sup>6</sup> This is the joy of performing a *mitzvah*, which is the driving force in pursuing a *mitzvah* and fleeing from transgression.

A beautiful allusion to this concept can be learned from the numerical value of the words of this *mishnah*, “For a *mitzvah* brings another *mitzvah* after it, and a transgression brings another transgression after it. For the reward of a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*, and the reward of transgression is transgression (ששכר מצוה, מצוה ושכר עברה, עברה), which equals 4942, or David (דוד) times joy (שמחה), where

<sup>4</sup>. Ch. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 6:10.

<sup>6</sup>. *Bereisheet Rabbah* 42:4.

the value of “joy” is also the value of “the secret of *Havayah* is to those who fear Him”<sup>7</sup> (סוד יהוה ליראיו), a phrase connected to Ben Azzai.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Psalms 25:14.

<sup>8</sup> See *Sotah* 4b.