

The Secret of the Threes: Pirkei Avot 1:1

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Joshua. Joshua gave it over to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it over to the Men of the Great Assembly. They [the Men of the Great Assembly] said three things: Be moderate in judgement. Establish many pupils. And make a fence around the Torah.

Our *mishnah*, the first *mishnah* in Pirkei Avot opens with “three things.” The following *mishnah* in Pirkei Avot, in the name of Shimon Hatzaddik, also discusses three things: “On three things does the world stand.” Chapter 1 ends with the words of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, “On three things does the world exist.”

Chapter 2 opens with the words of Rebbe: “Look at three things and you will not come to transgression: Know what is above you etc.” Later in the chapter, in the name of the five disciples of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai, the *mishnah* says, “They said three things.” Each of them said three things.

Chapter 3 opens with the words of Akavya ben Mehallel: “Look at three things and you will not come to transgression.”

The *mishnah* in chapter 5 says, “All those who have in their hands these three things are from the disciples of Abraham and three other things are from the disciples of the evil Bilaam.”

The division into three is very pronounced in many *mishnahs* in Pirkei Avot (such as “Yosei ben Yoezer says ‘Make your home a meeting place for the wise and dust yourself in the dust of their feet and thirstily drink their words”). The name of this tractate, ‘Ethics of the Fathers,’ is also connected to three: “There are only three who are called fathers”¹ (In Hebrew, אב means “father”. The numerical value of אב is 3). The entire tractate of Avot is “three things together” (שלושה דברים יחד) in Hebrew, which equals “*B’reishit*” - “In the beginning”).

The sages highlighted the predominance of the threes: “A three-part Torah (Torah, Prophets and Writings) for a three-part nation (Priest, Levites, Israel).² (This is particularly pertinent to this year, the 3333rd year since the giving of the Torah). The division into three is the secret of the World of Rectification, in which three axes – right, left and middle

¹ Brachot 16b.

² Shabbat 88a.

– exist in stable balance (the secret of the scale³ in Kabbalah, creating a face-to-face union).

The Persona of “Three Things”

The “three things” also have an inner dimension, in which they parallel the *sefirot*.

“They said three things” parallels the *sefirah* of *keter* (crown), which has three heads – faith, pleasure and will. “Be moderate in judgement” parallels faith: faith is connected to moderation, as in the verse, “He who believes will not hurry.”⁴ In addition, “*keter*” also means “waiting” as in the expression “כתר לי זעיר” (“Wait for me a moment”).⁵

“And establish many students” parallels pleasure – Torah study with expansiveness and joy, in which the students are the crown of the mentor.

“And make a fence around the Torah” parallels will: The fence stops the negative will. *Keter* also means “to surround” – like a fence.

The pair of sayings, “On three things does the world stand/exist” parallels *chochmah* (wisdom) and *binah* (understanding). The constant state of being of the world is from the union of *chochmah* and *binah* (*Abba* and *Imma*), as in the verse, “God by wisdom founded the earth, He established the heavens by understanding.”⁶

“They said five things” of the five disciples of Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai parallels the five attributes of the heart from *chesed* (lovingkindness) to *hod* (sincerity).

The pair, “Look at three things” parallels *da’at* (knowledge) and *yesod* (foundation). (*Da’at* is the inner dimension of *yesod*). The words of Rebbe, “Know what is above you,” parallel *da’at*, while the words of Akavya ben Mehallal parallel *yesod*: “From where you came, from a putrid drop” pertains to the rectification of *yesod*.

The “three things” relevant to the disciples of Abraham and the disciples of the evil Bilaam parallel *malchut* (kingdom). To rectify the attribute of the *malchut* of holiness, one should be sure to be counted among the disciples of Abraham and to completely distance himself from the students of the wicked person. The numerical allusion to this concept is that in Hebrew, **Abraham Abraham** equals *malchut*.

³ Zohar II, 176b.

⁴ Isaiah 28:16.

⁵ Job 36:2.

⁶ Proverbs 3:19.



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