

The Dee

Pirkei Avot Project

אַבְטָלִיוֹן אוֹמֵר, חֲכָמִים, הִזְהָרוּ בְּדַבְרֵיכֶם, שֶׁמָּא תַּחֲבוּ חוֹבֵת גְּלוֹת וְתִגְלוּ לְמָקוֹם מַיִם הָרָעִים, וְיִשְׁתּוּ הַתְּלָמִידִים הַבָּאִים אַחֲרֵיכֶם וְיָמוּתוּ, וְנִמְצָא שֵׁם שְׁמַיִם מִתְחַלֵּל:
 Avtalion used to say: Sages, be careful with your words, lest you incur the penalty of exile, and be carried off to a place of evil waters, and the disciples who follow you drink and die, and thus the name of heaven becomes profaned.

This Mishna is different from others because it targets a specific group of people: scholars. It also uses dramatic, metaphorical language. The idea of being careful with words is meant to instruct the scholars to take care that ambiguous words are not misunderstood. If somebody misunderstands a scholar would it ever actually lead to death? Where is this 'place of evil waters' and why does the Mishna use this evocative language?

First let's remember the key lesson of the Mishna, which is so important. If you have more wisdom or knowledge, then by definition you have more responsibility; the power that you hold to influence others' lives can be significant. Even if you only have increased expertise in one area, people are likely to ask for your advice and ideas. This message is particularly valuable today when social media enables more people than ever to influence others. Although influencers may enjoy the rush of success and feeling of having an impact, it is also crucial to keep in mind the weight of responsibility that comes alongside it. The larger the audience, the more potential there is for misunderstanding and the clearer the communication needs to be.

The language of the Mishna models its own message and leaves the reader with a visceral understanding of the dire consequences of being ambiguous in speech. Even lives can be put at stake by misunderstandings. Although this might not happen often, it is still important to keep the risk in mind. One life lost is too many. "Evil waters" refers to foreign and harmful philosophies to which people can be drawn through misunderstandings. The Mishna uses powerful metaphors to communicate this important point and to make it memorable.

But it is not only the students who may be misdirected to drink from evil waters. The scholars themselves may be exiled there. When you become more learned and start developing theories of your own, you naturally find ideas to support them and can easily veer away from the initial message. This Mishna is warning scholars away from the temptation of not being clear about valuable Torah messages.

Discussion Points:

Have you ever been influenced by a scholar or an expert?
 How do you decide whether or not to believe and follow the advice of a scholar?
 When you share your learning, how can you make sure that you communicate your ideas or advice clearly to others?

לעילוי נשמת:

לאה בת רפאל הכהן וציפורה
 מאיה אסתר בת הרב אריה מרדכי ולאה
 רינה מרים בת הרב אריה מרדכי ולאה

Idea by Rebbetzin Chana Hughes



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