



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS  
**THE GRASS IS RARELY GREENER ON THE  
OTHER SIDE**

*Avos Perek 2 Mishna 6*

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The little boy is driving with his father through the countryside in upstate New York. It is the 1950s, and the fact that he is riding in a car so far from home is an adventure in itself. The car passes a mansion, and a huge swimming pool can be seen from the roadside. The child sighs. "Wow, those people must be really rich!"

"Yes," says his father, "rich in money and in tzoros. You see that pool? They have built it because they have a kid just about your age who has polio."

This one word caused the child to shudder, for in those long-forgotten days this disease was a killer andcrippler of young children. There was no neighbourhood that didn't have one or two victims, and everyone lived in fear of it.

**"This constant searching for what  
others have can lead to disaster"**

The lesson was learned and learned well: you don't envy folk, because you don't know what their lives are about. How do I know that the lesson was learned well? Because I still shudder whenever that long-ago memory flits through my mind.

It may be that this occurrence sensitized me at a young age, but I am only human and need reminding all the same. Don't tell me it doesn't get you down sometimes. You see that fellow from across the way and you cannot understand why he has everything you

feel should be yours. His house is better, his kids behave like angels and his household seems to function like clockwork. You know he is not the mensch, the gentleman, that you are, and in fact he seems to be a bit of a shifty sort. Where is the justice? Why do you have to work so hard when he gets everything on a silver platter?

Obviously, such thinking is immature; we have all learned that such an understanding is fatuous. We have heard many talks from our mentors and, yes, every mussar schmooze has told us that jealousy is a wasted enterprise and that we can never measure someone else's wealth. However, we are human and we wonder. After all the schmoozen, it still hurts: Why him? Why not me?

Actualizing Torah truths in our daily lives is the hardest thing we will ever have to do. It is hard because it is the reason we were created. Our whole existence is just for this purpose, and the harder it is, the more important it is to succeed. In these times of spiritual plenty, where one can find a new chumra, a new halachic stringency, at every turn, we tend to forget that it is the little episodes of anguish that are the most telling. You may be keeping standards of kashrus that our bubbes never dreamed of, and sending your kids to kollel when you never thought such a thing was possible. But where you really live, in that place in your heart, are you really growing?

In this Mishnah we find Hillel standing by a stream and musing to himself. "He saw a skull floating on the surface of the water. He said to it, 'They have drowned you because you drowned others, and those who drowned you will themselves be drowned.'" This is a sharp insight. He has no apparent proof of how this skull came to be where it is, nor how those involved, will see their end.

Perhaps Hillel is saying something much deeper. There is a *din v'cheshbon*, a time of reckoning, in this world! But it is never as clear as we would want it to be – nor should it be. Part of the battle that we must wage within is the one that stops us from judging such matters.

The Riminover Rebbe explained that the Aramaic word for "drowned" is similar to a Hebrew word meaning "look." The Mishnah can thus be rendered: "If you are looking at others, look at yourself." That is, before you contemplate things that are far beyond you, examine your own deeds and improve your own character.

How often are we guilty of judging things on a superficial level? Our days are often filled with toil, and we think others are having an easy time. This is so absurd, yet it gnaws at our innards and turns our own goodness into bitterness. The Mishnah is telling you that Hashem has a plan that is beyond all human knowledge; things happen, seemingly with no possible connection, but there is a Heavenly scheme, one that is not ours to fathom because our perceptions are limited.

Instead of gazing wistfully over at the other person's garden, we should look within our own. The Rebbe, Reb Zisha, had a Chassid who was quite successful in the timber business. Each year this simple but charitable soul would come to the Rebbe for a blessing, leaving him with a considerable sum to cover the needs of the Rebbe's household. One year he came only to find that the Rebbe had gone to visit his own Rebbe, the Maggid of Mezeritch. When he heard this, he figured, "Why bother with the student when I can go to the master?" So he started to visit the Maggid of Mezeritch regularly and never went back to the Rebbe, Reb Zisha.

Lo and behold, as time went by his fortunes changed. He lost all his assets and was soon poor. Finally, he decided to make a return visit to the Rebbe, Reb Zisha. Upon entering the holy man's room he poured out his tale of woe. "Why have I become unsuccessful ever since I began to visit the Maggid of Mezeritch, whom you yourself acknowledge as your superior?"

"As long as you gave your support to any good man without calculating the degree of his goodness," Reb Zisha said, "Hashem likewise granted you a portion of His abundance without calculating your true worthiness. But since you began to look about for a better man to whom you might offer your charity, Hashem, too, looked for a man better than yourself upon whom to shower His bounty."

There are accountings that are not ours to make. The one and only cheshbon we will be held accountable for is what we did with that which Hashem gave us. Skulls may float past us, yet nothing is without reason. The only thing that is certain is that who and what you are is unique to your soul, and it is there that you should look.

We live in stressful times. Even the best of homes are often caught up in the rush to keep up with others. The world around us is designed to entice us into wanting more and more. We are slowly being programmed into feeling incomplete with the material gains we have. You are not meant to think that you have enough; rather, you are being pushed to seek extra.

This constant searching for what others have can lead to disaster. We become insensitive, judgmental and callous, all because of the edginess that lies within our hearts. Putting these feelings aside is difficult, but the alternative is the loss of our own skull.