

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 34

Va'eschanan, Sicha 1

The Mishnah:

The Mishnah teaches: "Whoever forgets one teaching from his learning, the verse considers it as if he is liable for his life, as it says, "But beware and watch yourself very well, [lest you forget the things that your eyes saw]" (Devarim 4:9) (Avos 3:8)

The Question:

The Gemara relates that Reb Zeira fasted 100 times in order to forget the Talmud Bavli. (Bava Metzia 85a) He then went up to the Land of Israel to study the Talmud Yerushalmi.

From the simple language, it appears that Reb Zeira intended to forget the entire Talmud Bavli, not just its dialectical discussion, but even the laws themselves. Furthermore, Talmud study is mandated to be one third of a Torah scholar's curriculum.

How could Reb Zeira commit this sin of forgetting the Talmud Bavli, and how could

he omit Talmud study altogether during this period?

The Explanation:

The Bartenura and Rebbeinu Yona maintain that the reason for this prohibition is practical — if a person forgets their studies, they will eventually make a mistake in practical halacha. The Alter Rebbe in his Shulchan Aruch, however, omits this explanation. This implies that he maintains that the prohibition is in the very fact that a person allows themselves to forget their studies, not in any action that he takes to cause the forgetfulness, nor in any practical result of the forgetfulness.

[This lends insight into another detail of this prohibition. The Mishnah continues to say that one may have thought that one is still liable if he forgets under duress or against his will, yet the verse exempts this condition with the exclusionary word, "but." Why would we require a special exemption from the verse for a case of unwilling forgetfulness? The general principal of halacha is that one is never responsible or liable for unwilling transgressions! Perhaps,

however, that applies to active prohibitions. When an action is done unwillingly, we do not consider that action as transgressive. But when one exists in a certain state, that state is still sinful, even if he cannot be punished for it. Therefore, we may have assumed that if one forgets his studies against his will, he is not punished, yet he is still considered to have committed the sin of being in a state of forgetfulness.]

Based on this omission, it may be that the Alter Rebbe defines the prohibition similarly to the Smag, who writes that through forgetfulness “one is separated from the Torah.” Regardless of practical outcomes of the forgetfulness, simply forgetting the material implies that there is a separation between the person and their Torah. This is also why the consequence is so drastic, “as

if he is liable for his life.” Torah is the very life of a person, if they separate themselves from it, it is as if they are separated from life itself.

But we now understand that Reb Zeira’s actions do not meet the standards of this prohibition. His behavior was not a “separation” from the Torah. Rather, it was necessary in order for him to ascend in his Torah study, he was attached to Torah throughout his period of “forgetfulness.” Furthermore, he was actually transitioning to a mode of study that would aid in recollection. The Talmud Yerushalmi’s dialectic is simpler and more direct than the Bavli, and therefore lends itself to easier recollection. Thus, Reb Zeira was trying to acclimate himself to a Torah study that would enhance his ability to recall his learning.
