

R' Chanania ben Akashia says: The Holy One, Blessed is He, desired to accord merit to Yisrael; therefore, He gave them Torah and mitzvos in abundance, as it states, “Hashem desired, for the sake of [maximizing Yisrael’s merit and reward for] its righteousness, that the [mitzvos of the] Torah be made great [in number] and magnified [in quality]” (*Yeshayahu* 42:21).

☞ *Three Categories of Torah and Mitzvos*¹ ☞

WE CAN DISTINGUISH between three groups of people who strive to serve Hashem sincerely:

1. The first group is made up of individuals who make **Torah study** the focal point of their lives. When the chance to perform a different mitzvah presents itself, they take advantage of the opportunity, but they do not feel it necessary to actively pursue mitzvos.
2. The second group comprises individuals who eagerly seek situations that will enable them to fulfill Hashem’s commandments that are “**between man and God**” — that is, mitzvos such as introspection, *teshuvah*, prayer and faith. They do not actively pursue mitzvos that involve other

1. This Mishnah is not part of *Pirkei Avos* but is rather an Aggadic Mishnah from a different tractate (*Makkos* 3:16). This portion of the Talmud was selected for recital at the end of public lectures because of the rule (*Sotah* 49a) that the Rabbis’ Kaddish is recited only after an Aggadic teaching. (Although *Avos*, too, is Aggadic in substance, the prevailing custom is to recite this Mishnah after **any** public study — including after a chapter of *Avos*).

This comment has been adapted from the Alshich’s commentary to *Tehillim* 119:1–4.

רַבִּי חֲנַנְיָא בֶּן עֲקֻשְׁיָא אָוִמָּה, רְצָה הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְזַכּוֹת אֶת
יִשְׂרָאֵל, לְפִיכֹךְ הִרְבָּה לָהֶם תּוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר יְהוָה חֲפֵץ
לְמַעַן צְדָקוֹ יַגְדִּיל תּוֹרָה וַיֵּאדָּיר:

people but will certainly do them if they come their way. They also do not understand that they should make Torah study an important part of their own lives.

3. The third group is formed by those who don't make either Torah study or *mitzvos bein adam laMakom* their priority, even though they are extremely careful in matters *bein adam lechaveiro*, "**between man and his fellow.**" They scrupulously avoid any endeavor or activity that might cause damage to another person or his property. They are sensitive to the needs of others and are constantly looking for ways to help them through difficult times. They emulate their Creator in the manner described by the verse, *You shall follow after Hashem your God (Devarim 13:5)*. The Sages of the Talmud explain that this means that one should act as Hashem does: Just as He clothes the naked,² so shall you clothe the naked; just as He visits the sick,³ so shall you visit the sick; just as He consoles mourners,⁴ so shall you console mourners; and just as He buries the dead,⁵ so shall you bury the dead (*Sotah 14a*).

2. See *Bereishis* 3:2.

3. See *Bereishis* 18:1 with Rashi.

4. See *Bereishis* 25:11 with Rashi.

5. See *Devarim* 34:6.

In *Tehillim* 119:1–4, David HaMelech praises the members of each of these groups in turn:

1. To the first, he says, *Praiseworthy are those on the road of perfection, who walk with the Torah of Hashem* (v. 1). He refers to this world as *the road of perfection* because it is the road that leads to the World to Come; the road on which a person travels to his eternal resting place. David is praising those who comport themselves with perfection as they walk nobly along the road of life in *Olam HaZeh*. They are without sin; they make **Torah study** their prime endeavor. It is concerning them that the souls in *Gan Eden* proclaim, “Praiseworthy is he who comes here with his learning in his hand” (*Pesachim* 50a). This, then, is the meaning of the verse, *Praiseworthy are those on the road of perfection, who walk from this world to the next with the Torah of Hashem* that they have studied.
2. The Psalmist then turns his attention to the second group of people, who emphasize the *mitzvos bein adam laMakom*, describing them and their way of life as: *Praiseworthy are those who vigilantly safeguard His testaments, who seek Him with all their heart* (v. 2). The verse does not speak of mere “watchmen” (*shomrei*), but of “vigilant guardians” (*notzrei*) — a term that implies a personal and constant wakefulness and watchfulness. They stand steadfast at their posts, all their desires and strivings directed toward the mitzvos that draw them closer to Hashem. And they do this wholeheartedly, without any thought of reward.⁶

6. See *Avos* 1:3 above.

In their drive to come closer to Hashem, they involve every aspect of their being. They even utilize their *yetzer hara*'s characteristics of passion and enthusiasm,⁷ but not for the earthly rewards that the *yetzer hara* usually craves and offers as bait to trap a person into sinning. Rather, everything they do is for the sole purpose of attaching themselves to Hashem.

3. David also has positive words for the third group: *Even they have not committed any sin; they have walked in His ways* (v. 3). He means that not only the individuals in the first two categories — those who attach themselves to the holiness of Hashem Himself or to the holiness of His Torah and make that holiness the fulcrum upon which all their actions revolve — are praiseworthy. Even those of the third group (who never expend time or effort on Torah study or drawing near to Hashem) are laudable. For they have excelled in matters **between Man and his fellow**, being vigilant not to wrong their fellow man — and thus *have not committed any sin* concerning interpersonal relationships. Rather, *they have walked in His ways*, by emulating Hashem's acts of kindness to Man, such as clothing the naked and visiting the sick.

Moreover, there is a Mishnah in *Kiddushin* 39b that teaches that whoever fulfills but a single mitzvah, and refrains from sin [i.e., he does not violate any of the negative commandments], is rewarded with good and inherits the World to Come. In light of that statement, we see that even the members of the

7. See commentary at the beginning of Mishnah 6:7 above.

third group are truly praiseworthy and have a place in the World to Come, despite their dearth of mitzvos in relation to Hashem and relative indifference to their Torah learning and personal sanctity.

However, if this is so, the following question may be asked: Why did Hashem give the Jews 613 mitzvos [which include both negative **and** positive mitzvos]? After all, if individuals can be considered good people just because they do not engage in iniquity, shouldn't that be good enough? David HaMelech denies the validity of the position suggested by this question, while making it sound as if he were talking to Hashem: *You have commanded Your precepts, that they be carefully observed* (v. 4). This means that the **reason** that *You have commanded Your numerous precepts*, is so *that they be carefully observed*.

It is axiomatic that the more mitzvos a person fulfills, the more reward he will receive; and it is Hashem's desire that the Jewish people gain more and more merits so that He can give them greater and greater rewards.⁸ This means that although King David commends all three groups of Jews described above, he ends by saying that **none** have reached the ideal, for each of them lacks the drive to perform certain mitzvos. This, when Hashem has provided so many ways to gain merit!

What R' Chanania ben Akashia is doing in our Mishnah is simply summarizing David HaMelech's latter point in a clear manner: He is telling the nation as a whole that the sole reason Hashem gave such an abundance of mitzvos is because He

8. In other words, although fulfilling a single mitzvah while avoiding improper behavior would indeed be good enough to gain *Olam HaBa*, that is not Hashem's ideal. See further in text.

wishes to confer merit upon the Jewish people (and by fulfilling more mitzvos, they will accrue more merits).⁹ Furthermore, because there are [so] many mitzvos, opportunities to perform one or another will come along constantly — something which would not be the case if there were just a few mitzvos, or a limit on the kind of mitzvos someone could do.

9. In his commentary to *Bamidbar* 25:10–11, the Alshich writes that our Mishnah is speaking of **positive** commandments; and he adds that the reason God gave 248 positive commandments, which correspond to the 248 limbs of the human body, is in order for the entirety of man's physical self to have the opportunity to become sanctified [for each body part becomes sanctified through the fulfillment of a different commandment].