

For Yoni's Bar Mitzvah סינים --(Version 2)

The last item of the last Mishnah in **מסכת אבות**, at the end of **פרק חמישי**, reads as follows:

בן הא-הא אומר, לפום צערא אגרא

The Rabbi called Ben Hei-Hei said that "according to the pain is the reward." This means that in performing a mitzvah, especially the study of Torah, your reward depends upon how much effort and struggle you put into it. If you work hard--so hard that it hurts--you get greater **שכר** or reward, and if it comes easy, without too much discomfort or suffering, the reward is less.

Maybe this is the reason that Moshe tells us in the Sidra **עקב** that Hashem punishes us in the same way that a father punishes his own son: **"כי באשר ייסר איש את בנו, ה' אלקיך מנסהו"**, "as a father punishes his son, so does Hashem your God punish you." When a child is disobedient and the parent disciplines him or her, it is for the child's good (at least that is what my Dad has been telling me all these years...), and the child later appreciates all the more the reward that comes from leading a good life of Torah and Mitzvos. If he were not disciplined, he might still behave well, but not with the same satisfaction.

According to Rabbi Saadia Gaon, the principle of our Mishnah holds true for all times and circumstances. Rabbi Saadia Gaon asks, in his **אמונות ודעות**, why Hashem did not give each of us a completely happy and worry-free life without having to perform the **מצוות** and avoid **עבירות**. He answers that if you don't work for a thing, you don't appreciate it. Only if you invest a great deal of effort can you enjoy the reward. So, this is the same idea that we learned in our Mishnah: **לפום צערא אגרא**.

This last Mishnah of **אבות** ties in with its very beginning, where we are told that Moshe received the Torah from Mt. Sinai and gave it over to Yehoshua and Yehoshua to the Elders, and so forth: **משה קבל תורה**. Some of the **מפרשים** say that this whole list refers not to the Written Torah, **תורה שבכתב**, but to the Oral Torah, **תורה שבעל פה**, which contains much more material and is difficult to understand. It requires much more effort and hard work to

understand **לפנים צער** than **חומש**, and therefore had to be handed down very carefully and with a great deal of mental effort. It also results in greater reward, and this is the principle of the concluding Mishnah, **אגרא**, that the reward is proportional to the pain.

The author of this statement in our Mishnah is **בן הא-הא**. Who was this man with the strange name?

He was, we are taught, a **גר**, a convert to Judaism. A real, genuine **גר** has to work hard in order to learn Torah and practice the **Mitzvos** in order to be accepted as a Jew. The **שלחן ערוך** rules that you must tell the candidate for conversion that it's very difficult to be a Jew, that there is anti-Semitism and there is punishment for violating the **mitzvos**--but you must also add that there is great honor and joy in living the Jewish life. And then he is rewarded by being a member of the **עם הנבחר**.

So **לפנים צער אגרא** **בן הא-הא** knew from his personal experience that **אגרא**. All the **צער** was worth it to come **תחת כנפי השכינה**. By his efforts, he proved that his **נשמה** was present to receive the Torah from Hashem at **הר סיני** together with the **נשמות** of each and every Jew from the very beginning of our history.

As I reach the age of **מצות**, I too know that it's not easy to be a Jew--that is, a really and truly observant and practicing Jew. I know that there are difficulties in being a loyal Jew--there are **איסורים** of all kinds, there is self-discipline, there is the need to study Torah.

But I also know that **לפנים צער אגרא**, that there is nothing that is more rewarding. I know that all the effort at being a good Jew is worth it because the Torah life is so rewarding. I know that I am already receiving the greatest reward--being brought up in the home of Dr. Joshua and Mrs. Rivky Lamm. And I thank them for teaching me to love Torah and Yiddishkeit.

So now, at my Bar Mitzvah, I proudly confirm that I love my Yiddishkeit and I commit myself to Hashem and to living a life of Torah.

And I pray that some day, with enough effort and struggle--and I hope without *too much* pain--I will become a **בן תורה** as well as a **בר מצוה**, and make my parents and grandparents and teachers proud of me.