

Of Asher he said, the most blessed of children is Asher; he shall be pleasing to his brothers, and dip his feet in oil. (33:24)

What made Asher so special that he was considered “the most blessed of children”? *Horav Shlomo Levenstein, Shlita*, quotes *Lechem Lefi HaTaf* who explains that the word, *shmeinah*, richness, which Yaakov *Avinu* uses to describe Asher – *Mei Asher shmeinah lachmo*, “From Asher- his bread will have richness” (*Bereishis* 49:20), – is a reference to Asher’s land which will be so rich in olive trees that it will flow with oil like a fountain. The word *shmeinah* is comprised of the same letters which comprise the word *Mishnah*. This alludes to the true “richness” of Asher; his tribe was devoted to studying Torah, and especially *Mishnayos*, more so than any other tribe.

The *Lechem Lefi HaTaf* supplements this exposition with a caveat from the **Arizal** who teaches that, after a person passes from this world, his soul is brought to *Gehinom*, Purgatory, for judgment. Is this soul to join the ranks of the punished, or will it ^{receive} its reward in *Gan Eden*? The soul cries out to each and every *shevet*, tribe, seeking redemption, salvation, from what might be a terrible fate. No one answers – no one responds to its pleas – until it calls out to Asher. Asher asks the *neshamah*, soul, of the deceased, “Did you study *Mishnayos* during your lifetime? If the answer is “yes”, the soul is immediately taken out of *Gehinom* and saved. The *Lechem Lefi Hataf* concludes his thesis with an allusion to the study of *Mishnayos* and its ability to save one from *Gehinom*, cited from the *pasuk* in *Sefer Tehillim* 30:4, (Hashem) *he’elissa min she’ol nafshi*, (Hay, mem, shin, nun)“(Hashem) You took my soul out from *she’ol*,” which is a term used to describe *Gehinom*. The first letter of each of these four words spell the word *Mishnah*!

The power of *Mishnayos* is sufficiently compelling for everyone to make the study of *Mishnayos* an integral part of his daily Torah-study ritual. **Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl**, relates an amazing story concerning the significance of *Mishnayos* study, especially regarding the moment of truth, when the soul passes from its earthly physical container. At that point, nothing accompanies the soul on its final journey – not money, not friends, not family. The only “baggage” allowed on this trip is the Torah he has learned and the acts of loving-kindness he has performed. Nothing else stands in his stead to support him at this most critical moment.

The *Talmud Torah* in Meah Shearim, in the mid-twentieth century, was a unique institution staffed by *rebbeim* of the highest caliber. These were holy men wholly dedicated to their students, but, above all, devoted to Hashem. *Rav Sholom* was a student in the *cheder*. His *rebbe* was an outstanding educator whose name was *Rav Yaakov*. *Rav Yaakov* was a holy man whose uniqueness was his ability to remain silent at all times, unless he was engrossed in Torah study or teaching his young charges. Silence was a common practice among the Jews of the *Yishuv*, especially during the month of *Elul* until after *Yom Kippur*. Even among these men who held silence to be a major virtue – *Rav Yaakov* was in a league all to himself. Indeed, he would speak no more than thirty words that were mundane in nature. (We must remember that his idea of mundane was

quite different than our idea of mundane.)

Rav Yaakov excelled in the study of *Mishnayos*, nary a moment going by that he was not either studying *Mishnayos* from a *sefer* or repeating it to himself from memory. Incidentally, *Rav Yaakov* knew the *Mishnah* by heart. Every free moment was filled with *Mishnayos* study.

Rav Sholom relates that one day he overheard one of the other *rebbeim* asking *Rav Yaakov* concerning his inextricable bond with *Mishnayos*. Why was he so obsessed with the study of *Mishnayos*? *Rav Yaakov's* response gives us a window into the mind of this holy Jew, and indeed, a virtual image of what *Yerushalmi* people were like less than a century ago. *Rav Yaakov* gave a smile and replied, "I began to think to myself what will happen to me when I pass from this world. You see, Torah study is very important to me, so, when I am not teaching my young students, I use every available moment for Torah study. What will I do, however, when I personally cannot study – during the short period from *yetzias neshamah*, the moment of death, until *keivurah*, burial? I am certain that, during this time, my corpse will be accompanied by men who will either be reciting *Tehillim* or studying *Mishnayos*.

"Then I realized that this might be fine if I were to pass from this world on a weekday, when the time elapsed from *yetzias neshamah* to *keivurah* is very short. Yet, man does not know when his time on this world has reached its conclusion. Quite possibly, I could die on *Erev Shabbos* and not be buried until *Motzei Shabbos*. Friday afternoon until Saturday night is not a short interval. Can I expect people to sit beside my corpse for so many hours – just to learn *Mishnayos* by my side? Therefore, I decided to memorize the *Mishnayos* and to repeat it constantly, so that it remains fixed in my memory. Thus, if I were to die on *Erev Shabbos*, I would recite the *Mishnayos* on my own behalf!"

The other *rebbeim* politely smiled at the notion of *Rav Yaakov* reciting *Mishnayos* on his own behalf, but they never for a moment thought that he was not sincere. This was *Rav Yaakov*. The postscript to the episode came when, years later, *Rav Yaakov* died on *Erev Shabbos*. *Rav Sholom* attended his funeral on *Motzei Shabbos*, and he was certain that his *rebbe* had recited *Mishnayos* throughout *Shabbos*.