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INTERPRETATION OF AVOT, CHAPTER ONE:

(gave at Jewish Center, morning services, July 19, 1976)

יהושע בן פרחיא - עזר לך רב יקרה לך חבר וזהו יסוד
כל הדברים הללו נבנו

What does the last of these three items have to do with the two preceding ones? The next Mishnah reads:

זה המצב איננו : הרי"ק : חסדו של ר' יוחנן
הוא שכל אדם יכול להיות רשע או צדיק.

The second Mishnah, that of Nitai, is one which presents us with a brooding awareness of the presence of evil in life, both moral and natural evil. Nitai tells us to keep far away from an evil neighbor, because such people become the most efficient teachers, insinuating their poison into our own systems. Similarly, he warns us against adopting an evil person as a friend. Finally, he is aware of כוחות, or natural evil. He tells us never to be fully secure, always to be aware of the possibility of catastrophe and cataclysm.

Joshua b. Perachia does not dispute these things, but gives us the positive formulation, instead of the negative. He is not so much afraid of evil, as he is anxious aggressively to find the way of the right and the good. He therefore tells us not to beware of the noxious pedagogic influences of the bad neighbor, but advises us to go out and make ourselves the right kind of teacher. Similarly, instead of being chary of having a bad friend, he tells us to acquire a good one. However, this does not mean that Joshua b. Perachia sees the world through rose-colored glasses. He is fully aware of the possibility of evil, and he is especially mindful of moral failure. He therefore is concerned that if we get ourselves a teacher, and begin to admire and even worship him, we will then be faced, suddenly and unexpectedly, with the imperfections of human beings. There is little that can compare to the terrible disappointment of a student who admires a teacher or a rabbi and suddenly discovers that he is - merely human... Similarly, we have friends and think we know them well, and then we find that we are deeply disappointed by them. At such a time, our inclination is to go completely to the other extreme, and to say that everyone is rotten... Therefore he tells us: אל תשפוט אדם על דבר אחד, to judge people by the scale of merit, to continue to see the good in them. Look for the good, and make yourself a teacher or a friend out of a good person. But then you will be confronted with his imperfections -- at such a time, do not allow yourself to slip into the opposite extreme, but continue to judge him by the scale of merit. Note carefully the expression אל תשפוט אדם על דבר אחד -- this means that you must judge a person not by individual traits or characteristics, but the entire person, you must take the good and the bad all together, and then you will discover that, in all probability, the good outweighs the bad.