

## 2

Ben Azzai says: Be one who runs to a minor mitzvah as to a major one, and who flees from the transgression, because one mitzvah generates another mitzvah and one transgression generates another transgression. Because the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah and the consequence of a transgression is a transgression.

Answer to  
questions  
10–11

of human beings than about His own honor, we may posit the following logical argument (*kal vachomer*):<sup>21</sup> If God honors those who honor Him — as the Mishnah teaches, *those who honor Me I shall honor* — then God will certainly honor those who honor people.<sup>22</sup> [This answers Questions 10 and 11.]

## MISHNAH 2

Consider the following questions:<sup>23</sup>

1. Why does our Mishnah express itself: *וְהָיָה רָץ ... וּבִרְחָה*, *Be one who runs to ... and flees from*, in the present continuous tense, instead of speaking in the simple imperative: *רוּץ ... וּבְרַח*, *Run to ... and flee from*?
2. In speaking about transgressions, why didn't the Mish-

21. An a priori course of reasoning carried to its logical conclusion.

22. The Alshich writes further that when our Mishnah speaks of honoring others, it means specifically honoring righteous people, and not those undeserving of honor.

23. The Alshich discusses this Mishnah in his commentary to *Vayikra* 22:32.

בן עזאי אומר: הוֹי רֵץ לְמִצְוָה קְלָה כְּבַחְמוּרָה, וּבֹרַח מִן הָעֵבְרָה. שְׂמִצְוָה גּוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה, וְעֵבְרָה גּוֹרֶרֶת עֵבְרָה. שְׂשִׁכַר מִצְוָה מִצְוָה וְשִׁכַר עֵבְרָה עֵבְרָה.

nah say to flee from a **minor** transgression, as it said to run to a **minor** mitzvah?

3. Why did the Mishnah say to flee from *the* transgression (הָעֵבְרָה) instead of “from a transgression” (עֵבְרָה)?
4. Why is it necessary to “flee” from the transgression? Would it not suffice to just be “beware” of the transgression?
5. Why does the Mishnah add, *because one mitzvah generates another mitzvah*? This clause implies that if one mitzvah did **not** generate another, it would **not** be proper to run to perform it [and conversely, that if one transgression did not generate another transgression, it would not be necessary to flee from it]. But this is not so! Certainly one should run to perform each mitzvah in its own right, and flee from all transgressions even if they did not generate others!
6. The statement, *for the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah* (שְׂשִׁכַר מִצְוָה מִצְוָה וְכוּ') is difficult: If it is a second explanation for why one should fulfill the **first** line in the Mishnah (*Be one who runs to a minor mitzvah as to a major one*), it should say, “**and** because the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah” (וְשִׁשְׁכַר מִצְוָה מִצְוָה). On the other hand, the wording of the Mishnah implies that it is connected to the sentence that precedes it. But how is it connected?

7. The statement that *the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah* seems incomprehensible. Would one say that a worker's reward is the work that he did? Why, his reward is the pay that he receives! The same question also applies to the statement that *the consequence of a transgression is a transgression*.

### ✧ *The Path to Piety* ✧

BEN AZZAI WISHES to teach us how to serve Hashem: If a person wants to serve Hashem righteously — and especially if he is seeking the path of true piety — he must follow that path constantly and consistently, until it becomes second nature to him. If he is inconsistent, his good intentions will not last — especially if people make fun of him. He will abandon his efforts out of embarrassment and will ultimately abandon this whole way of life. Ben Azzai therefore uses the present continuous tense (וְבוֹרֵחַ ... וְהוֹי רָץ), as if to say: Be a person who is **constantly** running for the sake of a mitzvah, acting as one for whom it is second nature to chase after good deeds; and likewise be a person who is **constantly** fleeing from transgression. [This answers Question 1.]

Answer to  
question 1

As to why Ben Azzai speaks of one mitzvah generating another, we can understand this by using the example of a businessman. If a deal comes along that offers the potential for only a small profit, a good businessman might well say, “Let me see if a more profitable deal comes along; if it doesn't, I have plenty of time to close the less profitable one later.” Ben Azzai is teaching that when it comes to mitzvos, this is not the correct approach. A person should run immediately to do the minor mitzvah and not delay in the hope that a bigger one

will shortly come his way. To the contrary, it is by **performing** the minor mitzvah that the bigger one will come along, *because one mitzvah generates another* — and this will **not** happen if he ignores the lesser one. So when he runs to do what is considered a minor mitzvah, he should realize that in fact he is running to **many** mitzvos!<sup>24</sup>

The same holds true with respect to transgressions: A person might say that it is not necessary to **flee** from a transgression, or to stay as far away as possible from anything that might be sinful or that could lead to sin. It is sufficient to simply not commit the sin itself (as a businessman simply avoids a business loss). To this Ben Azzai says: *Flee from **the** transgression* (הַעֲבִירָה)<sup>25</sup> — that is, from the type of sin that parallels the type of mitzvah mentioned just before, i.e., a minor one.<sup>26</sup> A person shouldn't say that he need not flee because it is just a minor transgression, for *one transgression generates another*. He is not running from one transgression, he's running from **many** transgressions.<sup>27</sup> [This answers Questions 2–5.]

Answer to  
questions  
2–5

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24. To elaborate: Certainly one should run to perform each mitzvah in its own right, even if one mitzvah did not lead to another (see Question 5). However, the Mishnah is speaking of a person who is putting off doing a mitzvah because he is hoping for the opportunity to fulfill a bigger one (the way a businessman would put off an opportunity to make a small profit for the chance of making a bigger one). The Mishnah addresses that person when it says that one mitzvah generates another.

25. The letter ה (the definite article, “the”) implies that reference is being made to something that is previously known or defined.

26. In other words, Questions 2 and 3 answer each other: The Mishnah in effect does say “a minor transgression.” But it accomplishes that through the specific use of the word הַעֲבִירָה (*the transgression*).

27. To elaborate: Certainly one should flee from a major sin even if one sin did not lead to another (see Question 5). But the Mishnah is speaking of

However, a fundamental question remains: Why did God design the world in such a way that doing one mitzvah generates other mitzvos, while committing a single transgression generates other transgressions? To answer this question, the Mishnah concludes: *for the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, etc.*<sup>28</sup> [At first glance this may seem incomprehensible, because one would expect the reward of a mitzvah to be something tangible, not just another mitzvah. But] we have a principle that “there is no reward for mitzvos in this world.”<sup>29</sup> Hashem therefore treats us the way a king or high officer treats someone he loves: He says to his beloved servant, “Do a job for me, and I promise you great reward. What will that be? I will immediately give you **another** job. You will not lose from this, for you will constantly be gaining great reward.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, when one performs a mitzvah, Hashem sends him opportunities for further mitzvos for which he will gain reward in the World to Come. (The same applies to transgressions: If someone commits sins, the *Satan* sends him opportunities for more sins, through which he will be further punished in the World to Come.) [This answers Questions 6 and 7.]

Answer to  
questions  
6–7

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a minor sin, where an argument could be made that simply not committing the sin is sufficient. And it tells us that because one sin leads to another, one must flee even from a minor sin (see Question 4).

28. This statement is thus connected to what precedes it — and not to the Mishnah’s opening line (see Question 6).

29. *Kiddushin* 39b.

30. Even though the king or high officer is not giving his servant any tangible reward at the moment, we know he will ultimately do so; and meanwhile, he is constantly giving his servant opportunities to increase that ultimate reward.

### ≡ A Different Way to Understand the Mishnah<sup>31</sup> ≡

THERE IS ALSO another way of understanding this Mishnah, based on the following two ideas:

- 1) It is proper for a person to view himself as lacking merits.
- 2) A mitzvah is its own reward.

Let us begin with the first idea:

There are two reasons why a person should think he has few merits: (1) He may have had ulterior motives in performing his mitzvos, which detracts from those good deeds. (2) The merit of the relatively few mitzvos that were performed with proper motives has probably decreased as a result of all the acts of kindness that Hashem has performed for him, as Yaakov Avinu said: *I have become less deserving by all the kindnesses ... You have done for Your servant (Bereishis 32:11).*<sup>32</sup> How much more so does this concern apply to the rest of us, who are not on Yaakov Avinu's level! Why, the average person may have no merits left at all, for God has surely saved him many times in his life. And that is counting only the miraculous interventions he **knows** about; how many more times are miracles performed on his behalf without his knowledge!

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31. The Alshich does not preface this second approach with a new set of questions. The questions he now addresses (some explicitly, the other implicitly) are similar enough to the ones listed above that we shall proceed on that basis.

32. The idea underlying this verse is that we all have a storehouse of merits in Heaven, accrued through the mitzvos we perform. However, when God interferes with the natural order (i.e., with how the world would function based solely on the laws of nature) on our behalf, we must “pay” for this with our merits, and our “account” is diminished. See Rashi, ad loc.

Meanwhile, the exact opposite is true regarding transgressions. No one can claim that he has no sins. He certainly has at least one!

Therefore, Ben Azzai expresses himself using the present continuous tense (הָיָה רָץ... וּבֹרֵחַ), as if to say, “Consider your mitzvos as being diminished, and be **constantly running** to do another one, even if it seems minor to you. Similarly, flee from ‘the transgression,’ i.e., from the transgression that is known to you — for you know that you have at least one.” [This answers Questions 1 and 3.]

Answer to questions 1 and 3

But a person may counter, “What good will it do me to run to perform a single, minor mitzvah?” To address this question the Mishnah says: “... because one mitzvah generates another mitzvah.” By doing one minor mitzvah, a person will become full of mitzvos, for the first mitzvah will lead automatically to another, the second to a third, etc. — ad infinitum. [This answers Question 5.]<sup>33</sup>

Answer to question 5

Why does the Mishnah speak of “fleeing” from a transgression? This word only makes sense if one is being chased! The answer is that a person is being chased. As the Mishnah says, the *one transgression* (at least) that he has committed *generates another transgression* for him to commit; his transgression thus pursues and seeks to harm him. And therefore, he must literally “flee” from transgression, as one flees from an enemy. [This answers Question 4.]

Answer to question 4

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33. That is: Certainly a person should run to perform each mitzvah in its own right, even if one mitzvah did not lead to another (see Question 5). But because a person might feel that he will not gain much from a single mitzvah, Ben Azzai informs us that in fact by doing one small mitzvah a person will end up with much, much more.

Moving on now to the second idea mentioned above: A mitzvah comprises its own reward. Thus, the Gemara in *Berachos* 17a, in describing the reward of the righteous in the World to Come, states: *The righteous sit with their crowns on their heads [and delight in the radiance of the Divine Presence]*. Those crowns are the mitzvos they fulfilled, which are transformed into spiritual crowns.<sup>34</sup> The mitzvah itself thus gives a person great joy, suffusing him with spiritual light and pleasure.<sup>35</sup>

Now, if one should ask what power, or what living force, a mitzvah or a sin possesses that enables it to generate another of the same, the answer is: *for the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the consequence of a transgression is a transgression*.<sup>36</sup> The spiritual good generated by a person's performance of a mitzvah creates an angel — a powerful living force.<sup>37</sup> Conversely, each sin that a person commits creates a destructive angel — a force that will cause him to suffer in this world and be punished (in order to cleanse him of his sins) in *Gehinnom*. Sins and destructive angels are therefore essentially one and the same; and when a person sins, it is his sin

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34. In his commentary to *Tehillim* 19:13, the Alshich explains that this is why the verse refers to “their crowns”: to bring out that these crowns are not given to them from some outside source; they are comprised of the angels created from their own mitzvos.

35. The Alshich refers us here to his commentary on the words *the righteous will be rewarded with good* in *Mishlei* 13:21.

36. That is, the words *for the reward, etc.*, are indeed connected to the preceding clause, for they serve to explain how *one mitzvah generates another, etc.* (see Question 6). See the Alshich to *Tehillim* 19:3.

37. This angel serves as a protection for him and acts, as it were, as his defense attorney in the Heavenly Court. See sources in next note.



3

He used to say: Despise no man and deem nothing impossible, for there is no man who does not have his day and there is no thing that does not have its place.

4

R' Levitas of Yavneh says: Be exceedingly humble in spirit, for the hope of Man is worms. R' Yochanan ben Beroka says: Anyone who profanes the Name of Heaven in secret will be punished for it in public. There is no distinction between public and private when it comes to the profanation of God's Name [*chillul Hashem*].

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which causes him to suffer, for it becomes a force that seeks to destroy him.<sup>38</sup>

The fact that a mitzvah has the power to become its own reward by becoming a holy angel and that a transgression has the power to become a destructive angel explains how *one mitzvah generates another mitzvah and one transgression generates another transgression* — for if they have the power to generate angels similar to their nature, they certainly have the power to generate their own kind.<sup>39</sup> [This answers Questions 6 and 7.]

Answer to  
questions  
6–7

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38. The Alshich adds that this is what Scripture is referring to when it states, *Melt us away because of our iniquities* (Yeshayahu 64:6); *Your evil shall chasten you* (Yirmeyahu 2:19); and *Evil pursues sinners* (Mishlei 13:21).

The idea that mitzvos and aveiros create different kinds of angels appears as well in *Avos* 4:11 below. See also *Shabbos* 32a.

39. Citing the *Zohar*, commenting on *Shmuel II* 12:13, the Alshich adds that a destructive angel may also be referred to as a “transgression” (see *Zohar*, *Noah* 73b).