



# Likkutei Sichos

Volume 17 | Pirkei Avos | Chapter 1

Shammai

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## 1.

SHAMMAI SAID

“Shammai says: Make your Torah{study} primary, קבֵּעַ; say little and do much; and receive every person with a cheerful countenance.”<sup>1</sup>

The simple explanation of these three clauses (as the commentators explain):<sup>2</sup> “*Make your Torah study primary* — Your principal occupation, day and night, should be Torah study. When you tire from learning, you should work. Your work, however, should not be your principal occupation.” As our Rabbis teach,<sup>3</sup> “The earlier generations made their Torah study their principal pursuit; and their work, tangential.” “*Say little and do much*” — Say little and do more. Meaning, do more than you say. “As we find regarding Avraham, he first said, ‘I will fetch a morsel of bread,’<sup>4</sup> but in the end, took a calf, tender and good.”<sup>5</sup> “*And receive every person with a cheerful countenance* — When you welcome guests into your home, do not attend to them heavy-heartedly.”

This is surprising: Tractate *Avos* discusses (only) matters of piety, as our Rabbis say,<sup>6</sup> “One who wants to be pious... should fulfill the dictates of *Avos*.” In other words, according to the law and *halachah*,<sup>7</sup> a Jewish person is not obligated to perform these practices; rather, he should perform them as pious conduct, beyond the letter of the law. But the three above-mentioned types of behavior, seemingly, do not belong in the category of “pious conduct.” The **obligation** to perform them is self-understood; alternatively, this obligation can be understood and derived from other Torah commandments and from *halachah*.

a) “Make your Torah study primary.” We find the same wording used in the **obligations** mandated by our Rabbis, and in fact, this is quoted **as**

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<sup>1</sup> *Pirkei Avos* ch. 1, *mishnah* 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Bartenura*; see Rashi, *Rambam*, *Rabbeinu Yonah*, and *Meiri*.

<sup>3</sup> *Berachos* 35b.

<sup>4</sup> *Bereishis* 18:5.

<sup>5</sup> *Bereishis* 18:7.

<sup>6</sup> *Bava Kamma* 30a.

<sup>7</sup> {Jewish law.}

**halachah:**<sup>8</sup> “Make your Torah study primary, and your work makeshift.” (Thus, what is the novelty here in terms of pious conduct?) Furthermore, we find quite a few verses, and statements of our Rabbis, which describe the constant **obligation** to study and involve oneself in Torah. [As the beginning of this very chapter in *Avos* says, “The world stands on three things: On Torah....”<sup>9</sup> Since Torah is one of the three “pillars” upon which the existence of the world stands, therefore, it is also understood that a person’s Torah study must be primary.]

b) “Say little” — this is an explicit commandment of the Torah, “He must not break his word.”<sup>10</sup> This commandment obligates a person to “Say little,” meaning, a person must be careful with his speech and only say things that he is absolutely **certain** he can carry out, so not to transgress the prohibition that “he must not break his word.” Additionally, the conclusion of this clause, “do much,” on the face of it, contains no special novelty regarding pious conduct. If a Jew can perform many *mitzvos* and good deeds, certainly he must do so!

c) The same applies to the conclusion of the statement: “and receive every person with a cheerful countenance.” Ostensibly, this demeanor is expected owing to the directive of doing what is good and upright<sup>11</sup> — simple politeness and courtesy. Moreover, these dispositions are all mandated by the **commandment** to “love your fellow **as yourself**”<sup>12</sup> (“what is hateful to you, do not do to others”),<sup>13</sup> and are not particularly pious conduct.

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<sup>8</sup> *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Talmud Torah*,” ch. 3, par. 7.

<sup>9</sup> *Pirkei Avos*, ch. 1, *mishnah* 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Bamidbar* 30:3.

<sup>11</sup> (cf. *Devarim* 6:18.)

<sup>12</sup> *Vayikra* 19:18.

<sup>13</sup> *Shabbos* 31a.

## 2.

### MORE QUESTIONS

Additionally, we need to clarify (further nuances) in this *mishnah*:

a) All three clauses comprise a single statement. (For Shammai surely taught many more lessons regarding a person's conduct, but only these three are quoted together.) This implies that thematically, they share a connection and a common denominator. {What is the thematic connection between them?}

b) Why here (in the context of the directive, “make your Torah study primary”) is the conclusion — “and your work makeshift” — not quoted, as in other dictums of our Rabbis (as noted above)?

c) As discussed numerous times,<sup>14</sup> the author's name has a connection with, clarifies, and underscores the point made in a teaching. How are these three directives better appreciated by knowing that it was Shammai who expounded them?

## 3.

### LICENSE TO OFFER AN EXPLANATION

Now is the place to take note: The source of the aforementioned explanation ({of Shammai's statements} in Section 1) is *Avos DeRabbi Nason*.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, perhaps we can offer another explanation, as in fact, we find regarding many *mishnayos* in tractate *Avos* that **many, many** explanations are offered by great Jewish leaders (such as Rashi, *Rambam*, *Machzor Vitri*,<sup>16</sup> and many more, including the later *Achronim*),<sup>17</sup> who explain the *mishnayos* differently than (and sometimes in a way that is contrary to) the explanations

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<sup>14</sup> See *Likkutei Torah*, “*Shir Hashirim*,” s.v., “*Tanu Rabbanan Keitzad Merakdin*” (48c), and many other places.

<sup>15</sup> *Avos DeRabbi Nason*, ch. 13.

<sup>16</sup> {*Machzor Vitri*, authored by Rabbeinu Simcha ben Shmuel of Vitri (died 1105). Rabbeinu Simcha is said to have been Rashi's foremost pupil. Interestingly, they passed away in the same year.}

<sup>17</sup> {*Achronim* is the title given to Torah scholars who lived from approximately 1600 until our generation.}

offered in *Avos DeRabbi Nassan*.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, these scholars encouraged their students to study these *mishnayos* in-depth and come up with novel explanations, and so forth, obviously, with an absolute prerequisite that the explanations concur with the rules and principles of Torah study, and taking genuine care to honor the giants of Torah (obviously, never “shouting: ‘Accept my opinion!’”) Additionally, they were to be very careful to avoid interpreting Torah in a manner contradictory to the true intent of *halachah* and actual Torah law, etc.

Thus, this is similar to the numerous (even contrary) explanations of Scripture. All such explanations are included in the adage that “Torah chatter is beneficial”<sup>19</sup> (and in the case of the truly great Jewish leaders, their explanations are part of the seventy facets of Torah).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, every person is **obligated** “to add to it”<sup>21</sup> as much as possible — to come up with novel ideas within Torah. [This is particularly the case when, according to the previously-offered explanation, questions remain; in such a case, a person must certainly toil as much as his mind is able, in order to explain the ideas in a format that answers the questions, etc. Because without doing so, the full understanding of the idea will be **deficient**, and a full understanding is required when learning the Oral Torah.

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<sup>18</sup> Note *Tosafos Yom Tov* on *Nazir* 5:5, explaining why *Rambam* explained a *mishnah* in a way that was different than the *Gemara*’s explanation: “For permission has been granted to explain....” It is clear that this {explanation was offered} **by way of Torah discourse**, and not to display his greatness in Torah. {Cf. *Menachos* 61b.}

<sup>19</sup> *Talmud Yerushalmi, Berachos* 68a.

<sup>20</sup> *Zohar*, vol. 1, 47b; vol. 3, 20a (*Raya Mehemna*), 216a, 223a; *Bamidbar Rabbah*, ch. 13, sec 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Zohar*, vol. 1, 12b; see *Iggeres HaKodesh*, ch. 26 (145a); *Alter Rebbe’s Hilchos Talmud Torah*, ch. 2, par. 2.

## 4.

### THREE PILLARS

The explanation of the above-mentioned issues:

This *mishnah* (“Shammai said”) follows the previously mentioned *mishnah* at the beginning of the chapter, “The world stands on three things: Torah, *Avodah*,<sup>22</sup> and deeds of kindness.”<sup>23</sup> Meaning, three things serve as a “pillar” upholding the world. Therefore, when a person cannot invest his entire heart, soul, and strength in all three areas, he must choose at least one — one of the three paths. He will then devote his primary abilities and efforts in this path, and the other two come afterward (unless it is time-sensitive, **or the like**, as clarified by *Shulchan Aruch*, etc.).

Regarding this, Shammai says that according to the “path” of pious conduct, one is advised to “make your Torah study primary.” Meaning, from among these three paths, a person should choose to “**make your Torah study primary.**” True, a person may choose whichever path he wishes; he can behave in the manner of Zevulun<sup>24</sup> and become a “master of good deeds” (meaning, his primary divine service is doing kind deeds). However, pious conduct mandates that he choose the path of Torah, that it should become his primary and principal mode of conduct.

Therefore, it does not make sense for Shammai to conclude, “and your work makeshift.” For here, he doesn’t mean to negate working — to say that a person should not work regularly. Rather, he wants to emphasize and bring out the preeminence of Torah<sup>25</sup> over the other two paths: *Avodah* and deeds of kindness.

On this basis, we can appreciate why he does not conclude (after saying, “your Torah study primary”) that *Avodah* and deeds of kindness need to be

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<sup>22</sup> {Sacrificial divine service, substituted nowadays by prayer.}

<sup>23</sup> {*Pirkei Avos*, ch. 1, *mishnah* 2.}

<sup>24</sup> Rashi on *Bereishis* 49:13; Rashi on *Devarim* 33:18.

<sup>25</sup> {In the original, “the permanent {quality} of Torah.”}

performed intermittently. The reason: The directive to “make your Torah study primary” was also directed to “masters of good deeds,” whose major occupation is (not in Torah study. They discharge their obligation to learn Torah by just learning, “one chapter in the morning and one chapter in the evening.”<sup>26</sup> Their principal occupation is) within the realm of deeds of kindness. Nevertheless, they, too, must “make your Torah study **primary**.” Torah study done in a short amount of time (quantitatively) should be **primary** (qualitatively) — engraved in his soul to the extent that it affects his entire day.

Furthermore, the word “makeshift” is not appropriate in reference to *Avodah* and deeds of kindness, for they are key and fundamental parts of Divine service, and they, too, must be performed in a “primary” way. But among these three elements themselves, the key “primary” must be in the path of Torah, specifically.

## 5.

### STUDY TORAH FOR ITS OWN SAKE

Following this directive — that from among these three paths, the path of Torah must be primary: “Make your Torah study primary” — Shammai continues and explains how a person should make Torah study his **main** occupation. Our Rabbis state:<sup>27</sup> “Study is greater, as study leads to action.” One could {erroneously} conclude from here that a person must devote himself only to Torah study that “reaches conclusions that clarify the *halachah*.”<sup>28</sup> Meaning, {he should learn} topics only relevant to issuing rulings in practical *halachah* and to him becoming a *halachic* decisor.

Therefore, Shammai immediately addresses this {mistaken conclusion} and says, “Say **little**.” A person’s involvement in Torah study in the manner of

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<sup>26</sup> *Menachos* 99b.

<sup>27</sup> *Kiddushin* 40b.

<sup>28</sup> *Yoma* 26a.

“saying”<sup>29</sup> — pronouncing the conclusive, practical *halachah* — should be “little.” A person’s primary occupation, and the majority of his study, should be **studying Torah for its own sake**, to the extent that he abides by the dictums, “expound and receive a reward,”<sup>30</sup> and, “make **Torah** great and glorious.”<sup>31</sup>

As such, a person might make a mistake and go to the other extreme, thinking the following: Since a person’s primary involvement and emphasis regarding Torah study should not be geared specifically to issuing rulings in practical *halachah*, perhaps this means that *mitzvah*-performance, in general, (**action**) does not need (G-d forbid) steadfastness — fulfilling the *mitzvos* with devotion and dedication.

Therefore, Shammai adds, “and do much.” True, in the context of being occupied in Torah, a person does not need to place primary emphasis on becoming a *halachic* decisor and deciding matters of practical *halachah*. Nonetheless, he must conduct himself according to the dictum, “**do much.**” *Mitzvah* observance must be expanded greatly, both quantitatively and qualitatively; performing as many *mitzvos* as possible, and with as much vitality and enthusiasm, as possible.

## 6.

### DO NOT BECOME A HERMIT

According to Shammai, every Jew must devote himself primarily to Torah study for its own sake, following the dictum to “**Say little.**” As a result, a person can entertain the following {wrong perspective}. By way of introduction:

The difference between the intellectual faculties (intellect) and emotions is known.<sup>32</sup> Intellect {is an inward-directed faculty, and} functions for the sake of

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<sup>29</sup> As our Sages say (*Shabbos* 114a; *Taanis* 10b): “Who is a Torah scholar? ... A person who, when asked regarding a matter of *halachah*... **says.**”

<sup>30</sup> *Sotah* 44a.

<sup>31</sup> *Yeshaya* 42:21; *Chullin* 66b.

<sup>32</sup> See *Hemshech* 5666, p. 111, ff.; *Sefer Hamaamorim* 5694, *Maamar “Vayisa Ahron”* (*Sefer Hamaamorim Kuntreisim*, vol. 2, p. 596, ff.); et al.



the person himself, whereas emotions are directed to others. Meaning, emotions are aroused and triggered only in relation to another person (for whom he feels love, or whom he fears, etc.) Conversely, intellect wasn't created for the sake of others, but on the contrary: Another person's input can disturb one's own intellectual effort. As known, if a person wants to grasp a concept soundly (especially, if he wants to grasp it with the **core** of his intellect which is {completely} beyond emotion and the realm of *halachic* rulings), he needs to do so specifically by contemplation and deep analysis, while he is alone, secluded.

Thus, a person may conclude that the lifestyle of making one's Torah study primary (according to the dictum of "Say little"), which involves properly grasping and understanding Torah concepts, requires him to be alone and to remain secluded. And should he need to interact with others, he may only do so with a study partner who will serve a purpose and provide added value to his Torah study, as it says, "close association with colleagues" and "sharp discussion with students" (which are among 48 ways through which "Torah is acquired"),<sup>33</sup> and so forth. As our Rabbis say,<sup>34</sup> "I have learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues..., and from my students more than from all of them." However, when it comes to socializing with those people who offer nothing in terms of enhancing his efforts in making his Torah study "primary," a person may believe that he must avoid them, distance himself from them, and have nothing at all to do with them.

Shammai's response to such thinking follows in the third clause of Shammai's statement: "And receive **every** person with a cheerful countenance." Although a person's main pursuit is Torah study, making it "primary," and {he follows the dictum}, "Say little," this must not prevent him from accepting **everyone**, without exception, with a cheerful countenance. Meaning, even if someone with whom he is pursuing a relationship offers no benefit (not in the path of Torah study nor in the path of good deeds, etc.), this person must not only be received, but he must be received with a cheerful countenance. Meaning, the recipient must feel that his friend accepts and interacts with him happily and attentively.

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<sup>33</sup> *Avos*, ch. 6, *mishnah* 6.

<sup>34</sup> *Taanis* 7a; *Makos* 10a.

## COMPARTMENTALIZING TIME

Still, after all the above, a question surfaces: How can a person possibly fulfill all these directives at once? At the end of the day, are they not contradictory? (As discussed earlier, “Make your Torah study primary” entails mainly comprehension, and learning Torah following the dictum, “Say little.” At the same time, however, he is told to “**do a lot**,” i.e., increase *mitzvos* with vitality and passion. Additionally, he is also expected to “receive every person with a cheerful countenance,” which is even more contradictory, since to succeed to “make your Torah study primary” is specifically through solitude. Yet, he must devote himself not only to performing *mitzvos* expansively but also to interacting with others. How can a person overcome all these contradictions?)<sup>35</sup>

The *mishnah* prefaces and informs us that the author of the teaching is Shammai: Shammai (the meaning of the name and the allusion contained within it) gives a person the ability to perform all the three directives.

In *Likkutei Torah*,<sup>36</sup> the Alter Rebbe discusses (the name) Shammai:

Therefore, his given name was *Shammai*, along the same lines as our Rabbis expound<sup>37</sup> the verse,<sup>38</sup> “*Ve’Sam derech*, {he orders his way}...”: “*Kol ha’Sham orchosav* — {lit.,} whoever *appraises* his ways”<sup>39</sup> — that is, he assesses his behavior, how and in what, etc.

Meaning, the name Shammai (etymologically related to the expression “*sham orchosav*,” i.e., assessing and evaluating his ways) alludes to, and teaches us, that a Jewish person must measure and evaluate his ways — his time and the capabilities entrusted to him.

<sup>35</sup> See also *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 14, p. 318 ff.

<sup>36</sup> *Likkutei Torah*, “*Shir Hashirim*,” 48c.

<sup>37</sup> *Moed Katan* 5a. {The entire passage there (with explanatory interpolations): “With regard to the verse, from *Tehillim* cited above, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Whoever *appraises* his ways in this world and contemplates how to act in the most appropriate way possible merits seeing the salvation of the Holy One, as it says: ‘And to him who orders his way.’ Do not read it as *ve’sam*, who orders; rather, read it as *ve’sham*, ‘and appraises.’ With this reading, the verse indicates that one who *appraises* his ways will be shown the salvation of Hashem.”}

<sup>38</sup> *Tehillim* 50:23.

<sup>39</sup> {Meaning, one who scrutinizes his behavior.} *Moed Katan* 5a; *Sotah* 5b.

If a Jew assesses and evaluates the Divinely given capabilities, he will discover that he possesses the strength and wherewithal to fulfill his *avodah* in all three areas, discussed above. (Particularly, during the time designated for studying *Pirkei Avos*, he is given special capabilities to succeed in fulfilling all the directives of (pious conduct taught in) *Pirkei Avos*.) If a person will properly assess and evaluate the time he has, he will see that he can divide his time in a manner wherein he will have sufficient time to adequately engage in all three of the above-mentioned directives.<sup>40</sup>

## 8.

### THE END ITSELF

The connection between these three directives and the author, Shammai, can be explained on a deeper and more esoteric level.

By way of introduction: These three directives share a common denominator. The first one: A person's primary preoccupation must be in Torah, following the dictum, "Say little." Meaning, a person must study Torah for its own sake and not just to issue rulings in *halachah* (as discussed). This {mindset} manifests when a person doesn't learn Torah for a secondary purpose, not even for the purpose of fulfilling *mitzvos*, but rather, just for Torah itself.

Similarly, the second directive — "Do a lot." Even when a person establishes his primary focus on the Torah, following the dictum, "Say little," he must still broaden his performance of *mitzvos*. This means performing *mitzvos* notto assist him (to be successful) in his Torah study. (He might do so in consideration of our Rabbis' exhortation,<sup>41</sup> "Anyone who says he wants nothing other than Torah — doesn't even have Torah.") Meaning, even someone whose occupation is Torah must serve Hashem through kind deeds and *mitzvah* observance, in general. But he might think that his actions (*mitzvos*) should be

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<sup>40</sup> See also *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 14, p. 318 ff.

<sup>41</sup> *Yevamos* 109b; see *Likkutei Torah*, "parshas Vayikra," 5a.

“little.”<sup>42</sup> Meaning, he should do only what is the minimum required — fulfilling time-bound commandments, such as eating *matzah* on Pesach, etc.; or fulfilling *mitzvos* to ensure that his Torah study is as it ought to be.

But here, Shammai teaches: “Do much.” This indicates that a person’s performance of *mitzvos* must be motivated only by the fact that Hashem sanctified us with his *mitzvos* and commanded us to perform them. (He must not even intend his performance of *mitzvos* to serve as an aid<sup>43</sup> to ensure that his Torah learning (which is primary) is really “his,” in the manner of “he has {Torah},”<sup>44</sup> i.e., it endures.)

The same applies to the third directive: “and receive every person with a cheerful countenance.” As discussed, this directive refers to someone who can offer nothing to the benefactor, not even {the benefit of being able to fulfill} *mitzvos* related to deeds of kindness. For this recipient needs nothing that the benefactor has to offer (as the wording indicates: “**every** person”).

[For if the recipient needed to receive some favor from the benefactor (even the mere favor of (by receiving him with a cheerful countenance) uplifting him from his sorry state, or the like), the benefactor may be doing a good deed possibly for his own benefit, i.e., he has fulfilled the *mitzvah* of doing a kind deed through this person, etc.]

The lesson here is to accept every Jew cheerfully just because pious conduct demands as much.

Thus, the common denominator of these three — Torah study, *mitzvah* observance, and accepting all Jewish people — is that a person engages in these acts as ends in themselves and for their own sakes (not for a secondary or ulterior reason). This common factor expresses how the Jewish people, Torah and Hashem, are all one.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, just as it is impossible to suggest that Hashem exists as a means to an end, so, too, it is impossible to consider this to

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<sup>42</sup> *Tanya*, “*Iggeres Hakodesh*,” epistle 5.

<sup>43</sup> {In the original Hebrew, “*segulah*”; a potent conduit or charm.}

<sup>44</sup> {Cf. *Yevamos* 109b.}

<sup>45</sup> See *Zohar*, vol. 3, p. 73a.

be true regarding His Torah and *mitzvos*, as well as the (conduct of the) Jewish people.

## 9.

### SHAMMAI AND THE FUTURE

This fact — that Torah and *mitzvos* and the Jewish people are one with Hashem — will be perceived openly in the Future Era. In the Future Era, the **truth of everything** will come to the surface. In our times, however, this is hidden in the *avodah* of every Jew. Therefore, there are (and there must be) different sorts of Jews: “Masters of Torah,” who are involved in doing kindness and *mitzvos* only during a small segment of their day. Alternatively, they engage in these activities only **for the sake of** their Torah, since, “anyone who says he has nothing other than Torah...,” as discussed. And then there are “masters of good deeds,” who, by performing *mitzvos*, primarily occupy themselves in making the world a home for Hashem. They (are obligated to) study Torah minimally, or in order to ensure that their *mitzvos* are carried out correctly. (Analogously, in successive generations, there are differences in the emphasis placed on these categories.)<sup>46</sup>

This, then, explains the connection between the author of these teachings — Shammai — and the three directives. As known, the *Arizal*<sup>47</sup> says that in the Future Era, the *halachah* will accord with Beis Shammai. Meaning, the lesson from these three directives is primarily connected with the disclosure of the truth of all that will unfold in the Future Era.

All the revelations in the Future Era are contingent on our actions and *avodah* during the time of exile,<sup>48</sup> and our actions and *avodah* contain a smidgeon of the revelation of the Future. Therefore, in **actual practice**, at least, even nowadays, we ought to fulfill all three directives. As a result, a person will experience “*Shammai*.” Meaning, the person will assess and evaluate his

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<sup>46</sup> *Iggeres Hakodesh*, epistle 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Mikdash Melech* on *Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 17b; *Likkutei Torah*, “*parshas Korach*,” 54c.

<sup>48</sup> *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 37.

capabilities with the appreciation that he has been given unique talents to succeed in all three areas.

“With the measuring stick that a person measures, he is measured.”<sup>49</sup> When a Jewish person fulfills all the directives of this *mishnah*, including its conclusion, “and receive every person with a cheerful countenance,” he will merit to be shown a cheerful countenance from On High.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, he will merit {to see the fulfillment of the promise expressed in the verse},<sup>51</sup> “In the light of the Living King, there is life,” until we all merit eternal life, which will occur in the Future Era. May this come about soon, with the Resurrection of the Dead, since every Jew has a share in the World to Come.<sup>52</sup>

— Based on a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Shemini*, 5735 (1975)

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<sup>49</sup> *Sotah* 8b.

<sup>50</sup> See *Likkutei Torah, parshas Re'eh*, p. 32b.

<sup>51</sup> *Mishlei* 16:15.

<sup>52</sup> {*Sanhedrin*, ch. 10, *mishnah* 1.}