ITLE	Jeffrey Lewis Falick Rabbi Obadiah Sforno:
An	Annotated Translation of the
Cor	nmentary on Pirgei Avot
YPE OF THE	SIS: Ph.D. [] D.H.L. [] Rabbinic [X]
	Master's [] Prize Essay []
	culate [) Not necessary) for Ph.D.
. Is rest	ricted [] for years.) thesis
I under	The Library shall respect restrictions placed on theses or prize essays for a period of no more than ten years. stand that the Library may make a photocopy of my thesis ecurity purposes.
The Lib	rary may sell photocopies of my thesis.
	yes no
2/27	189 Shuntalit
ate	Signature of Anthor
	V

Maulyn Kuder Signature of Library Staff Member

Digest

Rabbi Obadiah Sforno was born in Cesena, Italy, in approximately 1470, and died in 1550. This talented man was known as both a rabbi and a physician. In Bologna, he rose to prominence as the author of several commentaries on biblical works. The most famous of these is the Pentateuchal commentary which is found in most rabbinic Bibles until this day. He was very prolific, however, and he also wrote commentaries to many other biblical books. In addition, Sforno was well schooled in the philosophical tradition. Possibly in response to what he perceived as an over reliance upon Aristotelian thought, Sforno wrote his philosophical treatise, Or Amim.

The only known extra-biblical work upon which Sforno commented is the mishnaic tractate, <u>Pirqei Avot</u>, or, "Sayings of the Fathers." Basing himself upon the wealth of biblical and talmudic traditions, Sforno attempted to interpret the rabbinical sayings of the past for a contemporary audience.

The stylistic features of this commentary are very interesting. Sforno relies heavily upon past commentators, but does not hesitate to disagree, though he never cites any of his predecessors by name. He uses both biblical and talmudic personages to illustrate his points, often utilizing them as object lessons. While his interpretations of the individual sayings are generally according to standard rabbinic understandings, Sforno does at times reach

a different conclusion about the meaning of a specific saying.

Many of Sforno's own beliefs about providence,
theodicy, and so forth are read into the rabbinic text. At
times he utilizes traditional language, and at times he
creates or uses existing philosophical terminology.

This thesis is a translation of his commentary on <u>Avot</u>. It includes the page numbering and mishnaic divisions of the critical edition by Zev Gottlieb. It also includes an introduction which examines the life, times, and style of Sforno.

Rabbi Obadiah Sforno: An Annotated Translation of the Commentary on Pirqei Avot

Jeffrey Lewis Falick

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

1989

Referee, Professor Barry Kogan

Table of Contents

Acknowledgementsiii
Guide to Transliterationiy
Translator's Introductionv
Sforno's Introduction1
Chapter One5
Chapter Two
Chapter Three50
Chapter Four
Chapter Five114
Chapter Six - Pereq Qinyan Torah140
Bibliography

Acknowledgements

There are so many people whom I wish to thank for their wisdom and teaching during the translation of this work and my tenure at the Hebrew Union College. First of all, I would like to thank my family. Their enormous sacrifices have enabled me to pursue this thesis and all of my projects with a sound mind. I am forever in their debt.

I would also like to thank my advisor, Rabbi Barry Kogan. His patience, persistence, and scholarly guidance have been an inspiration to me throughout my rabbinic education. He has demonstrated to me the ways in which a rabbinical mind should be put to use.

I am also indebted to Rabbi Abie Ingber, my mentor and friend. He has wisely led me through the practical education that I have acquired for my profession. He is, and will always remain, my rabbi.

This thesis is dedicated to the one person without whom I would not even have attended rabbinic school. She is the wisest person I know. She is certainly the most patient. She is loving and giving. She is my wife, Tracey. Not only this thesis, but my entire being, is dedicated to her.

Guide to Transliteration

(Dagesh forte is noted by doubling the letter.)

Rabbi Obadiah Sforno; Translator's Introduction to the Commentary on Pirqei Avot

The Life of Obadiah Sforno

It is virtually impossible to compose a detailed account of the life of the remarkable Obadiah Sforno.

Unfortunately, even though there are several useful sources which may be consulted, none of these can provide us with the detail which would yield a full, much less rich biography. Instead, we must be satisfied with fragments of personal comments found in his letters and commentaries, and with brief references to him by others.

Rabbi Obadiah b. Jacob Sforno was born in Cesena,
Italy, in approximately 1470, and died in Bologna, his
family's home, in 1550. There is very little biographical
information available about his family. Since he dedicates
several introductions to his works to his father, Jacob, a
citizen of Bologna, he may have been an intellectual model
for Sforno. Yet even this is difficult to conclude because
of the commonality of this practice among authors. About
his mother or his wife we have absolutely no information.

From 1496 to 1525, Sforno lived primarily in Rome.

During this time in his life, Sforno became a physician.

Reuven Bonfil, in his history of the medieval Italian rabbinate, provides a reprint of the Latin text of the medical degree which Sforno received on April 27, 1501, from the University of Ferrara. In this document, he is referred

to as Servideus Jacobi Sfurni, a Latin equivalent of Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno. 1

While he lived in Rome, Sforno apparently did not pursue a medical career. Zev Gottlieb, author of the critical edition of Sforno's complete works, speculates that Sforno was not known at all as a physician in Rome. One primary source which places him in Rome during this time is the travelogue of David Reuveni, who visited there in 1524. He reports meeting four heads of the Jewish community, and among these is Sforno. In addition to his role as a respected leader of the Roman community, Sforno made a name for himself as a Hebrew grammarian, by publishing a grammar in Latin in 1520 and by teaching Hebrew to others. The cardinal, Dominico Grimani, recommended him to the famous German humanist, Johannes Reuchlin, whom he tutored in Hebrew. According to Gottlieb, he also tutored many priests in the language.

His most important activity, however, did not occur until his settlement in Bologna, the home of his brother, Hananel. It was there that Sforno's reputation as a physician was established. In Bologna he achieved fame as a rabbi and commentator. He received questions from far and near and composed several important halakhic responsa which

Bonfil, Ha-Rabbanut BeItalyah BeTequfat Ha-Renaissance, 226.

²Aescoli-Weintraub, Sippur David Ha-Re'uveni, 47.

are still extant. In 1537, he involved himself, along with some other citizens of the town, in re-establishing a Hebrew press there. According to Shalshelet Ha-Qabbalah, a historic source written by the sixteenth century Venician rabbi, Gedaliah b. Joseph Yachya, he also founded the Bet Midrash academy in Bologna.

It seems, however, that Sforno was not very satisfied with his life. It is extremely difficult to piece together a complete picture, but there is a great deal of evidence to indicate that throughout his life he was in economic difficulty. It seems that his financial support came primarily from his brother, Hananel.

As a financier, Hananel apparently had considerable funds. From Sforno's extant letters to him, as well as from other materials, it would seem that Hananel was no great scholar or rabbi, but that he did have a great deal of respect for Torah. Judging from some of the content of Sforno's letters to his younger brother, it would also appear that Hananel was greatly interested in Sforno's work. (Sforno may have had another brother, Zemach, who is alluded to in only one letter.) Hananel's aid does not seem to have served to raise the morale of Sforno, whose subsistence was so often provided by Hananel:

Despite his great talents and knowledge, and even with the support that at times he received from his brother...Sforno suffered continually from financial worries, a fact which is constantly

reflected between the lines of his commentaries. These worries gnawed at his spirit and robbed him of the peace of mind necessary for Torah study ...and complete service of God. 3

We shall see that this is also reflected in his commentary to <u>Pirqei Avot</u>.

Sforno did have children. One son, Jacob, named for Sforno's father, is mentioned in several letters. Jacob's son, named, interestingly, for Hananel, became the executor of his grandfather's commentaries and tracts. He was responsible for publishing many of them. The existence of another son might be inferred from a letter, but it is not clear. What is clear is that Sforno was not responsible for the upbringing or education of his children. Gottlieb cites the evidence for this assumption:

From a letter by Sforno, we know that his sons were raised in the house of his brother, Hananel, in Bologna....We do not know what forced Sforno to leave the education of his sons to his brother. It has been suggested that their mother had died.

There is a letter which suggests that Sforno had a wife, but since she is never identified as the mother of his children, we might surmise, as Gottlieb suggests, that this is a second wife.

³Gottlieb, Bei'ur `al Ha-Torah LeRabbi Obadiah Sforno,

⁴ Ibid., p. 15.

Sforno's university education certainly availed him of a strong renaissance education. He undoubtedly knew Latin fluently, both spoken and written. He not only taught Reuchlin in that language, but he also translated both his Hebrew grammar and his important philosophical tract, Or Amim, into Latin. Samuel Stahl, a translator of Sforno's commentary on Deuteronomy, has suggested that Sforno also knew Arabic. Ephraim Finkel, a late nineteenth century biographer of Sforno, also indicates that "it is to be inferred...that he was also able in Arabic, which among the occidental Jews of that Period is...astonishing."

All of Sforno's accomplishments seem astonishing, especially in view of the difficult life that it seems he led. As a commentator and writer he was very prolific. His most important work is undoubtedly the commentary on the Torah, parts of which were published during his lifetime. To this day, the commentary is included in the standard rabbinic Bibles, alongside the commentaries of Ibn Ezra, Rashi, Ramban, and other great rabbis.

Sforno did not limit himself to this commentary, of course. His works also extend to other books of Scripture. He wrote commentaries on Psalms, Job, Habakkuk, Zechariah, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Jonah. He also commented upon short sections of other scriptural texts.

Two works of his were not specifically exegetic

⁵Finkel, R. Obadjah Sforno als Exeget, 3.

commentaries on any book of the Bible. These were Kawanot Ha-Torah, a short introduction to his Pentateuchal commentary, in which he attempts to isolate the major themes of Torah, and the philosophical treatise, Or Amim. Sforno, in the Italian scholastic tradition, was extremely well-versed in the prevalent philosophies of Aristotelianism. He lived in a scholarly atmosphere that was dominated by this school of thought. According to many scholars of Sforno, he wrote this work in order to present his arguments against the widespread dependence upon this tendency. Others argue that he was primarily concerned with expressing his own very Aristotelian outlook. The truth is probably somewhere in between. Sforno seems to have held many Aristotelian assumptions, yet did not hesitate to disagree with any aspects of it philosophy with which he disagreed. As Stahl points out:

Sforno fundamentally disagrees with Aristotle's view of Creation and of Individual Providence. Yet, we can see obvious signs of Aristotle's philosophy when we study Sforno's views of form and matter, the self-consciousness of God, and the nature and objective of the human soul.

Basically, as Stahl notes, Sforno did not want Aristotle, whose thought should be appreciated as the starting point for many important ideas, to be seen as the last word for his contemporaries.

Stahl, "A Translation of Sforno's Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy," 2.

The work with which we are concerned is fundamentally different from Or Amim. The commentary on Pirqui Avot, aside from being Sforno's only known commentary upon a rabbinic text, does not, as we shall soon see, emphasize Sforno's philosophy. While some elements of philosophic insight are apparent, this work was primarily, in keeping with the intent of the rabbis, one of ethical concern.

The Times of Obadiah Sforno

Before returning to the commentary on Avot, it is important to understand the world in which Obadiah Sforno lived. Renaissance Italy was like no place else for the Jews. They were perhaps freer than any other place in previous Diaspora history, save medieval Spain. Yet, the tensions between burgeoning secular and humanistic forces on the one hand, and strong religious authority on the other, had a profound impact upon the Jews of the time. The effects were felt from both within and without. From without, the Jews often suffered from the Church's efforts to assert its authority; efforts that were invariably coupled with persecutions of Jews. From within, the Jewish communities struggled to retain their own religious authority over increasingly disinterested Jews, so often distracted by the kinds of secular problems which we will examine shortly.

Italy was not a unified nation for most of the years of

the Renaissance. The Jewish communities paralleled their political structure. In most every city, one could find a different political arrangement among the Jews themselves, as well as between the Jewish community and the Christian authorities. Therefore, it is very difficult to make many generalizations about the Jewish political situation, except to say that overall the Jews, especially those with money, lived very well under the arrangements with the authorities. This was particularly true if the community paid its taxes regularly and had some sort of representative body of shtadlanim who could intercede in its behalf. Sforno, whose sympathies often remained with the less fortunate Jews, lamented the fact that these shtadlanim, upon whom all the Jews relied, often performed their duties without the proper motivations of service to God. This is often reflected in his commentary on Avot.

Of the trades in which Jews were involved, the predominant one was financing. Moses Shulvass notes the process by which this developed:

Italian life [had begun] to expand, creating a demand for credit. However, precisely because of the enhanced significance of the loan business...the Church increased it opposition to usury....These...factors combined...to impel the development of the loan business among Jews.

One of the cities in which the Jewish financial houses

⁷Shulvass, <u>Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy</u>, 114.

became predominant was Sforno's home, Bologna. As we noted earlier, his family, especially Hananel, was engaged in this trade.

The loan banking business had an interesting by-product for the Jews; namely, it provided leisure time. Another important historian of this period, Cecil Roth, notes that these resources and the leisure time had a profound effect upon the Jews of the time:

...the Italian Jewish community of this period thus started with an essentially 'aristocratic' structure, not too common in Jewish history....[T]he profession of moneylending is not what might be called an exacting one, in terms of time. Like the merchant-princes of the Italian city-states, the loan bankers sat at home and waited for the profits to accrue. Meanwhile, they had ample leisure time to busy themselves with cultural matters...and they did so with all their might. 8

We shall see that in his commentary on Avot, Sforno was very concerned with the proper use of an individual's free time.

From all of this, we can see that during most of the period many Jews generally lived what might be called "the good life." Their housing was expansive, and even poorer Jews might be found who possessed houses with separate rooms for the children. This affluence led to some pursuits that

Roth, The Jews in the Renaissance, 16.

⁹Shulvass, 172.

were less cultured than one might think. Gambling, especially, was a prevalent vice of the Jewish communities.

The communities were rather weakly organized and did little for the education of the young. People educated their children by hiring private tutors, often rabbis. The tutors of the wealthy would teach both secular and religious subjects. University educations were not uncommon during the brighter days of the period. We have seen that Sforno became a physician. This was quite common for Jews in Renaissance Italy, who followed in the footsteps of Maimonides and other famous Jewish healers.

During the period in which the Jews prospered, which included much of Sforno's life, adherence to religious morality was sometimes weakened. Jews took up all of the sins of the surrounding cultures and placed less emphasis upon the religious values of the community. For instance, many lamented the occurrences of Jewish crime:

Especially shocking is the large number of informers and murderers. There were Jews who murdered in the act of robbery, and others who hired themselves out as murderers. 10

When Sforno deals with murder and robbery in his commentary, he is not doing so from a theoretical standpoint.

Another concern, about which many rabbis were deeply troubled, was the extensive social contacts between Jews and

¹⁰ Ibid., 200-201.

non-Jews. This often led to romantic liaisons between the two groups. In fact, scholars of the period report that Jewish prostitution became a reality for Italian Jewry. The rabbis weren't the only ones concerned about the closeness of relations between Christians and Jews. The Church did its best to stop this. In 1522, for example, the Church forbade even casual conversation between Jews and gentiles at parties and dances. Periodically, the Church would send forth zealous preachers who would visit a town to rail against the Jews. This would usually result in a temporary distancing of Christians and Jews. At times, particularly toward the end of the period, in the early 1500's (Sforno's lifetime), the Church, acting under the pressure of counter-Reformation, became especially cruel toward the Jews. Bologna witnessed this increasing division especially in the beginning of the sixteenth century when it was officially joined to the States of the Church. By 1569, only nineteen years after Sforno's death, the Jews of Bologna were expelled.

Characteristics of Sforno's Style

Now that we have surveyed some aspects of Sforno's life and times, we will turn to stylistic features of his commentaries, especially commentary on Pirquitation Avot. In his commentaries upon biblical works, Stahl notes that Sforno is "heavily dependent upon his predecessors" and although he

almost never quotes previous exegetical sources, although he does cite the Bible and Talmud. ¹¹ In the biblical works, he liberally uses the material available to him from Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Nachmanides, in particular.

Gottlieb notes many stylistic features which can be generalized to all of Sforno's exegetical works. He surmises that Sforno, like so many other commentators, knew the Bible by heart:

His memory...is wonderful. He was fluent in the entire Bible, and the majority of what he cites -- almost its entirety -- he wrote without looking in a book. 12

His expertise, according to Gottlieb, is not limited to scriptural citations. He is also thoroughly versed in talmudic literature, both halakhic and aggadic.

Both the observations by Stahl and Gottlieb, as well as many other characteristics of his style, are demonstrated in the commentary on <u>Avot</u>. This commentary also seems to display a great dependence upon the work of others, yet it is almost impossible to state where exactly Sforno found his material because much of it is located in many sources.

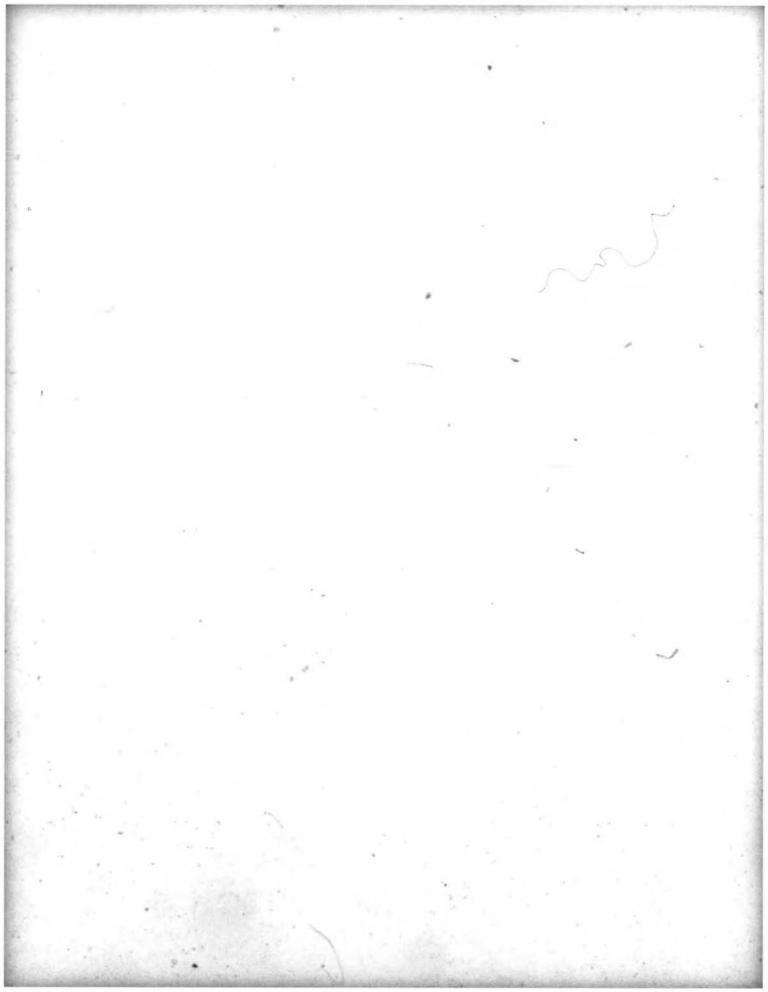
One source, perhaps the only one (except for the Bible and <u>Talmud</u>) which is undeniable, is that of Maimonides.

This is not surprising because Sforno's commentary may very well have been a response to that of the Rambam. Gottlieb

¹¹Stahl, 1-2.

¹²Gottlieb, 26.

suggests that in Sforno's introduction to his own work, the reference to his predecessors might refer primarily to Rambam. Indeed, the commentary was originally published in Sforno's lifetime, in the Machzor Roma, alongside Maimonides' commentary to Avot. The parallels between Sforno's commentary and his cannot be coincidental. A good example of this is found in 3:15, where Rabbi El'azar Ha-Moda'i states that "Someone who profanes holy objects...has no portion in the world to come." In explication of this mishnah, Sforno cites Numbers 15:31 to illustrate the punishment of someone who profanes holy objects, and so forth. This seems to be an addition to Rambam's citation of 15:30 in his own commentary. There he uses the proof text to illustrate that the person described in the mishnah should be understood as a heretic. There is no doubt that Sforno has built his comment upon the earlier one, although he never acknowledges his source. This is common throughout the entire work. Other commentators were also heavily dependent upon Maimonides and parallel this usage. A good example is Rabbi Obadiah Bertinoro, a contemporary of Sforno in Renaissance Italy (who later lived in Palestine). He not only relies upon many of Rambam's comments, as does Sforno, but he interprets many concepts in Avot very much like Sforno. Because of these commonalities and what they indicate about the similarity of rabbinic thought during the period, Bertinoro's parallels are cited throughout the



[like dew].'" His citations of biblical proofs in <u>Pirqei</u>

<u>Avot</u> are flawless. There is not a single example of a misquoted verse.

It is interesting to note that many times when Sforno cites a biblical verse, his interpretation in the context of Avot is not the same as in his exegesis on the verse in his pentateuchal or other biblical commentaries. Sometimes his reading of a particular verse is very different. In his comment upon Ps. 139:17, Sforno understands the verse to mean, "How weighty are your thoughts to me, O God." This is the simple meaning of the text. Yet in citing it to comment upon 6:1, he clearly takes it to mean, "How dear Your friends are to me, O God," a meaning which supports the text of the mishnah.

His fluency with the <u>Talmud</u>, much longer and more difficult than the Bible, is even more impressive. He rarely cites the tractate from which he is quoting, although he does once or twice. In all of the commentary on <u>Avot</u>, there is only one instance of a misquote, and this may have been purposeful. In the comment upon 4:23, Sforno quotes Rabbi Akiva as saying, "If I had an ignoramus before me I would bite him like an ass." The passage in <u>Pesachim 49b</u> actually reads, "If I had a learned man before me I would bite him like an ass." There are a few possibilities: that Sforno misquoted by mistake, that he had a different version of this talmudic section, or that he changed the quote

specifically to make his own point. Regardless, the important thing is that Sforno did have an almost unlimited fluency with the <u>Talmud</u>, a most amazing achievement for a man with so many other talents.

While Sforno is not primarily concerned with philological questions in any of his commentaries, he is even less so in Avot. In fact, not one original philological point is made by him in this commentary, although he echoes some earlier ones of his own and of the Talmud. For instance, in 4:18, he mentions Shiloh, a word which he had earlier analyzed in commentary upon Genesis 49:10. The word zagen is also understood by Sforno with a philological meaning as zeh sheqanah chokhma, ("one who has acquired wisdom"), but he has taken this from Qiddushin 32b.

Another feature of his commentary is the use he makes of both talmudic and biblical personages. The personal stories that comprise much of the Talmud are often linked with the Sages who are quoted in Pirqei Avot. In his commentary to 1:10, he links the statement by Shemayah, "Hate lordship and do not make yourself known to the authorities," to Shemayah's feelings about his student, Menachem, who eventually chose to work for the civil authorities. Further, in 1:15, he repeats the entire story of Menachem from Chagigah 16b in order to illustrate Shammai's charge to "say little and do much, and greet every man with a cheerful face." Similarly, 2:17 contains a

comment which links the statement of Rabbi Simeon, "Do not think yourself evil," to Elisha ben Avuyah, the famous heretic who, according to another story in Chagigah, would not repent because he thought himself beyond hope of return.

Biblical personages are also used to illustrate points in the commentary. Moses, for instance, is used to demonstrate a person who brings many to merit. The comment on 1:4 makes use of Elisha to illustrate how one is to sit in the dust of the Sages. In another very long comment on 5:7, Sforno explains the definitions of a boor and of a wise man by taking the characters from Job as examples. This particular comment is significant in that it is similar to the usage of these biblical personages in the Avot DeRabbi Natan, yet Sforno's comment is much more detailed. His characterizations are not limited to Elihu, but extend to Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar. Using many citations, taken creatively out of context, Sforno portrays the types spoken about in the mishnah.

Sforno does not usually change the generally accepted meaning of a specific mishnah. However, he does occasionally twist the meaning of a given saying to agree with his own interpretation. A very good example of this is found in 4:7, where he argues that earning a living by teaching Torah is not a profanation of Torah (a point of view to which Rambam had taken extreme exception). One more radical change that he does make in the actual manner of translating

a text is found in 5:2, "...All the generations angered Him until Abraham came along, and He received the reward of them all." Most commentators have understood the subject of "he received the reward of them all" to be Abraham. Sforno's comment leaves no doubt that he reads this mishnah differently as, "He (God) received the [equivalent of the] reward of them all [from Abraham]." Overall, however, Sforno does not diverge very much from the usual understandings of the mishnayot.

Themes of the Commentary on Avot

Sforno, due primarily to his <u>Or Amim</u>, has earned the reputation of being a philosopher. It is true that he was well versed in the philosophic tradition, and as so many before him, dealt seriously with the issues of revelation and reason and their interrelationship. Yet Sforno was, first and foremost, a rabbinic thinker. His world never ceased to revolve around the <u>Talmud</u> and rabbinic exegesis. <u>Or Amim</u> and many portions of his commentaries do indeed display great philosophic depth. Yet those with a solid grounding in rabbinic texts, but little philosophic background, will find that the preponderance of Sforno's work is accessible. In fact, Gottlieb has argued that:

...in truth, ultimately Rabbi Obadiah Sforno was not a 'philosopher,' but a talmudic rabbi, believing with all his heart not only in the essentials of the faith, but in the truthfulness of the words of the Sages, of blessed memory, in every single detail. 13

This might be somewhat overstated because every generation, including Sforno's, has believed the essentials of the faith in terms of its own scholarly background. However, the tendency which leads Gottlieb to make this claim is certainly apparent; Sforno is a talmudic thinker.

In the commentary on <u>Pirqei</u> <u>Avot</u> this is especially evident. We have already seen his enormous reliance on both biblical and talmudic texts. Now we will examine some of the themes of the commentary itself. It is important to note that while so many of these themes are developed in philosophical language, they are inseparable from traditional rabbinical concepts. There are some areas where the philosophic definitions of rabbinic categories seem more dependent on philosophy than the <u>Talmud</u> (e.g., what constitutes the eternal part of a human being), but overall, the rabbinic categories predominate. Moreover, in the commentary on <u>Avot</u>, Sforno reveals himself as an moralist, addressing the way in which Jews may attain perfection in the eyes of God.

The first theme which we will consider is Sforno's classification of the Torah. Throughout the entire commentary, Sforno describes the Torah as divided into two parts which he terms 'iyun and ma'aseh. In the translation,

¹³ Ibid., 26.

"theory") for 'iyun, and "practice" for ma'aseh. The latter category is the more easily understood: the Torah provides commandments and instructions as to what constitutes a person's proper behavior. The former is not quite as easy to explain. The Torah, according to Sforno, provides us with information about God and the world which may be understood from studying its speculative part. So, for instance, in 1:1, at the very beginning of his commentary, Sforno states immediately that the subject of this speculative part is "knowing God," and the goal of it is "to fear and love him."

These categories are inseparable from traditional rabbinic ideas. Even the verse which Sforno cites in 1:1, Ex. 24:12, has been commonly used by the rabbis to separate the Torah into the categories of "teaching" and "commandment," roughly the equivalent of speculation and practice. Sforno, however, introduces a philosophic dimension to this classification. A good example of this is given in 2:8. Here the idea of the human intellect's role in salvation is introduced. The speculative, or theoretical, part of Torah is identified as that which provides the soul with eternal life. That takes place because the potential intellect, which every person possesses, becomes actualized by cognizing the intelligibles. This is presumably guided by the study of the theoretical part of Torah. Furthermore,

while the speculative part may provide one with eternal life, the practical part, when followed correctly, will enable one to enjoy divine favor.

The relationship between the theoretical and practical parts of Torah are really inseparable. The commentary upon 3:1 defines the intellectual part of a human being as what is eternal. However, in 3:19, Sforno comments upon the statement, "everything is according to the preponderance of one's deeds," by explaining the interrelationship between the theoretical (which so involves the intellect) and the practical. It seems that the acquired intellect, which comes about by actually engaging in intellectual cognition of the intelligibles, does provide us with eternal life. It is also the very source of our humanity (our "rational animality," as Sforno describes it). However, it is the deeds which one performs which act as a gauge by which one measures the strength of the actual intellect. In other words, one's deeds are a reflection of what one knows. When one has perfect knowledge of what can be known about God and His world, then one's deeds (the practical part) will be in total consonance with that knowledge.

Deeds also play an important role for people who, by their natures, are not able to engage in the speculative portion to the same degree. Beginning with the first mishnah, Sforno places everyone who followed Moses on an inferior level of speculation. No one has ever known God in

the manner that Moses did. In other sections of the commentary, Sforno speaks about various Sages who were more or less capable in this area. Because of the different abilities of human beings, deeds have been provided in the practical part of Torah which enable everyone to share in eternal life.

Obviously, all of this has a strong philosophic basis. Yet Sforno is far more dependent upon the rabbis than Aristotle. His conception of the speculative part involves knowing God, fearing God, and coming to understand God's will. This assumes, as traditional Judaism does, that God has a will. Moreover, the view that deeds have been revealed by God and are accessible to anyone, regardless of their ability to cognize the intelligibles (which means God and His world) is distinctly rabbinic. Another important theme of the commentary is the types of fear of God.

Sforno often deals with the "fear of God." Commenting upon 1:3, Sforno first defines what is meant by fearing God: one may express fear out of a desire to avoid punishment, or because one recognizes (undoubtedly through the speculative part of Torah) the greatness of God. The latter kind of fear is superior to the former. In another section of the commentary, Sforno gives this an important practical application. In 3:11-12, he discusses the motivations of acts, notably of those who possess "political wisdom," which is how a person behaves in all of his affairs (we might say,

"behaving in a politic way"). The results of upright behavior are such that one will often be rewarded by it. However, the reward should not be one's motivation because then this "political wisdom" will not endure. What enables it to endure is a more appropriate motivation, namely, the fear of God. In this way, one will always behave ethically, even when there is no indication that this would be politically expedient. (This emphasis on motivation is qualified, however, at another point in the commentary. In order to demonstrate the importance of one's deeds, Sforno comments in 4:12 that even a good deed which is performed out of fear of punishment, the inferior kind of fear of God, will not go unrewarded.

God's pleasure or displeasure with individuals, or humanity as a whole, is expressed through a distinctively non-Aristotelian concept, namely, individual divine providence. Once again, in this entire theme, Sforno takes a rabbinic concept and overlays it with philosophical language. In this case, the rabbinic idea is that of the two worlds, which Sforno defines as the "temporal" and "eternal" lives of human being.

The temporal life is the period during which people are alive on earth, and the eternal life is, of course, what follows death. These categories are dealt with repeatedly throughout the commentary. Like the common rabbinic conception, the eternal life, also called by Sforno (in more

traditional words), "the world to come," is the time
(apparently in the distant future) in which all people will
be judged by God according to their deeds. The mishnayot of
Avot are so replete with this conception, often expressed
metaphorically, that most of Sforno's comments about it are
simply re-statements of the rabbinic saying. He does,
however, introduce some of his own concerns. One of these
is the concept of individual divine providence known as
"measure for measure."

The conception that God judges individuals according to the rule of "measure for measure" certainly derives from the tradition. Basically it means that one's reward or punishment will fit one's deeds. Sforno presents this idea repeatedly in his commentary. So, for example, in 2:4, Sforno demonstrates that when one works to fulfill God's will, he will "achieve that which [he] wish[es]," because God "desires lovingkindness and repays measure for measure." He states this with respect to punishment when he comments on 2:7, a mishnah in which the central concern is to teach this very lesson. Sforno, not satisfied that the subtleties will be grasped by the casual reader of Avot, makes it quite clear that the lesson of this mishnah will be that an evil deed will be punished in a fitting way. On 4:10, Sforno makes a similar point concerning the punishment and reward for "fulfilling" the commandments of the Torah. Finally, in his comment on 5:8, there is a very intricate systematization of the concept of measure for measure regarding punishment.

Despite this strong tendency to view reward and punishment as a fixed system, the theologian in Sforno knows that this is not something which can be attested to in our ordinary experience. In perhaps the two most fascinating sections of the commentary Sforno deals with theodicy. The comment on 4:18 is a lengthy essay which essentially examines the question of why the righteous suffer and the evil prosper. The comment deals with this issue based upon the mishnaic statement: "Neither the security of the wicked nor the afflictions of the righteous are in our hands." After a brief discussion of the rabbinic concept of "afflictions of love," Sforno makes an interesting attempt to explain that not only does this problem not contradict the claims of the Torah, but that the Torah never makes any statement regarding the security of the wicked or sufferings of the righteous. He believes that the righteous often bring about their own suffering (out of remorse for some imperfection they might see in themselves), or that they are being punished by God in this world for any small sins they may have committed. In this way they will enjoy the fullness of the world to come. Moreover, the wicked often prosper in this world because God wishes their punishment in the world to come to be even greater in comparison. comment on 3:20 develops this theme as well. There Sforno

explains that the righteous do suffer in this world only to rejoice more in the future life. Furthermore, the wicked, who presumably would be worthy of a reward for something they have done, receive the entirety of that reward in this life, and all of the punishment due them in the next life.

This approach is not at all original and students of Jewish thought will find that there is a remarkable similarity to the essay on this subject in Sa'adia Ga'on's Sefer Emunot WeDe'ot. Sforno, it would seem, was familiar with this and adapted it to his own needs.

A final theme which we will examine is the question of personal and contemporary references found in the commentary. This will not be an exhaustive treatment by any means, but it should suffice to indicate that Sforno read Avot as a living text, which spoke to his personal and social situations. We have seen above that enjoyment of the temporal life is not the goal of Torah, according to Sforno. He does not, however, discount the fact that many people have gained a measure of "nobility" in temporal life. As we have seen, much of his attitude toward any achievement or behavior is linked to the motivation for that behavior. Overall, he is opposed to the desire for temporal glory, as well as to the satisfaction of corporeal desires as such. In fact, he even uses Balaam, a traditionally wicked character, to illustrate the type of person who makes these things his goal. However, some achievements in temporal

life can be used for the good of the community. In his comment on 2:2 he extols those who use their time to provide for the welfare of the community (the shtadlanim), but exhorts them to remain grounded in Torah. Only by busying themselves in both, can they prosper. This does not represent any kind of rejection of those who spend their time making money, only a qualification.

Even for rabbis, Sforno is cognizant of the realities of life. In 2:13 he argues that anyone who uses the Torah in order to gain temporal glory will perish, but in the comment on 4:7, he further clarifies this. One who earns a living by studying and teaching Torah is not exploiting the Torah. He compares a rabbi's use of the Torah to the ways in which the priests used the holy objects of the Temple for holy service. This is because the rabbi (or one who functions as such) is increasing the learning and practice of others and himself. This interpretation of 4:7 is most definitely not based upon the simple understanding of the mishnah and Sforno was aware that Maimonides had argued against this. Nevertheless, the practical considerations of his own time and situation led him to this understanding, and as we have seen, Sforno's own financial straits may have demanded it.

Concluding Comments

This introduction can in no way explore all of the

various aspects of the style and thematic considerations of this commentary. Rather, I have tried to present the reader with an overview in order to facilitate an easier entry into this wonderful commentary.

Throughout the translation, I have employed devices which will hopefully aid the reader. Each <u>mishnah</u> is presented, with the number that it was given in the critical edition by Gottlieb. This numbering system, however, is not always the same as that found in other editions of <u>Pirqei</u>

<u>Avot</u>. Most important, the <u>mishnayot</u> have been translated according to Sforno's understanding of the text. This is usually the standard interpretation, but on occasion (as we have seen above) it does differ. Throughout Sforno's commentary, quotations, whether biblical or mishnaic, which are from the actual statement, are presented in boldfaced text. Numbers in brackets which interrupt the text indicate the pagination of the critical edition.

The modern reader will note that the commentary is presented in idiomatic contemporary English, but that it is not free of gender-specific language. Sforno, as a product of Renaissance Italy, would not have written in that style even if it had been available to him in Hebrew. Therefore, because I have endeavored to capture the flavor of the original, I have not rendered the translation gender-free.

Introduction

Commentary on Tractate Avot by the Chief among the Physicians, our Teacher and Rabbi, Obadiah Sforno

If many perfect individuals have produced many pleasing speeches to explicate this tractate which is called "Tractate Avot," consisting entirely of precious [words] which tell of the ways of pleasantness -- all in order to find favor in the eyes of God and man (cf. Prov. 3:4), as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "One who desires to become pious should fulfill the words of Avot" (Bava Qamma 30a) -- then many of the details of the words have now become self-explanatory in the view of some of the earlier commentators, so much so that they refrained from speaking about them. Yet some of them (i.e., the earlier commentators) went on at length with a wide-ranging and copious discourse, which was wearisome to many of our contemporaries, and [so] they said, "Behold, what a weariness it is," (Mal. 1:13).

Therefore, my thoughts turned willingly to relating what I have understood concerning [this tractate], as one who gleans in the wake of the greatest of those who investigate

¹Gottlieb suggests that Sforno's reference here may be to Rambam whose commentary to <u>Pirqei</u> <u>Avot</u> was printed alongside his own in the first edition of this work.

the heart. Is it not in this way that my words together with those of others will [best] be established before the elders of our people? Let them judge which is fit to resolve all doubt; may the Lord's desire prosper in their hands, as I distill my speech for them [like dew], (cf. Job 29:22).

I, Obadiah, son of my honored teacher, father, and rabbi,
Jacob of Sforno, in order to clarify and to elucidate the
intentions of the compiler, as briefly as possible, have
resolved to speak about the division of the chapters of this
tractate, and their order, according to what I have
understood.

Surely, the compiler began with the First Chapter, in order to report the words of our predecessors, the Nesi'im and Avot Bet Din, chronologically from the beginning of the building of the Second Temple. These are the famous men who stood as an example for the people in their generations and became luminaries who understood and gave instruction to the Sages and their students about to make their way worthy with regard to moral virtues and [grasping] objects of the

²The word heart is a synonym for the mind. It represents for Sforno's age the seat of the intellect.

intellect, 3 in order to raise up an eternal light. 4

In the Second Chapter, he arranged the words of the Nesi'im and others, likewise chronologically, with sayings which also taught the untutored masses that "prudence leads to zeal" ('Avodah Zarah 20b). Therefore, he returned to the words of Hillel of old, after he completed the order of the generations of the Tanna'im who sat upon the seat of judgment and leadership [of the Bet Din]. He did not put them with the other words of Hillel that are in the previous chapter. 5

In the Third Chapter, he recounted the words of the greats of each generation, likewise chronologically, established upon bases of care for the untutored masses, [350] arousing them to look upon the beauty of the words of God, the knowledge of the Most High, and the preservation of His way to obtain favor before the Lord.

And in the Fourth Chapter, the compiler arranged, chrono-

These are identical to <u>'iyun</u> and <u>ma'aseh</u>, speculation (or theory) and practice, which form much of the core of Sforno's approach to the tradition. (See introduction).

⁴This may refer to the soul or to the actualized intellect.

⁵Sforno is explaining why the text now returns to Hillel, having already quoted him in the chronological presentation of sayings. The return to Hillel is interpreted here as the beginning of a section which teaches the talmudic lesson that "prudence leads to zeal."

logically, clear statements which teach ways of uprightness for the [twin] purposes of acquiring and attaining prudence and zeal in counsel and knowledge. This occurs when a man directs himself toward the glory of God, blessed be He, in all of his deeds and guards against [doing] anything which would be contrary to His glory, or which would be in him a profanation of His holy Name, God forbid.

In the Fifth Chapter, he expanded upon the subject of speculation and practice, by demonstrating how precious those who hold fast to them are, and how detested are those "who rebel against the light" of the Lord's countenance, for He is the Judge and Litigant, our Savior. May He show us the way of life, [and] may His countenance shine upon us. Selah.

⁶Care must be taken in order to insure that one zealously directs himself entirely toward the will of God at all times. Any deed that is performed contrary to God's will, which often is the result of lack of prudence, profanes God's name.

Chapter One

- 1. Moses received Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets transmitted it to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be cautious in judgment, raise up many students, and make a fence around the Torah.
- 1. God, blessed be He, has already explained that His book (Torah) is divided into a theoretical [part] and a practical [part], as it says, "and the teachings and the commandments which I have inscribed to instruct them," (Ex. 24:12). For surely its speculative part, the subject of which is knowing God, blessed be He, and the goal of which is to fear and love Him, is truly called "teaching" (Torah). When the guardians of Torah ceased reflecting the speculative part, God, blessed be He, became angry, as it says, "The guardians of the teaching ignored Me" (Jer. 2:8). Its practical part is undoubtedly called "commandment" (mitzwah). They long ago stated, "The Account of Creation [may not be expounded] in the presence of two, nor [the Account of the Chariot] in the presence of one, unless he is a Sage and understands on

The teachings represent for Sforno the part of Torah which is called speculation or theory. The commandments represent the practice of the Torah. These are more traditional categories which Sforno re-interprets for his own philosophical purposes. His commentary on Exodus 24:12 reflects this as well.

⁸This concept appears in many of Sforno's commentaries.

his own" (Chagigah 11b). Moreover, they stated that chapter headings of such [things] as these are transmitted to the Av Bet Din, and so forth.

Since this is the case, the compiler said that Moses, our teacher, understood on his own so well that he received the speculative part, called Torah, from Sinai. That is, from the words spoken to him on Sinai he received and understood the entire speculative part without God, blessed be He, offering him any chapter headings at all.

After this, he transmitted it to Joshua, who was the Nasi in his generation and perhaps the Av Bet Din in the days of Moses. Thus [it was passed on] from generation to generation to the men of the Great Assembly. Inasmuch as they saw the disgrace of their [whole] generation, the majority of which had forgotten the teaching and the commandment during the Babylonian Exile, they warned about three things [in order] to correct these iniquities. They said to the Sages of the day: Be cautious in judgment, in contrast to the [other] nations of the earth, which judge presumptiously, (Bava Qamma 114a). [351] For even if a case comes before you, the like of which has been decided long ago, you should nevertheless take up the case at hand on its own merits since the witnesses, the litigants, and their

Sforno interprets the word "receive" to mean that Moses was privy to the entirety of the secrets of the Torah. Moses then transmitted the Torah to Joshua and so forth. Only Moses understood it all on his own. The rest obtained it second hand through instruction.

claims are different. 10

And raise up many students, until one of them goes forth as a bright light and rises up to the rank of a Sage who understands on his own, or [at least] until he is [ready] to have the chapter headings transmitted to him.

And make a fence around the Torah, [in order] to punish the sinners as an emergency provision, as in the case intended by our Sages, of blessed memory, "Rabbi El'azar ben Jacob stated, 'I heard that even without any Toraitic [authority for their rulings], the <u>Bet Din</u> may administer flogging and impose penalties; not, however, for the purpose of transgressing the words of the Torah but in order to make a fence around the Torah" (Yevamot 90b).

- 2. Simeon the Righteous was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He would say: The world stands upon three things: Upon the Torah, upon sacrifices, and upon deeds of lovingkindness.
- 2. He said that the world which belongs to Israel -- their characteristic concern being that the Divine Presence dwell among them and that they be acceptable [to God] -- stands upon three things which cause the Divine Presence to dwell

¹⁰ This is very similar to the comment of Bertinoro on this statement, as well as Machzor Witri.

in Israel. 11 For surely the Divine Presence will dwell [with Israel] by means of the sacrifices, 12 as it says, "It shall be a continual burnt-offering throughout your generations...And there I will meet with the children of Israel...(Ex. 29:42-43). 13 By Torah and by deeds of lovingkindness Israel shall be "in His image and in His likeness" (cf. Gen. 1:26), and they shall be worthy to be called His children, and He "like a father to a child" will delight in them (cf. Prov. 3:12) as One who dwells amongst them.

- 3. Antigonos of Sokho received it from Simeon the Righteous. He would say: Do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive a reward, rather, be like servants who serve the master not in order to receive a reward. And let the fear of Heaven be upon you.
- 3. Here, the one who serves [God] out of fear is called a servant, and the one who serves [God] out of love is called a child, as it says, "You are the children of the Lord your God" (Deut. 14:1). Fear manifests itself in two ways:

¹¹ This is a difficult passage. Sforno's intention here seems to be that the three things upon which the world stands refer to the three things in Israel's world by means of which God dwells with Israel.

¹²Bertinoro comments likewise, as does Rambam that avodah means sacrifices.

¹³ The comment on Exodus 29:45 indicates that God dwells among the children of Israel receiving their sacrificies and hearing their prayer.

either as fear of punishment and loss of reward, or as submission when the servant recognizes the status of his master and fears him, not his punishment or loss of reward. Therefore the Sage stated this: Do not be like those servants who serve the master because of the fear of losing [their] reward, rather be like those servants who serve the master in terms of submission and by recognizing the full extent of the greatness of the Holy King.

In this way the fear of heaven which He commanded in His holy Torah shall be upon you, as it says, "What does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear [the Lord your God]" (Deut. 10:12). 14 This is the type of fear ascribed to the fathers of the world, as it says: "For now I know that you fear God" (Gen. 22:12). Thus they are called "servants," as it says: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants" (Ex. 32:13), for surely, that fear which is [fear] of punishment or of losing reward is an inferior [kind of] fear, characteristic of a manservant acquired by money or wages.

[352] 4. Yosi ben Yo'ezer of Zeredah and Yosi ben Yochanan of Jerusalem receieved it from them. Yosi ben Yo'ezer says:

Make your home a meeting place for Sages, and sit in the dust of their feet, and drink their words thirstily.

¹⁴In his comment on Deut. 10:12, Sforno points out that to fear God is to comprehend His greatness, that second manifestation of fear that is described here.

4. He stated that these two received it from Simeon the Righteous and after him they received it from Antigonos. When he states, "Make your home (a meeting place for Sages)," he refers to your permanent residence. He meant, therefore, that you should dwell permanently in a place which is a meeting place for Sages. And sit in the dust of their feet, even outside the houses of study and meeting, as in the case of Elisha, as it says: "Then he arose and went after Elijah" (I Kings 19:21).

And drink their words thirstily, even their conversation, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Even the casual conversation of scholars demands study" (Sukkah 21b).

- 5. Yosi ben Yochanan of Jerusalem says: Let your house be open wide, and make the poor members of your household, and do not engage in much conversation with a woman. With one's own wife, the Sages said, then how much the moreso with the wife of one's companion. Hence, the Sages said: So long as a man talks much with a woman, he causes harm to himself, and he neglects the words of Torah, and in the end he will inherit Gehenna.
- 5. Open wide, to those in need who are worthy of it, so

¹⁵ Sforno interprets "sit in the dust of their feet," as following them from place to place as Elisha did with Elijah. Bertinoro explains it similarly, but he also adds that the passage might mean actually sitting on the earth. This is the interpretation that others, including the Avot DeRabbi Natan (vers. A, ch. 6), prefer.

that they may derive benefit which is sufficient to make up for that which they lack, rather than having to ask, so that they should not be shamed.

And make the poor members of your household, [but] to serve you for compensation, so that they may make a living with dignity. 16

Do not engage in much conversation even with your own wife, even though it is appropriate to speak with her regarding the matters of the household, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "If your wife is short, bend down and whisper to her [referring to household matters]" (Bava Metzi'a 59a), in any event, do not make much conversation with her.

Hence, the Sages said the reason for avoiding conversation with a woman is not due to fear of sexual transgression, for indeed they also warned against it with one's own wife, therefore this warning against [conversation] is on account of the loss of time which a man will not be aware of. By this [loss of time] he causes harm to himself in matters of temporal life, and he neglects the words of Torah by losing time and [by] the preoccupation of the intellectual faculty, [in such a way that it] turns toward vanity. 17

¹⁶This resembles both Bertinoro and Maimonides, who add further that one should hire the poor rather than acquiring slaves, because then one is aiding a fellow Jew.

Maimonides makes a similar interpretation here. The prohibition of engaging in much coversation with a woman, even one's wife, is not because of sexual transgression, but

In the end he will inherit Gehenna, for it is the way of the evil inclination to actualize potential evil. Our Sages, of blessed memory, said that such is the way of the evil inclination, as it says, "'There shall be no strange god in you; neither shall you worship any foreign god' (Ps. 81:10). Who is the strange god that is in man himself? Note that it says that it is the evil inclination" (Shabbat 105b). 18

- 6. Joshua ben Perachya and Nittai the Arbelite received it from them. Joshua ben Perachya says: Take a master for yourself, and acquire for yourself a colleague, and judge every man according to the scale of merit.
- [353] 6. Take a master for yourself so that you receive all your tradition from him. They already condemned one who learned in a manner contrary to this, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Joseph ben Chiyya took traditions from everyone" (Chullin 18b). 19

And acquire for yourself a colleague who is similar to you and is worthy of being associated with you, as they

because most talk with women was considered by the commentators as frivolity.

¹⁸ In Sforno's own comment on Ps. 81:10, he interprets this differently. There he says that the image of God, which is in every person, should not become alienated from its intended goal (takhlit ha-mekuwan). This is not unrelated to the comment to Avot in that alienation from God would mean the entrance of the evil inclination.

¹⁹ Bertinoro makes a similar comment that this means that one should have only one teacher.

said, "Every fowl dwells with its own kind, and a human being with one similar to him" (Ecclesiasticus 13 in Bava Qamma 92b).

And judge every man according to the scale of merit, for without this moral quality, no congeniality can exist. Indeed, by most statements the hearer is likely to judge the speaker according to the scale of culpability, and by this congeniality will undoubtedly be altogether abolished.

- 7. Nittai the Arbelite says: Keep far from an evil neighbor, do not associate with an evil person, and do not despair punishment.
- 7. Keep far, not only in avoidance of association with a man who is evil to people, but keep far also from his neighborhood, in that he is repeatedly aims at causing harm.

Do not associate with an evil person who is a transgressor, even though he was a Sage and never harmed people.

Do not despair of an evil person being punished, as was the case with Jehoshaphat in relationship to Ahaziah, as it says, "As you have made a partnership with Ahaziah, the Lord will break up your work" (II Chron. 20:37).

8. Judah ben Tabbai and Simeon ben Shetach received it from them. Judah ben Tabbai says: Do not make yourself like those who bring legal claims, and when the litigants

stand before you, let them be like the guilty in your eyes, but when they leave you, let them be like the innocent in your eyes when they have received the judgment.

8. Do not make yourself, even outside of the courtroom, like those who bring the legal claims and pleas of the litigants to the judges and teach [various and sundry] arguments to the litigants.

Let them be like the guilty in your eyes, so that you not believe a single one of their words; rather suspect that each of them is perhaps making a false claim, and in this, "You shall not utter a false report" (Ex. 23:1) at all.

Let them be like the innocent in your eyes, even if it is clear to you that one or both of them have made false claims; let them not be suspected in your eyes of transgressions, for sometimes a man will make a lying claim not in order to rob his fellow but to put him off for a time, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "He has done so only with a desire to put the claimant off for a while, thinking, 'When I shall have money I shall pay him'" (Bava Metzi'a 3b).

²⁰ Rambam and Bertinoro define the role of the legal advocates similarly. Because the legal system did not necessarily have lawyers for each side in a civil dispute, there may have been people who would advise them concerning their arguments. Sforno and the others remark that the judge in such a case must not serve this role, with Bertinoro and Rambam explaining that this should hold true even if you know the truth to be on the side of one or the other.

- Simeon ben Shetach says: Examine the witnesses very closely, and be careful with your words lest from you they learn to lie.
- 9. He said all of this to guard against what occurred in the case of his son who was killed by command of the <u>Bet Din</u> on the basis of witnesses who testified before it that he had taken a life, and the witnesses retracted their testimony in the end. (cf. Jerusalmi <u>Sanhedrin</u> 6:3).
- [354] 10. Shemayah and Avtalyon received it from them.

 Shemayah says: Love labor, hate lordship, and do not make yourself known to the authorities.
- 10. Love labor in order to be busy with Torah as was the case with Hillel his student, who behaved in this way and prospered.

Hate lordship and so forth, for from this (loving lordship) a man's withdrawal from eternal life into temporal life [typically follows], as happened to Menachem, his student, who departed for the service of the king.

- 11. Avtalyon says: Sages, be careful of what you say lest you suffer the punishment of exile and be exiled to a place of evil waters, and the disciples that come after you will drink and die, and hence the name of Heaven (God) will be profaned
- 11. He warned about this after the heretics, who inter-

preted both the words of the Torah and the words of the Sages and their riddles according to their evil ideas, had multiplied. In saying the punishment of exile, his intention is exile from city to city. He said that it might happen that you are exiled to a city which is the dwelling of the heretics who will also interpret your words according to their corrupt ideas. Then the disciples will drink [of these words], for they will think that this is your idea, but that you do not desire to publicize it. Hence the name of Heaven (God) will be profamed by you since the untutored masses will also think that such a corrupt opinion is yours. 21

- 12. Hillel and Shammai received it from them. Hillel says: Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving and pursuing peace, loving people and bringing them to Torah.
- 12. So that you should not be strict as Shammai, as our rabbis of blessed memory told of those proselytes who happened upon the same place and said, "The strictness of Shammai sought to drive us from the world, but the gentleness of Hillel brought us under the wings of the Divine Presence" (Shabbat 31a).

An aimonides makes a very similar comment. His comment directs one to be very clear about what is said lest the heretics re-interpret the words and others believe their interpretation is really your opinion. Machzor Witri contains a similar remark.

- 13. He would say: One who seeks to have his name made great destroys his name. He who does not add [to his knowledge] decreases it. One who does not teach deserves death. And one who exploits the crown [of Torah] will perish.
- 13. One who seeks to have his name made great is one who strives to pull his name into the world in order to attain honor. He destroys his name for the honor flees from him as it says, "But haughty eyes You humble" (Ps. 18:28).

He who does not add [to his knowledge] decreases it:

Rav Joseph taught that one who does not add to scholarship
will bury his mother (cf. <u>Ta`anit</u> 31a, <u>Bava Qamma</u> 121b).

For indeed when a man does not strive to add knowledge, he
is not even worthy of temporal life, for the concerns [of
knowledge] are only for eternal life, as our Sages, of
blessed memory, said, "This world is similar to an antechamber for the world to come" (Avot 4:20).

[355] One who does not teach: One who does not teach the people knowledge, by withholding grain, deserves death, as it says, "He who withholds grain, earns the curses of the people" (Prov. 11:26). 22

One who exploits the crown [of Torah] -- whose goal in [studying] Torah is to attain with it glory and benefit for temporal life -- will perish. He is worthy of death like

²²Sanhedrin 91b also equates this verse with one who does not teach the people.

one who profanes the holy and exploits it for profane things, as it says, "...and die for it, having committed profanation" (Lev. 22:9). Rather, any benefit derived from it in temporal life is intended so that one might be able to strive for the attainment of eternal life, as is meant by the verse, "...to deliver the portion of the priests and Levites, so that they might devote themselves to the teaching of the Lord" (II Chron. 31:4).

- 14. He would say: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? When I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?
- 14. Who will be for me: for a man is not able to acquire a portion in eternal life by means of an agent, as happens with imaginary acquisitions which a man will sometimes attain through his servants. Therefore, I spoke well in saying, "One who does not add to [his knowledge] decreases it."

When I am only for myself I strive to perfect myself alone and I do not strive to teach others so as to perfect the intention of God, blessed be He, among the multitude of the people. How am I so important that the will of my Maker should be fulfilled through me alone? Therefore, I spoke

As he says in the previous comment that the way to attain eternal life is through the continuous acquisition of knowledge and not, as he shows here, through other imaginary acquisitions.

well in saying, "One who does not teach is deserving of death," for he (Moses) did not care to magnify the glory of his Maker by means of that which he was able to do, as happened in the incident of the waters of Meribah, as it says, "You failed to uphold My sanctity" (Deut. 32:51). 24

There is no excuse in the days to come for one who neglects the duty of adding to knowledge or of teaching, for indeed nothing can ever compensate for time lost, since life is short owing to labor. This is the meaning of his saying, "If not now, when?"

- 15. Shammai says: Make [your study of Torah] fixed, say little and do much, and greet every man with a cheerful face.
- 15. Our Sages, of blessed memory, already told that
 "Menachem departed for the service of the king, and eighty
 pairs (of disciples) dressed in silk" (Chagigah 16b) of
 gold, and then Shammai entered into the place of Menachem.
 Therefore he said, "Even though you, Menachem, have departed
 for the service of the king, it is appropriate for you to
 fix times for the [study of] Torah. Moreover, in exercising
 your authority in the king's palace it is not appropriate

The concept of teaching others is extremely important in Sforno's commentaries. Not everyone has equal access to the speculative (or theoretical) part of the Torah, so others must bear that burden unequally and share what they may. No individual can perfect the intention of God singlehandedly, so knowledge must be shared. Otherwise one is deserving of death as in the previous comment.

much and do little, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, 'They appear as friends when it is for their benefit, but they do not stand by a man in his hour of need' (Avot 2:3). But it is appropriate for you, as a master of Torah, to do the opposite of this. You should rather say little and do much, and you should greet a man with a cheerful face, not with arrogance and contempt as is the custom of the authorities.

- 16. Rabban Gamliel says: Take for yourself a master, and remove yourself from doubt, and do not regularly tithe by estimate.
- 16. Even though [the Sages] said, "He who wishes to behave according to the House of Shammai may do so, and he who wishes to behave according to the House of Hillel may do so" (Eruvin 6b) [356] because "both of these are the words of the Living God" (13b); in any event it is appropriate for you to take for yourself some particular master; and you should always behave according to his opinion and teach according to his teaching. By so doing you will remove yourself from the doubt [that arises in situations] of disagreement in such a way that your heart will not incline toward conforming to this one's words at one time, and to that one's words at another. With regard to such people,

²⁵See Sforno's comment on 1:6.

our Sages said, "About him Scripture says, 'A fool walks in darkness' (Ecc. 2:14)" (<u>`Eruvin</u> 6b).

And do not regularly tithe by estimate, even though they said, "If he first measured [the grain] and afterwards recited the blessing, this is indeed an empty prayer for no blessing can be found in a thing which has already been...measured" (Ta'anit 8a), Because of this it might occur to you to tithe by estimation or calculation as in the case of terumah (Terumot 1:7). Do not regularly do this lest you err and eat of that produce from which priestly dues are not set aside and your reward will be offset by your loss.

- 17. Simeon, his son, says: All my life I grew up amongst the Sages and I have found nothing better for a person than silence. And not inquiry, but practice, is the main concern. Those who multiply words bring sin.
- 17. For indeed many have thought that the faculty of speech 27 in a man is the noblest of all his faculties, so that some of them have said that man is nobler than other creatures by virtue of having the faculty of speech, and that similarly, one man is nobler than another insofar as he

Wherein the priestly dues are not separated by measuring but rather by estimation.

²⁷The faculty of speech is equivalent to the rational faculty in a person.

is greater than his fellow in rhetoric. 28 Yet this Sage has said that speech, with all of its virtue, is of no use to a person at all as is apparent in the case of other creatures who live long and maintain themselves easily without speech at all. But the benefit of speech is [evident] in the affairs of practical reason, in political matters, and in the case of theoretical reason with regard to teaching another. Despite all this, however, inquiry and speech are not the main concern or the intended goal. Rather, what is intended is the practice that follows from them [either] in political matters or in teaching the intelligibles. Even regarding these, concise speech and succinctness in teaching are better. 29

Those who multiply words bring sin, for more doubt and error befall them due to forgetfulness. From all this it follows necessarily that speech is not a perfection in itself at all, but undoubtedly an instrument achieving the intended goal in political matters; and with regard to the intelligibles, to inform someone else of the thoughts of the heart. This should be [done] as concisely as possible, [which is] just the opposite of what happens with anything that is a perfection in itself, where the rule is "the more,

Literally, the "wisdom of speech." This may indicate that while human beings have varying capacities for grasping the intelligibles, one person is by no means nobler than another by virtue of this ability.

Rambam makes a similar point, quoting Pesachim 3b which indicates that teaching should be done concisely.

the better."

18. Rabban Simeon ben Gamliel says: Upon three things is the world sustained: Upon truth, upon justice, and upon peace, as it says, "Speak the truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates" (Zech. 8:16). 18. He stated that upon the basis of these things cities (i.e., civic life) [are] sustained: Upon truth so that a man is able to depend upon the words of his fellow, contrary to what Scripture describes: "They use their mouths to deceive. One speaks to his fellow in friendship, but lays an ambush for him in his heart" (Jer. 9:7). And upon justice and peace, for Zechariah the Prophet warned about these three things in his plan for the good and welfare of Israel and their sustenance, as it says, "Speak the truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates" (Zech. 8:16). For indeed their rendering a "judgment of truth" will be [the same as] strict justice, but when they execute a "judgment of peace" there will be compromise, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Which kind of judgement carries peace with it? One would have to say that it is compromise" (Sanhedrin 6b). From this [357] the power of peace in the preservation of cities (civic life) is made clear. For even in the case of a judgment in deviating from which injustice will undoubtedly occur, compromise is

always preferred because [it brings] peace. 30

³⁰Sforno values each of the three things upon which the tractate says the world stands: justice, truth, and peace. Yet, he seems to slightly favor the third of the triad. His emphasis is on peace, defined as compromise, even if that means deviating somewhat from a judgment and even causing some injustice to occur as a result.

Chapter Two

- 1. Rabbi says: What is the straight path which a man should choose for himself? That which is an ornament for the one who does it and an honor to him from his fellow man. Be just as careful in the performance of a light commandment as in a weighty one, for you do not know the reward of the commandments. Consider the loss involved in performing a commandment against its reward and the reward of a transgression against it loss. Look well at three things and you will not come into the clutches of transgression. Know what is above you: an Eye that sees, and an Ear that hears, and all of your deeds are written in the Book.
- 1. He said that the [various] kinds of endeavors in temporal life, a man should choose -- from among the possibilities available to him -- that kind [of endeavor] which is an ornament for him who does it. He should not choose some contemptible endeavor, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Happy is he whose craft is that of a perfumedealer; woe to him whose craft is that of a tanner" (Qiddushin 82b). Together with this, one should choose for himself some kind of endeavor through which he might be able find himself more perfect, in such a way that he will attain praise and honor from his fellow man through it, for this

means he will be more successful. 31

Consider the loss involved in performing a commandment, the doing of which may cause you some loss in matters of temporal life which undoubtedly has a limit, against its reward for eternal life which has no [such] limit.

Likewise, [consider] the reward for [committing] a transgression and its utility for temporal life, against the loss deriving from it for eternal life. There is no commensurability in value, or [even] similarity between them, in that one of them is eternal and the other is corruptible.

Know what is above you: Know the full account of the greatness of the King whose command you reject when you commit a transgression. Likewise, know that with all of His greatness, He does not desist from watching over [even] the lowest [creature]. Rather, there is an Eye that sees, and so forth. Also, know that the punishment for a transgression does not come immediately, and let not the delay cause you to go astray, for indeed all of your deeds are written in the Book, [in order] to grant reward and punishment for them.

Rabban Gamliel, son of Rabbi Judah the Prince says:
 Fitting is the study of Torah along with a worldly occupa-

³¹ Sforno's emphasis is clearly on the superior value of eternal life, but this is not at the expense of the temporal life. This comment clearly shows a bias that he has for those who are more respected in the community, even by their choice of a trade.

tion for toiling in both of them makes one forget sin. For any study of Torah which is without gainful labor is worthless and causes sin. And let all who deal with the community do so for the sake of Heaven, for the merit of their ancestors aids them and their righteousness endures forever. And I account the reward to you as if you had done it.

2. Our Sages, of blessed memory, have already said, "This people is likened to a vine; its branches represent those who own property," (Chullin 92a) whose [358] private and public endeavors in temporal life are for the sake of sustaining the cities (civic life) in Exile. 32 Therefore, this Sage gave counsel to them with regard to both their private endeavors and their public endeavors. He said that though indeed their private endeavors are in the main to acquire capital for temporal life, it is well for them alongside this to have some specific time to study Torah. Even if they think themselves unready for this, the fact is that toiling in both of them will drive any thought of sin from their hearts.

The opposite of this occurs when they turn away from business affairs; [for] they often turn to what is worthless. Thus he said that no one should consider it impossible for a man to pursue endeavors in temporal life while

³² This probably refers to the Jewish communities in the cities of the Exile.

at the same time being occupied with Torah, that any study of Torah which is without gainful labor is worthless, and so forth.

Indeed, as regards their public conduct, he says that it is appropriate that the intention of all those who are occupied with the needs of the community should not be to receive honor or to acquire dominion, but that it (their activity) should be for the sake of Heaven. For even though the needs of the community are many, and it is difficult for everyone to deal with them -- as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Impose the needs of the community upon them and they will cease of their own accord" (Sanhedrin 17a); in any event, when they occupy themselves with them for the sake of Heaven, the merit of the ancestors of this community helps those who occupy themselves thus, and the righteousness of these individuals endures forever. 33 Indeed, you property owners -- who try amidst the Exile to save the community from the decrees of the [other] nations 34 -- even though at times you are unable to [free us] from their fierce anger against us, I (God), account you worthy of great reward, as if you had attained all of the community's

³³Proper emphasis must be placed on every endeavor of the temporal life. All is done for the sake of God, the avoidance of sin, and the ability to aid the people in Exile.

³⁴ See the introduction for a discussion of the persecutions conducted by Church and state.

- 3. Be careful of the powers that be, for they do not approach a man except for their own needs. They seem like a friend when it is to their advantage, but they do not stand by a man in his hour of need.
- 3. Indeed, in your endeavors, be careful of the powers that be, for even though they greet you cheerfully and make promises to you to do [what is] good, do not trust in this at all. They do not approach you, nor greet you cheerfully, except when it is to their own advantage, [in order] to receive some reward from you.
- 4. He would say: Make His will like your own will, so that He may make your will like His will. Nullify your will before His will, so that He will nullify the will of others before your will.
- 4. Make His will like your own will, inasmuch as it is not proper for you to exert yourself for the sake of Heaven only as someone subjugated to Him and fearing His punishment.

 Rather, it is proper for you to do His will -- this means by exerting yourself for the sake of His people, as one who

³⁵ It is likely that many of his views of those who strive on behalf of the community and who are engaged in other worthy pursuits besides the study of Torah, may be related to his relationship with his brother, Hananel, who played an enormous role in his sustenance and in the upbringing of Sforno's own children (see introduction).

wills, desires, and rejoices in this, so that His will might be achieved. ³⁶ For then He shall do your will inasmuch as you shall achieve that which you wish and desire to achieve, as His will, for He desires lovingkindness and repays measure for measure.

In this endeavor of yours, nullify your will, which desires pleasures and leisure and other such things, in order to fulfill His will, that is, to save His people. For then, measure for measure, He will nullify the will of others before your will; and you shall fulfill all that you desire, even in your business dealings.

- [359] 5. Hillel says: Do not separate yourself from the community, and do not put trust in yourself until the day you die. Do not judge your companion until you have been in his place, and do not say something which is impossible to understand which will [only] be understood at the end. Do not say, "When I have leisure time I will study," lest you have no leisure.
- 5. After he completed [citing] all of the <u>Tanna'im</u> to the last generation of those mentioned in the <u>Mishnah</u>, he began [again] with the words of Hillel of old. He related what he (Hillel) said about prudence, which is the subject of this

³⁶When someone performs acts that are willed by God, he attains perfection. In this way, doing God's will is done with great happiness and joy.

chapter, as has been made clear. 37

This very Sage said, "Do not separate yourself from the community," as [did] Yochanan the High Priest who became a Sadducee and did not accept the eighteen edicts of the House of Shammai or their fellows, even though the rest of the community accepted them (Berakhot 29a).

And do not put your trust in yourself: do not assure yourself that you will not change your attitude, for Yochanan the High Priest served in the High Priesthood for eighty years and did not depart from the ways of the community, but rather issued ordinances like those found at the end of Sotah, and in the end he became a Sadducee. 38

Do not judge Yochanan the High Priest as evil in this, until you have been in his place and you understand his situation. For perhaps had you been [alive] in his days you would have separated yourself as he did, and not accepted these same edicts.

And do not say something which is impossible to understand at the beginning of reflection, such that it is unclear and in need of explication, as those who decreed the eighteen edicts did when they said that some of them were

³⁷In Sforno's introduction to Chapter Two, he relates that the tractate returned to Hillel, after some of his sayings had already been collected in the chronological presentation, because of the content of the chapter.

³⁸In the Mishnah, Sotah 9:10, Yochanan the High Priest issues a series of ordinances. Berakhot 29a, during a discussion of whether a righteous person can become a heretic, relates this story of the fall of Yochanan.

decreed because of something else, and that same "something else" because of something else, and perhaps in this way they generated doubt in the hearts of many people. 39

Do not say, O common man, who occupies himself in Torah at any odd time of leisure, "When I have leisure time I will study." Rather fix such times.

- 6. He would say: A boor does not fear sin, and an ignorant man is not pious. One who is shy does not learn, and one who is strict cannot teach. One who engages excessively in business cannot become wise, and in a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.
- 6. I have spoken well to you, O common man, that you should fix a time for Torah and should not say, "When I have leisure time I will study." For even though you cannot hope to apprehend its speculative part, you are not prevented from attaining its practical part, for indeed a boor does not fear sin even though he may be careful about a certain sin. Likewise, an ignorant man is not pious, even though he occasionally performs a deed of lovingkindness, for this happens when they possess the custom of their fathers as a

³⁹ Sforno is similar to both Rambam and Bertinoro in this comment. All of them interpret this saying to mean that one should not say anything which is not self-explanatory, more or less. Intricate explanations will only twist the meaning of one's words.

matter of habit. 40

When you fix a certain time to study, certainly do not be [too] shy to ask a question, for one who is shy does not learn, as it says, "If you have done foolishly in lifting yourself up" (Prov. 30:32), and our Sages, of blessed memory, explained it, "Whoever acts foolishly [by asking a question that he thinks might be foolish] will [in the end] be exalted" (Berakhot 63b). 41

[360] Guard against studying with someone who is strict, for one who is strict is not suited to teach. One who engages excessively in business cannot become wise, therefore it is proper for you to fix some time for Torah so that your excessive or multi-faceted business endeavors do not prevent you [from studying Torah]. Even when you do

⁴⁰One can be engaged in one or a number of deeds of lovingkindness simply due to the customs of one's ancestors. Piety is not ascribed to someone like this. That is only achieved by the performance of commandments that are the result of study of Torah.

The Talmud, in Berakhot 63b, takes the entire verse from Prov. 30:32 as follows:

If you have done foolishly in lifting yourself up [behitnase], or if you have planned devices, lay your hand upon your mouth.

One who has done foolishly is understood as one who, in spite of looking the fool, asks his question anyway. The word for "lifting yourself up" is re-vocalized to mean: In doing so, you will be exalted [bah tinnaseh]. So such a person, who is never afraid to ask, is exalted. While, according to the rest of the talmudic passage, one who plans devices [z'm'h'] is re-interpreted to mean keeping silent [z'm'm']. Such a person, when asked a question, will lay his hand upon his mouth as he does not know the answer. Machzor Witri contains this same comment.

acquire something of Torah, do not strive to be a teacher and guide of your fellow in a place where there are greater men, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "In a place where there is a man [who teaches Torah], there you should not be a man" (Berakhot 63b), but strive [to be so] in a place where there are no men who grasp Torah.

- 7. Moreover, he saw a skull floating on the water. He said to it, "Because you drowned [others], they drowned you, and in the end those who drowned you will be drowned."
- 7. This Sage saw the skull of a man who was known to him as a murderer and he knew that he had been murdered, and that his killers had not been brought to justice. He said, "You fell into the hands of killers who scattered your remains in the water because you drowned [others], that is, you killed others and made them float upon the water as you do today. In the end, these murderers, who did not kill you to punish you, but simply to commit a deliberate transgression [of their own], will themselves be killed by robbers or the authorities who will throw their corpses into the water, measure for measure." As our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "He who would have been subject to the death penalty is handed over to the authorities or robbers come upon him" (Sotah 8b).
- 8. He would say: The more flesh, the more worms; the more

possessions, the more worry; the more women, the more sorcery; the more maidservants, the more unchastity; the more manservants, the more theft. The more Torah, the more life; the more one engages in scholarly study, the more wisdom; the more counsel, the more understanding; the more righteousness, the more peace. One who has acquired for himself a good name, has acquired it for himself. One who has acquired words of Torah acquires life for himself in the world to come.

8. Note that with regard to something which is a perfection in itself, the more of it [there is], the better. However, that which is not a perfection in itself, even though it may be a necessary means to some perfection [is such that] any increase of it is excessive and harmful. Hence, this Sage said that although bodily health and similar attainments are necessary for one who is occupied with Torah, in any event, if he has much flesh, he will also have excess fluid which leads to rottenness and worms. Similarly, for one who has many possessions and exerts himself in acquiring them, his worry about their loss will increase. In this way his thoughts will be driven [away] from exerting himself for eternal life altogether. So with women, even though the company of a woman is useful in temporal life, as it says, "I will make a fitting helper for him" (Gen. 2:18). Yet an increase in women will bring an increase in sorcery, for each one of them will seek by her

sorcery to incline her husband's heart to her.

However, the more Torah, the more eternal life, as it says, "Because it is your life" (Deut. 32:47), thus anything that increases Torah, increases the level of life.

Likewise, the more one engages in scholarly study and raises up many disciples, this being through the perfection of his intellect which arouses him to understand and to teach.

Note that the more one increases this perfection, the better, for through it the wisdom of the teacher increases, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "From my students [I have learned] more than from them all" (Ta'anit 7a).

Likewise, the more counsel for the purpose of reflecting upon how to perform actions perfectly, the more understanding for the purpose of understanding their meaning. For indeed, that which arouses one to [perform] a good deed is perfect love of God and fear of Him, blessed be He. Whatever increases this, increases understanding for the purpose of knowing the ultimate goal of his Maker's will in this regard.

Similarly, one who increases righteousness, which is the arousal of the soul to benefit one's fellow. This is the perfection of that [particular] character [361] trait through which one increases peace for oneself and one's

⁴²Bertinoro also brings the verse from Deuteronomy, but does not specify life as eternal life. In addition, he explains that the more students one has, the more one will benefit from wisdom, as they will impart wisdom to their teacher.

fellow; that is to say, to the extent that one has acquired a good name through benefitting one's fellow man, and through exerting oneself to resolve strife, which is one of the activities of righteousness, he is shown favor on account of his good name, as in the case of Job where it says, "And I looked into the case of the stranger" (Job 29:16).

Likewise, he increases peace in that he has both acquired for himself and enlarged upon this trait of doing good for his fellow. In this way he imitates his Creator and will achieve safety in his [final] rest from anyone who would accuse him, by the rule of measure for measure, as it says, "For the work of righteousness shall be peace" (Isa. 32:17). 43 Indeed, by acquiring words of Torah, which is the speculative part, he acquires life for himself in the world to come, as it says, "Because it is your life" (Deut. 32:47). For the species of rational animals is indeed the noblest of the species. Note that the life of the potential intellect is identical with its cognizing [the intelligibles] in actuality. From all this it is clear that its theoretical portion provides the soul with eternal life, while its practical portion provides grace in the eyes of God. In this way, those who are alive will rejoice in the light of the face of the Living King.

⁴³Bertinoro cites this verse, but without any further comment.

9. & 10. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai received it from Hillel and Shammai. He would say: If you have learned more Torah [than others], do not take the credit for to this end you were created.

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai had five students, and these are they: Rabbi Eli'ezer ben Horqanus, Rabbi Joshua ben Chananya, Rabbi Yosi the Priest, Rabbi Simeon ben Netan'el, and Rabbi El'azar ben 'Arakh.

He would mete out their praise: Rabbi Eli'ezer ben
Horganus is a plastered cistern which does not lose a drop.
Rabbi Joshua ben Chananya -- happy is the one who gave birth
to him. Rabbi Yosi the Priest is a pious man. Rabbi Simeon
ben Netan'el fears sin. Rabbi El'azar ben 'Arakh is an
ever-flowing spring.

9. & 10. If you have learned more Torah than your colleagues, do not attribute this to your great effort and the smaller effort of your colleagues. Indeed this can happen when the efforts are equal, while the disposition(s) provided at birth are unequal. Therefore, attribute this to your having been created better disposed [to this outcome] than your colleagues.

To confirm these words of his, he apportioned praise of the greatest of his students. Their effort in regard to speculation and practice were equal, but the status of the [various] levels attained by them was not equal. This was due to their dispositon [for study] being unequal at birth.

11. He would say: If all the Sages of Israel were in one scale of the balance, and Elie'ezer ben Horqanus were in the second, he would outweigh them all.

Abba Sha'ul says in his name: If all the Sages of Israel were in one scale of the balance, Elie'ezer ben Horqanus among them, and El'azar ben 'Arakh were in the second, he would outweigh them all.

11. The first Tanna's opinion was that he praised the plastered cistern, [R. Eli'ezer b. Horganus,] the learned one whose learning was always at hand (cf. Sukkah 28a), as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "They sent off asking: Which is preferable, '[one who represents] 'Sinai' or 'one who uproots mountains?' [One who represents] 'Sinai' is preferable, for everyone needs the owner of wheat (authentic tradition) " (paraphrase of Berakhot 64a). This will undoubtedly be verified for those who require things known [only] by tradition, for whom there is no way to acquire them by reasoning. For it is indeed better for them to seat at the head [of the community] an expert called a "Sinai," so that they may know traditional things, than [to seat] a subtle dialectician called "one who uproots mountains." For they are able to understand insightfully and argue with subtlety, as in the case where "Rav Kahana and Rav Assi, [362] students of Rav, required his knowledge of traditional

lore, but not his deductions" (Sanhedrin 36b). However, when it comes to analyzing the truths implicit in any given matter, and drawing inferences, "one who uproots mountains" is more praiseworthy than "[one who represents] Sinai," as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Better is one sharp pepper (debater) than an entire basket of pumpkins" (Yoma 85a). 44

12. He said to them: Go out and see which is the straight path to which a man should cleave.

Rabbi Eli`ezer says: A good eye. Rabbi Joshua says:
a good companion. Rabbi Yosi says: a good neighbor. Rabbi
Simeon says: One who sees what is to be born. Rabbi El`azar
says: a good heart.

He said to them: I favor the words of El'azar ben
'Arakh more than your words because everything that you say
is included in what he says.

He said to them: Go out and see which is the evil path from which a man should distance himself.

⁴⁴ Sforno has taken two categories of scholars from the Talmud (Berakhot 64a) and applied the first to Eli'ezer b. Horqanus, who was a great teacher of traditional things. Such a person is likened by Sforno to "Sinai." From him traditional lore flows. Such a Jewish leader is especially important to communities that are not blessed with great intellectuals who will benefit from deep discourses into the meaning of things. For those who would benefit from a deeper understanding, "one who uproots mountains," a type of scholar with the ability to engage in subtle dialectics, is preferrable. For this he draws upon Talmudic evidence from Yoma 85a.

Rabbi Eli'ezer says: An evil eye. Rabbi Joshua says:
An evil companion. Rabbi Yosi says: An evil neighbor.
Rabbi Simeon says: One who borrows but does not repay. One who borrows from a man is like one who borrows from the
Omnipresent, blessed be He, as it says, "The evil man borrows and does not repay, the righteous is generous and keeps giving" (Ps. 37:21). Rabbi El'azar says: An evil heart.

He said to them: I favor the words of El'azar ben
'Arakh more than your words because everything that you say
is included in what he says.

12. A good path leads a man directly to [acquisition of] the moral virtues and [knowledge] of the intelligibles. A good eye, so that he does not envy and multiply his desires without limit, for in turning away from this, he will direct his heart to that which is truly good. A good companion: He should choose to associate himself with a man who possesses the moral virtues and [understands] the intelligibles, for by his companionship he will acquire them easily, and they will become fixed in his soul. A good neighbor, for not only does he require for this [purpose] a good companion, but he also requires a neighborhood of good people.

⁴⁵Bertinoro's comment is similar in defining a good eye as lack of envy or multiplying one's desire, which he calls superfluous things. The result of having a good eye is Sforno's own unique explanation.

One who sees what is to be born (possesses foresight); who always compares the good which derives from a good act and the evil which derives from a bad act. A good heart, so that in everything to which a man turns, he will always aim at the glory of his Creator.

I favor the words of El'azar ben 'Arakh more than your words, for indeed your words will not confirm that there are good ways without his words. But his words confirm that there is a good way, even without your words.

13. Rabbi Eli'ezer says: An evil eye, and so forth: even though the Rabbi (Yochanan ben Zakkai) said that everything which they praised as good cannot be truthfully so without a good heart. They thought that by this [reasoning] a thing does not cease to be bad, even [when it exists] without an evil heart, inasmuch as it is evil in itself. The Rabbi answered them and said that even that which appears evil in itself is not truly evil if it is not accompanied by an evil heart, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "A transgression, done for its own sake, is greater than a commandment which is not done for its own sake" (Nazir 23b; cf. Horayot 10b), as was made clear in the case of Jael [who killed Sisera (Judges 4)] and Tamar [who cohabited with her fatherin-law (Gen. 38)] and others. 46

⁴⁶ Sforno demonstrates with this comment how important one's intentions are. This qualifies the first part of the mishnah about what the good way is. It also gives a reason

- 14. They said three things. Rabbi Eli'ezer says: Let the honor of your companion be as dear to you as your own, and do not be quick to anger. Repent one day before your death, and warm yourself in the light of the Sages. [363] Be careful of their coals lest you be burned. For their bite is the bite of a fox, and their sting is the sting of a scorpion, and their hiss is the hiss of a snake, and all of their words are like coals of fire.
- 14. He said: In order to achieve the status of a plastered cistern, which I have attained, "No man ever preceded me [in arriving] at the academy...and I never left a man behind in the academy when I left" (Sukkah 28a). In order to do this his colleagues must not rebuff him. This comes about [either] through his being congenial to his colleagues or by his scrupulousness about their honor, and through his not easily becoming angry with them. Second, if at times his [evil] inclination overcomes him and he becomes angry, he repents of it immediately. Third, he should draw near to the Sages to learn from them, but he should not mix his heart with them, for their bite, that is, their rebuke, is

for the listing of the opposite values: One might infer from the simple listing of good and bad characteristics, that a good eye is all one needs and an evil eye is just the opposite of it. Rather, an evil eye has its own distinct definition, and is not simply the opposite of a good eye. Its definition is "the intention with which you perform some evil action."

bad. 47 And their sting, that is, the ban, is worse. And their hiss, which is a curse (shemmata), is more damaging than all of them [combined]. 48

Despite all this, a man always needs to approach them to learn from them, for their words are like coals of fire, which produce light and warmth, for "even the casual conversation of scholars calls for study" (Sukkah 21b).

- 15. Rabbi Joshua says: The evil eye, the evil inclination, and hatred of [one's fellow] creatures drive a man from the world.
- 15. The evil eye toward others and the desire for their wealth; 49 and the evil inclination, which is the longing for pleasures; and hatred of [one's fellow] creatures on account of envy; drive a man away from any moderate or happy measure [for leading his life], of [the kind for which] the Rabbi blessed me (Rabbi Joshua) [saying], "Happy is she that gave birth to him" (Avot 2:11).

⁴⁷The meaning of this is unclear. Perhaps he means that one should avoid becoming too involved or entangled with them personally. Rambam warns against imposing yourself upon them too closely. Rather, a person should wait until they offer to get close, for if one approaches too closely and they do not desire it, the rebuke may be very painful.

⁴⁸ Mo'ed Qatan 16a discusses these three curses (shemmata) in detail.

⁴⁹Bertinoro and Rambam similarly define an evil eye here.

- 16. Rabbi Yosi says: Let the property of your fellow be as precious to you as your own. Prepare yourself to study Torah, for it is not your [natural] inheritance. Let all of your deeds be for the sake of Heaven.
- 16. Note the measure of piety which the Rabbi praised.

 This is when in doing good for another it comes about that

 the property of your fellow is as precious to you as your

 own, in your love for his welfare.

Prepare yourself to study Torah beyond the disposition that is yours by nature. For it is not your [natural] inheritance; that which happens to an heir, who acquires wealth without effort, will not happen to you [with respect to Torah]. Indeed, in this [pursuit], a minimum of effort will not suffice. When you acquire Torah learning, you will acquire piety, and in no other way, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "An ignorant man is not pious" (Avot 2:6).

Let all of your deeds be for the sake of Heaven: Let your intention be to do the will of your Maker, to walk in His ways for He is "pious in all His ways" (Ps. 145:17).

17. Rabbi Simeon says: Be careful in the recitation of the Shema' and the Tefillah. When you pray, do not make your prayer fixed, but rather [entreaties for] mercy and

⁵⁰ Avot DeRabbi Natan, version B, chapter 30, states that if knowledge of the Torah were an inheritance of this type, one would pass it on to one's son and grandson. The midrash says that this is not possible.

supplications before the Omnipresent, blessed be He, as it says, "For He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, and renouncing punishment" (Joel 2:13). Do not think yourself evil.

17. The level of fear of sin which the Rabbi praised comes to you through carefulness concerning the recitation of the Shema and the Tefillah, which recall the greatness of the holy King, Who commanded [us] to keep away from sin. In this connection, however, do not make your prayer [364] fixed, as one who [merely] removes a burden from himself. Sl Rather, it should consist of pleas of mercy and supplications, for in this way you will realize that you need to attain eternal life before Him and all of your desires through Him, and you will fear sinning against Him.

Do not think yourself evil as did Elisha [ben Avuyah]
"the Other," for precisely because he believed that there
was no remedy he did not desire to repent. Shather it is
[more] appropriate that if you sin you should believe that
there is a remedy and you will repent by virtue of your

⁵¹ Rambam makes a similar comment about prayer not seeming like a burden which must be removed.

⁵² In Chagigah 15a, there is the story of Elisha b. Avuyah riding on a horse on the Sabbath. Behind him, Rabbi Me'ir walked, learning Torah from Elisha. When they reached the Sabbath limit for walking, Elisha instructed Me'ir to turn back. Me'ir told his teacher, "You, too, turn back." To which Elisha replied that he had already heard "from behind the Veil" that it was too late to turn back. Elisha is Sforno's model for one who thinks himself too evil. One must never give the reply which Elisha did.

regretting the evil.

- 18. Rabbi El'azar says: Be diligent to study Torah, and know how to answer an Epicuros, and know before Whom you toil, and that your Employer is faithful, for He will provide recompense for all that you do.
- 18. Note that by means of diligent study of Torah alone, and in no other way, you will find an answer that suffices for heretics, as it says, "If you seek it as you do silver and search for it as [you do] for treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God" (Prov. 2:4-5). Then you will be an "ever-flowing spring," overcoming every one who takes issue with you, as the Rabbi praised him.

And know before Whom you toil, for it is appropriate for you to increase your toil in this way for His glory.

And know that your Employer is faithful, for He will provide recompense, even though it is not appropriate that you intend this, but rather [that you] intend to do His will.

- 19. Rabbi Tarfon says: The day is short and the work is great. The workers are sluggish and the reward is great, and the Master of the house is urgent.
- 19. He stated that one should be surprised at the sluggishness of the majority of people, indeed, practically all of them, as it says, "All have turned bad, altogether foul"

(Ps. 14:3). For even though they do not occupy themselves with Torah and commandments out of love and fear as is appropriate, they should occupy themselves with Torah because of the reward which is great, for a man eats of its fruit in this world and its profit is sustained for him in the world to come (based on Pe'ah 1:1), undoubtedly, as it says, "Because it is your life" (Deut. 32:47). To acquire knowledge through it (Torah) requires much time, and man's life is short in relation to the work which is greater than the measure of the earth (cf. Job 11:9).

And the Master of the house is urgent. For when He fashioned him (man), He undoubtedly made it man's nature to desire knowledge, and he would exert himself for it were it not for the desire of the evil inclination for rest and human pleasures, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Master of the Universe, it is our will to do Your will. What is it that prevents us? The leaven in the dough (evil inclination)" (Berakhot 17a), and so forth.

20. He would say: It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but you are not free to desist from it. If you have learned much Torah, they give you much reward. And your Employer is faithful, for he will provide recompense for all that you do. Know that the reward of the righteous

 $^{^{53}}$ Bertinoro and Ibn Aknin both use the verse from Job in a similar way.

will be in the time to come.

20. There is no excuse for someone who says that it is not appropriate to labor in the wisdom of the Torah because one ought not [try to] acquire it in a short time. For indeed, any portion of it (Torah) which a man acquires is deemed important and [surely] intended by the Master of the house, even though you do not finish the work.

Likewise, one who has studied all of it and thought that he had finished all of the work is not free to desist from it. For if he occupies himself with it more, he will [always] add more [to his] perfection and his reward will be increased, so that he finds more favor in the eyes of the King, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "One who studies his chapter one hundred times is not to be compared to one who studies his chapter one hundred and one times" (Chagigah 9b).

[365] He is faithful, for he will provide recompense, even though you should not aim for this. Rather, it is proper for you to act out of love. In any event, He Himself is faithful for "He does not withhold the reward of any of His creatures" (Pesachim 118a).

Chapter Three

- 1. 'Aqavya ben Mehalalel says: Look well at three things and you will not come into the clutches of transgression.

 Know from whence you came, and to where you are going, and before Whom you will give a full account. From whence you came -- a fetid drop; where you are going -- to a place of dust, worms, and maggots; before Whom you will give a full account -- before the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He.
- 1. It is appropriate for you to reflect upon the beginning of your existence and upon its end, in terms of both its corporeal and its intellectual parts. Note that the beginning and end of the existence of the corporeal part is something that is corrupt and despised; therefore, it is not suitable to exert great effort concerning it. However, with respect to the existence of the intellectual part, it will either do well or do poorly in accordance with your effort regarding it, the judgment of which will be before the holy King. Therefore, it is proper for you to strive for its well-being so that you will obtain merit through it when it is judged and to be on guard against anything which prevents this.

Through this [kind of] reflection you will not come into the clutches of transgression, for you will not multiply your efforts to achieve your corrupt corporeal

desires. Rather, you will strive for the well-being of the eternal intellectual part [of yourself], so that it will be meritorious before the King of the kings of kings on the day it gives account. 54

- 2. Rabbi Chananya, Prefect of the Priests, says: Pray for the peace of the kingdom, for without fear of it, men would swallow each other alive.
- 2. Even though the king is sometimes unfit, as was the case with most of the kings of the Second Commonwealth, and perhaps plunders and oppresses; in any event, it is appropriate to pray for his welfare, for then he will impose fear of himself, and he will not agree to permit the people to rob each other. By means of this he removes oppression from amongst the multitude of the people. 55
- 3. Rabbi Chananya ben Tardyon says: If two [people] sit without words of Torah between them, it is a meeting of scoffers, as it says, "(Happy is the man who has not...) sat in a meeting of scoffers" (Ps. 1:1). But two [people] who

⁵⁴ Sforno's conception of the parts of the human person is reflected in this comment. The intellectual part of a human being is what is eternal, and not that of the corporeal part. Therefore, a person should strive for its perfection.

⁵⁵This comment refers to the authorities of Sforno's own time. Gottlieb suggests that Sforno was subject to the censor and therefore couched his criticism in terms of the Second Commonwealth.

sit with words of Torah between them, it is as if the Divine Presence dwells among them, as it says, "Then those that fear the Lord spoke to one another and the Lord heard and noted it, and a scroll of remembrance was written at His behest concerning those who fear the Lord and esteem His name" (Mal. 3:16).

[366] 3. If [two people] sit, even though there are no words of scoffing in their conversation, because there are no words of Torah in their speech it is considered a meeting of scoffers, for its substance is entirely vain and worthless. He adduced proof for this from what is written, "(Happy is the man who has not...) sat in a meeting of scoffers, rather, the teaching of the Lord is his delight" (Ps.1:1-2). That is to say that every meeting is a meeting of scoffers except one in which there is discussion of the Lord's teaching.

But two [people] who sit with words of Torah between them, even if it is not the principal part of what they discuss, [are such that] the Divine Presence dwells among them.

In reporting the consequences of each of the two opposing [situations], he informed [us] about the importance and value of the matter in order to arouse even the multitude toward the good. Therefore, even when one person sits and occupies himself with Torah, because of course for an individual [who is alone] there is no discussing Torah,

rather he occupies himself with it. He adduced proof for this from what is written just before [the citation from Lam. 3:28 in the mishnah], "It is good for a man to bear a yoke" (Lam. 3:27).

- 4. Rabbi Simeon says: Three who have eaten at one table over which they have not said words of Torah, it is as though they ate sacrifices of the dead, as it says, "Yea, all tables are covered with vomit and filth, so that no space is left" (Is. 28:8). However, three who have eaten at one table over which they spoke words of Torah, it is as though they ate from the table of the Omnipresent, as it says, "And they said to me, 'This is the table that stands before the Lord'" (Ez. 41:22).
- 4. Sacrifices of the dead designate foods the entire point of which is to sustain corruptible life. It is appropriate to reflect upon the difference between a table whose purpose is this alone and a table belonging to those who eat from the table of the Holy One, blessed be He. The priests are those who eat from the table of the Most High (cf. Betzah 21a; Qiddushin 52b; Bava Qamma 12b, 13a; `Arakhin 24b; Chullin 120a) which is the altar, for the entire point of their eating sacrifices (qodesh) is to aid everlasting perfection (cf. Pesachim 59b). See As for the table whose

⁵⁶In <u>Pesachim</u> 59b, the <u>Gemara</u> explains Exodus 29:33: And they shall eat those things with which

ultimate end is corrupt, "it is covered with vomit and filth" (Isa. 28:8), as the word of the prophet when he says, "Priest and prophet have erred by liquor....Yea, all tables are covered with vomit...(28:7-8), that is to say, the priest has erred in Torah and the prophet in prophecy in that the entire aim of their tables is only [to satisfy] corrupt desires.

He adduced proof that those who eat at a table unlike this are like those who eat from the table of the Holy One, blessed be He, from how the prophet designated the table by the term altar when it is "before the Lord" (Ez. 41:22).

Note that it [was stated] earlier, "Two [people] who sit with words of Torah between them, the Divine Presence dwells among them" (Avot 3:3).

- 5. Rabbi Chananya ben Chakhin'ai says: Someone who stays awake at night, and someone who walks on the way alone, and someone who turns his heart to vanity; behold such a person forfeits his soul.
- 5. After the compiler had arranged [the aforementioned] statements teaching about [various] kinds of religious zeal [under the heading of] "when you stay at home" (Deut. 6:7),

atonement was made

as teaching that the priests are actually the ones who eat the sacrifices while the owners of the animals are atoned for. So Sforno explains that the entire activity of eating sacrifices, for a priest, was to help others achieve everlasting perfection.

that is, in your academy or a gathering at your table, he now mentions [various] kinds of zeal [which come under the heading of] "when you walk on the way and when you lie down" (Ibid.).

This Sage stated, therefore, that someone who stays awake at night and someone who walks on the way when he is alone, and there is no one with him who diverts him to vain things, or who turns his heart to vanity, in terms of temporal matters, e.g., leisure times, [367] behold such a person forfeits his soul. For indeed each of these empty times, which arise from a waste of time such as this, is "a time to act for the Lord" (Ps. 119:126), and to look to His work and His teaching (Torah), and to reflect upon them [in order] to give life to his soul, for in his neglect he undoubtedly forfeits his soul.

- 6. Rabbi Nechunya ben Ha-Qanah says: Whoever accepts upon himself the yoke of Torah, they remove from him the yoke of the kingdom and the yoke of worldly concern. Anyone who casts off from himself the yoke of Torah, the yoke of the kingdom and the yoke of worldly concern are laid upon him.
- The yoke of worldly concern is the burden of maintaining oneself and one's household by means of a livelihood,

⁵⁷ According to Roth, the Jews of Italy had a great deal of leisure time. This is reflected throughout much of Sforno's commentary in which he exhorts those who have such time to put it to use by studying Torah and ensuring eternal life. See introduction.

and of guarding himself from the dangers of chance. He stated that when a man casts off from himself the yoke of Torah, after he has accepted it, is like one "who has studied and abandoned it" (Pesachim 49b); the yoke of the kingdom is laid upon him, as it says, "Because you have not served (the Lord your God)...you shall serve...your enemies" (Deut. 28:47-48). And the yoke of worldly concern [is laid upon him] as it says, "(You shall serve) in hunger, thirst, and nakedness" (Ibid.), and so forth (verse cited in Berakhot 35b).

- 7. Rabbi Chalafta ben Dosa of Kefar Chananya says: Ten [people] who sit and occupy themselves with words of Torah, the Divine Presence is among them, as it says, "God stands in an assembly of God" (Ps. 82:1). How do we know that the same is true even for five? As it says, "He founded His group on the earth" (Amos 9:6). How do we know that the same is true even for three? As it says, "Then those that fear the Lord spoke to one another and the Lord heard and noted it" (Mal. 3:16), and so forth. How do we know that the same is true even for one? As it says, "In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and I will bless you" (Ex. 20:21).
- 7. And occupy themselves with (words of) Torah: The statement mentioned above was about men who discuss their business and [include], among their words, words of Torah,

and he said that the Divine Presence was among them. 58 But here he speaks about those who [actually] occupy themselves with it, and he said that the Divine Presence rests there continually. They have already said in the Gemara, "The words of two are written in the book of remembrance, but those of one are not written in the book of remembrance" (Berakhot 6a). 59 Even if three are acting as a court, (cf. Ps. 82:1) they are considered to be occupying themselves with Torah, for "adjudication is also Torah" (Ibid.). 60 And "the Divine Presence comes first to ten; to three after they are seated" (Ibid.). 61

The group of five is not mentioned in the <u>Gemara</u> for it seems that they have compared it to the group of ten, when their gathering is for the purpose of occupying themselves with Torah from the very outset. Therefore he called them [in the mishnah], "His group" (Amos 9:6).

With regard to one, he adduced proof above that his reward is greater when he occupies himself with Torah [by himself] than the reward of those who [simply] have among

⁵⁸This is a reference to 3:3 above.

⁵⁹So, there is some difference between one person and two, and that is why two is explicitly mentioned.

The Gemara asks, "If two, why mention three?" Then it introduces this verse, lest one think that when three meet as a Bet Din, it is only for the purpose of making peace. Justice, the Gemara states, is also Torah.

The Talmud further asks, "If three, why mention ten?" and concludes that this verse shows that there is a difference between three and ten.

theselves some [mention of] words of Torah, in what he stated, "(In every place where I cause My name to mentioned)
I will come to you (and I will bless you)" (Ex. 20:21). 62

- 8. Rabbi El'azar ben Judah of Bartota says: Give Him what is His, for you and all that is yours is His; for thus it says about David, "For all is from You, and it is from Yours that we have given you" (II Chron. 29:14).
- 8. Even though it is said, "What does the Lord your God ask of you?" (Deut. 10:12), it does not ask that you give Him what is yours in any manner that you are justifiably able to refuse, inasmuch as you and all that is yours is His. 63 And He may demand justifiably, and if you refuse, you wrongfully seize what is His. Thus He is both Judge and Litigant.
- [368] 9. Rabbi Simeon says: Someone who walks on the way while studying, and interrupts his studies and says, "How lovely is this tree! How lovely is this field!" Scripture accounts him as one who forfeits his soul.
- 10. Rabbi Dostai bar Yannai says, in the name of Rabbi Me'ir: Whoever forgets a single word of his studies, the

⁶²The significance of this verse as a proof text is that it appears in the Hebrew as a second person singular imperfect. It is addressed to an individual alone.

⁶³Because of God's ultimate ownership over every human being, no one may justifiably refuse to give Him what He demands.

Scripture accounts him as one who forfeits his soul, as it says, "Take utmost care and guard your soul scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes" (Deut. 4:9). Is this so even for one for whom his studies became too difficult? Scripture says, "Lest they depart from your heart all they days of your life" (Ibid.). Thus he does not forfeit his soul until he sits and removes them from his heart.

- 9. & 10. Someone who interrupts his studies and diverts himself to mundane things, and likewise, someone who continually removes words of Torah from his heart, are both included with the rule, "lest they depart from your heart" (Deut. 4:9); and with regard to both of them it says, "guard your soul scrupulously" (<u>Ibid</u>.). In their saying, "Scripture accounts him as one who forfeits his soul," they intended both of them. ⁶⁴
- 11. Rabbi Chananya ben Dosa says: Someone whose fear of sin takes precedence over his wisdom, his wisdom endures. Someone whose wisdom takes precedence over his fear of sin, his wisdom does not endure.
- 11. When he said "someone whose fear of sin," he meant someone who is careful not to do harm to people. The

⁶⁴The main purpose of Sforno's comment here seems to be to link the Deuteronomy verse quoted in the latter <u>mishnah</u>, and which is an important part of the daily liturgy, to the <u>mishnah</u> preceding it.

"wisdom" of which he spoke is political wisdom, and the deeds of which he spoke are those which a man does for the good of another. Therefore, he stated that when a man behaves with political wisdom, with righteousness, and justice, and is careful to avoid injustice, all this is due to his fear of sin. This is because he has recognized the greatness of his Creator and that this is His will, and that it is appropriate to do all of this for His glory, and thus his wisdom endures. For there will never be a logical argument against this by which you would be able to negate it.

However, if the fear of sin is only for political wisdom, inasmuch as he is careful not to do harm to people in order not to ruin political arrangements, his wisdom does not endure. For at times a concern for pleasure, or for some private benefit that might be extended to him, might become greater [in importance] to him than the concern for the political arrangement.

12. He would say: Someone whose deeds exceed his wisdom,

⁶⁵Sforno speaks of the practical side of political wisdom as treating others righteously. If one does this due to fear of God, also called fear of sin, then this wisdom will endure, for the only real reward of such behavior is found in doing God's will. But if political expediency is one's reason for treating others well, then this political wisdom will not endure. This is because people will always find something else with which they are concerned and then the very reason for treating others well might disappear. What is important is both the deed and the motivation.

his wisdom endures. Someone whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, his wisdom does not endure.

- 12. As clear evidence and proof concerning this he said that anyone whose deeds exceed his wisdom -- such that he performs the good deed even in a place where there is no need for any political improvement -- he does so only to imitate his Creator and to walk in His ways, since he recognized His exalted status. This is evidence that his political wisdom also derives from this reason, and therefore, his wisdom endures. For there is no straightforward logical argument against this. Indeed, when the opposite of this occurs, the case will be reversed.
- 13. He would say: Someone with whom his [fellow] creatures are pleased, the Spirit of the Omnipresent is [also] pleased. Someone with whom his [fellow] creatures are not pleased, the Spirit of the Omnipresent is [also] not pleased.
- 13. When a man is careful to avoid doing harm to another, even when he is able to do so and even though he may derive some particular benefit from this, in the majority of cases,

The political wisdom, spoken of in the previous comment, endures only as a result of recognizing the Source of the commandment to deal righteously with others. This mishnah, according to Sforno, serves to prove his previous statement by illustrating a case of one who obviously does good deeds even when there is no motivation of political expediency to be found. The only obvious reason for doing such a deed is out of the fear of God. Thus, political wisdom endures. Again, the motivation is all-important to Sforno.

this happens only when his intent is to honor his Creator. 67
This is an explicit sign that the Spirit of God, blessed be
He, is pleased with him. When it is contrary to this,
undoubtedly his concern is the contrary as well.

- 14. Rabbi Dosa ben Harkinas says: Morning sleep, midday wine, children's talk, and sitting in the company of ignoramuses, drive a man from the world.
- [369] 14. They prevent a man from attaining eternal life and likewise from attaining [a worthwhile] temporal life. This is because of what necessarily follows from them in loss of time which a man will not [even] perceive.
- 15. Rabbi El'azar Ha-Moda'i says: Someone who profanes holy objects, who despises the festivals, who embarasses his companion in public, who breaks the covenant of Abraham our father, and who gives interpretations of the Torah which are not in accord with halakhah -- even though he possesses Torah and good deeds -- has no portion in the world to come.

 15. He said that someone who transgresses one of these things which he has mentioned has no portion in the world to come. For indeed each of these comes under the rule, "for he has spurned the word of the Lord" (Nu. 15:31), as it says

concerning him, "[that soul] surely will be cut off"

This emphazises further emphasizes Sforno's concentration on one's motivations as a factor in assessing one's character.

(<u>Ibid</u>.). Our Sages, of blessed memory, already explicated this, "he shall surely be cut off in this world and in the world to come" (<u>Sanhedrin</u> 64b) 68. He said [this] even though he possesses Torah and good deeds, for indeed his deeds are undoubtedly not intended to [fulfill] the will of their Creator, and his Torah is nothing but lip service. 69

- 16. Rabbi Ishmael says: Be lightly esteemed before a superior, and be easy going to a young person, and receive every man with joy.
- 16. Be lightly esteemed before a superior, as is meant by the verse, "Do not exalt yourself in the presence of the king" (Prov. 25:6), all the moreso in the presence of the holy King, as in the case of David, when it says, "(Before the Lord) I will dishonor myself even more" (II Sam. 6:22).

And be easy going to a young person; before young people be affable and treat yourself with honor for their benefit, so that they not become overly familiar with you, in order that they will accept [teachings] from you.

⁶⁸The repetition of the verb, "cut off," in the absolute construct serves the grammatical purpose of intensification. The rabbis interpret the doubling of the verb to indicate two different experiences of being cut off, i.e., in this world and the world to come.

Rambam brings the previous verse, Numbers 15:30, to identify such a person as a heretic. Sforno appears to have further built upon the use of that proof text by moving to the next verse and illustrating the punishment for heresy. In his comment on 15:30, Sforno says that such an offense is completely unforgiveable, even through repentance.

And receive every man with joy, so that you do not honor yourself over them in such a manner that they will be afraid to approach you. Rather, greet them with a cheerful face, in a manner which will bring them close to the service of God, as in the story which they told concerning Hillel when he was wrapped in a prayer shawl and sitting before a questioner, "'Ask, my son, ask'" (Shabbat 31a). By this attribute of his, he brought converts to seek refuge under the wings of the Divine Presence, and "he brought back many from iniquity" (cf. Mal. 2:6).

- 17. Rabbi Aqiva says: Jesting and levity lead a man to lewdness. Tradition is a fence around the Torah. Tithes are a fence around wealth. Vows are a fence around abstinence. A fence around wisdom is silence.
- 17. He recounted the ways of preserving and maintaining prudence and religious zeal, and he stated that it is appropriate to guard against jesting and levity in order to take precautions about lewdness. And for maintaining the speculative and practical [teachings of the Torah], as well as the wealth which is a means to them, he said that it is appropriate to be zealous in regard to traditions [which are] for the purpose of preserving the Torah, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "He made signs for the Torah" (cf. Shabbat 115a). And through tithes for the preservation of wealth, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "The salt of

money (i.e., its preservation) is its diminution" (Ketuvot 66b). The prophet already made this clear when he said,
"(Bring the full tithe into the storehouse...) and thus put
me to the test" (Mal. 3:10). Likewise, he said that vows
are a fence to preserve abstinence, as is meant by the
verse, "I have firmly sworn to preserve your just rules"
(Ps. 119:106). Further, he stated that protection from
forgetfulness and from error in all [aspects of] wisdom will
come about through silence with respect to any superfluous
speech and [likewise with respect to] vain conversation,
which diverts one away from reflecting upon wisdom [and]
toward false imaginings.

18. He would say: Man is beloved having been created in the [divine] image. So great is the love that it was made known to him that he was created in the [divine] image, as it says, "For in the image of God He made man" (Gen. 9:6).

[370] Beloved are Israel who are called the children of the Omnipresent. So great is the love that it was made known to them that they are called the children of the Omnipresent, as it says, "You are the children of the Lord Your God" (Deut. 14:1).

Beloved are Israel for the precious instrument through which the world was created is given to them. So great is the love that it was made known to them that the precious instrument through which the world was created is given to

them, as it says, "I have given you a good teaching; Do not abandon My teaching (Torah)" (Prov. 4:2).

18. He stated here that it is appropriate for a man to pay attention to matters of prudence and zeal, which I have said are for the glory of his Creator, in that he is beloved before Him [by virtue of] having been created in the [divine] image. Along with this he is warned about the preservation of this image, as it says, "But your life-blood I shall demand," ending with, "for in the image of God He made man" (Gen. 9:5-6). Among the [members of the] human species it is more appropriate for Israel [to be referred to as "beloved," as they are called children, and are therefore, more obligated concerning the honor of their Father in heaven than the rest of mankind who are not His sons, 70 all the moreso since they were warned about preserving this status of theirs, as it says, "You are the children of the Lord your God; do not slash yourselves" (Deut. 14:1). From among the [members of the] Israelite nation, this is [even] more appropriate for those who grasp the Torah, which was given to them as the precious instrument through which the world was created, as it says, "By

⁷⁰ Sforno uses the term "lo-banaw" here, which comes from Deuteronomy 32:5. There it describes Israel as unworthy, having sinned with the Golden Calf. Sforno's own comment there is of interest. He states that God's reference to Israel in this way is done by God with surprise because He had intended for them to be lights for the rest of the world and then they committed iniquity with the Golden Calf.

wisdom (taken as Torah) He founded the earth, He established the heavens by understanding" (Prov. 3:19). They were warned about the preservation of this instrument in its saying, "Do not abandon My teaching [Torah]" (Prov. 4:2).

- 19. Everything is foreseen, yet free will is given. The world is judged by goodness, and everything is according to the preponderance of one's deeds.
- 19. It is no excuse for a sinner to say that he is predestined to sin because of God's foreknowledge of his sin, about which there can be no falsehood. For indeed He does know the future choice of a man, and that it is not coerced, just as we have certain knowledge about present things, and it is not coercive. For indeed all of the future is before His knowledge, blessed be He, [appearing] in the status of the present, without this future having an existence whatsoever except through His existence. 71

He stated that the world is judged by goodness, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "He who abounds in grace inclines [the scales] to grace....He removes the very first iniquity" (Rosh Hashanah 17a). This remark concerns the sinner who can easily become meritorious through repentance in that the Judge inclines towards lovingkindness.

He said that everything [which God does] is according

⁷¹ All existents come into being through God's existence, according to Sforno.

of reward and punishment does not depend [only] upon the [amount of the] speculative part acquired, but [also] upon [the amount of the] practical part. For indeed man acquires the potentially human intellect (i.e., one's acquired intellect before it is attained) by bringing his potential intellect from potentiality to actuality, for in his being actually engaged in intellectual cognition, he will possess [the form of] rational animality in actuality, which is eternal and nobler than the other species. And this animality grows stronger or weaker according to the level of speculation that is acquired. 72

However, the strengthening of this rational animality, and its well-being, happiness, and honor, or the reverse of all this, will be according to the preponderance of good deeds, which are desired by the Lord, blessed be He, for through them the freely choosing intellect imitates its Creator, who benefits others, as is made clear when [Scripture] says, "In Our image and in Our likeness" (Gen.

⁷²A person's ability to possess the form of "rational animality" is what separates human beings from other creatures. One's humanity -- this "rational animality" -- becomes stronger or weaker depending upon how much effort one exerts in bringing the potential intellect into actuality (but not by this alone; see following note). Everyone possesses a potential intellect, but it only becomes actualized by the process of actively engaging in intellectual cognition.

20. He would say: Everything is given on pledge, and a net is spead over all the living; the shop is open, and the shopkeeper extends credit; the account book is open, and the hand writes; and all who desire to borrow may come and borrow. The collectors go around exacting payment from a man with or without his consent. And they have a basis upon which they can rely, and the judgment is a judgment of truth, and everything is prepared for the [final] meal.

[371] 20. He stated that although free will is given, it is indeed given on pledge, not for eternity but for a limited time, in a manner in which the soul that sins or is deserving, will in any case return to God, who gave it, in order to render an account [of itself].

And a net is spread over all the living, whether in eternal or in temporal life, so that not even one will escape the punishment that is appropriate for him in the two kinds of life, even though he may escape the chance events of the time, or at least some of them, by means of his choice, as it says, "He who values his life will keep far

⁷³ Even though engaging in intellectual activity is vital for acquiring and strengthening or weakening the form of "rational animality," this is not enough. The deeds which one performs are an index of how much the potential intellect has really been actualized. When a person has indeed acquired and strengthened his actual intellect, then the gauge of this is according to his deeds. A preponderance of good deeds indicates that one really has understood Torah theoretically.

from them" (Prov. 22:5), in any event, he will not escape punishments. 74

The shopkeeper extends credit: when he gives His potential image for the purpose of perfecting it and bringing it to actuality, he does not demand payment from the neglectful, but extends credit until the day of his death. 75 And all who desire to borrow, and become culpable before the King through his sin or sins may come and borrow, although He is not repayed immediately. But the collectors always go around to exact payment from man, whether [this is] with his consent, and he recognizes [that payment will be exacted and so] he repents, or whether he is not aware of it (i.e., without his consent). And they have a basis upon which they can rely in their exacting payment, so that they shall not be prevented from exacting payment unless there is nothing [left] to collect from him. Rather, they exact "from the rich man through his ox and the poor man through his sheep" (Pesachim 118a) or through his body, according to divine justice.

⁷⁴ The full verse reads, "Thorns and snares are in the path of the crooked, he who values his life will keep far from them." Evidently, Sforno understands the verse to mean that some people know how to temporarily evade punishment, those thorns and snares of life, but nevertheless, they will eventually be punished for their transgressions.

⁷⁵A human being is the potential image of God. The word "elohim" is explained by Sforno, in his comment on Gen. 1:1, as being the description of God's eternity as the Form of all forms. In Gen. 1:26, Sforno explains that God makes mankind in His image by endowing him with an intellect part, which is eternal.

And the judgment is a judgment of truth, preserving the relation between the poor and the rich, for the relation of a sheep analogous to a poor man is like the relation of an ox to a rich man.

And everything is prepared for the [final] meal: all of the judgment and exacting of payment in this world is preparatory to that meal which the prophet explained when he said, "The Lord...will make...for all the peoples a banquet of rich dainties, a banquet of choice wines; of rich dainties seasoned with marrow, of choice wines well-refined" (Is. 25:6), for indeed He will exact payment from the righteous even to "a hair's breadth" (cf. Yevamot 121b), so that not even one bit of punishment will be mingled with their rejoicing in eternal life. Similarly, He benefits the wicked in this world, so that not one bit of reward will be mingled with their punishment in eternal life, as it says, "Who repays those that hate Him to their face, to destroy them" (Deut. 7:10), and as it says, "To destroy them forever" (Ps. 92:8). 76

Therefore, in order to accord such a person a perfect eternal life, any punishment for his sins, no matter how minute, is received in temporal life. Similarly, the truly evil deserves complete and total punishment in the world to come. Therefore, the reward for any good that such a person might have done is received in this world. This is almost identical to Sa'adia's discussion of the theodicy in Sefer Emunot WeDe'ot:

He has arranged the retribution for the class of deeds which are in the minority to be meted out in this world, in the way in which He has explained

- 21. Rabbi El'azar ben 'Azaryah says: If there is no Torah (teaching), there is no worldly conduct; if there is no worldly conduct, there is no Torah. If there is no fear, there is no wisdom; if there is no wisdom, there is no fear. If there is no understanding, there is no knowledge; if there is no knowledge, there is no understanding. If there is no meal, there is no Torah; if there is no Torah, there is no meal.
- 21. If there is no Torah (teaching), which is the speculative part, [then] there will not be that type of worldly conduct which is intended [to follow] from it, namely, doing good to another in order to honor one's Creator and to imitate Him according to His will. Likewise, when there is not that kind of worldly conduct it is clear that there is no Torah there, either.

Likewise, when there is no wisdom, i.e., political wisdom, which means dealing honestly [with people] in such a way that people are pleased with him, [then] this is because there is no fear of God there, blessed be He. Likewise, when there is no true fear of God, which is the state in which a person recognizes His greatness, blessed be He,

that the total sum of good deeds of a pious man is stored up for the Future World, whereas the few good deeds of an impious man are rewarded in this world....(tr. Altman, p. 135).

This is only the beginning of Sforno's discussion of theodicy in Avot. In 4:18 he deals with it at length.

[then] the political wisdom appropriate to his occupation is missing, and the wise man will only conduct himself in accordance with it when he supposes that there is some private benefit [for himself]. 77

If there is no understanding, which is the activity of the intellect through which one abstracts forms from matter, there is no knowledge, [then] in that case, he will not comprehend them at all. The Likewise, if we have no knowledge of something intelligible, this has happened to us because we have not labored with understanding to abstract the forms from the matter and to make them intelligible in actuality, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "(If a man says to you,) 'I have labored and not found,' do not believe him. If he says to you, 'I have not labored and found,' do not believe him [either] (Megillah 7b).

[372] If there is no meal a man will not be able to occupy himself with Torah, and it is appropriate to exert some effort to attain what is necessary for it. Likewise, if there is no Torah, note that there is no meal, for the purpose of its (the meal's) existence is truly as food for

⁷⁷ This echoes Sforno's discussion of motivations in Mishnah 13. A person's wisdom, when only used for personal benefit, will not be of benefit to others and is not in accordance with the will of God and does not reflect fear of God.

⁷⁸Understanding is the very activity of abstracting forms from matter. When this is done, the intellect actually becomes one with the form, and one then possesses what Sforno describes as "knowledge." Rambam's commentary to Avot has a similar comment.

human consumption. This is due to the fact that it specifies [in the mishnah that which is] a beast's food for that of a man (cf. Pesachim 118a, Berakhot 58a). 79

22. He would say: Someone whose wisdom is greater than his deeds may be compared to what? To a tree with many leaves, but few roots, and the wind comes and uproots and overturns it, as it says, "He shall be like a tamarisk in the desert, which does not sense the coming of the good. It is set in the scorched places of the wilderness, in a barren land without inhabitants" (Jer. 17:6). But someone whose deeds are greater than his wisdom may be compared to what? To a tree with few leaves, but many roots, and even if all the winds in the world should come and blow through it, they do not move it from its place, as it says, "He shall be like a tree planted by waters, sending forth its roots by a stream: It does not sense the coming heat, its leaves are ever fresh; it has not care in a year of drought, it does not

⁷⁹ According to Pesachim 118a, Adam, when receiving his punishments, became distressed and, with tears in his eyes said to God, "Master of the Universe, shall I and my ass eat from the same crib?" God allowed Adam's bread to come from a different source, the sweat of his brow. Nevertheless, the food is almost the same as that of beasts. Berakhot 58a also relates just how difficult it was for Adam to attain bread.

Evidently, Sforno is reacting to the fact that the term in the mishnah for bread is "gemach," which is food in its most unprepared sense. This is even closer to the food of beasts, unprepared and uncooked. The contrast illustrates that only Torah is purely for human consumption. The meal, insofar as it has any importance at all, is to sustain one to study Torah.

cease to yield fruit" (v. 8).

22. He stated that [if] anyone exerts himself more in [connection with attaining] political wisdom than he does in [connection with fulfilling] the other commandments of the Torah, the intent of which is speculation and the honor of God, blessed be He, and His holy ones, then clearly this wisdom of his (political wisdom) is not more valuable than what he knows and ascertains about God, blessed be He, and for the sake of His glory. Rather it (the aformementioned political wisdom) is intended for his personal benefit in temporal life, as the prophet made clear when he said, "Who makes flesh his strength and turns his thoughts from the Lord" (Jer. 17:5). For this [attitude] is really a factor that touches on what is particular to the individual himself, [and which] opposes the governance of that very wisdom, [so that] the [political] wisdom [in question] will be loathed by him and be undone. 80

However, when the deeds of someone who intends only the glory of God are greater [in number] than his particular efforts with respect to [acquiring] political wisdom and exercising it, then these deeds of his are founded on the roots of knowledge by which he recognized his Creator and knew that it is appropriate to do everything possible for

⁸⁰ The motivation of the exercise of political wisdom is once again all important. If it is for the glory of God, then it will endure. If it is done selfishly, by someone who places all of his trust in himself, it will become loathsome to him and be undone.

the sake of His glory and to be pleasing before Him. In this regard, his heart will never be reproached, as it says, "(Blessed be he...) whose trust is the Lord," ending with, "(he) will not cease to yield fruit" (Jer. 17:7-8).

- 23. Rabbi El`azar ben Chisma says: Qinim (the laws of bird offerings) and the onset of menstruation are the essentials of the halakhah. The [reckonings of] the seasons and geometry are peripheral to wisdom.
- 23. Our Sages, of blessed memory, already said by way of clarifying the verse, "For it is your wisdom and understanding in the sight of the peoples" (Deut. 4:6): "What wisdom and understanding is it [that is said to be] 'in the sight of the peoples?' You must say that it is the calculations of seasons and planets" (Shabbat 75a). Note that this is the Sage about whom they said that he knew how to estimate how many drops are in the sea, as it says in Horayot (10a), and so forth. This Sage, owing to his great wisdom with regard numbers, told of the [exalted] status of the science of astronomy through his knowledge of the locations of the stars and of their movements. He also stated that the account of Masekhet Qinim (the laws of bird offerings) and of the onset of menstruation, which are considered difficult to grasp, are really the essentials of the halakhah. Indeed, the reckonings of seasons and likewise the art of numbers, called geometry, are only peripheral to the science

of astronomy. In this way you can appreciate the status of the science of astronomy in that these important sciences are only peripheral to it. In this way he has aroused the ear of everyone who hears to strive greatly to grasp it. [373]

Chapter Pour

- 1. Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? One who learns from all men, as it says, "From all my teachers I have gotten understanding" (Ps. 119:99). Who is strong? One who conquers his evil inclination, as it says, "Better is one slow to anger than a strong man; to have self-control than to conquer a city" (Prov. 16:32). Who is wealthy? One who is happy with his portion, as it says, "When you eat the labor of your hands you shall be happy and prosper" (Ps. 128:2). You shall be happy in this world, and you shall prosper in the world to come. Who is honored? One who honors his [fellow] creatures, as it says, "For I will honor those who honor Me, but I will dishonor those who spurn Me" (I Sam. 2:30).
- 1. The intent of this chapter is to guide a man and instruct him about how to attain the virtue of prudence and of zeal. The upshot of this is that this [goal] can indeed be attained, when a man's intent in all of his deeds is the honor of his Creator, for then he will be zealous to do anything from which honor for God, blessed be He, necessarily derives. And he will guard against everything that would be contrary to this, in that the prophet has already said, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; Let not the mighty man glory in his might; Let not the wealthy man glory in his riches. But only in this should one glory: in his

earnest devotion to Me" (Jer. 9:22-23). That is to say, it is appropriate for the wise man, the mighty man, and the wealthy man to glory in this manner: when the wisdom by which he intellectually apprehends and knows the greatness and goodness of God, blessed be He, takes precedence for him. From this it will follow that he will use his wisdom, his might, and his wealth for the glory of God, blessed be He, and for nothing else.

Ben Zoma stated that this wise man about whom the prophet spoke, is wise in regard to political matters, the majority of whose subject matter is based on experience. This [type of wisdom] is only attained when one learns from all men, so that one comes to have many experiences. Who, then, is the strong man about whom the prophet spoke? It is he who conquers his evil inclination. He adduced proof that one who conquers his evil inclination is called a strong man from what he (Solomon) wrote, "Better is one slow to anger than a strong man" (Prov. 16:32). For indeed two things, whether many or few, cannot be properly compared unless they are in the same category. Therefore, he said that one who is slow to anger acts with forebearance more than the strong man who conquers his evil inclination temporarily.

Who is this wealthy man about whom the prophet spoke?

He [who] is happy with his portion and does not waste his

time with the attainment of imaginary acquisitions. He

adduced proof that he is called a wealthy man from where it

states, "When you eat the labor of your hands you shall be happy" (Ps. 128:2), that is to say, when the labor of your hands is sufficient for you, and you do not seek more than this, behold you are happy in this world, just as a wealthy man, in the view of the multitude, is happy. Inasmuch as the proper intention of a righteous man is that he be praised in regard to all of these, and his purpose in being so praised is to be honored in the eyes of everyone so that they will strive to be like him for the honor of His creator, Ben Zoma said that a man will indeed attain this when he honors his [fellow] creatures, and does not lord it over them in his boastfulness. And all of his praise consists of the honor [brought to his] Creator, as is meant by the verse, "My praise is continually of You" (Ps. 71:6). He will undoubtedly be honored, as it says, "For I will honor those who honor Me" (I Sam. 2:30).81

2. Ben 'Az'ai says: Run toward a light commandment, and flee from transgression. For a commandment gives rise to another commandment [in its wake], and a transgression brings about another transgression [in its wake]. For the reward of a commandment is a commandment, and the reward of a transgression is a transgression.

When a person is righteous, then he is praiseworthy. At the same time, one must be careful to treat others with honor, for the only reason to be praiseworthy is to be an example to others. Thus they will do the same and the righteous person's behavior will be an honor to God.

He stated that even though at times a commandment or a transgression may be slight, and in and of themselves are not such as to make one run [to perform it] or to flee [from it], they are, nevertheless, worthy of this due to what derives from them. This is [374] because a commandment gives rise to another commandment [in its wake], and likewise a transgression brings about another transgression [in its wake]. The reason for this is that the reward of a commandment in this world is such that God, blessed be He, gives the one who observes the commandment [a certain] disposition for [fulfilling] another commandment, 82 as they expounded in connection with the observance of [the commandment that requires] sending forth the mother from the nest (Deut. 22:6) [leading] to the [fulfilling] commandments of [building] the parapet on one's house (22:8) and [wearing] tzitzit, (22:12) and other such cases (cf. Tanchuma on Ki Tetze), 83 which teaches that in the fulfillment of the commandments of sending forth the mother from the nest a man merits the disposition for the commandments connected with it. Likewise, the reward and pleasure of a transgression in this world dispose one to [perform] another transgression, as in what is meant by the verse, "Lest you

⁸²In Qiddushin 39b, the Talmud states that there is no reward in this world for the observance of a commandment.

⁸³The Midrash Tanchuma illustrates exactly this progression from less weighty commandments to the observance of weightier ones.

eat of their sacrifices and take of their daughters...and cause your sons to whore (after other gods)" (Ex. 34:15-16; cf. Nu. 25:1ff.).

- 3. He would say: Do not despise any man, and do not consider anything impossible. For you have no one who does not have his hour, and you have nothing that does not have its place.
- 3. Do not despise any man, even those whom you do not know and who are not fit for you to honor, not withstanding the fact that you honor people [as a rule], do not despise any man. Do not consider (anything) impossible, and think the possible, even if it is unlikely, to be impossible, for at times it will become actual. Therefore, I spoke well [when I said] that you should flee from transgression, ⁸⁵ and not consider it impossible that you will fail in [pursuit of this trangression] or its consequences, as in the case of Solomon, when he said, "I will multiply [wives], and I will not stray" (Sanhedrin 21a on Deut. 17). Note that he did stray, and he brought about the loss of his kingdom for his sons as well as damage and exile for Israel.

⁸⁴ Sforno's comment on Numbers 25:1ff. quotes from the Exodus verse in an effort to demonstrate exactly the outcome of committing one transgression: it leads to another. In Numbers, the Israelites began by committing one sin with the Moabite women and wound up committing idolatry as a direct result.

⁸⁵ This is a reference to the previous mishnah.

- 4. Rabbi Lewitas of Jabneh says: Be exceedingly lowly of spirit, for the hope of man is but the worm.
- 4. Someone who is lowly of spirit is one who does not aspire to mount up to the [various] kinds of honor in this world. This is opposed to the arrogance which they ascribed to Balaam (Avot 5:18), on account of which Balak, who knew of his pride, said, "I will honor you greatly" (Nu. 22:17), and [said later], "Am I really unable to honor you?" (v. 37), and also, "I had said I was going to honor you greatly" (Nu. 24:11), and so forth. 86

In this way Scripture ascribed a proud heart (arrogance) to Jehoshaphat, [but] for the [purpose of doing]
good, as it says, "His heart was elevated in the ways of the
Lord (he took pride in God's ways)" (II Chron. 17:6). This
derived from his constant yearning and striving to become
more virtuous in wisdom and piety.

He said exceedingly lowly of spirit, that is to say,

"Not only will I warn you not to strive to attain the

[various] kinds of honor which are difficult to attain, but

I will also say that your mind should not turn toward

attaining even those kinds of honor [which are] easily

attained." He gave a reason for this, when he said that the

hope of man is but the worm. For indeed the level of

dominance and honor for which a man in his arrogance will

⁸⁶ Balaam sought so many different types of honor from Balak because he was arrogant.

strive and hope in this world are [ultimately nothing more than] the worm and maggot (cf. Avot 3:1), inasmuch as it is something very despicable in itself, and unable to endure for any time [worth] reckoning, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Any creature that has no skeleton cannot endure more than twelve months."

- 5. Rabbi Yochanan ben Beroqa says: Anyone who profanes the Name of Heaven in private will be punished in public, whether [he did so] inadvertently or intentionally.
- 5. He issued a warning concerning the honor of God, blessed be He, since a man needs to be warned very carefully about this. For even [in the case of] one who transgresses it inadvertently, the sinner will be punished for it in public, not in order to increase his punishment more than is appropriate for him, but to benefit the many by informing them of the importance of this issue (God's honor), just as happened to David, of whom it is said, [375] "You acted in secret, but I will act in the presence of all Israel, in

Nevertheless, Rambam's thrust is that unlike the situation with other moral qualities where the middle ground is recommended, that is not the case with arrogancee and lowliness. Bertinoro echoes this comment and we see that

the import of Sforno's comment is the same.

Rambam also discusses the extreme virtue of lowliness of spirit and the extreme sin of haughtiness. Yet he does point out that no one should be completely lowly. If there are sixty-four steps between arrogance and lowliness of spirit, he states, then a person should stand upon the sixty-third step. This might be similar to Sforno's intent in mentioning the type of arrogance characteristic of Jehoshaphat, which was really for the sake of God.

broad daylight" (II Sam. 12:12). [God threatened this] even though in the case of profaning [God's] Name, he undoubtedly transgressed inadvertently, for he supposed that it would not become known and that thereby (because it was unknown) the Name of Heaven would not be profaned at all.

- 6. Rabbi Ishmael says: One who learns in order to teach is enabled to learn and to teach. One who learns in order to act is enabled to learn and to teach and to observe and to act.
- 6. He stated that even though the purpose of one who learns in order to teach is inferior [to the purpose of one who learns in order to act], for indeed his concern is for honor or benefit in temporal life, [he] is, in any event, enabled to learn and to teach, "for out of [doing it] not for its own sake, [he eventually] comes [to do it] for its own sake" (Pesachim 50b). The purpose of one who learns in order to act, however, is undoubtedly to do the will of his Creator, [and he] is aided to learn and to teach others and to preserve himself from transgression and to perform the commandment of his Creator.
- 7. Rabbi Zadok says: Do not make [words of Torah] a crown by which to glorify yourself, or a spade by which to dig.

 Thus would Hillel say, "One who exploits the crown [of Torah] will perish" (1:13). Hence, you may conclude that

anyone who derives profit from words of Torah takes his life from the world.

Undoubtedly, one who uses what is holy for secular purposes profanes the holy and is culpable of death, as it says, "[Lest] they die for it having committed profanation" (Lev. 22:9). 88 Now inasmuch as words of Torah are [like the] holy of holies, [it follows that] a person who makes them [part of] secular work, the purpose of which is to seek out his food (cf. Job 39:29) for temporal life alone or to attain honor in temporal life, like the crown or the spade whose main purpose he clarified, [is such that] he profanes the holy. This sage warned about this [kind of behavior] and said that Hillel spoke about just such cases when he said that, "One who exploits the crown [of Torah] will perish" (1:13). However, one who strives to attain temporal life through them (through his knowledge of words of Torah), yet whose objective is to increase speculation and practice for himself or for another, is like someone who uses a holy implement in order to perform a holy service. This is indeed confirmed when [such a] man suffers a loss of work in order to teach or judge another, and is proved in the last chapter of Ketuvot, "The judges of civil law in Jerusalem" and the teachers of the laws of meal offerings and slaughtering for the priest "took their wages from the Temple

⁸⁸ Bertinoro also compares the words of Torah to holy objects and declares that one who uses them for secular purposes is culpable of death.

heave-offerings" (<u>Ketuvot</u> 105a). In this way, [God], blessed be He, commanded that they should be given portions of the offerings and tithes, as it says, "(He ordered the people...) to give the portions of the priests and the Levites, so that they might devote themselves to the teaching of the Lord" (II Chron. 31:4).

The <u>Tanna</u> clarified all this when he said, "Hence, you may conclude that anyone who derives profit from words of Torah takes his life from the world," and indeed one who earns his livelihood through words of Torah [in order] to learn or to teach or for [the purpose of fulfilling a] commandment does not derive any profit at all, as they already said, "Commandments were not give in order to derive profit from them" (<u>`Eruvin</u> 31a).

As in many other comments on this mishnah, Sforno qualifies R. Zadok seemingly unequivocal statement. The reality of life in his time, as in so many other periods of Jewish history, was that a scholar had no choice but to earn his livelihood through teaching and sitting as a judge. So Sforno qualifies what he believes was meant by the mishnah. First he points out that one who uses words of Torah to increase his own grasp of Torah or that of others is using words of Torah in exactly the same way in which the priest did in the Temple. Moreover, even though the mishnah explicitly states that one who derives profit from Torah is culpable of death, Sforno, citing Eruvin, argues that this cannot apply to those who earn their livelihood by learning and teaching Torah because such people do not "derive profit."

Sforno was certainly aware that Rambam was emphatic in his rejection of just such arguments as this. He insisted in his commentary to this mishnah, that no money should ever be taken in return for studying or teaching Torah. Undoubtedly Rambam understood R. Zadok's intention correctly, yet the preponderance of commentaries seems to support Sforno.

- [376] 7. Rabbi Yosi says: Anyone who honors the Torah is himself honored by others. Anyone who profanes the Torah is himself profaned by others.
- 7. One who honors the Torah honors the One who gave it and brings others to serve Him with one accord. The opposite of this occurs with one who profanes the Torah, as it says, "He reviles the Lord...for he has spurned the word of the Lord" (Nu. 15:30-31). For this reason, it is proper for one who honors the Torah to be honored, and [that one who does the] opposite of this, be profaned, as [God], blessed be He, said, "For I honor those who honor Me, and those who despise me will be lightly esteemed" (I Sam. 2:30).
- 8. Rabbi Ishmael says: Whoever shuns [the task of rendering official judgment] loosens himself from enmity, and theft, and perjury. But he who is arrogant in giving instruction is a fool, is evil, and also arrogant.
- 8. Whoever shuns [the task of rendering official judgment] when this is warranted while [at the same time] he is able to bring about compromise settlement [between the parties] (cf. Sanhedrin 5-6), 91 or [even] when he is not specifically

⁹⁰ Avot DeRabbi Natan, version A, Chapter 27, brings this same verse in commentary on this statement.

In Sanhedrin 5-6, there is a great deal of discussion about the various merits of arbitration versus rendering legal judgments. The conclusion of most of the rabbis is that arbitration, that is, compromise, is superior because it creates peace between the two parties.

suited to being a judge for the public, will in that case spare himself the enmity of the party declared culpable in the suit, as well as the theft which occurs [when] a judgment [is achieved by] deceptive means, and [finally, even] perjury, the punishment of which is imposed upon the one who requires the oath [to be sworn], if he lodges a false claim, or upon the one sworn, if he swears falsely. 92

(But he who is presumptious in giving instruction is) a fool, because he does not fear the harm which comes from enmity. He is likewise evil, for he is not strict about accidental theft or perjury coming about because of him. He is also arrogant, for he has undoubtedly entered into all of this only in order to be honored by his having rendered his judgment.

- 9. He would say: Do not judge alone, for no one judges alone save One. And do not say, "Accept my opinion," for they are empowered and you are not.
- 9. Because the question of judgment is full of danger, as I have said, [what] is appropriate for you [to keep in mind is that] even if you are able to judge alone because you are an expert, it is [still] better for you not to judge alone, but rather [to do so] with two others who bear [the responsibility] with you. For no one judges alone save One,

⁹²The judge who administers the oath becomes entangled in the perjury.

who judges without the testimony of witnesses and without the claims of litigants [attempting] to cause Him to err.

Rather, He is Witness and Judge and Litigant. But the other judges, who in their judgments need to hear the words of the witnesses and the litigants, are at times [subject to] error and fraud which will occur in their judgments.

And do not say to your fellow judges, "Accept my opinion," even if you are greater than they, for they are empowered to make the judgment according to the commandment of the Torah, as it already said, "Follow after the majority" (Ex. 23:2).

- 10. Rabbi Yochanan says: Anyone who fulfills the Torah in poverty, in the end, he will fulfill it in prosperity.

 Anyone who neglects the Torah in prosperity will in the end neglect it in poverty.
- 10. In the end, he will fulfill it in prosperity, as it says, "In order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end" (Deut. 8:16). 94 For by virtue of the fact that Israel fulfilled the Torah in poverty, they became worthy to fulfill it in prosperity, in accordance with divine justice, which is measure for measure.

⁹³This translation is based upon the common understanding of this verse cited by Rashi and many others.

⁹⁴Sforno's comment on Deut. 8:16 explains "to test you by hardships" by using the language of this mishnah, "that you fulfill it in poverty."

Likewise, anyone who neglects the Torah in wealth will in the end neglect it in poverty, as it says, "Because you would not serve the Lord...with the abundance of everything, you shall have to serve your enemy...and with a lack of anything" (Deut. 28:47-48).

[377] 11. Rabbi Me'ir says: Minimize your business and be occupied with Torah. Be lowly of spirit before all men. If you neglect Torah, there will be many things neglected in your way. If you labor with Torah, there is an abundand reward to give to you.

11. Minimize your business, for in this way you will have time to occupy yourself with Torah, and you will make known its importance for you. In this way you will honor both the Torah and the One who gave it, as it says, "Embrace her to you and she will exalt you" (Prov. 4:8).

Be lowly of spirit before all men so that they will recognize that by your occupying yourself with Torah it is not your intent to attain the various kinds of honor [which men pursue]. He stated that if you neglect the Torah, that is to say, you will also minimize your occupation with your other affairs; for if you neglect the Torah on account of your [worldly] affairs, not only will those affairs cause you to neglect [the Torah], but still other obstacles besides these will arise and cause you to neglect [Torah].

And if you occupy yourself with Torah, and decrease

your pre-occcupation with affairs of temporal life, there is an abundant reward to give to you, through that very decrease of business affairs through which you profit greatly in temporal life, and you shall attain eternal life, as it says, "Let not this Book of the Teaching cease from your lips," and so forth, "for then you shall make your ways prosperous" -- in temporal life -- "and then shall you have a worthwhile success" (Josh. 1:8), and you shall attain eternal life. 95

12. Rabbi Eli'ezer ben Jacob says: One who performs one commandment acquires for himself one advocate. One who commits one transgression gains for himself one accuser. Repentance and good deeds are a shield against punishment.

12. A shield against punishment, even though the good deed may be [performed] out of fear of punishment, it is nevertheless a shield that defends against the punishment which should have come, as occurred in the case of Nineveh [in the story of Jonah], even though they continued to practice idolatry; ⁹⁶ and as it says, "Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why should you die, O House of Israel?" (Ez. 33:11). In this way the prophet taught that

⁹⁵The word used in the verse cited in Joshua is taskil, which Sforno probably understands as "you shall attain reason."

⁹⁶The people of Nineveh repented their evil and were saved from punishment, yet the text never states that they worshipped God alone.

they should flee from punishment even though their repentance arose only out of fear of punishment.

- 13. Rabbi Yochanan the Sandalmaker says: Every assembly which is for the sake of Heaven will be established in the end. Any that is not for the sake of Heaven will not be established in the end.
- 13. When this sage saw all the various factions of Pharisees, and hypocrites, and Sadducees of his day, including the falsely humble Pharisee and the Pharisee who wore his religious obligations on his sleeve, among others, as our Sages, of blessed memory, clearly reported (Sotah 22b), 97 [and when he also saw that] the Sages of that generation did not have the power to abolish them, and [that] they were troubled about this, he said that they should not be greatly troubled about this. For indeed those factions that were not formed for the sake of Heaven would perish by themselves, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Leave the wicked alone and they will perish by themselves" (cf. Gittin 7a; Shabbat 32a).
- 14. Rabbi El'azar ben Shammu'a says: Let the honor of your disciple be as dear to you as your own, and the honor of

⁹⁷ Sforno is discussing here the nogfi Pharisee and the shikhmi Pharisee discussed in Sotah 22b. The nogfi is the one whose knees knock together with false humility and the shikhmi is the one who wears religious obligations on his shoulder.

your colleague as the fear of your teacher, and the fear of your teacher as the fear of Heaven.

- 14. Within the general rule for honoring God, blessed be He, is [included the obligation that] we honor His sacred things and His holy ones, as it says, "And show deference to the old; you shall fear your God" (Lev. 19:32). Therefore, this sage enjoined that we honor the guardians of Torah [378] by "raising them up in honor" (Sheqalim 6:4). 98 This means that the honor of your disciple, who is lower than you, should be equal [to yours] in your estimation, and the honor of your colleague who is your equal should be in your estimation at the level of the fear of your teacher, who is greater than you. And the fear of your teacher in your estimation should be on the level of fear of Heaven, the level which is incomparable to any other.
- 15. Rabbi Judah says: Be careful in study, for an unintentional error in study is accounted as intentional.
- 15. An unintentional error, in something which you have not studied on account of your negligence, is accounted as intentional, to punish you because you were intentionally negligent, as it says, "...Who never give a thought to the plan of the Lord...assuredly My people will suffer exile for not giving heed" (Is. 5:12-13).

⁹⁸In his comment on Lev. 19:32, Sforno understands "the old" to refer to the guardians of Torah, basing himself upon Qiddushin 32b.

16. Rabbi Simeon says: There are three crowns: The crown of Torah, the crown of Priesthood, and the crown Kingship. But the crown of a good name surpasses them all.

16. There were three crowns which were placed in Israel at the command of the Most High. They are indeed crowns for those who merit them. Because the crown of a good name surpasses them all, and not in any other way, there is no need to speak of what takes place in the opposite case.

For indeed of a scholar with whom people are pleased, our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "What do people say about him? 'Have you seen this man who has studied Torah? How pleasant are his ways'" (paraphrase of Yoma 86a), and so forth. Of him it says, "(You are my servant,) Israel, in whom I glory" (Is. 49:3). For him the Torah becomes a crown and holy diadem. The Torah, [however,] will be the opposite of this for a disciple who has a bad reputation (e.g., an adulterer) (Megillah 25b), as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "What do the people say about him? 'Have you seen this man who has studied Torah? How ugly are his ways" (paraphrase of Yoma 86a), and so forth. Of him Scripture says, "It was said to them, 'These are the people of the Lord, yet they left His land'" (Ez. 36:20).

The case is similar with regard to the crown of Priesthood, as happened to the sons of Eli (I Sam. 2), and as it says, "I will reject you as My priest" (Hos. 46).

Likewise, with the crown of royalty, as happened to Jehoram, who killed his brothers "as well as some of the officers of Israel" (II Chron. 21:4), "(His people) did not make a fire for him like the fire for his fathers...and they buried him in the City of David, but not in the tombs of the kings" (vv. 19-20).

- 17. Rabbi Nehor'ai says: Go into exile to a place of Torah, and do not say that it will come to you, for your colleagues will make it secure in your hands. And do not rely on your own understanding.
- 17. Go into exile (to a place of Torah) -- when you need to depart from your place to seek out your livelihood or for another reason, choose to depart to a place of Torah. Do not say that you will disseminate Torah in a place where it is not and that you will raise up many disciples. For even though the disciples will increase in understanding and dialectical ingenuity, your colleagues who are your equals in [mastery of] tradition will make it secure in your hands, whereas disciples cannot do this.

And do not rely on your own understanding, [in the

⁹⁹ Sforno's comment here closely parallels Bertinoro. Both of them illustrate how any one of the first three crowns mentioned in the mishnah can be perverted, even drawing at times upon the same evidence. Yet they both state that there is no need to illustrate this with one who wears the crown of a good name for this is the highest and, according to Bertinoro, all of the others, in order to be truly good, need to wear this crown as well.

hope] that it will be made secure for you without colleagues, for sometimes what happened [379] to this sage who forgot all or part of his learning will happen to you, although his colleagues restored him to his original capacity, as is clarified in Shabbat, Chapter Chabit (Shabbat 147b).

- 18. Rabbi Yann'ai says: Neither the security of the wicked nor the afflictions of the righteous are in our hands.
- 18. When he says, "the security of the wicked," he stated this concerning the type of security which only the completely wicked attain, as it says, "The security of fools will destroy them" (Prov. 1:32), and as it says, "Why are the workers of treachery at ease?" (Jer. 12:1). Even the completely righteous will not attain this since they are "worthy of enjoying two tables" (Berakhot 5b), as our Sages, of blessed memory, said in Genesis Rabbah, "Jacob wished to dwell securely, whereupon he was attacked by Joseph's accusers (Joseph's troubles). The accuser says, 'What is prepared for them in the life of the world to come is not enough for these righteous! They wish to dwell in security even in this world!" (Gen. Rab. 84:3).

¹⁰⁰ Rav Nehor'ai's true identity is unknown to us. In Shabbat 147b, some Sages identify him as R. Eleazar b. Arakh and while this is doubtful, Sforno is probably making this same identification. Nevertheless, the talmudic passage presents the same story of R. El'azar b. Arakh and then states, "And it is thus that we learned, 'Rav Nehor'ai said,'" and goes on to quote this mishnah.

¹⁰¹Rashi also quotes this in his commentary on Gen. 37:2.

Indeed, all this [security enjoyed by the wicked] appears [to be] the very opposite of the worthy promises of the Torah, and the reverse of what our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Would the righteous who ate of both worlds find it distasteful?" (paraphrase of Horayot 10b). It is similar with regard to that type of afflictions which are ascribed only to the righteous, namely, the afflictions of love [which were] in evidence from [the time of] Abraham, of blessed memory, [and] which befall a man without [his having committed] any prior sin, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "If a man sees afflictions coming upon him, let him examine his deeds.... If he examines [them] and finds nothing [amiss], he should attribute it to the neglect of Torah.... If he examines [them] and finds that it is not this, it is none other than an affliction of love" (Berakhot 5a). The Sages, of blessed memory, have already made clear that this type of affliction occurs in a man's life only if they are precious to him, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Could someone really suppose that [such sufferings] are endured without consent? Scripture says, 'The Lord chose to crush him with disease, to see if his soul would offer itself in restitution' (Is. 53:10). Just as a guiltoffering is brought with consent, so afflictions are accepted with consent" (paraphrase of Berakhot 5a). They had already told about Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Yochanan [who espoused the doctrine of afflictions of love, and] who spoke

[to him] about those crushed by afflictions, "'Are your afflictions precious to you?'" and he answered, "'Neither they nor their reward'....He gave him his hand and raised him up, and his afflictions departed from him" (Berakhot 5b).

In fact, the "upright are bewildered" (cf. Job 17:8) by all of this, for indeed one infers (lit., "sees") from this that God, blessed be He, [apparently] desires [to inflict] pain on the bodies of His pious ones without [their having committed] previous sin, contrary to what [Scripture] says, "For He does not willingly bring grief or affliction to man" (Lam. 3:33), and contrary to what our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "There are no afflictions without iniquity" (Shabbat 55a). Moreover, if God, blessed be He, desires this, how then can a righteous person refuse them [and act] contrary the will of his Maker? And how can it be possible that they depart from him when he does not want them?

In order to resolve all these doubts, this sage stated that it is not in our hands, and so forth. That is to say, with regard to the Torah's promises of good, we do not have anything [that we can offer as an explanation] about the security of the wicked, and likewise with regard to the Torah's promises of woe, we do not have anything [we can offer as an explanation] about the afflictions of the righteous. For, indeed, the well-being of the wicked, which [is the same as] earning a livelihood without distress, as

happened [in regard] to the people of the Generation of the Plood, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "The Holy One, blessed be He, gave them a taste of the world to come" (Sanhedrin 108a), [is something that] no righteous individual has attained since the sin of the first man, when it was decreed concerning him, "By the sweat of your brow you shall get bread to eat" (Gen. 3:19). Likewise, with all of the worthy promises of the Torah, it did not promise that the righteous would earn a livelihood without distress, rather it said, "You shall gather in your new grain" (Deut. 11:14), (i.e., you will not starve; that is all).

From the words of the prophets and our rabbis, may their memory be a blessing, [380] it appears that no righteous individual will attain this type of security until Shiloh comes, about which it is written, "Let there be abundant grain in the land" (Ps. 72:16). The Sages, of blessed memory, clarified this, "The Land of Israel is destined to bring forth cakes and robes of wool" (Shabbat 30b), that is to say, that Israel's situation will [eventually] return to what it was for the first man before his sin, "Anyone who has had forty days without afflictions in this world, has received his world" (based on 'Arakhin 16b).

¹⁰² In his comment on Gen. 49:10, Sforno explains "until Shiloh comes" as follows: the word comes from two Hebrew words, shul, or shulayim, meaning edges or limits, and shalwah, which means quiet, calm, and secure, and which he takes as the root of the word shalom, or peace. So Shiloh means the peaceful end. This fits in well with his comment here.

Similarly, this sage stated that among the Torah's promises of woe, we do not find anything which teaches that afflictions will befall a man without [his having committed] any prior iniquity. From this it follows that nothing of this type of security [enjoyed by] the wicked comes as a reward of the kind promised in the Torah. Likewise, the afflictions of the righteous are not the type of punishment promised in it. Rather, the security of the wicked shall be to cause them to fall "from the highest roof to the deepest pit" (Chagigah 5b), and the afflictions of the righteous [belonging to] this type, which are [really] afflictions of love, will not occur at all, except for that which the righteous individual wishes to bring upon himself in accordance with his own will. This occurs whenever some commandment comes within the righteous man's capacity [to perform | and if he performs it, he will receive a reward, but if he does not perform it he will not receive punishment on its account, as in the case of Nahum, who did not rush to aid the poor man before unloading his ass [and consequently, the man died and Nahum sought to be afflicted on his account) (Ta'anit 21a). For then the righteous individual becomes so regretful that he himself punishes his body because [he did not] attempt [what he should have attempted] and he receives afflictions because of this. In fact, it is undoubtedly [regarded] as if he performed the commandment, and through it continued to find grace in the eyes of God,

blessed be He. So [that is why] those very afflictions depart and come about at his command, as our Sages, of blessed memory, reported about Rabbi El'azar son of Rabbi Simeon (Bava Metzia' 84-85a).

In this way, the sage also removed any doubt deriving from the words of Jeremiah and Habakuk (cf. Jer. 12:1-2; Lam. 3:35-39; Hab. 1:2-4, 13-16) who cried out about the judgment of "a righteous man who suffers evil, and of a wicked man who prospers" (Berakot 7a). Moses, our teacher, explained this when he said, "He repays them who hate him to their face, to destroy them" (Deut. 7:10), and when he said, "Who shows no favor and takes no bribe" (10:17).

When he said that it is not in our hands, the sage also dissolved this doubt, for indeed of all the promises of the Torah which we have concerning good or woe, which are types of preparation or types of reward and punishment for the righteous and wicked in this world and the next, there is nothing concerning the security of the wicked or the afflictions of love [which befall the righteous]. From this it follows that none of them are a reward or punishment from

b. Simeon. In short, he suffered greatly because he believed he may have accidentally condemned at least one innocent man to death. All tests proved that he had not, yet he afflicted himself. His profound righteousness (despite his rejection by his colleagues) was testified to by the fact that his body did not decay for eighteen years after his death, though he laid unburied in an upper chamber. When finally buried, a snake protected his cave and even his very righteous son did not merit being laid to rest at his side since he had not suffered.

God, blessed be He. Rather, the security of the wicked is in order to intensify the [eventual] punishment [reserved] for them, to agitate them, and destroy them even more, as it says, "You set them in slippery places; You hurl them down to utter ruin" (Ps. 73:18), for when they become fully aware of their fall from their lofty level, their pain will be all the greater in this regard.

Similarly, the afflictions of the righteous are not a punishment to them from God, blessed be He. Rather, a righteous individual desires them because he grieves over some commandment which he was not able to perform, so that his soul will repent by virtue of his being distressed about this to such a worthy degree [381] that it will be as if he [actually] performed the commandment. Now the prophets did indeed bemoan the type of security which befalls the wicked, but not like those who are distressed about the welfare of the wicked and the perversion of justice. Rather, they were distressed because of the damage which befalls the righteous on account of the arrogance of the wicked, and they attacked them for it, as it says, "As the one in the wrong devours the one in the right" (Hab. 1:13).

- 19. Rabbi Matya ben Charash says: Greet every man peaceably. Be a tail to lions, and do not be a head to foxes.
- 19. Even in [the case of] greeting people with whom you do

not associate, whether you are a "head" or a "tail" [in your relation] to them, do not desist from greeting them in a humble way. Note that you should indeed be a tail to lions, for in their company you will add to your stature and become a lion, as in what is meant by the verse, "He who keeps company with the wise becomes wise" (Prov. I3:20). And do not be a head to the foxes, for then you will use your stature to enlighten them, and you will not add [to your stature], but will perhaps even decrease it, as is intended by the verse, "But he who consorts with dullards comes to grief" (Ibid.). 104

- 20. Rabbi Jacob says: This world resembles a foyer for the world to come. Prepare yourself in the foyer so that you may enter the inner chamber.
- 20. (This world) resembles a foyer, inasmuch as abiding there is not intended for its own sake, rather to attain by means of it a way to enter [the world to come] and find grace [there], which is its intended purpose. For anyone who does not attain this, his abiding there was in vain. So it is with temporal life; for anyone who does not attain eternal life by means of it, temporal life for him was in vain. 105

¹⁰⁴ Midrash Shemuel quotes this same verse.

 $^{^{105}}_{
m Rambam}$ similarly notes that in this world a person must acquire the merits by which he can be admitted to the world to come.

- 21. He would say: Better is one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than all the life in the world to come. And better is one hour of calm spirit in this world than all the life in the world to come.
- 21. Although I have stated that life in this world was not intended for its own sake, it is not appropriate for a righteous person to despise it or to shorten his days.

 Rather, it is appropriate for him to strive to prolong them as much as possible, for by doing so he is able to acquire strengthening for life in the world to come which he cannot acquire afterward. Yet I have stated that it was not intended for its own sake, for even if one had every possible success in this world, such success is not even considered equivalent to life in the world to come.
- 22. Rabbi Simeon ben El'azar says: Do not soothe your colleague at his moment of anger, and do not console him at the moment when his dead lies before him; do not question him at the moment of his vow, and attempt not to see him at his moment of humiliation.
- 22. Although it is appropriate for a righteous person to strive for the improvement of his colleague, as it says, "Love your fellow as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), it is not appropriate for you to strive in situations like these [and] at these times, for indeed passion [at such times] is

natural and not voluntary, and he cannot choose to accept from you [what you offer] at such a time. 106 Therefore, you will not achieve your intent, and will perhaps add to the damage.

- 23. Samuel the Younger says: "Do not exult when your enemy falls, and when he stumbles let your heart not rejoice, lest the Lord see it and be displeased and turns away His anger from him" (Prov. 24:17-18).
- 23. They have already stated, "Greater is the hatred with which the ignorant hate a learned man, than the hatred of the nations [382] of the world for Israel" (Pesachim 49b). When this sage saw that some of the [other] Sages of his day who took this strictly would rejoice in the misfortunes of the ignorant, to the extent that Rabbi Akiva said, "If I had an ignoramus before me I would bite him like an ass" (Pesachim 49b), 107 he said that it is not appropriate to rejoice in their downfall at all. But it is appropriate to be concerned about their wickedness, which caused their fall, following the example of our Creator, who said, "It is not My desire that anyone should die" (Ez. 18:32).

¹⁰⁶ Machzor Witri's commentary makes a similar point that it is useless to try to calm someone who is so upset.

¹⁰⁷ This is actually a reworking of what Rabbi Akiva said. His actual quote is, "When I was an ignoramus, I said, 'If I had a learned man before me I would bite him like an ass.'"

- 24. Elisha ben Avuyah says: One who learns as a child may be compared to what? To ink written on new paper. And one who learns as an old man may be compared to what? To ink written on paper which has often been erased.
- 24. For indeed in a child the faculty of memory is stronger, and not many images have passed through his faculty of imagination so as to disturb him in [his] understanding the truth. It is the opposite of all this in old age.
- 25. Rabbi Yosi bar Rabbi Judah of Kefar Ha-Bavli says: One who learns from the young may be compared to what? To one who eats unripe grapes and drinks wine from his winepress.

 One who learns from the old may be compared to what? To one who eats ripe grapes and drinks aged wine.

Rabbi says: Do not look at the bottle, but at what is in it. There is a new bottle full of aged wine, and an old one which does not even have new wine.

25. Unripe grapes and wine from his winepress [are those] which have not reached their best (lit., "perfected") state. This also happens with the learning of the young who have not attained the level of perfect theoretical reflection, free of error; and the opposite of this occurs with regard to learning from the old. It said there that Rabbi Yosi condemned learning from the young and praised learning from the old. He did not say this about those who are young in

age or those advanced in years, but designated as young (lit., "little") those who are young with respect to apprehension, even though they are old with respect to age. He designated as old those who have achieved wisdom, even though they be young in age. 108

- 26. Rabbi El`azar Ha-Kapar says: Envy, desire, and [ambition] for honor drive a man from the world.

 26. For the ultimate goal which is intended in each of these is something that has no bounds, and with [envy, desires, and the need for honor] there is no "time to act for the Lord" (Ps. 119:126), but they always deter a man from attaining eternal life.
- 27. He would say: Those born, die; and those who are dead, are revived; and those who are dead are judged -- [so as] to know, to make known, and to have it made known that He is God, He is the Maker, He is the Creator, He is the One who understands, He is the Judge, He is the Witness, He is the Litigant, He will judge in the future. Blessed is He, for there is no unrighteousness before Him, nor respecting of

¹⁰⁸ Qiddushin 32b defines a zagen, an old person, by taking the word as an acronym, zeh sheganah chokhma, one who has acquired great wisdom.

¹⁰⁹ When someone is preoccupied with acquiring worldly pleasure, he soon discovers that there is no limit to what he desires to possess. This leaves him with no time to obey the will of God and can deter him from attaining eternal life.

persons, and He does not take bribes, for everything is His.

And know that everything is according the final accounting.

Do not let your [evil] inclination assure you that Sheol is a refuge for you. You were formed against your will, you were born against your will, you live against your will, and you are obligated against your will to give a complete accounting in the future before the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

27. [383] Note that the end of those who were born is to die and the end of those who are dead is to be revived and to bring into being new existents from them, as it says, "And they turn again to dust; send back Your breath, they are created, and You renew the face of the earth" (Ps. 104:29-30). Behold, this continuous cycle of existence which exists only insofar as it goes around continuously, would be a completely useless act were it not intended that all the living who were born or re-created from them, be judged in the future, and that He who brought them into existence judge them according to how each one of them achieves what He intended in bringing them into existence or [how he does] the contrary. The [divine] intention for those born is that they reflect and know, and this is [the case] because the activity of cognition that we perceive in them is indeed the noblest of all their activities, and the intent of the continuous round [of renewal] was to make known His existence to terrestrial beings by virtue of the

process of generation and corruption which goes around continuously, for this is what compels those who reflect [upon it] to ascend through their investigation to the reality of the First Agent. What is intended by divine judgment in this world, even before the judgment regarding these things for eternal life is provided, is to make known to the others [that He is God].

Indeed, when I say "to know," I mean by this that He who brought them into being, intended that they know that He is an infinitely powerful God, through their recognition of His power over creation, and that there is no one else who has such power. For indeed, what is intended for them is that they should know [whatever is knowable about God], and note that this type of knowledge is the noblest of all the types of cognition.

When I say "to make known," I mean that He who brings them into being intended that terrestrial beings know by this that He is the Maker [of all things] who ordered the nature of existence [to produce] one entity from another entity through continuous process [of generation and corruption], and by ascending through their investigation [they come] to the existence of the First Agent, who has a [certain] goal, and by this they will ascend to [the knowledge of] what we have said, that He is the Creator.

When I say "to have it made known," I mean to say that it will be made understood to all the rest that He intends

all their deeds and oversees [them]. They will understand this when He does justice even in this world, and they will understand that it necessarily follows from this that He is the Witness who knows all of their hidden and revealed deeds [even] where there are no [other] witnesses. Similarly, it follows necessarily that He is the Judge, when they see His judgments in this world. Also that He is the Litigant, for once they know that He arranged all of these things, it will follow necessarily that He rejoices over that which assists [in fulfilling] His intent, and [He] deals strictly with that which opposes and destroys it. From all this it necessarily follows that He will judge in the future with regard to eternal life, for indeed the standard of strict justice in this world is imperfect, as is evident in the case of "a righteous man who suffers evil and a wicked man who prospers." This is an impossible deficiency with respect to God, blessed be He, for there is no unrighteousness before him, nor forgetfulness, nor respecting of persons, all of which exist in man on account of emotion, but [which] do not occur in Him who is unchanging, blessed be He. He does not take bribes, for the [performance of] a commandment does not extinguish a transgression. 110 reason for this is that everything is His. Therefore, when you have fulfilled some commandment you have given Him nothing of your own, corresponding to which He should cancel

¹¹⁰ Rambam makes precisely this comment.

out the liability which you incurred to Him through your sin. For everything is His; and you and all that is yours are His (cf. Avot 3:8). Therefore you are obligated to do His will.

Know that even though you have fulfilled many commandments and studied much Torah, it is appropriate for you to
strive to add [more]. For everything comes out according to
the account, and the more good that you add, the more you
add the benefits and rewards of eternal life to your eternal
soul.

Do not let your [evil] inclination assure you that in Sheol there will be a refuge from all punishment, as is thought by those who say that after the decay of the body there remains nothing upon which reward or punishment will fall. For if this were true, [then] He who brought us into being, and who is properly described a "loving His creation" inasmuch as He made the effort to create it, would have created you [384] completely happy and well in your temporal life. But note that we see the opposite of this: [for example, | you live against your will, for often it happens that a man's condition is that he is despised during his lifetime, and he lives against his will. And [again,] sometimes it happens that a man's life will be as good as possible and he really takes delight in it, yet in any event death comes against his will. Similarly, with the process of birth and creation for there is no one who experiences no pain or woe in connection with these things. From all this it follows necessarily that you are obligated against your will to give a complete accounting in the future, for indeed whatever the Creator and His righteousness intend is not complete without it.

- 1. The world was created with ten utterances. And what does Scripture mean by this? Could it not have been created with one utterance? It was in order to exact punishment from the wicked who destroy the world which was created with ten utterances. And to give a good reward to the righteous who sustain the world which was created with ten utterances.
- In this chapter the compiler taught about the greatness 1. of the subject of speculation and practice. He adduced proof for this from what the Torah endeavored to make known to us about the world being created with ten utterances, for indeed the intent was not to teach that the One who brings into being was unable to create it in another manner. For the creative power which brings into being without matter whatsoever and without time elapsing is not too weak to bring a great many substrata into being, just as it is not too weak to bring into being only one substratum, inasmuch as neither motion nor time nor pre-disposed matter apply to such [creation] in the way that lassitude applies to the multiplication of substrata [in ordinary production]. 111 Rather, the intent was to make it known that in order to create an existent in His likeness and His image (cf. Gen. 1:26), it was necessarily better to produce the entire order

 $^{^{111}}$ Sforno's conception of creatio ex nihilo begins with his first comment to the Book of Genesis.

of the ten utterances in such a way that each existent would come into being from the other. It follows from this that anyone who aids in this design of His, the existence of which was so greatly sought for, will be worthy of a good reward from the Creator, and whoever acts contrary to this is deserving of great punishment.

2. [There were] ten generations from Adam to Noah, in order to make known how patient He is, for all the generations angered Him until He brought the waters of the flood upon them.

[There were] ten generations from Noah to Abraham, in order to make known how patient He is, for all the generations angered Him until Abraham came along, and He received the [equivalent of the] reward of them all [from Abraham].

2. By this He made known the ways of His goodness, so that every intelligent person would love Him and rejoice in doing His will. Along with this, [one should] not be confused by seeing an evil person persevere in his wickedness, for this is on account of the ways of His goodness in that He is patient.

And [God], blessed be He, received from him (lit., "before him," that is, Abraham) such reward and satisfaction, that if each one of the generations had produced one-tenth of that satisfaction, it would not have perished. He

called this satisfaction a recompense to Him, [385] blessed be He, in the manner of, "For the Lord's portion is His own people" (Deut. 32:9), and in the manner of, "'Pay me my recompense....So they weighed out my recompense, thirty shekels of silver'" (Zech. 11:12), as our Sages, of blessed memory, made clear concerning the righteous of the generation. 112

- 3. Ten trials afflicted Abraham and he withstood them all, in order to make known how great was the love of Abraham.
- 3. To make known how much he loved His Maker, increasingly invoking His name and bringing many under His wings, even though he had endured many trials; this befits every member of the covenant, as it says, "Look back to Abraham your father" (Is. 51:2).
- 4. Ten miracles were done for our ancestors in Egypt and ten by the Sea. The Holy One, blessed be He, brought ten plagues upon the Egyptians in Egypt, and ten by the Sea. Our ancestors tried the Omnipresent with ten trials in the wilderness, as it says, "They have tried Me these ten times and have not listened to My voice" (Nu. 14:22).
- Corresponding to the ten trials which our father
 Abraham withstood, God, blessed be he, dealt mercifully with

¹¹² In Chullin 92a, the thirty silver pieces identified by Zech. 11:12-13 are the thirty righteous men of the world.

his children through ten miracles, twice. Yet contrary to this they were ungrateful by their testing and struggling against the Lord. His holy Torah reported all these things in order to teach the higher way of life to an intelligent person and also in order to turn him away from Sheol below (cf. Prov. 15:24).

- Temple: No woman ever miscarried due to the odor of holy flesh; holy flesh never went bad; no fly was ever seen in the slaughterhouse; the High Priest never had a nocturnal emission on Yom Kippur; no rain extinguished the fire on the altar; no wind prevailed over the pillar of smoke; no defect was found on the Omer sheaf, and the two loaves, and the show bread; the people, standing close together, had room to bow; no serpent or scorpion ever harmed anyone in Jerusalem; no one ever said to his companion, "There is not enough space for me to lodge in Jerusalem."
- 5. These miracles were also performed during [the period of] the Second Temple, even though the situation of Israel was not in any sense perfect, and "their hearts were inconstant with Him" (Ps. 78:37). He related that, in spite

¹¹³ The ten miracles in Egypt were the plagues. Many different commentators enumerate the ten miracles at the sea. Sforno seems more interested in the fact that not only were all ten of Abraham's trials matched by a miracle, but that each was really matched by two miracles, in that there were two sets of ten. Yet, even with this overwhelming proof, the people rebelled.

of this, the divine lovingkindness did not cease performing supernatural miracles for them within His holy city, inasmuch as His Temple was [located] therein.

- 6. Ten things were created at twilight. These are they:
 The mouth of the earth; the mouth of the well; the mouth of
 the ass; the rainbow; the manna; the rod; the shamir; the
 letters; the writing; and the tablets [of the commandments].
 There are those who also say: the evil spirits, Moses's
 grave, and the ram of Abraham our father. And some also
 say: the tongs made with the tongs.
- 6. He stated that these were created at twilight, for even though God, blessed be He, performed many signs and wonders which changed the nature of things, such as the plagues of Egypt, the miracles of the Sea of Reeds, and others. In any event, He did not create any new existent after the six days of Creation, as it says, [386] "On the seventh day God finished the work He had been doing, and He rested" (Gen. 2:2), and as it says, "There is nothing new under the sun" (Ecc. 1:9). Thus concerning these ten, which are existents not mentioned in the Account of Creation, he stated that they were undoubtedly created then. 114 The reason that they

¹¹⁴ Rambam's comment bears upon an understanding of Sforno's. Some miracles such as the splitting of the sea were provided for at the beginning of creation by various acts of creation mentioned in the Bible (for instance, the separation of waters). Other miracles, which at first glance don't appear to be analogous to some act of creation in which they were provided for at the outset, were indeed

were not mentioned along with the rest of [the things created] in the Account of Creation is because it was not possible to tell us the time of their creation, for indeed it took place during that intervening time between two days, which cannot possibly be ascribed to either one of them.

- 7. [There are] seven characteristics of a boor, and seven of a wise person. The wise person does not speak before someone who is greater in wisdom than he, neither does he interrupt the words of his colleagues, and he does not answer in haste. He asks in accordance with the issue [at hand], and answers according to the proper rule (kehala-khah), and he answers according to the first thing first and the last thing last. Concerning what he did not hear, he says, "I did not hear it," and he admits the truth. The reverse of these [apply to] a boor.
- 7. After he told of the greatness of speculation and practice and the beauty of their value before God, blessed be He, and His ways of goodness, blessed be He, and the ways of those who rebel against the light, and the ways of His servants who found favor before Him through speculation and practice, he called attention to those things which are useful in the attainment of the speculative part [of Torah],

created at dusk and are enumerated in the mishnah. So both Sforno and Rambam agree that no miracle was ever dependent upon something which was not already present in the first act of Creation:

which are the ways of the wise, guarding against the ways of the boor, which keep one from attaining that which is intended. He began with an enumeration of the characteristics of the boor, as Moses, our teacer, taught about all or most of them in the book of Job, which is attributed to him (cf. Bava Batra 14b). From their evil nature the goodness of the contrary is made evident. In fact, he [also] made clear the noble ways of the wise, and by reversing them, their contrary is made clear.

He stated that one of the ways of the wise is that he does not speak before someone who is greater in wisdom than he, as was the case with Elihu, who did not speak before those older than he, when he thought that they were greater than he in wisdom, as it says, "I thought, 'Let age speak; Let advanced years declare wise things'" (Job 32:7); "Wisdom is with the aged" (12:12), and so forth.

Neither does he interrupt the words of his colleague, as it says, "Elihu waited on Job's speech" (32:4), contrary to his fellows, to whom Job said, "'Bear with me while I speak, and after I have spoken, you may mock'" (21:3).

He does not answer in haste, until he has correctly heard the opinion of his colleague, contrary to Bildad, as it says, "Will God pervert the right?" (4:3). Job answered him that he had not understood what he meant in his saying, "Indeed I know that it is so: Man cannot win a suit against God" (9:2).

He asks in accordance with the issue [at hand], as opposed to Eliphaz, as it says, "Think now, what innocent man ever perished?" (4:7), to which Job answered, "If I have sinned, what have I done to You, Watcher of man....Why do You not pardon my transgression?" (7:20-21), for it was appropriate that the answer suffice for [his] being innocent.

And answers according to the rule (kehalakhah),
contrary to that which Job's three friends did, as God,
blessed be He, perceived, as it says, "'For you have not
spoken the truth about Me'" (42:7). And he answers
concerning the first thing first as in the case of Elihu, as
it says, "You are not overwhelmed by fear of me....Indeed,
you have stated in my hearing....'I am guiltless, free from
transgression....But He finds reasons to oppose me'" (33:710), and so forth.

Concerning what he did not hear, he says, "I did not hear it," as opposed to Zophar, as it says, "But would that God might speak....He would tell you the secrets of wisdom" (11:5-6).

He admits to the truth, as opposed to the three of them, as it says, "He was angry as well at his three friends, because they found no reply, but merely condemned Job" (32:3).

¹¹⁵ In Avot DeRabbi Natan, version A, chapter 37, the book of Job is also cited in order to illustrate one who does not speak before someone who is wiser. The comment

- [387] 8. [There are] seven types of retribution which come into the world for seven types of transgressions: When some people tithe, and some do not, famine through drought comes. some are hungry and some are sated. When all decide not to tithe, famine of tumult and drought comes. When they do not take the dough offering, famine of destruction comes. Pestilence comes to the world on account of capital sins mentioned in the Torah which are not brought to justice; and for the fruits of the seventh year. The sword comes into the world on account of perversion and delay of justice, and on account of those who do not teach Torah according to the halakhah. Wild beasts come into the world on account of perjury, and profanation of the Name. Exile comes into the world on account of idolators, those who commit sexual transgression, the spilling of blood, and [neglect of] the release of the land.
- 8. He mentioned seven types of retribution which come into the world: these are the three kinds of famine, pestilence, and the sword, wild beasts, and exile. And seven classes of transgression which are: sin in tithing, sin in judgment,

there also uses Elihu to illustrate this, as do Bertinoro and others later. However, the Avot DeRabbi Natan also uses the three friends of Job to illustrate the same virtue. Sforno's comment is concerned with why the characteristics of the boor are not specifically listed in this mishnah. Consequently, he enlists the book of Job, attributed to Moses, to be the guide to these undesirable traits in the persons of Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar.

the sin of profanation of the Name, the sin of idolatry, the sin of illicit sexual behavior, the sin of spilling blood, and the sin of neglecting the shemitta [restoration of land to the seller in the jubilee year].

He stated that with regard to the sin in tithing, depending on whether it is great or insignificant, there will be one of three types of famine, the reverse of the Scripture [which says], "Bring the full tithe...and I will pour down a more than sufficient blessing for you" (Mal. 3:10).

With regard to the sin of removing power from the court, for this happens through the power of the multitude of the relatives of those being condemned to death; or those who gather in the produce of the land in the seventh year, there will be pestilence, as [described] in the verse, "And if the people of the land should shut their eyes to that man.... I Myself will set My face against that man and his kin" (Lev. 20:4-5).

With regard to the sin of delaying justice and its perversion and the corruption of teaching, which are all sins of those who deal with the Torah, comes the punishment of the sword, as it says, "I will bring a sword against you to wreak vengeance for the covenant" (26:25).

With regard to the sin of profanation of the Name, including an oath in vain, the cause of which is a diminution of the awareness and knowledge of the greatness of God,

blessed be He, the punishment comes by way of wild beasts, [which are] lacking in knowledge and to which He did not apportion understanding (cf. Job 39:17).

with regard to the sin of idolatry and neglect of the shemitta, both of which constitute denial of divine sovereignty over the Land, as it says, "For the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me" (Lev. 25:23), the punishment will therefore be that the deniers are expelled from His Land, and He will exile the nation, as in the verse, "They shall not dwell in the Land of the Lord" (Hos. 9:3).

Similarly, with regard to the sin of illicit sexual behavior and the spilling of blood, which corrupt cities completely, the punishment will be exile, as it says, "Lest the land spew you out" (Lev. 20:22), 116 and as it says, "For blood pollutes the land" (Nu. 35:33).

9. At four seasons pestilence is on the increase: In the fourth year, in the seventh year, and at the end of the Feast [of Shavuot] every year. In the fourth year because of the tithe for the poor in the third. In the seventh year

¹¹⁶ Lev. 20:22 follows immediately upon the list of sexual prohibitions.

¹¹⁷ Sforno has carefully constructed a system of analogies between each transgression and its corresponding punishment. The mishnah itself deals with the rabbinic conception of "measure for measure," and Sforno's details parallel those of many previous commentators.

because of the tithe of the poor in the sixth. At the end of the seventh because of fruits of the seventh. And at the end of the Feast [of Shavuot] because of robbing the poor of their due.

- 9. Pestilence is increased for all those who have a part in robbing the poor of their due, as it says, "Do not rob the wretched....For the Lord will take up their cause and despoil those who despoil them of life" (Prov. 22:22-23).
- 10. [There are] four types of people: One who says, "What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours;" this is the average type. Some say this is the character of Sodom.

"What is mine is yours, and what is yours is mine;"
this is an ignoramus.

"What is mine is yours, and what is yours is yours;"
this is a pious person.

"What is mine is mine, and what is yours is mine;" this is a wicked person.

10. He mentioned some natural characteristics which a man should strive to improve, for by virtue of psychic characteristics [which are] directed to [performing] the good deed, the soul will be prepared for eternal happiness by its resemblance in this [respect] to its Creator, as it says

¹¹⁸ In its comment to the previous mishnah, Avot DeRabbi Natan cites this same verse as the reason why pestilence is the punishment.

about Him, "The Lord is good to all" (Ps. 145:9). 119

[388] 11. [There are] four types of temperament: Easy to anger and easy to appease, his gain is cancelled by his loss; hard to anger and hard to appease, his loss is cancelled by his gain; hard to anger and easy to appease, he is pious; easy to anger and hard to appease, he is wicked.

11. After he mentioned the characteristics [which apply to] the case of the desire for money and the opposite, he mentioned the characteristics [which apply to] the case of rage and anger. In both of these he called the one who inclines to [that which is] wrong, one who suffers loss, and the one who possesses the evil characteristic, wicked. For indeed, despite the fact that the inclination to [each of] them is natural, their repair is completely dependent upon a free choice. 120

12. [There are] four types of disciples: Quick to grasp and quick to lose, his gain is cancelled by his loss; slow to grasp and slow to lose, his loss is cancelled by his gain; quick to grasp and slow to lose, he is wise; slow to grasp and quick to lose, this is an evil portion.

¹¹⁹ Sforno takes this <u>mishnah</u> as describing natural characteristics of different people. Apparently, these characteristics can and should be changed.

¹²⁰ This again attests to one's ability to change natural characteristics.

- 12. He now mentioned natural characteristics which free choice cannot repair, but you may guard against the damage deriving from them by striving [to do so] with profound understanding and great diligence. Therefore, he did not say that one with such an evil characteristic is "wicked," for indeed its nature is completely unrelated to free choice. Rather, he said that this is an evil portion, for the one who possesses such a portion will need to be on guard against the damage it may ultimately produce. 121
- 13. [There are] four types who give tzedakah: One who wishes to give himself, but not that others give has an evil eye toward others; [one who wishes] that others give and he does not give has an evil eye toward himself; [one who wishes to] give himself and [also] that others give is pious; one who does not give and [wishes that] others not give is wicked.
- 13. Note that an "evil eye" is the quality which hardens one against the welfare of his fellow man, and sometimes

This is clearly different from the two previous mishnayot, in that these characteristics are unalterable. A person does, however, possess the power to reduce the damage involved in being apportioned an "evil portion." Rambam's observation is very similar here. One who possesses the best characteristic is not defined as pious and one with the worst is not wicked because people have no control over possession of these traits. Bertinoro, in explaining why the language chosen is "evil portion," rather than an evil or wicked person, also explains that this trait is part of the person from his creation and therefore, it is not something which may be altered by someone's free choice.

even when he does not hate him but desires the inferiority of his fellow man in order that he be submissive to him. Concerning this [meaning of the term], Scripture stated in the portion about tzedakah, and not in the portion about remission of debts, "'The seventh year, the year of remission is approaching,' and your eye is evil (against your brother) " (Deut. 15:9), that is to say, it should occur to you that since the seventh year is approaching, when the produce is ownerless, which is also the year of remission of debts when the poor need not pay back debts, because of this the giving of tzedakah should be in your view a supplement and additional kindness for the poor. Therefore, this Sage stated that one who desires to give tzedakah to the poor, yet takes a dim view of the poor receiving from others after receiving a portion from him, is not judged on the scale of demerit for cruelty against the poor, but rather from the standpoint of the evil eye which hardens him against [both] the supplement and additional kindness for the poor which he sees that he receives from others.

Similarly, when others give and he does not give, this
[too] is because his eye is evil against the poor receiving
any benefit of his own. Now when he wishes to give himself
and [also] that others give, he is worthy of being judged on
the scale of merit, for his desire is not only for the
welfare of the poor, but that others become meritorious as

well. This is the measure of a pious man, not only righteous.

Yet someone who does not give and who finds it difficult [to accept] that others give, is not to be judged as loving those others on account of this, as if the dispersion of their money is hard on him. Rather it is appropriate to judge that it is because of the wickedness of his cruelty towards the poor and his abhorence of the commandment of tzedakah.

- 14. [There are] four types who go to the house of study:
 One who goes but does not practice [commandments] has the
 reward of going; one who practices but does not go has the
 reward of practice; one who goes and practices is pious; one
 who neither goes nor practices is wicked.
- 14. He stated that by going to the house of study a man earns merit in that he honors [both] the Torah and Him who gave it, by virtue of the fact that he takes pains to go and to seek it in a place of meeting. And because he goes and practices, occupying himself with it there with [389] his colleagues, he does great good by increasing wisdom for himself and his fellow, as they said, "(I have learned more) from my colleagues than from my teachers" (Ta'anit 7a). Therefore, he called him a "pious man," and the opposite of this is "a wicked man."

- 15. [There are] four types of those who sit before the wise: A sponge, a funnel, a strainer, and a sifter. A sponge, because it absorbs everything; a funnel, because it takes everything in and lets everything out; a strainer, because it lets out the wine and keeps the dregs; a sifter, because it lets out the coarse meal and keeps the fine flour.
- 15. He recounted some of the natural dispositions which prevent [the acquisition of] knowledge of the truth, in order that a man might strive to repair them in such a manner that he will attain the fourth disposition which distinguishes the good from the bad, so that he will remember the good portion of what he studies and observe it, and will forget the evil and remove it from his heart, just as "he found a pomegranate, ate the inside and discarded the peel" (Chagigah 15b).
- 16. Any love which is dependent upon something, if the thing ceases, the loves ceases. That which is not dependent on something never ceases. Which type of love is dependent on something? This is the love of Amnon and Tamar. And that which is not dependent on something? This is the love of David and Jonathan.
- 16. Love is called dependent upon something when its existence is dependent on something outside of the beloved, such as when the lover hopes to achieve something without

which that love would not exist at all. Indeed, the love which is not dependent on something is such that its cause is that the beloved is worthy of it in the eyes of the lover, without his looking toward something outside of the one who is loved. 122

17. Every dispute which is for the sake of Heaven will be established in the end, and that which is not for the sake of Heaven will not be established in the end. What type of dispute is for the sake of Heaven? This is the debate between Hillel and Shammai. What type of dispute is not for the sake of Heaven? This is the conflict of Korah and his faction.

Anyone who brings merit to the many, no sin is brought about by him. And the one who brings many to sin they do not give a chance to repent. Moses had merit, and brought merit to the many, and the merit of many [people] was ascribable to him, as it says, "He executed the Lord's judgments and His decisions for Israel" (Deut. 33:21). Jeroboam brought many to sin and the sin of many [people] was ascribable to him, as it says, "Because of the sins which Jeroboam committed and which he caused Israel to commit" (I Kings 15:30).

17. He stated that when some debate occurs over a disagree-

¹²² Most commentators understand this as a reference to one's unselfish love for God. There is no reason to suspect that Sforno would see this any differently.

ment between the Sages, and the goal of the debate is to find the truth and not [to achieve] victory, then this goal will be realized and will be permanently established as was the case with the debate between Hillel and Shammai, for the truth was made clear from it. The opposite of this occurred with the conflict of Korah and his faction with Moses and Aaron, when they said, "'Why then do you raise yourselves up?'" (Nu. 16:3). For the goal of this was not the search for truth, but to triumph and rule, and behold the goal sought by them came to naught. 123

No sin is brought about by him in that no stumbling block of trangression lies before him. He mentioned the reason for this: that indeed the merit of the many is dependent upon him. And behold this would appear to be like a wrongdoer who endeavors to do well for another but falls into a bad condition. 124

And the one who brings many to sin -- no path lies before him which will aid him in making repentance [390] as

¹²³ Rambam, Machzor Witri, and others also define a debate that is not for the sake of Heaven as one in which one or both parties desire victory and rule.

¹²⁴ Sforno's question here relates to the wording of the mishnah which must not necessarily be seen as indicating a wholly righteous man, but could be a person who causes others to do righteous deeds. So what does it mean to say, seemingly ambiguously, that no sin is brought about by him? All human beings sin, after all. Sforno indicates that the interpretation of this is that no stumbling blocks are ever before such a person. As an illustration of the type of person about which he is talking, he mentions the man who causes others to do well, but falls into a bad way himself.

would be appropriate for any other person who comes to purify himself and is aided in this. 125 He mentioned the reason for this in saying that the sin of many [people] is ascribable to him, and he would seem to be like [the kind of] wrongdoer whose evil endeavors make others culpable while he is found innocent. But in any event, nothing will prevent him from repentance if he so chooses, as happened with regard to Manasseh after he sinned and caused [others to] sin, inasmuch as it says about him, "In his distress he entreated the Lord, his God...and He granted his prayer" (II Chron. 33:12-13), and so forth.

18. Everyone in whom are found these three things is among the disciples of Abraham, our father. [Those in whom are found] three other things are of the disciples of the wicked Balaam. [Those who possess] a good eye, a lowly spirit, and a humble soul are of the disciples of Abraham, our father. [Those who possess] an evil eye, a haughty spirity, and a proud soul are of the disciples of the wicked Balaam. The disciples of Abraham, our father, enjoy this world and inherit the world to come, as it says, "I endow those who

¹²⁵ Sforno's problem here is clear. In his view, all human beings must be given the opportunity to repent. Yet this mishnah seems to indicate that one who causes others to sin does not have this opportunity. Sforno understands this, in keeping with his view, to mean really that unlike others who are aided in their repentance, such a person will not find the path to repentance lying before him. He will, however, still be able to make repentance, but not in any easy way.

love Me with substance; I will fill their treasuries" (Prov. 8:21). But the disciples of the wicked Balaam inherit Gehenna and descend to the pit of destruction, as it says, "For You, O God, will bring them down into the pit of destruction -- those murderous, treacherous men" (Ps. 55:24).

18. A good eye is the virtue of a man who occupies himself with what is his and does not look enviously at what belongs to others, as in the case of Abraham when he says, "'I will not take anything that is yours'" (Gen. 14:23). 126 A lowly spirit is the virtue of one whose self-esteem is not so high in his view that he pursues honor, as was evident in [the case of] Abraham, when it says about him, "Thereupon Abraham bowed low to the people of the land, the Hittites" (23:7), even though he was considered a prince of God among them (cf. 23:6). A humble soul is the virtue of one who does not lust after pleasures which cross over the bounds of what is necessary, as is evident in [the case of] Abraham when he says, "'I know what a beautiful woman you are'" (12:11). And our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "Until now he did not recognize this about her...and now he did because of an incident" (Rashi to 12:11; Bava Batra 16a). 127

The opposite of these [virtues] are [to be found] in

¹²⁶ This definition of a good eye along with the corresponding text from Genesis are both found in Rambam and Bertinoro.

¹²⁷ This is also very similar to Rambam and Bertinoro.

Balaam, who eyed the money of others, which is made clear by his saying, "'Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not transgress the command of the Lord'" (Nu. 22:18). That is to say, that if he were able, on account of this he would transgress in order to receive the money that he coveted. Similarly, among his vices was that he would pursue honor, just as Balak, who knew of his real concern, said to him, "'I will honor you greatly'" (v. 17). And the meaning of his desiring and choosing corporeal pleasures and delights was made clear from what he advised about the evil design of women, as it says, "'Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam (to trespass against the Lord, in the story of Peor)'" (31:16), 128 as our Sages, of blessed memory, said, "A robber knows robbery" (Bava Metzi'a 84a).

He adduced proof about the real concern of the disciples of Abraham, our father, from what is said, "I endow those who love Me with substance" (Prov. 8:21), for they follow in the footsteps of Abraham our father about whom it is said, "The seed of Abraham are those who love me" (Is. 41:8; literally, "The seed of Abraham, my friend"). 129 With regard to the disciples of Balaam, he adduced proof from what is said, "Murderous, treacherous men" (Ps. 55:24),

¹²⁸ This again parallels both Rambam and Bertinoro.

¹²⁹ Bertinoro also juxtaposes the Isaiah verse with the verse from Proverbs cited in the mishnah.

and they follow in the footsteps of Balaam who spilled much blood by the treacherousness of his counsel.

[391] 19. Judah ben Teima says: Be bold as the leopard, light as an eagle, and fleet as the deer, and mighty as the lion to do the will of your Father who is in heaven.

He would say: The impudent person [is destined] for Gehenna, and the diffident to the Garden of Eden. May it be Your will, O Lord, our God, that Your city be rebuilt speedily in our days, and grant our portion in Your Torah.

19. Bold as the leopard to reprove sinners time after time, even though they do not accept it. Light as an eagle to ascend to the substance of the moral virtues and objects of the intellect, the opposite [of those referred to in the verse], "Wisdom is too lofty for the fool" (Prov. 24:7).

And fleet as the deer to [perform] both light and weighty commandments. Mighty as the lion to rise up against sinners when you possess the ability to blot them out, as in the verse, "Do I not rise up against those that rise up against You?" (Ps. 139:21).

The impudent person is one for whom a rebuke has no effect (cf. Prov. 17:10) even in an appropriate place.

Since it is proper to employ boldness in order to fulfill the command of our Creator and to guard against whatever diverges from this, may it be Your will that Your city be rebuilt, and may You enlighten our eyes there by

Your Torah, in such a way that we will be able to distinguish between good boldness and evil boldness and [other distinctions] like [these]. 130

He would say: [At] the age of five, [one is ready for] Scripture; at ten, for mishnah; at thirteen, for the commandments. [At] the age of fifteen, [one is ready for] Talmud; eighteen, for the wedding canopy; twenty, to pursue [a livelihood]; thirty, for full strength; forty [years of age], for understanding; fifty, for counsel; sixty, for old age; seventy, for fullness of years; eighty, for great strength; ninety, for a bent back; [and] at one hundred, it is as if one has died, passed on, and faded from the world. 20. He stated with this that the life of a man is generally short. Still, despite this, one should consider that the appropriate times to strive within it are very short, late in coming and early in departing. Therefore, a man needs to hurry, for indeed he is not ready for Talmud until the age of fifteen and is not prepared for certainty until forty years of age, and after fifty the decline of faculties is clear, as it says, "At the age of fifty they shall retire from the work force" (Nu. 8:25). 131

¹³⁰ Rambam's comment also deals with the two types of boldness. Both Sforno and Rambam seem to be concerned with the surface contradiction between the first and last parts of the mishnah, since the first part seems to praise the bold and the last to condemn them.

¹³¹ Bertinoro.

By this he aroused [our] attention to diligence for the purpose of acquiring eternal life while the faculties that serve us are still in their strength, as Solomon commented in his saying, "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before those days of sorrow come" (Ecc. 12:1).

21. Ben Bag Bag says: Turn it over and turn it over, for everything is in it, and you should contemplate it, and grow old and gray in it, and do not turn away from it, for you have no better lot than it.

Ben Hei Hei says: According to the labor is the reward.

21. Turn over the Torah in order to understand and see the wonders it contains, and you will not need the books of the philosophers of the nations and their scholars. For everything is in it, and you should contemplate it; see the rational demonstrations concerning true opinions on the subject of what is divine and in the immortality of the soul and so forth, which are the fundamental principles of investigation, appropriate for [both] loving and fearing God, blessed be He, for this is the entirety of man and the the whole principle of the intent of the Torah.

Inasmuch as all of this will not be apparent to you and will not come about from the words of the Torah except after great effort and toil, as it says, "If [392] you seek it as you do silver and search for it as for treasures, then you

will understand the fear of the Lord and attain knowledge of God" (Prov. 2:4-5). Ben Hei Hei said that no man will be kept from this toil at all, for indeed the greater the toil the greater will be the status of the intellectual soul in eternal life, as it says, "In addition, my wisdom remained with me" (Ecc. 2:9). 132

¹³² Rambam also cites this verse. Sforno seems to mean by it that what remains with a person in eternity is only wisdom, so one must take great pains to acquire it. The more pain, the more wisdom, the greater the life in the world to come.

Chapter Six - Pereq Qinyan Torah

The Sages taught in the language of the Mishnah. Blessed is He who chose them and their Mishnah.

- Rabbi Me'ir says: Anyone who occupies himself with Torah for its own sake merits many things, and not only this, but he is worth the entire world. He is called: friend; beloved; one who loves the Omnipresent; one who loves humanity; one who gladdens the Omnipresent; and one who gladdens humanity. And it (Torah) invests him with humility and fear; it makes him fit to be righteous and pious, upright, and faithful; it distances him from sin; and draws him near to merit. From him [others] derive the benefit of counsel, wisdom, understanding, and strength, as it says, "Mine are counsel and wisdom; I am understanding; strength is mine" (Prov. 8:14). And it (Torah) bestows upon him kingship, dominion, and discernment in justice. It reveals to him the secrets of the Torah, and he becomes like an ever-flowing spring, a river that does not cease. He is modest, long-suffering, and forgiving of insult. It makes him great and exalts him above everything.
- He is called friend, a partner with the Holy One,
 blessed be He, in the act of creation in that he helps to achieve His intended purpose, blessed be He, as it says,

"How dear Your friends are to me, O God" (Ps. 139:17). 133

One who loves humanity, by benefitting them according to the standard of his Creator, who is good and does good, as it says, "...Walk in His ways" (Deut. 28:9). And it (Torah) invests him with humility and fear, which are types of prudence. It makes him fit to be righteous and pious, which are types of zeal, as our Sages of blessed memory said, "Prudence leads to zeal" ('Avodah Zarah 20b). And they derive benefit from him [inasmuch as he] understands and teaches his fellow man the ways of eternal life and temporal life. Dominion, to guide his fellow man in political matters, and likewise the secrets of Torah in metaphysics, like a spring so as to increase knowledge even with respect to things not included in the Torah. He is modest, inasmuch as he acquires characteristics of good deeds through it (Torah).

2. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Every single day a divine echo issues forth from Mount Horeb, proclaiming: Woe to humanity because of their contempt of the Torah, for anyone who is not occupied with Torah is rebuked, as it says, "Like a golden ring in the snout of a swine is a beautiful woman

¹³³ This verse reads literally, "How weighty are your thoughts to me, O God." In his commentary on the Book of Psalms, Sforno clearly understands this verse in this way, while here the verse is understood to refer to God's friends which Sforno identifies in his comment as those who are partners with God in the act of creation.

who lacks taste" (Prov. 11:22). And it says, "The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing, engraved upon the tablets" (Ex. 32:16). Read not engraved (charut), but freedom (cherut), for no one is free (from the judgement of Gehenna) save one who occupies himself with the study [393] of Torah. Everyone who is occupied with the study of Torah is exalted, as it says, "And from Mattanah to Nahaliel, and from Nahaliel to Bamoth," (Nu. 22:19, understood as, "From the gift of Torah to the inheritance of God, and from the inheritance of God, and from the inheritance of God to high places").

2. Contempt of the Torah [arises] when a man does not esteem it [so as] to reflect upon it and to understand the benefit deriving from it, and because of this he is said to be rebuked, for what will happen is that someone rebukes him by calling him by a belittling name, as in the following case: "Tyya! Who is calling you outside?" 134

He cited as proof for this what [Scripture] said about a beautiful woman, whose beauty is not appreciated, being "like a golden ring in the snout of a swine" (Prov. 11:22), for he does not recognize the value and significance of the gold. He characterized the one who does not appreciate the splendor of a beautiful woman by the word "swine." Accordingly, this is what happens to someone who does not occupy himself with Torah because he has no recognition of

¹³⁴ In Mo'ed Qatan 16b, Rabbi, in rebuking Chiyya calls him 'Iyya. Since he shortens his name, this is taken as a type of rebuke.

its worth and utility. He gave a reason for the fact that he deserves rebuke because through his negligence he foregoes the attainment of its utility and great honor.

- One who learns from his colleague one chapter, one halakhah, one verse, or even one letter is obliged to render honor to him; for thus have we found with David, King of Israel, that he learned only two things from Ahithophel, and he called him his teacher, his companion, and his confidant, as it is said, "You are my equal, my companion, my confidant" (Ps. 55:14). [Using the example of] David, King of Israel, who learned only two things from Ahithophel, yet called him his teacher, his companion, and his confidant, how much the moreso one who learns one chapter, or one halakhah, or one verse, or even one letter is obligated to render honor to him. And there is no honor except Torah, as it says, "The wise shall obtain honor, and the innocent will obtain goodness" (Prov. 3:35). And there is no goodness except Torah, as it says, "For I have given you a good teaching; My Torah, do not forsake it" (4:2).
- 3. Since one who does not study Torah deserves the insult of rebuke, someone who bestows honor upon a man, which is the opposite of insult, deserves honor. He adduced proof that it is appropriate to render honor even to one who is lower than oneself from [the story of] King David, who rendered honor to Ahithophel, who was lower than he. He

cited as proof for his statement, "even one letter", as he said, "there is no honor except Torah." That is to say, that the Torah is in its very essence honor, not only the cause of honor: and note that with regard to every part of [its] honor the term of "honor" is justified as is the rule when all parts [of a whole] resemble one another. He adduced proof that the Torah in its very essence is honor from what he (Solomon) wrote, "The wise shall obtain honor" -(Prov. 3:35). He brought [further] proof that when he said, "shall obtain," he meant the Torah which he called honor, from what is said in the verse, "The innocent will obtain goodness" (28:10), for complete goodness for the intellectual soul, which gives it existence and eternal life is the speculative teaching. He adduced proof for this from what he stated, "For I have given you a good teaching" (4:2), and he made it clear that this good is the Torah, as it says, "My Torah, do not forsake it" (4:2).

4.[5.] This is the way of Torah: You eat a morsel of bread with salt; you drink water by ration; you sleep upon the ground; you live a life of hardship; and you labor in Torah. If you do this, you will be happy and it will be well for you. Happy in this world, and well in the world to

¹³⁵ This is based upon the principle of homeomereity, when all the parts of a thing manifest the same essential character as the whole. Gottlieb utilizes the illustration of a piece of gold jewelry, of which all the pieces are similar.

come.

Do not seek greatness for yourself, and do not covet any more honor than from your studies. Do not yearn [394] for the table of kings, for your table is greater than theirs, and your crown is greater than theirs. And your Employer is faithful, for He will provide recompense for all that you do.

4.[5.] He warned against two things, which in the majority of cases are undoubtedly what prevent a man from occupying himself with Torah. The first is the desire for bodily pleasures. He stated that someone who occupies himself with Torah needs to be satisfied [only] with what is necessary for temporal life and not to waste his time seeking luxuries. The second is the yearning for greatness and superiority in temporal life. He stated that one should not desire to add to [one's] honor in this world beyond what one [derives] from one's studies, meaning more than he is accustomed to by his position in temporal life. He stated that in the attainment of Torah he will find a life of honor greater than any other. 137

¹³⁶ Sforno seems to ignore the overwhelming ascetic tendency of this passage in favor of finding a message that matches his concerns about indulging in anything that is unnecessary to one's life on earth. It is not that one must afflict oneself to acquire Torah, but a person should certainly not seek luxuries.

¹³⁷ There are two ways to interpret this part of the mishnah. Sforno's choice is reflected in the mishnah itself. An alternative might be, "Perform, more than study." Since Sforno places his emphasis on the perfection

Torah is greater than the Priesthood, or than Kingship. For the crown of Kingship is acquired by means of thirty virtues, and the Priesthood by twenty-four. And the Torah is acquired by means of forty-eight things, and these are they: by study; by listening with the ear; by careful speech; by understanding of the heart; by dread; by fear; by humility; by joy; by purity; by serving the Sages; by association with colleagues; by debates with disciples; by serenity; by Scripture; by Mishnah; by minimizing commerce; by minimizing worldly occupation; by few pleasures; by little sleep; by little conversation; by little laughter; by long-suffering; by a good heart; by faith in the Sages; by accepting afflictions; by knowing one's place; by rejoicing in one's lot; by making a fence around one's words. He does not claim it to his credit that his is beloved; he loves the Omnipresent; he loves his [fellow] creatures; he loves justice; he loves the upright paths; he loves reproaches. He distances himself from honor; he is not arrogant in his study; he does not rejoice in rendering judgments. He takes up the yoke with his colleague and judges him according to the scale of merit; he establishes him upon truth; he establishes him upon peace; he is

of a person which comes about through study of the speculative part of the Torah, it is not likely that he would recommend the practical part, which he obviously also values, over and above the speculative.

satisfied with his learning. He asks; and he answers; and he hears; he adds thereto. He learns in order to teach and he learns in order to practice. He increases the wisdom of his teacher; he reports accurately what he hears; he says something in the name of the one who said it. So you have learned: One who says something in the name of the one who said it brings redemption to the world, as it says, "Esther reported it to the king in Mordechai's name" (Es. 2:22). They have already said that there are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of Priesthood, and the crown of Kingship. With this he stated that the crown of Torah is greater than the two remaining crowns. This is the case because the crown of Kingship is acquired by means of thirty virtues, all of them corporeal, [and capable of] producing glory in temporal life. These are mentioned in the account (of the rules) of Kingship, which have roots extending to many branches, and the king is permitted them, at least for the needs of war. 138 Similarly, the crown of Priesthood is acquired by twenty-four contributions given to the Priesthood, through which the glory of the Priesthood is produced, as it says, "I have given them to you as a consecration" (Nu. 18:8), all of them corporeal, bestowing honor in temporal life.

However, the crown of Torah is acquired in a way which

¹³⁸ I Samuel 8:11-17 details many of the perogatives of the king during Samuel's warning to the people that they will regret having wanted one.

is contrary to this, for in fact all these things that he mentioned are not virtues, but things which distinguish and separate man from materiality and from the glory of temporal life, and the goal of this is necessarily to acquire eternal life, compared with which temporal life has neither value nor similarity. [395] He further stated that among the gifts of honor for eternal life is the stating of something in the name of the one who said it, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said that "his lips (those of a deceased scholar in whose name a statement is made in this world) move slowly in the grave" (Yevamot 97a). From this you learn that this virtue brings redemption to the world in the temporal life and in the eternal life. For from the meaning of the verse, "Moving gently the lips of those that are asleep" (Songs 7:10) we learned of the measure of its redemptive power for eternal life [so as to rescue us] from the hands of accusers and from the attribute of strict justice. Concerning the redemption which derives from this virtue for temporal life, he adduced proof from what is said, "Esther reported it to the king in Mordecai's name" (Es. 2:22) which was the cause of [a] redemption in temporal life. 139

7. Torah is great for it gives life to those that practice

¹³⁹ Since the mishnah itself presents the type of redemption which Sforno considers temporal, he brings his own evidence that quoting a source can also bring redemption in terms of eternal life.

it in this world and in the world to come, as it says, "They are life to him who finds them, healing for the whole body" (Prov. 4:22); and it says, "It will be a cure for your body, a tonic for your bones" (3:8); and it says, "It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and whoever holds onto it is happy" (v. 18); and it says, "For they are a graceful wreath upon your head, a necklace about your throat" (1:9); and it says, "It will adorn your head with a graceful wreath; crown you with a glorious diadem" (4:9); and it says, "For through me your days will increase, and years be added to your life" (9:11); and it says, "It is more precious than rubies; all of your goods cannot equal it" (3:15); and it says, "For they will bestow on you length of days, years of life and well-being" (v. 2).

7. The Sages already enumerated some of the commandments concerning "which a man eats of their fruit in this world and its stock remains for him in the world to come" (Pe'ah la), and among them they said, "The study of Torah is equal to them all" (Ibid.). With this he said that the Torah gives life and happiness in different degrees in this world and in the next. He cited with these verses as proof for it bringing about life in this world, and likewise for happiness in this life; and for the Torah's bringing about eternal life and the varieties of happiness [to be found] in that life, according to the goodness of one who occupies himself with it and according to the greatness of his

effort.

8. Rabbi Simeon ben Menasyah says in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Yochai: Beauty, strength, wealth, honor, wisdom, old age, gray hair, and children are becoming to the righteous and becoming to the world, as it says, "Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is attained by the way of righteousness" (Prov. 16:31); and it says, "Grandchildren are the crown of the old, and the glory of children is their parents" (17:6); and it says, "The glory of youths is their strength; the majesty of the old is their gray hair" (20:29); and it says, "The ornament of the wise is their wealth" (14:24); and it says, "Then the moon shall be ashamed, and the sun shall be abashed. For the Lord of Hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and the Presence will be revealed to His old ones" (Is. 24:23).

Rabbi Simeon ben Menasyah says: These seven virtues which the Sages enumerated for the righteous were all fulfilled in Rabbi and his sons.

8. He stated that it is becoming to the righteous and becoming to the world that the righteous should have these successes, and they should endure through them for a long time in order that they be able to do good to their fellow men. It is appropriate to pray for the righteous members of a generation so that they may acquire these successes for their welfare and for the benefit of those of their

generation. He adduced proof for some of these from the Scriptures. Rabbi Simeon ben Menasyah attested that there is not [even] a remote possibility that all of these successes should be found together in the righteous. He [further] attested that indeed all of them were found in his generation in Rabbi and his children.

9. Rabbi Yosi ben Qisma said: Once I was walking along the way, and I met a man who greeted me. I returned his greeting. He asked me, "Rabbi, where are you from?" I answered him, "I am from a great city of Sages and scribes." He said to me, "Rabbi, if you would agree to live with us in our place, I [396] will give you thousands and thousands of gold dinars, precious stones, and pearls." I said to him, "My son, if you were to give me all the silver, gold, precious stones, and pearls in the world, I would not live in any place except [a place] of Torah."

Thus it was written in the Book of Psalms, by King David, "I prefer the teaching You proclaimed to thousands of gold and silver pieces" (Ps. 119:72). Moreover, when a person dies neither gold, nor silver, nor precious stones, nor pearls accompany him, but only Torah and good deeds, as it says, "When you walk it will lead you; when you lie down it will watch over you; and when you are awake it will talk with you" (Prov. 6:22). When you walk it will lead you -- in this world. When you lie down it will watch over you --

in the grave. When you are awake it will talk with you -in the world to come. [Scripture] says, "Silver is Mine and
gold is Mine, says the Lord of Hosts" (Hag. 2:8), and it
says, "He who strives to do good and kind deeds attains
life, success, and honor" (Prov. 21:21).

Only Torah and good deeds, and these two can only be obtained perfectly in the company of the guardians of Torah, who occupy themselves with Torah and good deeds. This is because in their company he will increase knowledge in Torah and will accustom himself to good deeds like them. When a man does good there to his fellow man, his performance of goodness is done for worthy people. He cited as proof that the Torah accompanies a person when he dies from what is written, "When you lie down it will watch over you" (Prov. 6:22) so that he will not be distressed in the grave. He adduced proof that gold and silver are insignificant to an experienced person compared to the value of the Torah, from the words of King David, who experienced precisely this with his great wealth, for he stated, "I prefer the teaching You proclaimed to thousands of gold and silver pieces" (Ps. 119:72). He cited proof that it is appropriate to use silver and gold, which are unnecessary for temporal life, only when they are used for [the sake of] His glory, blessed be He, from what is written, "Silver is Mine and gold is Mine, says the Lord of Hosts" (Hag. 2:8).

The Holy One, blessed be He, acquired five possessions in this world for Himself, and these are they: Torah is one possession; heaven and earth are one possession; Abraham is one possession; Israel is one possession; and the Temple is one possession. How do we know that the Torah is one possession? As it is written, "The Lord acquired me at the beginning of His way, as the first of His works of old" (Prov. 8:22). How do we know that heaven and earth are one possession? As it is written, "Thus says the Lord, the heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where could you build a house for Me? What place could serve as My abode?" (Is. 66:1). Further, it says, "How many things have You made, O Lord; You have made them all with wisdom; the earth is full of Your possessions" (Ps. 104:24). do we know that Abraham is one possession? As it is written, "[Melchizedek] blessed him, saying, 'Blessed be Abram of God, Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth " (Gen. 14:19). How do we know that Israel is one possession? As it is written, "...Till Your people cross over, O Lord; this people You have acquired" (Ex. 15:16). Further, it says, "The sanctified and the mighty of the earth, I desire for Myself" (Ex. 16:3). How do we know that the Temple is one possession? As it is written, "The place You made to dwell in, O Lord; the sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands established" (Ex. 15:17). Further, it says, "He brought them to His holy realm; the mountain His right hand had

possessed" (Ps. 78:54).

Everything which the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world was [created] only for [the sake of] His glory, as it says, "All who are linked to My name, I have created, formed and made for My glory" (Is. 43:7). Further, it says, "The Lord will rule forever and ever" (Ex. 15:18). 10. He stated that the ultimate goal which God, blessed be He, intended to acquire and attain by what He created was fulfilled by five things. He stated that the first is Torah which is for the perfection of a freely choosing being, so that he will be in His image, blessed be He, and in His likeness, and he cited proof concerning this from the verse, "'I am wisdom'" (Prov. 8:12), and so forth, "'The Lord acquired me at the beginning of His way, as the first of His works of old'" (v. 22). 140 The second is the existence of heaven and earth, through the existence of which the human species [397] exists; a species disposed to become that [kind of] perfect being which God, blessed be He, intended by creation, and he cited proof about this from the verse, "The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool" (Is. 66:1), and so forth, "Yet to such a one I look: to the poor and brokenhearted, who is concerned about My word" (v. 2). From this it becomes clear that this is the [kind of] being who trembles at and strives in behalf of the word of

¹⁴⁰ Wisdom, in Proverbs, is often taken by the Rabbis to be the Torah personified.

God, blessed be He, which is the Torah, and [such a person] is the one intended by the existence of heaven and earth. Similarly, he adduced proof from the verse, "How many things have You made, O Lord; You have made them all with wisdom" (Ps. 104:24), which is said after he told of the creation [ex nihilo] of heaven and earth, that is to say, that all that He brought into existence was for the sake of the [aforementioned] Wisdom (Torah), the intended goal of which was completed in the earth, as it says, "The earth is full of Your possessions" (Ibid.). 141

The third possession was Abraham, who alone in his generation was the very being who was intended. He cited proof concerning this from what is said, "Blessed be Abram of God, Most High, Possessor of Heaven and earth" (Gen. 14:19), that is to say, that by the existence of Abraham, God, blessed be He, became "Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth," by His attaining through them the intended goal.

The fourth possession was Israel, for His intended goal was not perfected among any of the nations, yet it was perfected by Israel. He cited proof from the verse, "This people You have acquired" (Ex. 15:16), that is to say, that the divine will was attained, and His possession perfected, by this people alone from among the nations.

The fifth possession was the Temple, in which alone of

¹⁴¹ God's possessions are taken here as people who are really described as being in His likness and image, having acquired wisdom, or Torah.

all places, the divine will and purpose was fulfilled. cited proof for this from the verse, "The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands established" (v. 17). That is to say, that for the sake of the Temple which He made, His hands established all the rest of the corporeal existents. To clarify that this was said about the permanent Temple, and not about the Sanctuary of Shiloh, he adduced proof from the verse, "The mountain His right hand had possessed" (Ps. 78:54). Inasmuch as His perfect glory, blessed be He, exists in every kind of purpose, this was necessarily the goal of His intention. He cited proof this from the verse, "All who are linked to My name, I have created, (formed, and made) for My glory" (Is. 43:7), and from the verse, "...Which Your hands established, the Lord will rule...." (Ex. 15:17-18), that is to say, that the intention of everything which His hands established was that He rule forever and ever, and His glory will fill the whole world (cf. Ps. 72:19). Amen and amen.

11. Rabbi Chananya ben 'Aqashya said: The Holy One, blessed be He, desired Israel to acquire merit, therefore, He gave them an abundance of Torah and commandments, as it says, "The Lord was pleased, for His righteousness' sake, to make the teaching great and glorious" (Is. 42:21).

11. He stated that in order for each person in Israel to have some portion in the world to come, He gave them an

abundance of Torah and commandments, so that by whichever of them he fulfills for His sake, he will acquire some portion in eternal life, as our Sages, of blessed memory, said in clarifying the verse, "Assuredly, Sheol has opened wide its gullet, and parted its jaws in a measureless gap" (Is. 5:14) 142, [that is,] for one who has not fulfilled even a single statute (cf. Sanhedrin llla). He adduced proof for this from the verse, "The Lord was pleased, for His righteousness' sake, to make the teaching great and glorious" (Is. 42:21). That is to say, that in order to make Israel righteous, He desired to make the teaching (Torah) great and to produce an abundance of commandments, in order for each of them to become righteous through some part of the teaching (Torah) and the commandments, and for all of them to merit life in the world to come.

¹⁴²Or, as Sforno explains in his commentary on Isaiah,
"...parted its jaws for those without law."

Bibliography

Modern Works

- Aescoly-Weintraub, A.Z. Sippur David Ha-Re'uveni.
 Palestine, The Land of Israel Society for Historiography and Ethnography, 1940.
- Altmann, Alexander. "Saadya Gaon," (in Three Jewish Philosophers). New York, Atheneum, 1985.
- Baron, Salo. A Social and Religious History of the Jews. Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1952.
- Bonfil, Reuven. <u>Ha-Rabbanut BeItalyah BeTequfat Ha-Renaissance</u>. The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1979.
- Breslauer, S. Daniel. "The Theology of Ovadia Sforno". Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, New York, 1968.
- Broyde, Isaac. "Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno" (The Jewish Encyclopedia, Volume II). New York, KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1901, p. 212.
- Ehrlich, Israel. <u>Italyah: Peragim BeToldot Ha-Qehillot Ha-Yehudiot</u>. Moreshet, Tel-Aviv, 1974.
- Finestone, Sally Rena. "In the Beginning; the Philosophic Commentary of Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Sforno on Genesis 1." Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, 1982.
- Finkel, Ephraim. R. Obadjah Sforno als Exeget. Breslau, 1896.
- Goldin, Judah. The Living Talmud: The Wisdom of the Fathers. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1957.
- Gottlieb, Zev. Bei'ur 'al Ha-Torah LeRabbi Obadiah Sforno.
 Mossad Ha-Rav Qooq, Jerusalem, 1980.
- Qooq, 1987. Kitvey Rabbi Obadiah Sforno. Mossad Ha-Rav
- Grossman, Avraham. "Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno" (Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume 14). Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971, p. 1210.
 - Herford, R. Travers. The Ethics of the Talmud: Saying of the Fathers. New York, Schocken Books, 1962.

- Neusner, Jacob. Torah from our Sages. Dallas, Rossel Books, 1984.
- Peilen, Mark A. "R. Obadiah Sforno: A Commentary to the Book of Numbers -- An Annotated Translation," Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, 1980.
- Roth, Cecil. The History of the Jews in Italy.

 Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1940.
- Harper and Row, 1959. the Renaissance. New York,
- Ruderman, David B. The World of a Renaissance Jew: The Life and Thought of Abraham ben Mordechai Farissol. Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 1981.
- Shulvass, Moses A. <u>Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy</u>. New York, Histadruth Ivrit of America, 1955.
- Italian Jews of the Renaissance, Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research, 18, 1949.
- BeTequfat Ha-Renassaince, Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research, 17, 1948.
- BeTequfat Ha-Renaissance. New York, 1947?
- Sirat, Colette. A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Stahl, Rabbi Samuel M. "A Translation of Sforno's Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy." D.H.L. Dissertation, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, 1975.

Traditional Sources

Avot DeRabbi Natan, versions A and B.

Bertinoro, Rabbi Obadiah b. Abraham. Mishnaic Commentary.

Gans, David Ben Solomon. <u>Tzemach</u> <u>David</u>. ed. Offenbach, 1768.

Maimonides. Mishnaic Commentary.

Machzor Witry. Pirqei Avot Commentary.

Midrash Shemuel. Commentary of Rabbi Samuel b. Isaac of Uceda.

Yachya, Rabbi Gedaliah b. Joseph. Shalshelet Ha-Qabbalah. Warsaw, 1877.