

PIRKEI AVOT 3-1

Translation

Akavya ben Mahalalel says: Look in three things and you will not come to sin. Know from where you came and where you are going and before whom you are destined to give account and reckoning. From where have you come? From a putrid drop. Where are you going? To the place of dust, worm, and maggot. Before whom are you destined to give account and reckoning? Before the King of the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

Maimonides

This consideration brings a man to modesty as he remembers his origin. Thinking of his end, he will disdain worldly things. Keeping in mind the greatness of the Lawgiver will make him listen more readily to His laws. Once a man assimilates these three ideas he will never sin.

Rav Chaim of Volozhin

(As Read by Chanoch Levi in "Ruach Chaim")

Focus on these things before desire strikes, for it is very difficult to conjure up images of reverence and fear of punishment while under the spell of desire. (This we discussed in Avos 2:1.) You must act like a soldier on the front lines who never lets down his guard. Even when he is eating or sleeping, his mind is still on the battle. So, too, you must never let down your guard against the evil inclination. Always be prepared for an attack by constantly reinforcing your reverence of Heaven. The word "know" is apparently extraneous. It serve to reinforce the lesson, to teach us the need to meditate on these ideas. When a student hears a lesson from his master, he will not immediately attain full clarity. He must sift through the lesson, clarifying the ideas before he can fully understand his master's intent. This is also true with words of rebuke such as, "Take counsel amongst yourselves and return to Hashem" (Hoshea 14:3). After hearing the rebuke of the prophet, discuss it amongst yourselves. Then you will "return to Hashem." "If you seek it like silver and dig for it like treasure, then you will understand reverence of Hashem and find Hashem's knowledge" (Mishlei 2:4-5). A treasure seeker will first consult his map to find the area where the prize is buried. Then he will sift through every grain of sand, every clod of earth, to make certain that he has not missed a precious gem. Similarly, the student will seek a master who will then teach him a lesson, one indicating where the treasure may be found. The student will then dig through the lesson, unearthing all the pearls of wisdom which are hidden in his master's words. It is not sufficient to merely hear the idea from Akavya. You must know it, you must embellish the theme on your own. Only then can you truly retain it. **From where you came . . .** There are three tenses: past, present and future. Man may merit great things based on the events of any of these three things. For example, Egyptian converts can eventually marry into the Jewish nation because the Egyptian nation sheltered Yaakov and his family

during the great famine (Devarim 23:8). Yishmael was miraculously saved because of his momentary righteousness; Hashem spared him in spite of the fact that he would later become wicked (Rosh HaShanah 16b on Bereishis 21:17). Ammon and Moav were spared destruction because future converts from these nations would serve an important role in the founding the Jewish monarchy (Bava Kamma 38b). However, we must not lose sight of the reality of these time frames. Our past is a putrid drop, as the day passes it dies, it is irretrievable; and the future holds the awesome reckoning before the King. **A putrid drop** A king cleared a huge garbage dump and built there a beautiful palace. Nobody dared to mention the history of the place in the king's presence, for it would be an embarrassment to admit that the imperial palace stood on the former grounds of a garbage dump. For this reason, we are forbidden to speculate on what existed before the creation of the universe (Chagigah 11b).

עֲקֵבֵיָא בְּן מְהַלְלָאֵל אוֹמֵר, הִסְתַּכַּל
בְּשְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים וְאִין אַתָּה בָּא לְיַדֵּי
עֵבְרָה. דַּע, מֵאִין בָּאתָ, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה
הוֹלֵךְ, וּלְפָנֵי מִי אַתָּה עֲתִיד לִתְּנוּ דִין
וְחֲשָׁבוֹן. מֵאִין בָּאתָ, מִטְּפָה סְרוּחָה,
וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, לְמָקוֹם עֶפְרָר רִמָּה
וְתוֹלְעָה. וּלְפָנֵי מִי אַתָּה עֲתִיד לִתְּנוּ דִין
וְחֲשָׁבוֹן, לְפָנֵי מַלְאָךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים
הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא :

Nevertheless, we should not refrain from discussing our own ignoble past, for this will aid us in avoiding sin. **To a place of dust, worms and maggots.** Invertebrates do no live more than twelve months (Chullin 58a). The densest coals cannot burn more than twelve months (Bava Basra 74b). Therefore, the punishment of most sinners does not last more than twelve months (Shabbos 33a). By then, the worms and fires are no longer effective. In regard to great sinners, however, "Their worm will not die and their fire will not extinguish (Yeshayahu 66:24). The fire is theirs, the product of their own actions. The worms are theirs, those of a vertebrate. Therefore their punishment is eternal. **Reckoning and calculation.** A king distributed royal raiments to his servants. The intelligent ones folded the cloaks and stored them in a safe place. The foolish ones wore the clothing while going about their work. After a while, the king ordered that the cloaks be returned. The intelligent ones returned clean and pressed clothing, while the foolish ones returned soiled clothing. The king placed the clean clothing in a safe place and washed the dirty clothing. Hashem takes the clean royal cloaks, the souls of the righteous, and stores them under His throne. The dirty souls of the sinners, however, must undergo a cleansing process in Gehinnom (Shabbos 152b). It is significant that the intelligent servants in the parable did not merely return clean and unsullied garments. They improved the garments by pressing them. By the same token, we have a dual responsibility for our royal raiment, our soul. We must avoid staining it with sin, and we must improve it by performing the positive mitzvos. When we stand before the King, we will have to justify any stain upon our souls. We shall also provide an accounting if we have improved our souls to the measure of our capabilities. The body comes from a putrid drop and eventually rots in the grave. It is the immortal soul which remains in order to give a reckoning before the King. If you recognize that only the soul has any permanence, you will be inspired to pursue spiritual perfection. As the Sages said, "A man must always say, "When will my deeds emulate the deeds of the Patriarchs"" (Tanna D'vai Eliyahu 25)