



Likkutei Sichos

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Swallowing Alive

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1.

PRAY FOR THE MONARCHY?

“Rabbi Chanina, deputy to the kohanim, would say: ‘Pray for the welfare of the monarchy, for were it not for fear of its authority, a man would swallow his friend alive.’”¹

We need to clarify:

- a. Our Sages teach:² “One who wishes to be pious should practice the teachings of *Avos*.” This means that tractate *Avos* consists of “words of piety” — conduct that is not required by the letter of the law but should be practiced due to “piety” — beyond the letter of the law.

[See, for example, the lesson in the first mishnah of this chapter:³ “Reflect upon three things, and you will not come to transgress.” The letter of the law requires only that a Jew not actually sin, and this mishnah **adds** a level of pious conduct, {challenging him} to reach a state of fear of sin (which is also a strategy and a directive) not to come (even close) to sin — by reflecting upon these three things, “**you will not come to transgress.**”]

But seemingly, the directive, “pray for the welfare of the monarchy” is unrelated to pious conduct, nor is the directive a cautionary one that goes beyond the letter of the law.

The reverse is true. Precluding “swallow[ing] his friend alive” is mandated by the most severe prohibitions in the Torah.

- b. What is the meaning of the nuanced wording, “a man would **swallow his friend alive?**” The simple and expected verb to use for such a warning would be “kill,” as in the idiom of Scripture, “There is no fear of

¹ *Avos* 3:2.

² *Bava Kamma* 30a.

³ {*Avos* 3:1.}

Hashem...and they will *kill* me”;⁴ or “rob” (if the intention here is to include robbery and financial loss) and so forth. Why is a new expression and **concept** used here — “swallow... alive?”

- c. All aspects of the world depend on the Jewish people,⁵ as it says,⁶ “He placed the world in their hearts.” From this dependency, it is clear that the dynamic of fear deterring a person from “swallowing” another “alive” also operates within the Jewish people. And in fact, when the Jewish people follow the directive {of praying for the government’s welfare}, the fear of authority (preventing someone from “swallowing” his “friend”) is strengthened throughout the world, as well.

This is puzzling: How can we possibly say this about Jews — that notwithstanding the numerous unambiguous Divine commands against such abhorrent behavior, without the fear of the monarchy, a Jew would “swallow” (not just anyone else, but even) his friend?! Especially, as mentioned, since we are referring to someone who (learns *Avos*, for he) “wishes to be pious” — does **such** a person need to be cautioned to “pray for the welfare of the monarchy” so that he should not “swallow” his “friend”?

2.

WHAT IS THE FLOW?

After the above teaching, **this** mishnah goes on to relate: “Rabbi Chanina, son of Tradyon would say: Two who sit and no words of Torah are exchanged between them, this is a company of scoffers... but two who sit and exchange words of Torah....”

⁴ *Bereishis* 20:11.

⁵ This is axiomatic, based on the teaching of our Sages (in Rashi and Ramban’s commentaries at the beginning of *Bereishis*, and elsewhere), “*Bereishis* — for the sake of the Jewish people, who are called “*reishis*” {beginning}.

⁶ *Koheles* 3:11.

On numerous occasions,⁷ we have noted that the division of mishnahs is precise. [In halachah, there is a practical difference how mishnahs are divided:⁸ When someone consecrates a woman “on condition that I know how to learn mishnah,” we can argue that it is sufficient (and necessary) that he understands **three** mishnahs.] Some say that it is (also) for this reason that the Alter Rebbe inserted the tractate of *Avos* in his Siddur⁹ — so that we would know how the mishnahs of this tractate are divided.

This is unclear: What is the connection between the teaching, “two who sit...” and the teaching, “pray for the welfare...,” for which reason both teachings were taught in the same mishnah? There seems to be no connection between these teachings.¹⁰

[On the contrary, logic dictates that this teaching is connected with, and should be juxtaposed to, the **next** mishnah, “Rabbi Shimon says: ‘Three who ate... and did not speak words of Torah,’” since this mishnah also highlights the virtue of a group discussing words of Torah (and the shortcoming of a group that does not).

3.

SELF-ABSORBED SWALLOWING

The explanation is as follows:

Tractate *Avos* consists of “words of piety,” as discussed. This means that its directives are aimed at a Jew whose Torah study and practice of mitzvos is faultless and executed carefully. All that such a person lacks is pious conduct.

⁷ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 4, p. 1175; et al.

⁸ It is possible that another ramification would be in the case of “one who is traveling and learning Torah, and who interrupts his study” ch. 3, (mishnah 7, in the Alter Rebbe’s version; see also *Midrash Shmuel*, loc cit., by R’ Moshe Almoshino).

⁹ See *Shaar HaKolel*, ch. 30, par. 3.

¹⁰ What’s more: the first segment discusses something relevant to all of society and is **essential** to civilization: “Were it not for fear of its authority, a man would swallow his friend alive.” The second segment discusses something relevant only to the Jewish people (the study of Torah), and at its highest level — “The Divine Presence abides.”

It is, therefore, obvious that there is no need to warn him not to rob another Jew and certainly not to imperil his life. (So it's clear why the mishnah does not say “a man would kill his friend,” or rob him.)

The specific point being made is that “(... a man would) *swallow* (his friend) alive”: He has no desire to threaten the life (or property) of another Jew; his desire is “merely” to “swallow him alive” — that the life (the existence and deeds) of another person should be “swallowed” within **his** own.¹¹

In fact, sometimes, the **virtues** he possesses — his perfection in his Torah study and his scrupulous mitzvah observance, and by contrast, the many shortcomings he sees in his fellow Jew, especially if this fellow is simple and not a Torah scholar, or possibly is lacking in the careful observance of mitzvos — lead him to the inescapable conclusion that the other person ought to be subservient to him. Moreover {he concludes that} it would be a merit and a favor for the other person to become “swallowed” within his existence.

4.

FEAR AS A SOLUTION

To dissuade a person of this attitude and approach, a logical explanation would not suffice. For on the contrary, rigorous logic — as we are not speaking about a person who is a fool, wicked and arrogant, G-d forbid — supports the legitimacy of such a claim: Ultimately, the person has indeed achieved greatness in Torah study and mitzvah observance, while his friend remains far from this level. This assessment is accurate and reliable, since it is made using the litmus test of Torah values and behavior,¹² and especially when the other fellow **relies** on him as a source of Torah knowledge and guidance in his mitzvah observance.

¹¹ See the explanation of the Maharal (in his work, *Derech Chaim*) here.

¹² See the teaching of our sages (*Sifri* [and Rashi] on *Devarim* 11:22; see also *Kesubos* 111b, and elsewhere): “And to cleave to Him’ (through) cleaving to Sages and their students.”

Therefore, even after hearing the whole argument why he ought to conduct himself differently (since it is based only on reason), he cannot change his opinion that his friend should be subservient and “swallowed.”

The way he can thoroughly negate this conclusion in **himself** is by fulfilling the guidance in this mishnah: “Pray for the welfare of the **monarchy**.” Doing so will awaken¹³ the fear of the King of kings, the Holy One, within him — and the experience of fear can stop him from lording himself over a fellow Jew.

The explanation of this: Our Sages teach that “the monarchy on earth reflects the monarchy in Heaven.”¹⁴ This means, as known,¹⁵ that monarchy on earth descends through the continuum of Creation from the Heavenly monarchy — a mortal king is rooted in his celestial “minister,” and that minister is rooted in a loftier level, and so it goes higher and higher, “for the Highest over the high waits”¹⁶ — up to the monarchy of “the King of kings, the Holy One.”

From the above, it is understood that when the “welfare of the monarchy” is in an obviously stable state, and the rulership of the “monarchy on earth” is robust, the real reason and cause for this success is that the *source* of the “monarchy on earth” is revealed, namely, the “monarchy in Heaven” — Hashem’s monarchy — and with great force.¹⁷

Therefore, when a Jew’s behavior emulates the “words of piety” (and consequently, the Jew perceives the truth of every matter), then in his prayer for “the welfare of the monarchy,” he can sense (and, in fact, he can palpably visualize)¹⁸ the sovereignty of Hashem. Consequently, the fear of the King of kings, the Holy One, is awakened within him through the “monarchy on earth.”

This fear of Hashem itself subdues a person’s feeling of superiority and curtails his grandstanding — since Hashem’s monarchy is such that “He is

¹³ See the beginning of *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch* (and Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*).

¹⁴ *Berachos* 58a; *Zohar*, vol. 1, 197a; vol. 3, 176b.

¹⁵ See *Zohar*, vol. 1, 197a; et al.

¹⁶ *Koheles* 5:7.

¹⁷ See *Toras Shalom*, p. 204.

¹⁸ See *Sefer HaMaamarim 5670*, p. 51; *Sefer HaMaamarim Kuntreisim*, vol. 1, 226b ff.

immutable, and treats small and great alike.”¹⁹ The greatest of the great is as utterly insignificant as the smallest of the small.

5.

PRAY FOR HELP

However, the evil inclination is a professional²⁰ in leading a person astray. Therefore, it is insufficient for the person, on his own, to meditate upon the idea of “the welfare of the monarchy” (that the “monarchy on earth” reflects the “monarchy in Heaven,” as discussed). For with the passage of time, this meditation may cease to have the desired effect, because of the tactics of the evil inclination. In the end, the “fear” may become weakened — and even become altogether neutralized.

For this reason, this directive emphasizes to “**pray** for the welfare of the monarchy:” He should not rely on meditating with his own abilities. Rather, he must turn to **prayer** — beseeching Hashem to **help** him, with His goodness and kindness, His undeserved kindness (as our Sages teach:²¹ “Were it not for Divine intervention, one would be powerless against the evil inclination”) in all the above — to the extent that through the “monarchy on earth,” he will recognize and sense the monarchy of Hashem.

6.

TWO TOGETHER

On this basis, we can appreciate the next teaching in the mishnah: “Two who sit and no words of Torah are exchanged between them...”: The ultimate proof that a person (who is on the level of pious conduct, having studied Torah properly and performing mitzvos scrupulously) has truly eliminated his feelings

¹⁹ “*V'chol maaminim*” prayer (High Holidays liturgy).

²⁰ See *Shabbos* 105b: “this is its craft...”

²¹ *Sukkah* 52b; *Kiddushin* 30b.

of superiority and haughtiness is ascertained when his Torah study is also carried out in a manner of “**two who sit...**”²²

The explanation: The essential identity of a person who studies Torah (who is being addressed in *Pirkei Avos*, as clarified above) is precisely his occupation with Torah study — which renders all his other concerns secondary. As the passage says,²³ “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom... the strong man... of his strength... the rich man... of his riches” (as wisdom, strength, and riches fluctuate with time). “But let him exult in this — that he understands and knows Me.” Torah is constant and eternal — “For it is our life and **the length of our days.**” This idea is likewise expressed by our Sages:²⁴ “I set aside all the worldly trades, and I teach my son only Torah... in his youth... in his old age, etc.”

Since Torah is the real essence of the person occupied in its study, the *bittul*²⁵ of his essence and being will be measured by the degree of *bittul* he feels while learning Torah.

This is the point of “**two who sit**”: As long as the one learning (senses that **he**) is the **one** who sits and studies Torah, that he is the scholar busy innovating Torah insights, then his study does not conform with the style of “two who sit” — not as two people who study **while sitting in equality**, on level seating, since he considers himself to be a “**Rosh Yeshiva**,” and the other, as one who sits before him as a pupil (and who knows in which row this pupil is seated?).²⁶

Only when a person is truly in a state of *bittul* will his learning with a friend be like “two who sit” — **as one**, without one learner feeling superior over the other.

²² This is the connection to Rabbi Chanina Ben Tradyon {author of this teaching} one of the Ten Martyrs killed by the Romans (according to all historical opinions). Gathering groups **in public**, he would sit and teach Torah , **and was burned together with a Sefer Torah** (*Avodah Zarah* 18a).

²³ *Yirmiyahu* 9:22-23.

²⁴ Mishnah and *beraisa* at the end of *Kiddushin*.

²⁵ {*Bittul* connotes self-nullification, humility, and the negation of ego.}

²⁶ See *Bava Kamma* 117a. {Rav Kahana was progressively moved back from the front row of students when he did not challenge the teachings of Rabbi Yochanan, giving the impression that he was unlearned.}

Then, the Divine Presence — the manifestation of Hashem’s monarchy²⁷ — rests there.

As known, when a Jew brings himself to this level of *bittul* (by “praying for the welfare of the monarchy,” as discussed) — the level of “two who sit” — “the Divine Presence rests”; Hashem’s monarchy (the Heavenly monarchy) is revealed as it truly is, not just as it is encloded in the monarchy on earth. In turn, this leads to {a person reaching} the consummate level of fear and *bittul* to Divinity, the way it is from Hashem’s perspective.²⁸

7.

TWO TOGETHER

In light of all of the above, we can also appreciate the wording, and its order, in the verse cited by this mishnah: “Then the G-d-fearing people spoke to one another. Hashem listened and heard, and a scroll of remembrance was written at His command concerning those who fear G-d and meditate on His Name.”²⁹

For if we are discussing “two who sit and exchange words of **Torah**,” then why would we refer to them as “G-d-**fearing** people” (and why is it relevant to refer to them here using this term)?

{The answer:} The fact that they “**exchange** words of Torah” leads to “the Divine Presence rests among them” because their way of “speaking to one another” is in a manner of “G-d-**fearing** people”: They have an open, visible, and palpable fear of the King of kings, the Holy One (due to them “praying for the welfare of the monarch”). And so their “speaking” in Torah is due to their status as “G-d-fearing people” who “spoke to one another.” (Such G-d-fearing people represent the antithesis of someone who “would swallow his friend

²⁷ See *Tanya*, ch. 52.

²⁸ See *Siddur Im Dach*, the gloss to *Tikkun Chatzos*.

²⁹ *Malachi* 3:16.

alive.”) Therefore, their Torah study leads them to “**meditate on His Name,**” including their recognition also that “the entire Torah” consists of “the Names of Hashem.”³⁰

—From a *sichah* delivered on Shabbos *parshas Shelach*, 5735 (1975)

³⁰ Ramban’s Introduction to his Commentary on the Torah, based on *Zohar*, vol. 2, 87a; *Likkutei Torah*, beg. of “*Metzora*.”