

OUR QUESTIONS

- 1** Why does this Mishna record the teachings of Avtalion without mention of his co-leader Shmaya, as in the prior Mishna?
- 2** Avtalion is warning scholars to be careful with “their words” so they won’t be exiled from their lands. What types of words is he referring to, and why may the penalty for them be exile?
- 3** Also, the Mishna says “lest” you be exiled. It’s not even definite. Why would he connect not being careful with their words as a “possible” cause of exile?
- 4** And if this were to be the punishment, it would lead to going to a place of “bitter waters”? What does a place of bitter waters refer to?
- 5** The next step of the process is that their students will follow them into exile. Is this voluntary or forced on the part of the students?
- 6** Then the students will drink of the waters and die. What does that mean, and doesn’t it imply that the teachers will not die? Why?
- 7** And the result of all this will be that “the Name of Heaven will be profaned.” Usually, Shem Shamayim refers to “God’s Name.” His name will be profaned. How? What does it mean to profane G-d’s Name in this context?
- 8** What can non-scholars without large followings take from this cautionary tale? Can we similarly cause G-d’s Name to be profaned through our actions?

COMMENTARY BY RABBI MORDECHAI ROTTMAN

“ Avtalion says: Scholars! Be very careful about your choice of words when you are teaching. If not, you may come to be exiled to a place of bitter waters, where your students will drink of these waters and die, thereby bringing great desecration to the Name of Heaven. ”

SYNOPSIS:

In this very poetic Mishna, Avtalion is cautioning all of us about how careful we have to be with our words. But scholars/teachers have to be more careful than others. The words that leave the lips of the scholar of today become the mores and ideals of the student of tomorrow. Especially in the realm of Torah, which is looked up to as the guiding light for our civilization, words spoken with authority must be weighed very carefully. In the end, we will be held accountable for all of the damage caused by careless words. Damage that could have been avoided had more prudence been employed.

A Deeper Look:

By nature, good teachers are the kind of people who enjoy giving over concepts that can have a beneficial effect on the lives of other people. There is nothing more rewarding for a teacher than watching his beloved disciple grow and develop along the lines and concepts that the teacher himself has inculcated within him.

However, with every benefit, there are responsibilities. A careless phrase can wreak havoc and destruction upon the student. It is for this reason that the Talmud says that if a school has a choice between two different teachers, one who moves through the material quickly but is not careful in his explanation, and the other who moves rather slowly, but very meticulous about his explanation, the school should hire the slower teacher. Better quality than quantity in the world of impressionable minds and open hearts.

We can take the words in the Mishna a step further, to apply not only to the information being given over, but to the teacher's interpersonal relationship with the student as well. Perhaps then the Mishna could be understood as follows:

Teachers! Be careful with your words! Say the wrong thing to a child and you can ruin him for life! Be careful not to ridicule him when he makes a mistake! Be careful not to destroy his self-esteem! If you must reprimand him, do it with love! And if you cannot, please, please, for the sake of Heaven, get a job as an accountant or some other profession.

Pencils don't cry themselves to sleep at night and swear revenge against humanity if you break them in half.

SUMMARY

The ramifications of careless speech are impossible to know at the time that it is spoken.

It is for this reason we must be exceedingly careful about the things we say, especially teachers and scholars. Because the stature and authority that they have in the eyes of their students gives their words special significance in the minds of the listeners.

Misunderstandings that arise as a result of this inattentiveness on the part of the teacher may result in a tragedy that he will be held accountable for. By the way:

The word for parent in Hebrew, "horeh," has the same root as the word for teacher, "moreh." Parents are teachers too, and must also keep the words of the Mishna in mind in their various conversations with their children.