

Rabbi's Article II

Ben Bag Bag and Ben Hei Hei

Ethics of Our Fathers (-Chapter 5, Mishna 21¹), teaches: "Ben Bag Bag² would say, 'Delve and delve into it, for all is in it; see with it; grow old and worn in it; do not budge from it, for there is nothing better.' Ben Hei Hei² would say, 'According to the pain is the gain.'"

Tractate Avot is not about obligatory law, but about, "matters of piety". However, Maimonides rules, and in great length (-Laws of Teshuvah, 3:15, and more), that G-d is "obligated" to pay a reward for his service to G-d, as that of an employer who higher an employee³. The novelty of this Mishna is that the "According to the pain is the gain," rather than, "According to the action and its benefit." To quote the Midrash Shmuel on this teaching, "Even if the cost, effort, and pain, were greater than the benefit!" However, to begin with, the Torah has set the reward of a mitzvah with its necessary cost, effort, work, and pain, to perform the mitzvah: "(-Leviticus 26:3), *If you follow My statute* (Rashi: 'It means that you must toil in the study of Torah')... *I will give your rains in their time*," "(-Chagigah 9b): "(-Malachi 3:18), *Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between he who serves G-d and he who does not serve Him*'... (The one) 'who serves Him' (and the one) 'who does not serve Him' are both completely righteous people. But as one who reviews his studies one hundred times is not comparable to one who reviews his studies one hundred and one times... Go and learn from the market of donkey drivers. (One can hire a driver to travel up to) *ten parasangs* (Persian unit of distance, equal to about 3.5 miles) *for one dinar*. (However, he will travel) *eleven parasangs* (only) *for two dinars*. (Tanya, Ch. 15: 'for he is changing his norm')"?! Even by one who hires a worker, it is only by (-Baba Metziah 101a), "One who entered another's field and planted in it without the permission," that the owner only pays for the benefit, when "the benefit is greater than the costs." However, when the worker does what the employer hires him for, then even when the work brings no benefit⁴, the employer must (-Baba Kama 116a-b), "gives his entire wage"! Even more so, between two people, the pain is but a side construct, for the desire of the employer is but to have the action accomplished. However, concerning our service to G-d, the pain is not a side construct, but is part-and-parcel of the gain and benefit of a mitzvah mitzvah: "(-Maimonides, "Eight Chapters", Chapter 6), *They consider him who desires iniquity, and craves for it (but does not do it), more praiseworthy and perfect than the one who feels no torment at refraining from evil... Again, as if this were not sufficient, they even go so far as to say that the reward of him who overcomes his evil inclination is commensurate with the torture occasioned by his resistance, and they said, 'According to the labor is the reward.'* Furthermore, they command that man should conquer his desires, but they forbid one to say, "I do not desire to commit", but he should say, "I do indeed want to, yet I must not, for my father in Heaven has forbidden it."! Hence, what is our Mishna teaching us?!

The Explanation: We are speaking of when one takes upon himself a service to G-d in which he is not obligated ("matters of piety"). Hence, one may think that in such a case one gets paid for the amount in which the benefit supersedes the effort, hence, the Mishna tells us, "According to the pain is the gain." And with this we shall also understand the names used in the Mishna (See *Footnote #2*), *Ben Hei Hei*, because he was a convert: And is therefore the, "Son of --the two ("Hei Hei," 2x) who had the letter 'hei-' added to their names-- Abraham (Abram to Abraham) and Sarah (Sarai to Sarah)." So too, concerning *Ben Bag Bag* (בג בג), which, (i) the numerical value of the letters B"G (2+3) = is the letter Hei (5), and (ii) the letters B"G twice serves as the acronyms⁵, "Ben Ge'er (son of a male convert) and Ben Geioret (son of a female convert), for no gentile is obligated, or asked, to convert (only that they keep the Seven Noachide Laws (-[Link](#))), and by doing so, the convert embraces huge amounts of "pain" of adhering to the 613 Mitzvot, with all the Rabbinic Fences! And even though, by the convert, this becomes his/her entire being, nevertheless, we can apply the same to everyone concerning a beatification of a mitzvah, good behavior, or accepting an appointment to a position of service of something holy, in which he is not obligated, but accepts upon himself willfully.

However, this explanation in itself does not suffice: Previously, we already explained, "One who entered another's field and planted in it without the permission," if the owner shows that he is happy with this, then he must pay the worker for all his work, even if the expenses are greater than the benefit! Hence, being that G-d is happy with one going, "beyond the letter of the law," to the point that we can say that this is considered, "with the permission," hence, most definitely G-d is obligated (not a, "matter of piety") to, "pay the worker for all his work"! Thus, the question of, "what is this Mishna teaching us," returns!?

The Answer: We are speaking here of when that which the person takes upon himself now as beyond the letter of the law leads to a 'negligent loss'. For example, doing an extra non-obligatory behavior three times, without specifically declaring, "bli neder - without establishing a promise," it then becomes as an obligatory promise to do so, and from there on an offence when not done. How much more so, concerning a convert, who has now placed themselves in the possibility of 613 Offences, plus the myriads of Rabbinic Fences, of which they were not accountable at all! Hence, in such cases, if not for the Mishna clearly telling us, "According to the pain is the gain," that not only is does he not receive any reward, but that he even must pay for the damages --as in the case of (-Baba Metziah 83a), "If one took upon himself to move someone else's barrels from one place to another," and because of his negligence, barrels broke, he is obligated to pay the owner of the barrels for the broken barrels! Thus, the Mishnah comes to tell us, that even in such a case, G-d, in a manner of, "matters of piety," pays him for his "pain" damages --as in the case of the broken barrels, "The porters said to Rav, 'We are poor people and we toiled all day and we are hungry and we have nothing.'"

1. (i) Originally, Tractate Avot had only 5 chapters, and letter a 6th was added on from the sages, and hence begins with, "The sages taught in the language of the Mishnah." (ii) There are transcripts in which Mishna 21 is the last Mishna of chapter 5. Hence, this sicha is a *siyum* (-[Link](#)) on Tractate Avot.

2. The Midrash Shmuel quotes an opinion that both names are for the same person. In the Talmud (-Kiddushin 10b) we find the name to be Yochanon Ben Bag Bag. Commentaries explain the reason for the code names ("Son of Bag Bag" "Son of Hei Hei") is because they were converts, and they needed to be protected from informers.

3. See within Tractate Avot itself (-2:14), "Who is your employer who will repay you the reward of your labors," and (-ibid, Mishna 15), "the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master is pressing."

4. For example, "one who hires a laborer to bring cabbage and plums to an ill (person), and he went and found that (the patient had already) died or recovered."

5. According to this, Ben Bag Bag himself was not a convert, but the offspring of converts.

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Rav said to Rabba bar bar Hanan, 'Go and give them their wages. Rabba bar bar Hanan said to him, 'Is this the halakha?' Rav said to him, 'Yes, as it is written (-Proverbs 2:20), 'And keep the paths of the righteous.'" Now, even though, in that case we are speaking of, "Yes! -it is the law!" and not a, "matter of piety," nevertheless, that is because the barrel-owner hired him. However, even on our case, when the person is taking upon himself, from only his own volition (with not obligation from G-d), nevertheless, when the owner is "happy" with what the worker did, then, as a, "matter of piety," the owner is obligated to pay (even for the transport of the broken barrel!). For being "happy," constitutes as if he hired him for this. So too, in our case of anyone taking upon himself that which is not obligatory, without declaring, "bli neder," and a convert, that even though this leads to a "broken barrel," nevertheless, "matters of piety" dictate G-d's, "According to the pain is the gain."

In essence, the reason why the teaching of, "According to the pain is the gain," is said in the name of Ben Hei Hei (a convert), in the name that personifies his being a convert, is because ultimately, it is only the convert who fully embraces the concept of excepting upon him/herself that which they absolutely are not obligated to. The entire creation of the Jew is (-Kiddushin 82b), "To serve my Creator," to use all one's strength and talents for the service of G-d. Hence, it is difficult for a Jew to find any effort in service to G-d, which he is absolutely not obligated at all, for even that which is, "beyond the letter of the law," and the, "matters of piety," is under the obligatory, "To serve my Creator," with all his might. The convert, on the other hand, before his conversion has absolutely no obligation at all to convert --to the point that we tell the convert, "Why are you coming to convert?!"--, and is therefore the only one who truly and freely takes upon themselves something for G-d 100% voluntarily. And nevertheless, this Mishnah in *Tractate Avot* --the last (See *Footnote #1*), and hence, the pinnacle of the entire *Tractate Avot*!--, is being said to every Jew, in which their voluntarily accepting upon themselves a non-obligatory service to G-d is like that of a convert voluntarily converting.

From a Different Angel: We quoted earlier the law that G-d is, per se, obligated to pay a Jew for his . However, the foundation of paying one for work done for him comes from a dynamic in which the employee has no obligation to work for the employer, and does the work in order to get paid. However, concerning a slave (who is a bought possession) serving for his master, and so too, a son serving his father due to the obligation of, "Honor your father and mother," there is no concept of paying them for their service. Thus, being that a Jew's relationship with G-d's, "Be it like children, be it like servants," and more so, "Created to serve my Creator," how can we see that the Jew is owed payment for his service to G-d?!

The Answer: In the Torah's being given from G-d to Israel there are two dynamics: That of *The Giver* (G-d) and that of *The Receiver* (the Jew). Hence, we find in Torah these two dimensions: (i) On the one-hand, "The words of Torah do not receive impurity⁶, for (-Berochos 22a, extrapolating from Jeremiah 23:29), "My words are like fire⁷." (ii) On the other-hand (-Kedushin 32a), "A teacher that forgives his honor, his honor is forgiven," being that, "It is his (the teacher's; Jew's) Torah(-knowledge)." Hence, we see that part of the Torah went over to the ownership of the Jew who received the Torah, and part remains in the ownership of G-d. And just as it is so concerning the Torah and the Mitzvot, so too, it is concerning the obligation to study Torah and observe its mitzvot: From the perspective of *The Giver* the obligation of the Jew is as that of a son to his Father, and a servant to his Master. From the perspective of *The Receiver*, the obligation is connected with the Torah's obligation of receiving a reward for it⁸!

--(i) This difference within the obligation of Torah and Mitzvot express themselves within the two categories of the mitzvot that one must, "die and not transgress (Idol-worship, forbidden sexual relationships, and murder)," and all the other mitzvot of (Leviticus 18:5), "You shall observe My statutes and My ordinances, which a man shall do and live by them." For generally speaking, in the observance of mitzvot, the emphasis of the obligation is of *The Receiver*, "I was created to serve my Creator," and, "You shall live by them," while those specific three mitzvot, the obligation is primarily of *The Giver*, and hence, we must even die for them.--

Now that we understand that the reward for a mitzvah comes from *The Receiver's* dimension of the Torah, we can appreciate that the receiver's dimension expresses itself in that the reward is in the fashion of, "According to the pain," how much effort and pain *The Receiver* has. And this is the deepest connection of this teaching being (the last; pinnacle) of *Tractate Avot*, which is only of, "matters of piety," and "beyond the letter of the law," which as said, can only exist in *The Receiver's* dimension of the Torah. Hence, the opening of *Tractate Avot* is, "Moses received the Torah at Sinai," and not, "G-d gave the Torah to Moses at Sinai," emphasizing, *The Receiver's* dimension of the Torah. And this is the depths of, "According to the pain is the gain," the pain, being that we are talking of one voluntarily accepting upon himself an effort in Torah-study and mitzvot of his own volition, as that of a convert converting, hence, the "pain" is all his (*The Receiver's*). And this is yet another connection to the emphasis in the opening, "Moses received the Torah at Sinai," in which we were all as converts undergoing conversion!

And now, let us look at the first teaching of our Mishnah, "Ben Bag Bag would say, 'Delve in it and delve into it, for all is in it....'" Here too, the secret lay in the that the sage giving this teaching is specifically being called by the name that points out that he is a convert (See *Footnote #2*). Being that the convert is obligated in the Seven Noachide Laws, and therefore, his Torah-study concerning the laws and details of these are a lofty action, to the point of (-Baba Kama 38a), "A gentile who occupies himself with Torah-study as the High Priest,"

6. Hence, one who is experiencing an impurity (i.e. a nocturnal omission) may study Torah.

7. And fire can not become impure.

8. From one of two perspectives: (i) (-Maimonides Laws of Teshivah 10:2&5), "One who serves (G-d) out of love... This is a very high level which is not merited by every wise man... Therefore, when one teaches children, women, and most of the common people, one should teach them to serve out of fear and in order to receive a reward." (ii) G-d is obligated, per se, to pay the Jew for his service, even when the Jew is serving, "not in order to get a reward," just as with one who hires a worker.

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nevertheless, a gentile's Torah-study is not an concept of its own, but only of knowing how to observe the *Seven Noachide Laws*. While, for a Jew, and for the gentile once he/she converts, Torah-study becomes a concept of its own, void of just in order to, "Know what to do and what not to do." Hence, after he/she converts, there is a total essential transformation in their Torah-study, which is *infinitely* greater than their Torah-study as a gentile. Hence, "*Ben Bag Bag* says, 'Delve *in it* and delve *in it*, for all is *in it*...', " "it" as a concept *of its own*, Torah-study for the sake of Torah-study! And *Ben Bag Bag*, a *convert*, says this, for specifically a convert appreciates this, by experiencing the difference of his Torah-study as a gentile, and then as a Jew!

And this is the connection and the order between the two teachings of this Mishnah: "Delve in it... (Torah-study)," and, "According to the pain is the gain (mitzvot-observance)," both being specifically said by a convert, and in the order of (-Kiddushin 40b), "Great is Torah-study that brings to action (Mitzvot-observance)."

Deeper yet, the two names are not just connected with the teachings in that they are both names referring to a convert, but that each teaching is connected *specifically* with the name used for it⁹:

In the code name *Ben Hei Hei* --of the teaching, "According to the pain is the gain"--, it is more recognizable that he is a convert, as the *RaSHBaM* (-[Link](#)) states, "*Bag Bag* (which is only a numerical value of *Hei Hei* (Avraham and Sarah)), is more concealed and hidden." So too, with the two teachings, the "Delve in it and delve in it," is more *hidden* than the, "According to the pain is the gain." Meaning, that in the, "Delve in it," we are speaking of studying the Torah for itself, without the purpose of knowing what the bottom-line law is. Hence, the Hebrew word used in the Mishna is *hafoch*, which literally means, "opposites; turn it over," in which before and after the entire study process, we have no revealed bottom-line. And hence, we find commentaries (-Midrash Shmuel on this mishnah), "As we find... he (*Ben Bag Bag*) would extrapolate 49 reasons for (the law should be that it is) impure, and 49 reasons that it should be pure, even those these (49 reasons) were contrary to one to the other... therefore he said, 'Delve in it (turn it over) and delve in it (turn it over), and extrapolate opposite concepts one of the other, reasons to purify and reasons to render it impure, and (-Eiruvim 13b), 'These and these are the words of the Living G-d.'"

Hence, the, "Delve in it (turn it over) and delve in it (turn it over)," in which the novelty it speaks of, is Torah-study of the part of the Torah that is (Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh, Epistle 29), "Closed and not clearly expressed, nor revealed and known," carries the name, *Ben Bag Bag*, which is, "more concealed and hidden," while the teaching of, "According to the pain is the gain," which (i) the voluntary action, and (ii) the *pain* involved, is relatively revealed, carries the more revealed name of *Ben Hei Hei*.

6. Hence, one who is experiencing an impurity (i.e. a nocturnal omission) may study Torah.

7. And fire can not become impure.

8. From one of two perspectives: (i) (-Maimonides Laws of Teshivah 10:2&5), "One who serves (G-d) out of love... This is a very high level which is *not* merited by every wise man... Therefore, when one teaches children, women, and *most of the common people*, one should teach them to serve out of fear and *in order to receive a reward*." (ii) G-d is obligated, *per se*, to pay the Jew for his service, even when the Jew is serving, "not in order to get a reward," just as with one who hires a worker.

9. Especially according to the opinion (See Footnote #2) that they are both one and the same person!