With a New Commentary Anthologized

from the Works of the Classic Commentators

and the Chasidic Masters

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2. **Ben** Azzai said: Run to [perform even] an easy mitzvah, and flee from transgression; for one mitzvah brings about another, and one transgression brings about another; for the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the recompense of a transgression is a transgression.

**MISHNAH 2**

Like Ben Zoma (see previous Mishnah), Ben Azzai died at a young age and never received ordination (Bartenura; Rashi).

A student and colleague of Rabbi Akiva (see Bava Batra 158b), Ben Azzai’s brilliance and passion for Torah was legendary. No sage “uprooted mountains”—i.e., displayed incisive, profound insight—like Ben Azzai. All sages of Israel were “like the skin of garlic” in comparison to him—aside from Rabbi Akiva (see Rashi on Eruvin 29a, s.v. Hareni, and Sotah 45a).

When he taught Torah, he was surrounded by flames, akin to the original revelation of the Torah at Sinai when the mountain was aflame with fire (Deuteronomy 4:11) (Vayikra Rabbah 16:4).

Ben Azzai would sit in the markets of Tiberias and teach Torah. When later sages wanted to convey that they were feeling particularly sharp, they would say, “I am [ready to answer questions with sharpness and profundity] like Ben Azzai in the markets of Tiberias” (Sotah 45a and Rashi there.).

He was so immersed in Torah study, including its esoteric teachings (see below), that he did not wish to be distracted from it by marriage and raising a family. Although betrothed to Rabbi Akiva’s daughter, he either never married her (see Ketuvot 63a), or married but soon separated from her (see Sotah 4b).

When he was questioned about this by the Sages, his reply was, “But what should I do? My soul thirsts for Torah. The world can exist through others” (Yevamot 63b). Although Ben Azzai was halachically justified in his behavior, he was obviously the exception to the rule. See Hilchot Talmud Torah l’Admor Hazaken 3:1, and Kuntres Acharon there.

It was said of him, “When Ben Azzai passed away, the assiduous students [of Torah] ceased” (Sotah 49a).

Ben Azzai speaks not only of physical running—which is not appropriate for many mitzvot—but of an emotional yearning and joy in the fulfillment of a mitzvah, even a “minor” one. This pleasure and joy stems from an awareness that a mitzvah, even a minor one, connects us with the Infinite One. This awareness causes one to shed all restraint and “run” to the mitzvah (see Rambam, Hilchot Lulav 8:15).

A person who is limited by ego and self-centeredness, cannot truly “run” to a mitzvah with all of his being, since he is held back by his finiteness.

Even so, this person should still run to a mitzvah, since the act of running will bring him closer to running naturally (see Chinuch, 15) (The Rebbe in Biurim).

TO A “MINOR” MITZVAH. Or “easy” mitzvah. Hence the absence of a parallel “easy sin,” since all sins are easy (Tosfot Yom Tov). According to Machzor Vitri, however, “mitzvah” refers to sin as well—i.e., flee from a sin, even one that seems minor.
A person is conditioned by his actions. If he accustoms himself to mitzvot, mitzvot will come naturally to him. The same is true of sin (Bartenura).

In addition to the natural conditioning caused by one’s actions, God rewards the performer of a mitzvah with the opportunity and assistance to do other mitzvot. This is true of sin as well (Bartenura).

In the case of sin, however, God merely allows the person to follow his sinful path, but He does not assist him—“One who comes to be purified is assisted; one who comes to be defiled is allowed” (Yoma 38b) (R. Yonah).

Alternatively, the “reward”—i.e., the enjoyment that is experienced in performing the mitzvah, which is expressed in running to do the mitzvah—is also a mitzvah (Bartenura).

**THE ULTIMATE REWARD**

Midrash Shmuel explains that the greatest reward for a mitzvah is “mitzvah,” meaning “bond,” referring to the bond that is created between finite man and infinite God through man’s fulfillment of His will (see Tanya, ch. 37).

The Maggid of Mezritch applies this thought to the previous phrase as well: the performance of “a mitzvah brings about a ‘mitzvah’”—a bond with God.

The thrust of Ben Azzai’s Divine service was a yearning for transcendence, to cleave to God. He therefore distanced himself from marriage, saying, “What shall I do? My soul yearns for Torah” (see biography, above).

This yearning eventually led to his death during a meditative experience in which he “entered” the celestial spheres (Chagigah 14b). His performance of mitzvot therefore emphasized the exhilaration, sweetness, and joy of a mitzvah, the awareness that a mitzvah connects the finite human being with the infinite God (The Rebbe in Biurim; see above on 2:1).

There is no greater punishment for sin than sin itself—the fact that through sin one becomes separated and distant from the Creator (see HaChasid).