**Look To Avoid**

Rabbi Reuven Taragin March 29, 2022

Rebbe says: … “Look at (scrutinize) three things, and you will not come to the hands of sin. Know what is above you: An eye which sees, an ear which hears, and all your actions are written in a book.” (Avot 2:1)

רבי אומר…הִסְתַּכֵּל בִּשְׁלשָׁה דְבָרִים וְאִי אַתָּה בָא לִידֵי עֲבֵרָה,

דַּע מַה לְּמַעְלָה מִמְּךָ, עַיִן רוֹאָה וְאֹזֶן שׁוֹמַעַת, וְכָל מַעֲשֶׂיךָ בַסֵּפֶר נִכְתָּבִין (אבות ב:א).

Akavia Ben Mehalalel says: Contemplate three things, and you will not come to the hands of sin. Know from where you came, and to where you are going, and before whom you will ultimately give judgment and accounting. From where did you come? From a putrefied drop (of semen). To where are you going? To a place of dirt, maggots and worms. And before whom will you ultimately give a judgment and an accounting? Before the King of Kings, The Holy One, Blessed be He. (Avot 3:1)

עֲקַבְיָא בֶן מַהֲלַלְאֵל אוֹמֵר,הִסְתַּכֵּל בִּשְׁלשָׁה דְבָרִים וְאֵין אַתָּה בָא לִידֵי עֲבֵרָה.

דַּע, מֵאַיִן בָּאתָ, וּלְאָן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, וְלִפְנֵי מִי אַתָּה עָתִיד לִתֵּן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבּוֹן.

מֵאַיִן בָּאתָ, מִטִּפָּה סְרוּחָה, וּלְאָן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, לִמְקוֹם עָפָר רִמָּה וְתוֹלֵעָה. וְלִפְנֵי מִי אַתָּה עָתִיד לִתֵּן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבּוֹן, לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא (אבות ג:א).

**Consciousness**

Over the past months, we have learned about Jewish beliefs and perspectives on life. Internalizing and maintaining consciousness of these beliefs and perspectives in a way that facilitates living by them can often be challenging. The Mishnayot of Avot speak about how to generate this consciousness.

Two different Mishnayot encourage us to reflect upon three things in order to avoid sin. One Mishnah quotes Akavya Ben Mahalalel, a *Tanna* who lived in the first generation of the *Tanaaim*. The other quotes Rebbi Yehuda Hanasi (known as Rebbe), a *Tanna* who lived in the last generation.[[1]](#footnote-1) The two *Tannaim* recommend focusing on two different triplets of ideas.

**Rebbi: G-d-Consciousness**

Rebbi encourages us to focus on Hashem’s existence, His knowledge of our actions, and the implications of that knowledge. He taught: “Know what is above you: an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and a book that records all of your actions.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Cognizance of Hashem’s awareness and recording of our actions should ensure that we are careful to behave properly.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Similarly, the Rema begins his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch by identifying the pasuk “I set Hashem before me always”[[4]](#footnote-4) as “the great principle that helps man walk before Hashem.” G-d-consciousness inspires us to keep halacha and live our lives properly.

**Akavya Ben Mahalalel: Our Existence[[5]](#footnote-5)**

Akavya Ben Mahalalel’s “three things” focus on another topic: the nature of our existence. “Know from where you come, where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Sin can emanate from either high or low self-esteem. Akavya’s teaching aims to help us avoid both scenarios.

People often see themselves as worth more than they actually are. Remembering our meager origins and eventual demise humbles us. Similarly, the Gemara in Brachot[[7]](#footnote-7) tells us that when we feel drawn to sin, we should remind ourselves of our eventual death.[[8]](#footnote-8) The reality of death puts life in perspective.

Lest this reflection cause us to think that our lives do not matter (which can itself lead to sin) Akavya also reminds us of the ultimate reckoning we will eventually need to give for our lives. Though our existence emanates from and ultimately ends in nothingness, we are expected to maximize our existence while we can. The final reckoning shows how significant our life is meant to be, as Tehillim teaches: “What is man that You have been mindful of him, mortal man that You have taken note of him.”[[9]](#footnote-9) What is man that G-d should take him so seriously — yet G-d does.

Kohelet ended his sefer by linking our need to fear Hashem and keep His mitzvot to the fact that Hashem judges all His creations.[[10]](#footnote-10) The gift of life comes with the expectation that we use it properly. Another Mishnah in Avot[[11]](#footnote-11) teaches that this accountability is unavoidable: “Just as we are born against our will, so we will die and appear before G-d for this accounting.” Our knowledge of our inevitable responsibility to account for our life should inspire us to fully maximize it.

**3x3**

The statements of Akavya and Rebbe complement one another. Living life with the proper perspective is reinforced by reflecting on both **G-d’s presence** as well as the meaning of **our existence**. We need to appreciate our existence in order to maximize it; we need to sustain awareness of G-d’s presence in order to ensure *yirat Shamayim*.

May our sustaining consciousness of both G-d’s presence and the significance of our own existence protect us from sin and inspire us to live our lives properly.

*Rabbi Taragin is the Dean of Overseas Students at Yeshivat Hakotel. The essay is based on a class by Rabbi Taragin and then written by Yedidyah Rosenwasser.*

1. This concept of focusing on three things in order to avoid sin seems to have threaded the entire *Tannaitic* period. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Avot 2:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Meiri (Ibid) explains that the three aspects mentioned by Rebbe Yehuda Hanasi parallel the three principles of faith:

   1. The existence of G-d (“Know what is above you”).
   2. G-d’s awareness and *hashgacha* of what is going on in this world (“an eye that sees, an ear that hears”).
   3. The implications of this being that all of our actions are recorded (“and all your deeds are written in the book”).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Tehillim 16:8 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Akavya Ben Mahalalel also believed in the importance of maintaining G-d-consciousness. The Mishnah in Ediyot (5:6) describes how he responded to an offer to be appointed one of the leaders of the Sanhedrin on condition he retract certain personal beliefs by saying that he would “rather be called a foolhis whole life than to be wicked for even one moment before G-d.” Our cognizance of G-d’s presence should inspire us to remain true to our principles. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Avot 3:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Brachot 5a. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Similarly, in one of the five times David HaMelech said *shira,* he looked at the day of death for perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Tehillim 8:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Kohelet 12:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Avot 4:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)