

SICHA SUMMARY

PROJECT LIKKUTEI SICHOS | 5783 - YEAR OF HAKHEL



Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 17

Pirkei Avos, Perek 5, Sicha 2

The Mishnah:

Ben Bag Bag would say: "Delve and delve into it, for all is in it..." Ben Hei Hei would say, "according to the suffering is the reward." (Avos 5:21)

The Question:

At first glance, Ben Hei Hei seems to be saying that G-d will repay the strenuous effort expended by a person in their Divine service. But to pay one's worker is expected and legally mandated. It is not a practice that is "beyond the letter of the law," the kind of ethically advanced behavior we expect to see in Ethics of our Fathers. Even if a person provides a service that did not reap a profit for the owner or did not reach its objective - such as a doctor who failed to save a patient - still, the hirer must pay for the services rendered. Similarly, even if the Jew toiled to serve G-d but failed to complete the objective, he is still owed reward by the letter of the law.

What, then, is this statement doing in Ethics of our Fathers?

The Explanation:

There is a scenario where the owner need not pay the laborer: If the laborer voluntarily takes upon himself a certain task, and in the process causes damage to the owner's possession, the owner need not pay him for his effort.

Similarly, when a Jew commits to a lofty form of Divine service that is not mandated by halacha, but then fails to keep his vow and commitment, he has actually caused damage through his well-meaning effort. He expended strenuous effort — pledging to live up to a high standard — but caused damage by violating his oath. In this scenario, perhaps G-d will not reward him for his effort? This is the novelty of Ben Hei Hei's teaching: G-d will reward the person for their toil, even if there are damaging results.

This is most pronounced in the case of the convert. The convert has no obligations to fulfill all the mitzvos of the Torah. When he or she voluntarily assumes those obligations, the convert is going far beyond the expectations G-d had for them. Yet, in doing so, the convert opens himself up to

even more catastrophic failure, for if he sins he is now violating his obligations, while previously he had no such obligation.

This mishnah teaches, however, that G-d cherishes the efforts of the convert and rewards him or her for their dedication, no matter if there is some detriment.

This is why the author of this teaching is Ben Hei Hei, which alludes to his identity as a convert (the two letter “heis” in his name referring to the letter hei that was added both to Avraham and Sarah). It was a convert who could appreciate most that drastic commitment carries risk, and that G-d rewards that commitment nonetheless.

This also explains the continuity from the previous clause, “Ben Bag Bag would say: ‘Delve and delve into it, for all is in it...’” Ben Bag Bag was also a convert, and in his teaching he is highlighting the infinite value in Torah study for its own sake. As a non-Jew, his obligations of Torah study were limited to what was relevant to his responsibilities as a Noahide. Now that he has joined the Jewish people, he is able to study Torah for its own sake, to plumb its depths not just for the sake of practical knowledge.

Both statements, therefore, emerge out of the awareness of the convert.

A Question of Perspective:

The entire concept of Ethics of our Fathers, of there being an ethical standard beyond the Torah’s laws, exists only in our human perspective as recipients of the Torah. To us, there is mandated law, and a standard above the law we can strive toward. But from G-d’s perspective, humanity was only created to serve their Divine purpose, and so any behavior that enhances that service is seen as obligatory. This entire discussion of reward for toil in Divine service, then, exists only from our human perspective.

Therefore, the tractate opens with the statement, “Moshe received the Torah from Sinai,” to underscore that this is the tenor of the entire tractate — our human experience as receivers of Torah. This Mishnah, which is towards the end of the tractate, echoes this theme by focusing on reward for Divine service, a concept that only applies in our human reality as receivers of Torah.
