PIRQE ABOT 4:22 The afterlife and the library

Yesterday we explained the words of Rabbi Yaaqob: this life is a preparation for the life to come.
Today, we are going to expand a little more on this idea.

In this Mishna, Rabbi Yaaqob says something that seems surprising. He compares our life with life after death and he says that this life is more important than the next.

He says: *“It is more valuable a moment of repentance and good deeds in this world, than the entire life of the world to come.”*

What did Rabbi Yaaqob mean? The most essential virtue of man, what distinguishes man from the animals and angels, is man’s free will. Man can choose to do good or to do evil, to grow spiritually or to stagnate. To be selfish or altruistic. It is thanks to this “freedom of choice” that we make our moral decisions: Will I or will I not help someone who needs me? Will I or I will not speak ill of so and so? Will I or will I not steal, hurt, heal, apologize, forgive?

Free will is an exclusive prerogative of mortals. In the world to come we do not make moral decisions. There are no poor who needs help, nor sick who needs visitors, not physical people to speak ill of them or conspiring against them. No money to steal, nor the possibility of being faithful or unfaithful, cruel or compassionate.

Rabbi Yaaqob main message to us is that our development and spiritual growth consists in making these moral decisions throughout our life. We are what we have decided to do in our lives. And the better those decisions are, the more our souls grows, and vice versa. Rabbi Ya’aqob also emphasizes the idea of Teshuba, repentance. In the world to come there is no

possibility of repentance. Only here, in this life, we can ask forgiveness from God for having violated His will, and only in this life we have the opportunity to apologize to those whom we have offended. In the world to come there is no possibility of change, progress, growth or repentance. That's why, in this sense, life in this world is incomparably more meaningful than the life in the next world.

Imagine that the world to come is a beautiful library, containing books, only books. The most beautiful books in the world are in this library. In this life, you have the opportunity to learn to read, in any language you want, so when you get to the library you can enjoy the most fabulous works of human literature. But this library has some limitations: there are no audiobooks there and no one to teach you how to read. "Reading" can only be learned before one enters into the library.The example of the library serves also to understand what Rabbi Ya'aqob said regarding the greater importance of this world, compared to the world to come.

Incidentally this illustration also helps us to understand why the Mishna never speaks of paradise or hell, but only of the world to come, as if it was one and the same place for the righteous and for the wicked. Two people come to the library. The first person learned several languages and appreciates a good reading. Now in the library he has access to all the books he wants. He is in paradise! The other person knows a lot about politics and sports, and he is an expert in playing poker and video games. But he is illiterate. He never wanted to invest some time to learn how to read. The two people are in the same place … and yet, they are not in the same place. The literate man is in paradise. The other one, is not.