



## **Sicha Summary**

Chelek 17 | Pirkei Avos | Perek 2

### **The Mishnah:**

Rabbi Shimon says: Be meticulous in reciting the *Shema* and with prayer. When you pray, do not make your prayers a routine [i.e., perfunctory] act, but [a plea for] mercy and supplication before G-d, as it says, “For He is benevolent and merciful, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, and relenting of the evil decree” (*Yoel 2:13*). And do not consider yourself wicked in your self-estimation. (*Avos 2:13*)

### **The Questions:**

- a) *Pirkei Avos* discusses “matters of piety”; it is a manual for those who desire to go beyond the letter of the law. (*Bava Kama 30a*) But Rabbi Shimon’s first two statements — to be meticulous and intentional when reciting *Shema* and with prayer — are legal requirements. Why are they included in *Pirkei Avos*?
- b) What is the thematic relevance of the third clause to the preceding two clauses?

### **The Explanation:**

Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel, the author of this Mishnah, was one of a rare category of sages whose “occupation” was Torah study. These sages were exclusively dedicated to Torah, unlike other sages who balanced work and study. The most eminent of these sages was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai himself declared that the law allows these unique individuals to study without interruption, even for time-bound *mitzvos* such as the recitation of the *Shema* and prayer. (*Jerusalem Talmud, Brachos 1:2*) When a regular scholar is studying, he must interrupt his

studies when the time for reciting the *Shema* arrives. But one “whose Torah is his occupation” need not interrupt.

Therefore, Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel had to exhort his students to not follow his example, because he was an exception to the rule. They, however, had to “be meticulous with the reading of the *Shema* and with prayer.”

Rabbi Shimon then addresses his colleagues who, like him, were dedicated to Torah study as their occupation and were exempt from prayer at the regularly mandated times. Even though they prayed only periodically, they were not to pray with haste so as to return to their studies, but rather, “When you pray... [make your prayers an a plea for] mercy and supplication before G-d.”

Once we have established that Rabbi Shimon taught the first two clauses from his personal perspective — as one whose occupation was Torah study — we can understand the thematic continuity of the third clause. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai claimed that as long as he was alive, he protected the entire world from G-d’s judgment. (*Sukkah* 45b) Meaning, even those who deserved punishment were spared because of Rabbi Shimon’s merit. Because Rabbi Shimon ben Nessanel attained similar spiritual heights, he, too, could protect the people from punishment due to his immense merit. It was possible for a person who lived in his generation to remain entrenched in negative behavior while going unpunished. For such a person, there would be little incentive to repent. Therefore Rabbi Shimon taught, “And do not consider yourself to be wicked in your self-estimation” — you have the ability to repent, and you don’t need fear of punishment to repent; you can repent from a place of prosperity, rest, and serenity.