

Discovering Hashem's Unity in the World

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The Mishna, as compiled and arranged by Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, forms the authoritative foundational corpus of Jewish law, the oral Torah, upon which the G'mora, Talmud, and Shulchan Aruch, Code of Jewish Law, are based. Thousands of pages of G'mora endeavor to explicate the sometimes terse or obscure phrases of the Mishna, and the Shulchan Aruch provides practical guidance in every area of halacha. Every word of every mishna has meaning, and nothing is taken for granted.

It is precisely for this reason that it is surprising to anyone who has studied meseches (tractate) Shabbos why Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi would choose to begin it with the halachic principle of hotza'ah, the melacha (prohibited Shabbos activity) of transferring items from the public to the private domain and vice versa. Why not start with things to be mindful of Friday afternoon in order to be able to properly prepare for Shabbos, as the remainder of the first perek, chapter, discusses? Why not save the discussion of hotza'ah

until the seventh perek, where all of the melachos are discussed? The G'mora discusses this question and concludes that the topic most special to the author was the one with which he chose to begin the mesechta. After all, the example brought in the mishna involves a homeowner extending necessities to a poor individual standing in the public domain outside the house, and providing for the needy is certainly an important mitzvah, especially for Shabbos.

Reb Noson deepens these concepts. He explains that the melacha of hotza'ah is in actuality representative of all the melachos, and in fact reflects the very essence of Shabbos itself, and that's why it was chosen to have the prominent placement as the first mishna. When engaged in the various melachos of the workweek, our intent is not exclusively to earn a livelihood or accomplish our other goals. By conducting ourselves within the framework of halacha and with emuna, all melechos help us achieve an extraordinary feat – finding and extracting the k'dusha extant and dispersed in the world, so we can “transfer” it from the public to the private domain where it belongs, ie. back into the malchus d'kedusha, Hashem's kingdom of holiness and oneness.

In fact, discovering Hashem's Unity amongst the diversity of the world, uncovering the good and holy intermingled with the bad, forms the true purpose of the workweek, as well as being a preparation for the upcoming Shabbos. Once Shabbos begins, however, we refrain from this process. Hashem has made Himself accessible to us without having to perform melachos. On Shabbos, we do not search for the holiness that lies without, but rather bask in the holiness that lies within, part of which is the very holiness we ourselves were able to extract from the workweek – for one who exerts himself before Shabbos will eat on Shabbos – one who has captured k'dusha during the workweek can enjoy an even greater experience of holiness on Shabbos.

(Based on Likutey Halachos, Choshen Mishpat, hilchos shutafim

b'karka 2)