



Likkutei Sichos

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Only Torah

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1.

THREE QUESTIONS ON A *MISHNAH*

{The *mishnah* says:}¹

Rabbi Shimon says: Be meticulous in reciting the *Shema*² and in prayer.³ When you pray, do not make your prayer a routine act, but rather a plea for mercy and supplication to Hashem.... Do not consider yourself wicked.

We need to clarify:

- a) Why does tractate *Avos* (which teaches matters of piety)⁴ need to exhort us to be meticulous in performing a positive, biblical commandment (or even a positive, rabbinic commandment)?⁵ And certainly {no such command should be necessary} regarding **these** two *mitzvos* — reciting the *Shema* and prayer — which are fundamental and overarching⁶ *mitzvos* of divine service?
- b) Likewise, regarding the second clause: “When you pray, do not make your prayer a routine act, but rather a plea for mercy and supplication to Hashem”: What novelty does this lesson introduce over and above the **explicit** *mishnah* in tractate *Berachos*?⁷ “If a person makes his prayers routine, then his prayer is not a supplication”?

¹ *Avos* 2:13.

² {*Shema* consists of three Torah passages: *Devarim* 6:4-9, *Devarim* 11:13-21, and *Bamidbar* 15:37-41. It is a biblical precept to recite the *Shema* twice daily — morning and night.}

³ {Prayer here refers to the *Amidah*, also known as the *Shemoneh Esrei*. It is recited during each of the prayer services.}

⁴ *Bava Kama* 30a.

⁵ According to those authorities who maintain that the *mitzvah* of prayer is rabbinic (*Ramban* in his gloss on *Sefer Hamitzvos*, positive *mitzvah* 5; this is the opinion of the majority of *halachic* authorities. See *Magen Avraham*, on *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 106, sub-par. 2; and see *Likkutei Torah*, “*Balak*,” 70c ff.). However, see *Tanya*, ch. 53; letter of the *Alter Rebbe* to Harav Alexander of Shklov (printed in *Beis Rebbe*, vol. 1, 20a (*Iggros Kodesh* of the *Alter Rebbe* (Kehot, publ., 5780) p. 32 ff)); et al.

⁶ Reciting the *Shema* is the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven (*Berachos* 2:2, 20b; et al.). Prayer is the service of the heart (beg. of tractate *Taanis*) and “prayer is {a request for} mercy” (*Berachos*, *ibid.*); et al. See the commentaries on this *Mishnah*.

⁷ 4:4.

- c) The third teaching says, “Do not consider yourself wicked.” (Such a {dismal} self-appraisal might lead a person to give up hope of ever repenting, and so he might be more inclined to sinning again). What is the connection between this third teaching and the two preceding ones regarding the need to be meticulous in reciting the *Shema* and prayer?

2.

TORAH STUDY WAS HIS SOLE VOCATION

The gist of the explanation:

These three lessons are connected by the fact that their **author** — Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel — was a person whose vocation was Torah study, similar to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai⁸ (as will be elucidated in Section 8).

And a person whose vocation is Torah study does not interrupt his study to recite the *Shema*. As Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says in the *Jerusalem Talmud*:⁹ “**People, similar to us**, who are engaged in Torah study, do not interrupt even to recite the *Shema*.” Such a person certainly does not interrupt for prayer, following the ruling⁶ that a person whose vocation is Torah study “does not interrupt for prayer.”

Therefore, since he **did not** interrupt studying Torah for the recitation of the *Shema* and prayer, he needed to ensure that his students¹⁰ would not become relaxed in their observance of the *Shema* and prayer as a result of witnessing his conduct.

Subsequently, he offers a second teaching for his colleagues, whose vocation was (also) Torah study [however {their vocation in Torah study was} not on **his** level; therefore, they **did** need to interrupt studying Torah for the

⁸ *Shabbos* 11a; *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch* (and the Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*) “*Orach Chaim*,” end of sec. 106; Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Hilchos Talmud Torah*,” ch. 4, par. 4-5.

⁹ *Berachos* 1:2; *Shabbos* 1:2.

¹⁰ Who were not in the category of one whose Torah study is his sole vocation.

recitation of the *Shema*¹¹ (like the colleagues of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, as will be explained in Section 3)]: “When you pray, do not make your prayer a routine act, but rather a plea for mercy and supplication....” It is true that they don’t “interrupt for prayer,” but “**when you pray**” — at those times when they would pray, for as known, people whose vocation is Torah study still pray from time to time¹² — it must not be “routine” (that while praying he thinks, “When can I be done with it?”¹³ so that he can return to his Torah study), but it must be {a plea for} “mercy and supplication.”

Similarly, the third teaching — “Do not consider yourself wicked” — is also connected to the greatness of Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel (whose vocation was Torah study), as will be explained in Section 10.

3.

RABBI SHIMON AND HIS COLLEAGUES

Seemingly, a difficulty can be raised regarding the above explanation on the teaching, “Be meticulous in reciting the *Shema*”: The opinion of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai that “we do not interrupt even for the recitation of the *Shema*” is recorded only in the *Jerusalem Talmud*. However, according to the *Babylonian Talmud*⁶ (and this is also the *halachah*),⁶ even those “whose vocation is Torah study” — and even, “for example, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and his colleagues” — “must interrupt for the recitation of the *Shema*”!

The explanation: Based on the principle¹⁴ that we must attempt to harmonize the *Jerusalem Talmud* and the *Babylonian Talmud* as much as possible (even with a “slightly forced” explanation), it is reasonable to say that the *Jerusalem* and the *Babylonian Talmud* do not disagree about this {law}.

¹¹ {According to some, since it is a biblical obligation. However, they didn’t interrupt for prayer, since liturgical prayer is only a rabbinical obligation. However, the Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch* (referenced in footnote 8) uses different reasoning.}

¹² See the end of tractate *Rosh Hashanah* {35a}; see *Rabbeinu Yonah* on *Rif, Berachos* (8a), that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai would pray once a year; and see (the *Chida*’s) *Nitzotzai Oros* on *Zohar*, vol. 2, 188a.

¹³ Rashi, *Bartenura*, and others on the *mishnah* here, based on *Berachos* 29b.

¹⁴ *Yad Malachi*, “*Klalei Shnei HaTalmudim*,” *Sec. 10*, and the sources cited there.

Rather, it is a difference between Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai himself and “his colleagues”:

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai maintains that a person {whose vocation is Torah study} does not need to interrupt his Torah study for the recitation of the *Shema* because “this (Torah study) constitutes study, and that (reciting the *Shema*) constitutes study, and we do not push aside one study for another study.”¹⁵ And (as the *Jerusalem Talmud* continues according to one of the answers), “Since Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was exceedingly sharp in his Torah study, it (the recitation of the *Shema*) wasn’t more precious (to him) than Torah study.”

Accordingly, we can say that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai alone wouldn’t interrupt for the recitation of the *Shema* (based on the nuanced wording, “Since **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai** was exceedingly sharp in his Torah study... it wasn’t more precious **to him**...”). By contrast, his colleagues would interrupt for the recitation of the *Shema*.

Similarly, regarding Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai’s status, we can suggest that there was a difference between his status before the time he spent in the cave and his status after he left¹⁶ — that the fact that he would not interrupt for the recitation of the *Shema* only began after he left the cave, when he had reached the highest degree of “incisiveness” and “sharpness” in his Torah study, as the Talmud relates in tractate *Shabbos*.¹⁷

We can suggest that Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel was comparable to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (his state after he left the cave), as will be explained, and thus he would not interrupt for the recitation of the *Shema*.

¹⁵ *Jerusalem Talmud, Berachos* and *Shabbos* 1:2.

¹⁶ {[Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai](#) and his son, fleeing from the Romans, hid in a cave for 13 years, where they studied and prayed until they became the holiest sages of their day.}

Based on the above, we can explain the wording in the *Babylonian Talmud* {mentioned in the beginning of this section} “for example, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and his colleagues” {to be referring to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai} *prior* to his leaving the cave.

¹⁷ 33b.

4.

RABBI SHIMON

This fact that Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel’s vocation was Torah study, like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai — and that this is the central theme of the three teachings of the *mishnah* — is alluded to in the fact that the redactor of the *Mishnah* does not mention here the father’s name of this statement’s author (as customary), Rabbi Shimon *ben Nesanel*, as his full name. Instead, he only refers to him as Rabbi Shimon, **without a qualifier**; and the name Rabbi Shimon without a qualifier, however, usually refers to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.¹⁸

Understood simply, there is no need for the *mishnah* to spell this out {that Rabbi Shimon mentioned here refers to Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel}. For **this** *mishnah* comes as a continuation of the previous *mishnayos* of the chapter, where the “five students” of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai, including Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel, are listed.¹⁹ And the *mishnah* continues, “**they** said three things”²⁰ (each of the students said three things), from which it is self-understood that here, when it states, “Rabbi Shimon says,” the *mishnah* refers here to Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel.

Nevertheless, since everything in Torah is precise [and especially since these teachings of Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel are in a separate *mishnah*²¹ (appearing several *mishnayos* after the *mishnah* in which his name and father’s name are noted),²² and there is, therefore, room for a person who learns just **this** *mishnah* to mistakenly think that the author is Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai], it is clear that what is important in understanding the deeper reason behind the lessons of Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel, is (not that he is Rabbi Shimon **ben Nesanel**, but) that he is Rabbi Shimon (**without specification**) — sharing the same persona²³ as Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

¹⁸ Rashi on *Shavuos* 2b, s.v. “*mishmo*”; preface to the Rambam’s “Commentary on *Mishnah*,” s.v. “*haperek hashishi*”; et al.

¹⁹ *Mishnah* 8 (in the Alter Rebbe’s version — *mishnah* 9).

²⁰ *Mishnah* 10.

²¹ {*Mishnah* 13.}

²² {*Mishnah* 9.}

²³ {In the succinct original, “*ein inyan.*”}

5.

UNITED WITH TORAH

The explanation: The deeper reason that the name “Rabbi Shimon,” unqualified, refers to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is that the name “Shimon,” שמעון, is etymologically related to the word for *hearing* {“שמעיה”},²⁴ which essentially connotes understanding and comprehension. A Jew whose vocation is Torah study is united with Torah to the point that it becomes his entire “vocation.” This is only possible, though, only when his intellectual **understanding** in Torah is optimal. Then, he merges with the Torah (in the words of *Tanya*)²⁵ with “a most wonderful unity; there is no unity like it... that they should actually become one and united from every side and angle.”

Accordingly, the same also holds true with all those who share the name *Shimon*. As known,²⁶ the name of a Jew, and especially one of the *Tannaim*,²⁷ etc., expresses the substance and core of the person’s divine service. Thus, all those who share this name *Shimon* possess (potentially, at least) a “semblance” of Rabbi **Shimon, without a qualifier** — Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (whose vocation was Torah).

This is why the *mishnah* specifically says *Rabbi Shimon* here, without specifying which Rabbi Shimon, since Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel taught these lessons owing to him possessing the same virtue of *the* Rabbi Shimon, without a qualifier, viz., Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, whose vocation was Torah study.

²⁴ *Bereishis* 29:33. See *Likkutei Levi Yitzchak*, “*Igros*” (p. 339) regarding **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai**.

²⁵ Ch. 5.

²⁶ See *Or Torah* of the *Maggid*, end of *parshas Bereishis*; *Likkutei Torah*, “*Behar*,” 41c.

²⁷ {A title given to the authors of the *Mishnah*.}

6.

AN ABODE FOR THE *SHECHINAH*

Simply understood, the parameters of one “whose vocation is Torah study”: (a) It is related to time — he studies Torah without interruption, not stopping for anything;²⁸ and, (b) it applies (also) to the continuous study of the revealed Torah.²⁹ As we find regarding Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai himself — even while he was living in the cave, his primary vocation was in “the study of *Mishnah*” (and not in “the work of *Zohar* and the *Tikkunim*”).³⁰

However, *Zohar* writes³¹ that those “whose vocation is Torah study” refers to those individuals regarding whom “the *Shechinah*³² doesn’t ever leave them all of their days,” and who serve as “an abode for the *Shechinah*.” From this it is understood that:

- (a) The advantage of one whose vocation is Torah study is in the **quality** of his connection to Torah: His entire being is permeated with Torah, and his identity is only that he is an “abode for the *Shechinah*”;
- (b) This connection is not only to the wisdom of Torah, but (primarily) to the **Giver** of the Torah — “the *Shechinah*.” **Such** study is specifically connected to the deeper parts of Torah, as *Tikkunei Zohar*³³ says explicitly that (specifically) “masters of ***Kabbalah***... create an abode for it (the *Shechinah*).”

This is also the basis for the *Chassidic*³⁴ explanation that one whose vocation is Torah means that a person engages in his Torah study in the manner expressed by the verse, “and I placed My words into your mouth”³⁵ — the words

²⁸ See *Magen Avraham* on *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*” 106:4; Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, sec. 106, par. 4; sec. 90, par. 17; *Tanya*, end of ch. 23; et al.

²⁹ See Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, end of ch. 106; “*Hilchos Talmud Torah*,” ch. 4, par. 4-5.

³⁰ *Iggeres Hakodesh*, ch. 26 (143a).

³¹ *Zohar*, vol. 3, 238b.

³² {The Divine Presence.}

³³ Preface (p. 1b).

³⁴ *Torah Or*, 38d; *Or HaTorah*, “*Vayikra*,” p. 256; *Sefer HaMaamarim 5627*, p. 271 ff.; et al.

³⁵ *Yeshayahu* 51:16.

of Torah articulated by the person studying are **Divine**: He repeats the words of Torah that Hashem utters, so to speak. This form of Torah study comes a result of the person's total *bittul*³⁶ to the Giver of the Torah, to the extent that the person constitutes "an abode for the *Shechinah*."

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Accordingly, it is understood that Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's vocation of Torah study was tied to his mastery of *Kabbalah*. Indeed, it was he who transmitted the deeper parts of Torah to the other *Tannaim*³⁷ (and therefore, in pursuing his vocation of Torah study, was himself on the loftiest level).

7.

SUBMISSION TO HASHEM

On this basis, we can better appreciate why it was Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai specifically who would not interrupt for the recitation of the *Shema*:

In order for Torah study to be such that it can be said about it, "and I placed My words into your mouth," as explained above, a person must first achieve a state of complete *bittul* to G-dliness. This is accomplished through the recitation of the *Shema*, the substance of which is self-sacrifice.³⁸

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, however — especially after he was in the cave — was **constantly** in a state of complete *bittul* to G-dliness, as he said,³⁹ "I am just a sign {of G-d}." He had no personal existence; his whole being was devoted only to serving as a "sign" of G-dliness. He was the consummate "abode for the *Shechinah*," and thus, regarding him, it says:⁴⁰ "Who is the face of the Master, Hashem? It is Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai."

³⁶ {*Bittul* connotes self-nullification, humility, and the negation of ego.}

³⁷ See *Siddur Im Dach*, 304b; *Sefer Hamaamarim* 5631, *Maamer* of *Lag B'omer*, and the following *maamer*.

³⁸ Or *HaTorah*, "Vayikra," beg, of p. 256; *Sefer HaMaamarim* 5627, p. 271 ff.

³⁹ *Zohar*, vol. 1, 225a.

⁴⁰ *Zohar*, vol. 2, 38a; see the citations in *Nitzotzai Zohar* (Margolios, ed.) there.

For this reason, he did not need to recite the *Shema* first in order that his Torah study to be of the quality of one “whose vocation is Torah study.”

8.

WITH HIS OWN STRENGTH

The *Talmud*⁴¹ relates that Rabbi Elazar ben Arach asked Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai for permission to repeat to him “one thing that you taught me” regarding the Divine Chariot.⁴² After “Rabbi Elazar ben Arach opened {his discourse} and expounded,” it says that “fire descended from Heaven....” The *Talmud* goes on to say that when Rabbi Yose the *Kohen* and Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel⁴³ heard about this {episode} — “they, too,⁴⁴ opened {their exploration of the} the Divine Chariot. They said {about this episode} that it was on a summer day when the earth shook and a rainbow appeared in the clouds, and a Heavenly voice proclaimed”

From here, we see that Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel was an expert⁴⁵ *Kabbalist* to the extent that when he expounded on the Divine Chariot, he **caused** that “the **earth** trembled... and a Heavenly voice **proclaimed...**” — he drew the *Shechinah* below. From this description, he was clearly “an abode for the *Shechinah*.”

From among the *Tannaim* mentioned above, Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel possessed a special virtue (and thus, he specifically is like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai — he was called **Shimon** — as explained above in Section 3):

Rabbi Elazar ben Arach only **repeated** something that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai had taught him (as it says, “you taught me”), but nothing that he had innovated himself. Among Rabbi Yose the *Kohen* and Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel

⁴¹ *Chagigah* 14b; *Yerushalmi Chagigah* (2:1).

⁴² {The Divine Chariot refers narrowly to the description of angels and the Divine Throne as described in the prophecies of *Yechezkel* (1:1ff). More broadly, it refers to the discussion of mystical concepts.}

⁴³ According to the *Jerusalem Talmud*. In the *Babylonian Talmud*, it is Rabbi Yehoshua.

⁴⁴ *Yerushalmi*, loc cit.

⁴⁵ {In the original Aramaic, “*maarei*.”}

— who expounded on the Divine Chariot, such that they “**opened,**” **with their own strength**⁴⁶ (and especially according to the known explanation⁴⁷ of {the phrase} “Rabbi Shimon *opened*” and similar wording, meaning, he opened a **new** idea and channel, etc.) — Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel possessed an advantage over Rabbi Yose the *Kohen*:

The advantage of *Kehunah*, priesthood (the **readiness** to stand and serve before Hashem) — Rabbi Yose the *Kohen* — is bequeathed as an inheritance. Therefore, even when he “opened,” to begin expounding the subject of the Divine Chariot, the “opening” wasn’t completely accomplished **with his own strength**;

The perfect proof that a person is “an abode for the *Shechinah*” — that his entire being is one with “the *Shechinah*” — is when the opening of the subject of the *Shechinah* — thereby, **causing** the earth to tremble — is entirely a result of his own strength. We only find this was the case with Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel, who was not called “the *Kohen*” (he wasn’t a *kohen*), yet he, nevertheless, initiated exposition on the {subject of the} Divine Chariot in the manner discussed above.

9.

THE MEANING OF A RAINBOW

Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel’s advantage (over Rabbi Elazar ben Arach), as expressed in his exposition on the {subject of the} Divine Chariot is also accentuated by the fact that only when he began to expound, “the earth shook **and a rainbow appeared in the clouds.**” (This was miraculous, as it was a summer day when {the appearance of} clouds is unusual {in Israel}).⁴⁸ This calls for clarification:

⁴⁶ {I.e., they discussed an idea that they themselves had innovated.}

Although {as mentioned above} the term “he opened” is also used regarding Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, nevertheless, {in his case, it cannot mean that he innovated this idea, for} it explicitly states {that he merely repeated something} “that you taught me.”

⁴⁷ *Maamerim* 5678, s.v. “*Ki kaasher.*”

⁴⁸ Rashi on *Chagigah*, *ibid.*; *Korban Ha’edah* on *Yerushalmi*, *ibid.*

The *Talmud*⁴⁹ relates that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi was so great that a rainbow was **not** seen in his lifetime (since a rainbow is a safeguard and a sign that the world will not be destroyed, “but if the generation has a wholly righteous individual, then there is no need for a sign”).⁵⁰ As such, what was so special about a rainbow’s **appearance** in the clouds as a result of Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel's exposition of the Divine Chariot?

The explanation — a rainbow has two features:

{1.} (a) It is a covenantal sign that “there will not be another flood”;⁵¹ and,

{2.} (b) It says that a rainbow, קשת, is “analogous, מוקש, to Me”⁵² (it is compared to Hashem). Therefore, by law,⁵³ it is forbidden to gaze at a rainbow (for {by doing so, a person shows that} “he shows disregard for the honor of his Maker”).⁵⁴ And primarily, (c) it says **explicitly** in the description of the Divine Chariot (which we are discussing):⁵⁵ “Like the appearance of the rainbow which is in the cloud... such was the appearance... that was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Hashem.” It is clear that this is a sublime **manifestation** of the *Shechinah* which brings with it {the physical phenomenon of} a “rainbow {appearing} in the cloud.”

The first feature of a rainbow is expressed only when the rainbow is seen on a cloudy day, since the clouds signal that it is a day of harsh judgment.⁵⁶

However, the appearance of clouds (and a rainbow) after expounding on the subject of the Divine Chariot is (not a sign shown to counteract “judgment,” but) only a sign of a lofty revelation of the Divine Presence.

⁴⁹ *Kesuvos* 77b.

⁵⁰ Rashi on *Kesuvos* ibid.

⁵¹ *Bereishis* 9:9ff.

⁵² *Bereishis Rabbah* 35:3.

⁵³ *Chagigah* 16a; *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Orach Chaim*,” sec. 229, par. 1.

⁵⁴ *Chagigah*, ibid. And see *Zohar*, vol. 1, 71b; vol. 2, 66b; vol. 3, 84a; et al.

⁵⁵ *Yechezkel* 1:28.

⁵⁶ See *Brachos* 32b.

In light of the above explanation, we can now better appreciate how Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel exemplified someone whose “vocation is Torah study” in a manner that made him into an “abode for the *Shechinah*.”

10.

AN IMPETUS TO REPENT

One of the things illustrating the lofty level of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai is his declaration:⁵⁷ “I can exempt the entire world from judgment.” And since the character and greatness of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was expressed in the fact that he was a person whose vocation was Torah study, it is understood that the fact that he could exempt the entire world from judgment is linked to his vocation of Torah study.

We have already spoken in the past at length⁵⁸ about the {above} statement of Rabbi Shimon, “I can exempt the entire world from judgment,” and clarified that it doesn't mean that he would have exempted them from judgment by influencing his generation and inspiring them **to repent**.⁵⁹ Rather, {it means that} **his** merit was so great that despite the sins of his generation, he “**bears** all of their sins and **exempts them** from judgment.”⁶⁰

Since Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel had the virtue of being occupied solely with Torah study, similar to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, as explained above, his impact on the world was **similar** to the one made by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai: “I can exempt the entire world from {receiving a terrible Divine} judgment.”

On this basis, we can also explain how the third teaching of the *mishnah* — “Do not consider yourself wicked” — fits in with the previous two {teachings}:

⁵⁷ *Sukkah* 45b.

⁵⁸ *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 4, p. 1235 ff (and fn. 40, 43); see also *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 20, p. 152.

⁵⁹ If that were the case, a strong question could be raised: Why didn't he **actually** do so, rather than just saying, “I can”?

⁶⁰ Rashi on *Sukkah*, *ibid*.

Precisely because Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel was someone whose vocation was Torah study, like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (as expressed in the first two teachings of the *mishnah*), and as a result, he safeguarded his generation and bore “all of their sins” — it was necessary to caution {Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel’s generation}: “Do not consider yourself wicked”:

Generally, when a person considers himself wicked (and so is not inclined to repent on his own), he is afflicted with punishment and suffering, in consonance with what it says, “poverty is good for the Jewish people.” This hardship is intended to break his ego and spur him to repent.

This was not so in the generation of Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel, for his merit protected and guarded them against punishment.

Therefore, it was especially crucial to caution {Rabbi Shimon ben Nesanel’s generation}: “Do not consider yourself wicked.” Know that everyone can, must, and (in the end, no Jew will be left behind — everyone) will repent. Moreover, we do not need punishment, etc. {to motivate us to mend our ways}. Rather, we can return to Hashem while living lives with prosperity, rest, and serenity.

— From talks delivered on Shabbos *parshas Beha’aloscha, Shelach, and Balak*, 5728 (1968)