



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS

Avos - Perek 6 - Mishna 4

MAKING SACRIFICES FOR A GREATER END

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The Rebbe, Reb Bunim of Peshischa ztl (1767-1827) was a leader who had a career that covered a vast amount of life experience. Known for his gadlus in Torah and Chassidus, he was also at one time a successful lumber merchant and latterly a pharmacist. His gift of explaining deep concepts with stories lives on today in the many seforim that quote him. One such tale speaks of how the merchants of that time would travel to the great fair in Leipzig. The trip could be pivotal for their livelihood. The Leipzig Fair drew in thousands of businessmen from all over Europe, and large fortunes could be made in those few days. Travel was problematic, the roads of Poland were rough and dangerous, and one never knew where or if he would find a place to sleep or eat. The taverns in which the travellers stayed were often very basic and kosher food was not always available. Often as not, these Yidden had to live on stale bread, salt with some water. Would any of them even think of turning around and going home? Obviously not. They were going to make enough money to last a whole year; anything they suffered on the way was worthwhile. They could subsist on meagre rations, sleep on the floor and suffer every indignity, because their focus was on the prize: the fair in Leipzig.

**“This world is just a road, a pathway
leading to a much greater destination, a
bond with Hashem”**

Our Mishnah tells us:

This is the path of the Torah: Eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure, sleep on the ground, live a life of deprivation, but toil in the Torah.

The Rebbe explained that the Mishnah is underlining the fact that this world is just a pathway to the world to come, and this road must be navigated through the Torah. Our relationship with life's material comforts is much like the business traveller to the Leipzig fair. Sure, he would prefer a comfortable bed and sumptuous food, but he would be content with just bread and water if it meant getting to his destination. Whilst we may desire worldly comforts and pleasures, even if we must go without them we must not be deterred from our mission in this world: bringing Torah into our lives and creating a Kiddush Hashem.

The goal of our existence is not about obtaining material trinkets or creature comforts. This world is just a road, a pathway leading to a much greater destination, a bond with Hashem. This is what is meant by “the path of Hashem” of which the Mishnah speaks.

Allow me to turn to another story concerning those businessmen of old.

A Chassidic lumber merchant in Riga was calculating his accounts. Under a column of figures he inadvertently wrote, "Total: *Ein od milvado*—There is none besides Him!" In response to his assistant's raised eyebrow he said: "During prayer it is considered perfectly natural to let one's mind wander off to one's lumber in Riga. So what is so surprising if in the middle of business dealings the mind is invaded by thoughts of the unity of Hashem?" Jewish life is meant to be focused on this one overarching truth!

The Mishnah continues:

If you do this, “You are praiseworthy, and all is well with you.” (Tehillim 128:2) “You are praiseworthy” in this world; “and all is well with you” in the World to Come.

The Mishnah isn't directing us to live in want; rather, we are being told to accept that which Hashem sends us and know it is His Will. You will be praiseworthy in this world because it is a world swamped with consumerism that goads us into wanting ever more, whilst yours will be a life free from the insistent drive for material gain which can never be assuaged. The Torah will give you an understanding of what is important in life and what is a block that holds you down. In a life filled with these goals then no matter what happens, you can accept things for what they are: Hashem's Rotzon. Praiseworthy can mean that Hashem will be extolled by your actions bringing a Kiddush Hashem amidst the darkness of emptiness that drives others.

As a young student I had the merit to sit at the feet of many holy Yieden who may have seemed poor and unnoticeable to others. Coming to America as survivors from the hell that was the Churban, they had nothing, yet in truth everything. I often ate on Shabbos with one such Yied who shared his meagre meals with this “Americana” bochur. He had a unique custom, in that at every Shabbos meal he would learn something from the Holy

Sefer Noam Elimelech from the Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk. This is no easy undertaking; the sefer can be very challenging. Yet, when he read from its pages, we all sat silently engrossed, not only in the words, but for me, the sense of spirituality he brought into that sparsely furnished room.

This was not a unique situation; I saw this time and again from many of those brave sweet Jews. As I grew older and became more involved in communal affairs, I began to delve into what it was that gave these Yieden the wherewithal that allowed them to survive and then thrive after all they had experienced. There was just this determination that seemed simple but was extremely deep. They lived with Hashem; it didn't need explaining. It was just there for others to learn from.

Avos is a primer taught before Shavuos because before accepting the Torah we must be sensitized to what it means to live as Torah adherents. In this final chapter we find bold nuggets of what this task entails. This Mishnah explains what life is and what is real.