

The Pirkei Avot Project

A Communal Commentary on Pirkei Avot

*Written by members of
Beth Sholom Congregation & Talmud Torah*

Shavuot 5780 / May 2020

Dedicated by Ellen & Marv Goldstein and Family



Beth Sholom
CONGREGATION

Dear Friends,

We read each day in the *tefilah* רבה אהבה before the Shema: ותן חלקנו בתורתך. We ask Hashem to grant us a portion within the Torah. This communal commentary is exactly that - Beth Sholom's portion in the Torah. We are all privileged to be part of a community that has prioritized Torah study in this way! May it be Hashem's will that Beth Sholom continue to learn and study Torah together!

-Rabbi Nissan Antine

-Rabbi Eitan Cooper

Shavuot 5780

Note:

- ❖ Some versions of Pirkei Avot differ in how they number each chapter and Mishnah.
- ❖ The English translation is provided by Dr. Joshua Kulp, from the Mishnah Yomit Archive found on www.sefaria.com.

Thank you:

Everyone who contributed

Debra Band for cover art

Judry Subar for editing

Steven Lieberman for consulting

Message from Ellen and Marv Goldstein & Family:

We dedicate the Pirkei Avot Project to the Beth Sholom Community, who has enriched our lives with a love of learning and a deep connection to this community. (Goldstein family contributions to the commentary appear below):

משנה אבות ד:יב

רבי אלעזר בן שמוע אומר, יהי כבוד תלמידך חביב עליך כשלך, וכבוד חברך כמורא רבך, ומורא רבך כמורא שמים:

Pirkei Avot 4:12

Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua says: Let the honor of your student be dear to you as your own, and the honor of your fellow like the reverence of your teacher, and the reverence ...

Marv and I have been blessed with the opportunity to learn from so many teachers, as we raised Steven, Corey, Maya (and now Lily) within this community. Rabbi and Aviva Tessler, Rabbi and Nechama Rackover, Rabbi Krimsky, Rabbanit Fruchter, Rabbi and Sarah Antine and Rabbi Cooper; plus we have learned just as much from our fellow congregants and fellow board members, who taught us the power and compassion of what it means to be part of this community over the past 20+ years.

משנה אבות ד:א

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם

Pirkei Avot 4:1

"Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from every person, as it is stated: 'From all those who have taught me I have gained wisdom...'"

The verse states, "From all those who have taught me I have gained wisdom," whereas the Mishna adds that one must learn from every person. One must learn not only Torah from one's teachers but also the good qualities of character and upright conduct which one discerns in any person.

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To be more printer friendly, this edition contains only commentary and not the mishnayot. The numbering of the mishnayot used may differ from what you have in other books

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Chapter 1 / פרק א

Mishnah 1 / משנה א

Commentary by: Nina F. Schor

This very brief Mishnah, the first we read in Pirke Avot, contains the substrate of many conundrums and cryptic pronouncements. The first of these is apparent almost as soon as the Mishnah opens! Moses does not stand on the mountain -- as he did when the Ten Commandments were given -- and there recite the entire oral Torah to all the people. He passed it to Joshua, who passed it to the elders, who passed it to the prophets, who passed it to the Men of the Great Assembly. Why the chain? And why in that order?

The chain of communication reminds me of the way in which what are called protein cascades – enzyme activation, clotting factor activation – magnify each small, individual effect to generate a bigger and broader dissemination of a message. One clotting factor molecule activates, say, ten molecules of another clotting factor. Each of those ten molecules activates ten molecules of the next clotting factor in the chain, for one hundred in total. The action of one protein molecule gets amplified with each step down the chain.

But numbers do not drive Moses' Torah teaching chain. This chain is about dissemination among the various groups of people whose behavior, one would hope, would be governed by this document. First, Moses tells the new leader; then the leader tells his advisors; then the advisors tell the prophets who can influence behavior by predicting and communicating to the people what this means for the future; then the prophets tell the Men of the Great Assembly so there will be consequences for people who do not heed the prophets' warnings. It is a cascade from vision to operations and from Moses to the people. These wise Men of the Assembly then tell us:

1. Be patient in the administration of justice;
2. Raise many disciples; and
3. Make a fence around the Torah.

These are three rather puzzling things. First, we often talk about making justice "swift." But the Men of the Assembly tell us, "Don't be too hasty to mete out justice. Be patient in getting the whole story, in finding the right person, in determining the appropriate consequences." One imagines that this is a source for from where the notion of "preventing the incarceration of one innocent person even if it means letting two guilty people go free" comes. At face value, raising many disciples and making a fence around the Torah would seem to work at cross purposes to one another. One is about growth and perhaps dissemination; the other is about containment. But a closer evaluation brings these two into alignment. We are told to "Raise many disciples," not to recruit or to convert many disciples. This is about teaching, learning, and growing from within the community. The glue that cements this community is the Torah. Building a fence around it is not necessarily about keeping people in or out; it is about preventing "aish zarah" -- a strange fire, or an wayward thought -- from working its way into, and history and practice from escaping from, the understanding and practice of Torah principles by the community. What will keep the fence intact? It is the disciples raised within its confines.

Chapter 1 / פרק א

Mishnah 2 / משנה ב

Commentary by: Bruce Wiener

The *Maharal* wonders why it's necessary to say that Shimon the Righteous was "one of the last survivors" of the men of the Great Assembly. He believes it's a rebuke to the generation that Shimon finds himself in. The previous generation, when the Great Assembly was at full strength, was at a much higher level. Now only a remnant of the holier generation is left. Shimon was a link from a time when prophecy ended to an era when the sages (*Tannaim*) began. The *Tannaim* were teachers whose views are recorded in the Mishnah. In fact, it's stated that Shimon was the first *Tanna*. With prophecy having receded, maybe this is why Shimon stresses those pillars which will preserve the Jewish people in a post-prophetic world – Torah, service to G-d, and acts of loving kindness.

Mishnah 3 / משנה ג

Commentary by: Rabbi Mitch Malkus

Antigonus teaches that we should emulate those who perform mitzvot unconditionally rather than for the purpose of receiving a reward. In reading this Mishnah, I was reminded of numerous studies in educational psychology that suggest promised rewards do not enhance student achievement. In fact, the research has shown that people expecting a reward actually do not perform as well as those who expect nothing. This finding has been shown to be true for children, teenagers and adults and for different rewards and different tasks. One explanation for this surprising finding is that rewards may cause people to lose interest in whatever they were rewarded for doing rather than building interest in the task itself. From this perspective, we might understand that Antigonus is teaching that a lifelong commitment to serving G-d requires an interest in fulfilling divine goals rather than in being rewarded. If we are only interested in rewards, we will ultimately lose interest in trying to serve G-d and eventually stop performing mitzvot.

Mishnah 4 / משנה ד

Commentary by: Jim and Tsippora Rosenberg

When Yossi ben Yoezer says: "Your house should be a meeting place for wise people," I believe, with respect to "your house," he is being literal in that our houses are places where learning should begin. With respect to "a meeting place for wise people," I believe he is being symbolic, suggesting that we set high goals to increase our wisdom, insight and knowledge, something we ask Hashem to endow us with in our weekday Shemoneh Esrei. And when he says to "attach yourself to the dust of their feet," this too, I believe, is symbolic, suggesting that we humble ourselves in order to be open for growth. And finally, when he says "drink thirstily of their words," he is encouraging us to increase our love and enthusiasm for learning.

Chapter 1 / פרק א

Mishnah 5 / משנה ה

Commentary by: Bernard Dov Cooperman

Pirkei Avot is not an easy book to read. A collection of aphorisms, it easily overwhelms us with what seem trite platitudes. But sometimes, when we pay careful attention to the words, we are left bewildered. Far from stating the obvious, the Mishnah seems to be insisting on the impossible—or the unacceptable.

Let your house be kept wide-open and make the poor part of your household. "Are you kidding?" we say. "Why do you think I bought my house in this expensive neighborhood? Do you think I paid this much money to let poor people live in my neighborhood, much less right in my house? Leave my doors open? Why do you think I pay for an alarm system?"

And then, the text continues with total disregard for logical coherence, not to mention political correctness or even everyday civility. Don't talk too much with women, it says. Not just with your own wife; even more so with someone else's wife. And then the punchline: Talking too much to women harms the individual and leads straight to hell.

Here's a question for you: How can I offend a maximum number of my neighbors, my wife, and my friends in as few words as possible? I've got it. Just read them this Mishnah. The easy way out of the problem is to ignore what the words mean. Let's just say that the Mishnah was written for a different time, when social norms were different. Probably in the Mishnahic period, there were no burglar alarms, and society was so segregated that women didn't go to college or serve on the Supreme Court or chair the House of Representatives. And so we laugh, ignore the uncomfortable text and go on to the next Mishnah. But that's the easy way out.

It is not enough to ignore the texts of tradition. In every generation, we seek to identify the principles passed down to us from the past in order to apply them in the present. Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) had no doubt of this. Perhaps reflecting social conditions in the Islamic world in which he lived, the RaMBaM reads the text as demanding social action. His policy combines care for strangers (we call them immigrants) with an affirmative action plan for employment opportunities. Weaving together the first and second phrases of the text, he reads the Mishnah as making a statement against exploitative slavery: open your house to the poor, he says, and *give them jobs in your employ* instead of buying slaves to serve you. What had appeared as a pie-in-the-sky platitude calling vaguely for generosity has now become a concrete program to address a real social problem.

Almost three centuries later, living in a very different social environment, Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508) continued to read the Mishnah as suggesting principles of social welfare. But now he adds a remarkable observation on the very different ways that men and women built social capital and got to express personal status in the areas of Christian Europe where he lived.

The end of the Mishnah, as we know, seeks to limit conversation with women. What does that have to do with charity? Abravanel sees the connection clearly. Women, he declares, are generally much more concerned than their spouses over financial security and they therefore discourage their husbands from giving charity to the poor or inviting guests into the home. Abravanel therefore urges his (male) readers not to discuss such matters even with their own wives, much less with other women lest they dissuade him from his generous plans.

Why would women be, or at least seem, less generous than men? To understand Abravanel's generalization we have to remember that in his time, women's property was almost universally controlled by their husbands. Only divorce or widowhood would give them back control over their own funds. Failing that, it was the husband who controlled disbursement of funds. No wonder then, that men were more willing to use liberal handouts to buy status in their communities. And no wonder that women might perceive his handing out the family's funds as a potential threat to their own security.

Abravanel, and Maimonides too, were wealthy men who ran elaborate households. Not only could they afford to engage in scholarly pursuits; it is also highly likely that they themselves were not called upon to prepare food or make up a bed for a poor man seeking shelter in either of their homes. Perhaps the women of their households had a more personal sense of what was actually involved.

Moses Maimonides' commentary to *Avot* was published alongside Isaac Abravanel's *Nahalat Avot* (Venice: 1545).

[In celebration of our newest grandsons, Rafa and Leo, and to mark the *yahrzeit* of my mother, Bella Cooperman.]

Chapter 1 / פרק א

Mishnah 6 / משנה ו

Commentary by: Michael Rubinstein

Having a friend is very important. Having friends makes your life more fun and exciting. Friends help you when you are feeling sad or are having trouble with something. You can also always turn to a friend for advice. Right now, we cannot see our friends because of the coronavirus. Life without friends is far more difficult and I look forward to playing with my friends, G-d willing, sometime soon.

Mishnah 7 / משנה ז

Commentary by: Faye Bresler

In our COVID-19 world this verse leapt off the page to me as “keep a distance from a neighbor, keep a distance from evil.” And what is a wicked person in this changed world? We learn from Proverbs 21:29 “A wicked person is brazen faced.” Being literal in this mask-protecting world, “brazen faced” is a face without any attempt to be hidden. We also learn from Proverbs 21:23, “The person who guards their mouth and tongue guards themselves from trouble.” So guarding, protecting – well, masking – your mouth will keep you from trouble. So stay safe, stay distant, and look forward with faith that we will again join together in community.

Mishnah 8 / משנה ח

Commentary by: Mindy Suchinsky

This Mishnah relates to judicial conduct. First, a judge should not act as the lawyer in a dispute, but strictly as the decider of the matter in front of him or her. Secondly, a litigant is presumed guilty! The presumption of innocence is ingrained in our American legal system and it seems counterintuitive to assume guilt. How can a person be considered guilty when he or she has not yet been tried?

Yet, that is exactly what happens on Yom Kippur when we come before Hashem, the ultimate decider and judge. It is presumed that we are guilty. Of course we did wrong things during the course of the year. It is a given. However, we do teshuvah, we are cleansed and become innocent once again in the eyes of Hashem.

Many years ago, members of my shul in Chicago were convicted of a crime. They actually served time. (It was a big deal that they were able to get kosher food in prison in those days.) The first time one of them was released from jail and showed up in shul, the congregants in shul were at a loss. How should they act? What should they do? My father, Jerry Garoon, z”l, who was a judge, walked right up to the gentleman, shook his hand, said good Shabbos and welcomed him back. The others followed suit.

It’s against human nature not to take sides in a matter and to consider a person innocent after they have committed a crime, but Judah ben Tabbai describes how judges should act and we as individuals can learn from that wisdom.

Chapter 1 / פרק א

Mishnah 9 / משנה ט

Commentary by: Nat Lewin

Sounds like good advice to a trial lawyer, but it was directed to the judges in Batei Din, the courts. They conducted the examination. My own experience was that my worst trial moments resulted from asking too many questions, not too few.

Small Mishnah (only 16 words). But the tumultuous life of Shimon ben Shetach would make an exciting novel. He was the brother of Shlomzion Hamalka and used his power to establish Pharisee control. His advice in this Mishnah may have been generated by the episode in which he (as Av Bet Din, the head of the court) executed 80 witches in one day only to have revenge taken out by false testimony that resulted in the execution of his son.

You must question the witness a lot
Ask him where, and whether, and what
But take care when you speak
Not to reveal what you seek
Lest an innocent defendant be shot.

Mishnah 10 / משנה י

Commentary by: Martin Weiss

Abtalion and Shemaiah were pre Tannaic nobles and presiding officials of the Sanhedrin. Hillel, who would later be called 'the Great' was one of their students.

Some traditions say Abtalion and Shemaiah were converts or children of converts or descendants of Sennacherib of Assyria. They had an uneasy relationship with the Priest Kings Hyrcanus II, Aristobulus II and Antigonus as well as Herod before the latter became king and was called "the Great." Abtalion and Shemaiah defended the Pharisee tradition against the Sadducee tradition.

In a narrow sense, all their injunctions in Mishnah 1:10 could be considered as peculiar to their times.

In a wider sense the injunctions of 1:10 are broadly consistent with the values of diligence, modesty and prudence that are advocated in other parts of Avot and Mishlei (Proverbs). I find the second injunction the most interesting. In this phrase, "hate acting the superior" is sometimes translated as "despise lordship." Fascinatingly, the noun in this phrase is "Rabbanut" (הַרְבָּנוּת), which today means "Rabbinat."

In the time Abtalion and Shemaiah lived there was danger from factional intimidation and even violence if a decision went against certain parties. In our day, while violence within the Jewish community is not a threat (I hope), any given halachic decision may ruin somebody's day. There have been times (involving alcoholic beverages) when, as a mashgiach, I had to make a decision that I knew would make someone unhappy, and where that person had spent many dollars and meant no harm. At those times I truly did hate acting the superior.

Chapter 1 / פרק א

Mishnah 11 / משנה יא

Commentary by: Julian Silk



Mishnah 12 / משנה יב

Commentary by: Al Belsky

In the first of his volumes of his series *The Sages*, Rabbi Binyamin Lau devotes several chapters to examining “Hillel and Shammai and Their Students,” covering the period from about 40 BCE to 30 CE. We learn that this was a time of political and religious transition marked by the often-bloody reign of the Roman client-king Herod as well as construction of the greatly expanded Temple. It also witnessed the steady development of approaches to the Oral Law that increasingly relied on logical analysis of Biblical text rather than stringent, intergenerational transmission of traditions and practices.

Hillel came onto this turbulent stage from Babylonia to learn from Shemaya and Avtalyon, ascending in wisdom to become the spiritual leader whose impact Rabbi Lau characterizes as follows: “He would inject a spirit of humanity into the beit midrash and revitalize the ethical tradition...he would develop halakhic interpretations that could successfully navigate an ever-changing reality...”

The “spirit of humanity” that Hillel fostered is epitomized in his appeal to exemplify Aaron’s loving attitude. In an era when the Jewish people and Judaism were beset with existential challenges -- both internally in the Temple and the beit midrash and externally in the world of Roman hegemony – Hillel advocated for a path of love and peace to preserve our faith and nationhood.

Chapter 1 / פרק א

Mishnah 14 / משנה יד

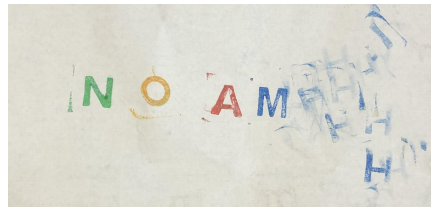
Commentary by: Ilene Van Houter

"If I am not for myself, then
who am I?"



Mishnah 13 / משנה יג

Commentary by: Noam Cooper (3 years old)



Mishnah 15 / משנה טו

Commentary by: Meyer Katzper

Let us work our way backwards in the Shammai statements. The last part shows that he got a bad rap with respect to his interaction with people. This is especially so in connection with the story told in *שבת ל"א א'ו-ז'*

מעשה בנכרי אחד שבא לפני שמאי, אמר לו: גיירני על מנת שתלמדני כל התורה כולה כשאני עומד על רגל אחת. דחפו באמת הבנין שבידו. בא לפני הלל, גייריה. : דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד (מה ששנוי עליך לא תעשה לחברך), זו היא כל התורה כולה, ואידך פירושה הוא, זיל גמור (והשאר - פירוש, לך ולמד בעצמך).

An occurrence with a non-Jew who came before Shammai. He said to him, "Convert me on the condition that you teach me all the Torah while I am standing on one foot." [This is a less outrageous request than it seems. It means, teach me the essence of the Torah very briefly.] Shammai pushed him out with the building implement that was in his hand. He came before Hillel {who} converted him. Hillel said to him, "What is hated by you do not do to your comrade. That is the entire Torah. And the rest is an explanation; go out and learn for yourself."

A classical interpretation is found in Avot D'Rabbi Natan 13:4:

"Greet everyone with a smile." How so? This teaches that if a person gives his friend all the finest gifts in the world, but does so with a pained face, Scripture considers it as if he had given him nothing. But one who receives his friend with a smile, even if he gives him nothing, Scripture considers it as if he had given him all the finest gifts in the world.

Shammai's middle statement of "speak little, but do much" is an obvious exhortation.

The first part of the Mishnah, *עשיה תורתך קבע*, *שמיא אומר*, "make your [study of the] Torah a fixed practice" is good advice. The commentator Tosafot Yom Tov brings the following Rabbinically oriented advice --

KEEP YOUR TORAH FIXED. Rav: do not rule stringently for yourself and leniently for others or stringently for others and leniently for yourself. This runs counter to the opinion of the house of Rabban Gamliel, who were descendants of Hillel. They used to rule stringently for themselves and leniently for others, as in the Mishnah in Beitzah, 2:6 and in Eduyot 10:3.

Another classical interpretation is that of the Rambam on 2:4:3 *הלל אומר*: *הלל אומר* ... Say not: "when I shall have leisure I shall study"; perhaps you will not have leisure.

"When I will be available": He means with this, when I am available from this business (not busy). And this is similar to what preceded of the commands of his colleague, Shammai (Avot 1:15), "Make your Torah fixed."

Chapter 1 / פרק א

Mishnah 16 / משנה טז

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

All three of these teachings are concerned with the reader being more thorough.

עשה לך רב - Make a teacher for yourself. This is the second time this phrase appears in this chapter (the first being 1:6). Here, the intent (according to Bartenura) is aimed at those who themselves are judges. If a case comes before them about which they have doubts, they should seek out a mentor to help them discuss the case.

הסתלק מן הספק - Stay away from doubt. A more general point than the one made above - we should try to avoid *all* situations of doubt if we can. If you are someone who frequently feels doubt in making decisions that come before you, you must find ways to combat this phenomenon. (For some, this is easier said than done!)

ואל תרבה לעשר אמדות: Ensure that your tithes (donations) are exact. Do not give too much or too little.

The theme of this Mishnah - encouraging precision - makes me think of all of the very successful people I know who are particularly thorough with all things. Of course, this is also a double edged sword - we must be careful not to be *too* precise, as this can prevent productivity!

Mishnah 17 / משנה יז

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

At my first day in Pastoral Counseling class in Rabbinical School, Dr. Michelle Friedman wrote on the board: "W.A.I.T." which stands for "Why Am I Talking." This principle guided much of what she taught us that year. We were asked to embrace the concept that we can do much more for people if we provide a listening ear, as opposed to attempting to "talk at" someone to solve their problems. Of course, this idea can be applied to any interaction we have - not just to pastoral counseling. We should always consider how we listen to others and hold their emotions - and before we speak, think about what and why we are talking.

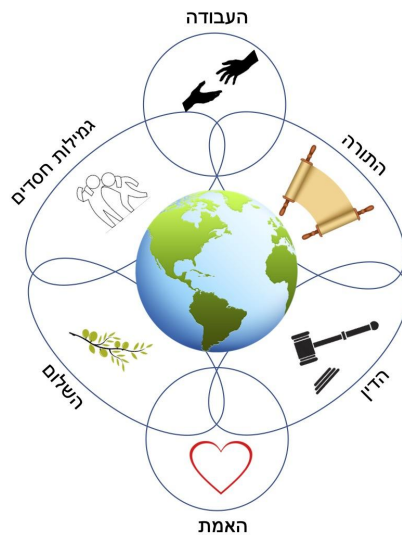
Chapter 1 / פרק א

Mishnah 18 / משנה יח

Commentary by: Sheryl, Jonathan and Aaron Sachs

We used commentary from the Artscroll Mesorah series. The commentary that really spoke to us was from the following and we based our graphic submission off of it:

"*Knesses Yisrael* views this triad as the underpinnings of the previous triad in Mishnah 2. 1. Torah is based on truth; one must seek truth in his torah study, since the two are synonymous. 2. Service of G-d is based on law and justice; it must be structured and remain within the parameters of Torah law...3. Peace, in its most pristine form, causes a harmonious blending of all elements of society. Hence, the pursuit of peace underlies the performance of acts of loving kindness."



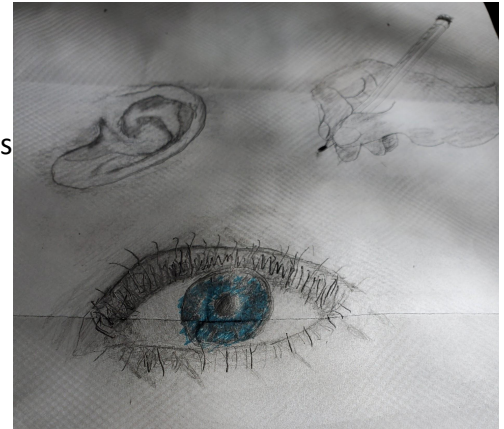
כנסת ישראל

Chapter 2 / פרק ב

Mishnah 1 / משנה א

Commentary by: Liliana Di Nola-Baron

In a time of despair as it is now, it is so comforting to know that there is always an eye looking after us, an ear listening to us and a hand that takes notes.



Mishnah 2 / משנה ב

Commentary by: Benjie Krasna

What we have here is an interesting insight that tries to help us achieve an appropriate balance between learning Torah and other aspects of our lives.

Most of the commentators speak about דרך ארץ (literally “the path of the land”) in terms of the need for one to be sure that he has a livelihood, in addition to his pursuit of Torah study. It is emphasized that failure to insure this may negatively impact the long term ability of maintaining the level of study as one will be poor and search for money and possibly even need to resort to criminal activity as a shortcut to getting money. Thus the Mishnah says that the proper balance between תלמוד תורה (learning Torah) and דרך ארץ also allows for distancing from transgressions.

A second way of looking at our Mishnah emanates from an alternative understanding of the term דרך ארץ. We are all familiar with the saying דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה, that derech eretz comes before (or is a prerequisite) for our pursuit of the fulfillment of the Torah. Thus it is imperative that we show derech eretz, which is adhering to a path of behavior (the derech) that the Torah defines for us.

The Midrash in Vayikra points out that 26 generations passed before we received the Torah. This was the דרך ארץ that preceded the Jewish nation receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai. There already was a code of conduct that was well established before we received the fully codified version. It was the internalizing of this code that allowed us to be worthy of receiving the Torah at Sinai.

This is a code about treating one another properly, in the spirit of ואהבת לרעך כמוך, loving your neighbor as yourself. Not speaking ill about one another. Not seeking out the , כיבוד, the honor, with the chance of even doing an additional mitzva, but rather making sure that our fellow man is offered that honor and opportunity.

So when we look at the Mishnah above, what we should recognize is that our goal shouldn't be to squeeze that extra bit of Torah at the expense of דרך ארץ. If we're asked a question or a favor, we mustn't put it off so we can finish one more page of study. We must be attentive and respond as this too is a part of our fulfillment of תלמוד תורה.

I see one more way to approach this term of דרך ארץ and how it enhances our fulfillment of תלמוד תורה.

Many of us grew up in a generation when we spoke endearingly about “Aretz.” It was our quick way of referring to Israel, in an almost mystical and holy way, such as it was הארץ המובטחת – “the promised land.” Of course, that still holds true and we try to enhance it with every passing day.

Through this lens we can interpret the Mishnah as also showing the beauty and interconnection between תלמוד תורה and literally the “paths of the land,” דרך ארץ. For the midrash in ספר בראשית רבה tells us אין תורה כתורת ארץ ישראל - that there is no Torah study as that that can be done in ארץ ישראל, the Land of Israel. When we walk along its דרכים, literally its paths, we can also experience the Torah in a way that we cannot experience it anywhere else.

Finally, the latter part of the Mishnah provides guidance to those who engage themselves in pursuits to benefit the ציבור, our public. They should never be deterred from the importance of what they are involved with and know that as we say every Shabbat, הקדוש ברוך הוא ישלם שכרם, their reward will be paid by Hashem and their righteousness will keep them in good standing forever – לעד.

Chapter 2 / פרק ב

Mishnah 3 / משנה ג

Commentary by: Martin Weiss

Avot 2:3 mentions the relationship between an individual and the Rishus (רשות), literally “permission” in the sense of “authority,” but which is typically translated here as 'ruling authorities' or 'government.' Rishus could, based on this meaning and depending on the context, include something as small as the local Beth Din or as big as national or international government. Avot 2:3 counsels caution in dealing with the Rishus.

The preceding Mishnah tells us that Avot 2:3 is likely a statement, or based on a statement, of Gamliel III who lived in the early Amoraic period. His statement might narrowly be interpreted as a change in policy from the approach of his father, Judah the Prince, who was apparently on familiar terms with high ranking Romans. A second meaning is a warning to look beyond crafted first impressions, false promises, pandering, misdirection and the like when dealing with authority figures. A third meaning, less pshat (literal or contextual meaning), comes from some of the commentators who call 'Rishus' the permission that G-d grants man (plausibly via government involvement) to be tempted by the evil inclination. I once worked in government and can relate to these meanings.

I expected to, but did not, find commentary that one reason for caution in dealing with the government was the possibility that government could significantly change, as when the Torah relates in Exodus 1:8 that "there arose a new King over Egypt ..." . There is some tension between Avot 2:3 and, 3:2 as the latter notes the positive role of government, although 3:2, as well as 3:5, use a different word for government: 'Malchus' מַלְכוּת: literally “royalty” or “kingship.”

Mishnah 4 / משנה ד

Commentary by: Ben Galper

In a normal year, Hillel's warning would have made perfect sense: do not remove yourself from the community, as community is such a key aspect of Judaism. However, in the era of COVID19, this perek of Pirkei Avot takes on a whole new meaning for me. Now, in 2020, we are actually being asked to socially isolate, to separate ourselves from others in order to stop the spread of the virus and to save lives. In order to allow for pikuech nefesh, saving a life, which is one of the most important concepts in Judaism, we actually seemingly must violate Hillel's very important principle of not separating oneself from the community. However, I look at the COVID-19 situation in a different light. While we are socially isolated, we do not need to be separate from the community. In fact, through Zoom Kabbalat Shabbat and Zoom classes, and by looking out for each other -- especially for the most isolated members of our community -- we actually are not separating but are an even closer community than ever. Even more so, the fact that we are socially isolating to prevent the spread of the corona virus through our community demonstrates that even through isolation we are caring for one another and are doing whatever we can to protect each other. So even during the COVID19 pandemic when we can't be in shul together for Shavout we are listening to the words of Hillel more than ever and doing what we can to unite as a community, to prevent the spread of the virus, and help one another get through the pandemic so that we can hopefully be safely physically together again at Beth Sholom soon.

Chapter 2 / פרק ב

Mishnah 5 / משנה ה

Commentary by: The Yourman Family

We wanted to share our insights about the last phrase of this Mishnah in particular, because we think that the message is so profound. The literal translation is, "in a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." A common rendition of this is, "in a place where there are no leaders, strive to be a leader."

But our preferred way of reading this Mishnah is, "in a place where there are no *mensches*, strive to be a *mensch*."

We see this as an appeal to keep strong our internal moral compass, no matter the circumstances. It is a reminder that if we find ourselves in a situation or in a world where kindness, generosity, morality, *tzedakah*, and *menschlichkeit* are lacking, our task remains simple and straightforward — we bear continued responsibility to exercise good *middot* and to commit to *tikkun olam*.

With this in mind, we can look again at the more conventional translations of this Mishnah. Returning to the common reading that refers to leadership, perhaps where leaders are lacking we can strive to lead by good example; and returning to the literal reading, perhaps when humanity is lacking our job remains to engage in the kind of behavior that elevates us into the highest realms of humanity.

Mishnah 6 / משנה ו

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

At its core, this teaching asks us to consider a simple truth: People ultimately get what they deserve. The Rambam interprets the skull described by the Mishnah as that of a person who killed someone else. Because they committed murder, they themselves were killed (and the one who killed them will be killed in the future). The Rambam also notes that we must also consider the opposite: Someone who brings goodness into the world - helping and supporting those around them - will ultimately experience a reward for their efforts, even if not immediately perceptible.

Of course, we may know individuals who are particularly good or bad and do not seem to get what they deserve. But this Mishnah wants us to believe that things will eventually work out the way they should. "What goes around comes around."

Chapter 2 / פרק ב

Mishnah 7 / משנה ז

Commentary by: Marc Zweben on behalf of Lynn, Noah, Jesse and himself

The intent here seems obvious – all material things in moderation, whereas all spiritual pursuits, and pursuits of the mind, provide more benefits with no downside, even as they increase. As for the material side, there is a saying this reminded us of: there is no such thing as benign neglect. If you own things, you must constantly care for them – there is a cost to owning things. The Mishnah makes clear that some of that cost is moral degradation, but it is also time, focus – all of which necessarily means you have less time for other things, such as Torah and other worthy pursuits. We read in one commentary that Hillel in particular was reacting to a notion in the ancient world that obesity was a badge of success and prosperity, and Hillel's response is reminiscent of Kohelet.

On a side note, we also saw here some Covid-relevant messages: the more flesh the more worms reminded us that hoarding is not only bad for others, but leads to waste and rot; if you have more than you can use, it will go bad; the Mishnah makes clear it also is bad for the soul. (We also noted you could read “worms” as “bugs, or virus” – and then – the more people around, the more chance of bugs/virus – so stay home, focus on learning etc!). Finally, the focus on a good name (which is something Jesse Zweben spoke about at his bar mitzvah almost 11 years ago!) – is a uniting them here: we know so many who are rich in material goods but have acquired or used them in such a way that they do not have a good name; a good name is acquired entirely through one's actions, one's chesed, honesty etc. Many try to build their reputations through the former, but the former without the latter is not a path to a good name – or, ultimately, to “peace” – the last and ultimate goal here. That comes when you realize that chesed is a higher value than material goods, when you can find satisfaction with whatever you have, and when you are driven not by “more flesh,” but more significant goals.

Mishnah 8/ משנה ח

Commentary by Rena Ableman

This Mishnah teaches us about the five Talmidim (disciples) of Raban Yohanan ben Zakkai. We start off with Raban Yohanan's statement that learning Torah is the purpose of our having been created. At the end of this Mishnah there is a debate on who is the greatest of the Torah scholars Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus or Rabbi Elazar ben Arach.

The Mishnah wants us to imagine a scale and it's either the weight of Rabbi Eliezer that is greater than all the sages combined or it's Rabbi Elazar ben Arach whose Torah weighs more than all the Torah of all the other sages combined.

These two rabbis are described by Raban Yochanan ben Zakkai as having two opposite virtues. Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus was like a plastered cistern and Rabbi Elazar ben Arach was like a spring that gathered force. In many places throughout the Talmud and Midrash, Torah is compared to water. The sages are both compared to water sources.

Israel is a country with small water reservoirs. In the past, people had Borot Sud (plastered cisterns) in their fields, where they collected water from the rain so it could be used later as drinking water and more importantly water for agriculture. In this parable we understand that Rabbi Eliezer got all his Torah from above, from someone else, his rabbis. He “collected” a great “amount” of torah and he did not forget any of it. It can be used later-on for the crop of many. In comparison, Rabbi Elazar is a spring. All his water, his Torah, is new. It is a strong spring that provides fresh water to many. Rabbi Elazar is a strong innovator refreshing those that are dry.

The question that the editor of the Mishnah poses by bringing the two opinions of who is greater, is: what is more important for learning Torah: preserving the heritage and traditions or constant innovation and creativity?

In our study of Torah, what should we be aspiring towards, a model of a cistern or a model of a spring?

I want to suggest, because we are not as great as these two sages, a third model. I want to suggest we should strive to be like a well. The well gathers rain-water from above, has a spring and mixes the water to one abundant blend providing plenty of water to continue the growth.

Chapter 2 / פרק ב

Mishnah 9 / משנה ט

Commentary by: Tomer Hillel

In my last Shabbat of the seminar of Shlichim that we had before coming to the States, we got this chapter of Pirkei Avot. We had to split into couples (that is, we each had a Chavruta, a study partner) and discuss what is the right way in life. The tricky thing was that in dividing up the text, they cut off the end of the chapter that says that Elazar ben Arach's words conclude all of the other ways. I remember it because this is the way that my father z"l taught me: to have a good heart. I really think that if you want to be a good person, a good Jew, or a good parent, you should have a good heart. And yes, I was the one to guess it right.

Mishnah 10 / משנה י

Commentary by: Marc Zweben for Lynn, Noah, Jesse and himself

We had much debate about this Mishnah, focusing primarily on the strong language about not getting too close to the flames of the learned, lest you be burnt. The older generation saw this as a warning to the young or less educated who might not be ready: if you try to tackle the deeper or more complex issues before you have established a base of learning, you could get “burnt” – confused, led astray, undone. It is akin to the notion of avoiding the study of kabbalah until one is older. The younger generation saw something else here, focusing on the language being quite negative about the learned – their wisdom can be a warming flame, but it can bite like a fox, by being used in sly strategic ways; it can sting like a scorpion, used to bring an opponent painfully down; and can be the hiss of a serpent, alluring and evil. That to many sounded not like a warning to the student about the student's behavior (that is, not a warning to the student to go slow), but a criticism of the rabbis.

This reminded us of other learnings (from daf yomi) about some of the very heated battles and disputes in the beit midrash, some of which got political and ugly, with factions and excommunications. Notably, Rabbi Eliezer himself had been excommunicated for not agreeing on an issue, so it seems likely that he *was* being critical and noting that even wisdom can be turned to ugliness or used as a weapon. So – knowledge can warm you like glowing coals, or be used to burn – as glowing coals thrown at another would. This seems like a warning to the rabbis themselves not to use their wisdom to fuel judgmentalism, rebuke, anger, self aggrandizement, or political objectives. This matches the beginning of the Mishnah, which reminds us to care about the honor of your fellow man and not to be easily provoked – a warning that makes sense to those who are wise and perhaps impatient with those less learned, and prone to embarrass or judge others, or become impatient. And because you must repent every day as if it is your last, these are words to live by.

Another thought. There are two ways to look at embers - the first is that they are at the center of the fire. This means you shouldn't get too close as we have mentioned before. Another way to look at embers (because who would actually try to touch an ember while it is in the fire?) is by noticing that they are what remains after the fire goes out. After the great sages have passed away, if we try to get too close to what they have left -- to hold on to their embers -- we will burn ourselves. This is to say that we must start our own fires. Sure, we can use their embers, make a new fire on top of their old one. But their embers alone will not suffice, and trying to get too close will even hurt what is left of those who came before.

Chapter 2 / פרק ב

Mishnah 11 / משנה יא

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

One might read this Mishnah and feel that the message does not apply to them. The examples given may feel extreme. Who embraces the “Evil Eye,” the evil inclination, or hatred for humankind? Surely only those who are evil themselves (and most, I imagine, do not identify as evil people!). Why do we even need this warning at all?

Perhaps this Mishnah is speaking not to the reader directly, presuming the reader to be an evil person (would an evil person find themselves reading Pirkei Avot to begin with?), but instead is asking us to look beyond ourselves. You may not be evil... but it's possible that you know someone who is. Or, at least, a good person who may be engaging in evil things. There are good people in this world - more than we care to imagine - who get trapped in vicious cycles. Whether it be addictive behavior, or social challenges that lead to someone feeling more hatred for others than they should, we must not forget them. They are removing themselves from the world through their behavior, and they very well may need our support to come back.

Mishnah 12 / משנה יב

Commentary by: Rabbi Josh Kent

The solution is to first take a better look. The Rabbi of Gur takes note that the verse in Devarim writes the word “it” to teach us that “it” is an inheritance – but something “is not.” The Torah **itself** is an inheritance. Generation after generation we receive the Torah again and again by sheer fact that we are descendants of those that stood bravely at Mount Sinai and declared “We will do and we will listen.” However, the studying of the Torah **is not** an inheritance, it is not something that is automatic, we have to work for it. We can compare this to a normal inheritance that one receives from a loved one in the form of money. When we inherit the money, it goes to our bank account automatically. The money is yours, you own it, but the money in and of itself does absolutely nothing for you – how you use it is how you benefit from it. So the Torah is ours by inheritance, but how we use it is all up to us.

Mishnah 13 / משנה יג

Commentary by: Rosalinda Fainchtein

To me, this Mishnah speaks of the healing power of tefilah, prayer. It is a reminder to envelop oneself in that healing power, a guide for seeking forgiveness and understanding from Hashem, and in the process restoring our belief in our own good nature and our capacity to do good.

The last sentence of the Mishnah instructs one to “not be wicked in our own eyes”. The Rambam explained: “do not consider yourself a wicked person. For due to this, you will go off to evil ways completely...”

Chapter 2 / פרק ב

Mishnah 14 / משנה יד

Commentary by: Nat Lewin

In comparing the qualities of his five disciples, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai believed that Rabbi Elazar ben Arach, who declared that a “good heart” was the best trait and an “evil heart” was the worst, was superior to all the other four combined. Rabbi Elazar’s own instruction does not seem, however, to focus on one’s heart but on one’s conduct and on how to respond to an intellectual adversary.

You may think you know how to deal

With views that have no appeal

You had better take care

Study up and prepare

Or your foe may win with a steal.

Mishnah 15 / משנה טו

Commentary by: Michael & Tani Hurwitz

The interesting thing about this Mishnah from Rabbi Tarfon is that it is a pure metaphor. It doesn’t ever state what is being compared or invoked -- it lets the imagery speak for itself. And the picture that it paints is all about labor and workers’ motives to do or not to do work. This is in contrast to the preceding Mishnah of Rabbi Elazar, and the next Mishnah from Rabbi Tarfon, both of which expressly compare learning Torah to labor.

“The day is short.” All lives are finite. Even when we are young, we have to think of our time as limited.

“There is a lot of work to do.” Becoming immersed in the Torah is an immense undertaking. It’s not something that can be done quickly or easily.

“The workers are lazy.” People are usually averse to doing anything that is challenging. But this statement is not all negative, because it also suggests that the work is not individual but communal.

“The wages are high.” The reward for learning Torah and doing mitzvot is worth the effort. If wages were low, the job might not be worth the effort (given inherent laziness). While other Mishnahyot specifically reference and describe the reward (e.g., in the world to come), this Mishnah simply says the wages are “high,” leaving it undefined. This suggests that every “worker” needs to comprehend why it’s worth it to them personally to undertake the effort. Not coincidentally, Rabbi Tarfon was among the richest of the Sages, but he also became among the most generous (as a disciple of Rabbi Akiba).

“The owner is pressing.” HaShem is constantly prodding us to get started. It’s not enough that the wages are high, but we need to understand that a supervisor is expecting us not to let him down. This provides an added incentive -- interest in avoiding the disappointment of our master (and possibly fear of punishment) rather than just wages.

Chapter 2 / פרק ב

Mishnah 16 / משנה טז

Commentary by: Michael & Tani Hurwitz

This Mishnah answers skeptics who aren't totally convinced by the prior Mishnah. They might say, "So what if the wages are high and the owner is pressing? It's still not worth my time and effort because the work is too immense and I'll never be able to complete it. I might as well live for pleasure instead of undertaking the hard labor of Torah." This is exactly what an "apikoros" might argue, as mentioned in Mishnah 2:14. And that Mishnah instructs that you need to know how to answer an "apikoros." This Mishnah, 2:16, could be thought of as the more complete answer not provided by the prior Mishnah.

"You are not required to complete the work, but you are not at liberty to stand idly by." This is a comforting statement. It says you don't have to set unattainable goals. You just have to do your part to make progress. Some people will have more time than others to do so, but no one will "finish." It is the work of the generations that follow you to pick up the cudgel. This is such a powerful statement, because it invokes the forefathers in the Torah and the great Sages of the post-Temple period, none of whom saw their work completed. (Moshe is the preeminent example of this, since he never entered Israel.)

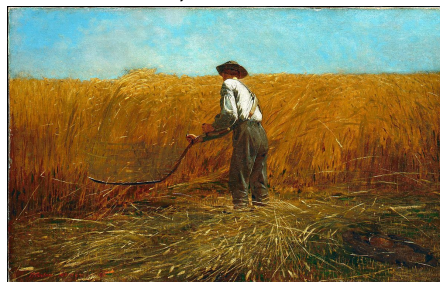
"If you have learned much Torah, they give you great wages. Your employer is trustworthy to pay the wages of your labor, but know that giving the reward of the righteous happens in the world to come." This tries to reconcile reality on the ground with the points made previously. The reward may not be visible at all to us; in fact, life might be full of challenges, disappointments, and suffering (as it was in the post-Temple period). But the reward will be in the world to come.

We can also relate these Mishnahot to some of the great old paintings about mowing (a favorite subject of many painters and poets throughout the ages). These paintings typically show the difficulty and immensity of the work yet still seem hopeful and even heroic. **Two examples:**

The Mowers in the Outskirts of Lagny (1899-1900), by Henry Labesque, shows the communal effort in mowing with everyone working in parallel yet at different points in their work. The field before them is huge but they are making progress in neat lines.



The Veteran in a New Field (1865), by Winslow Homer, shows that the labor itself is a form of reward -- the reward of peacetime.



Chapter 3 / פרק ג

Mishnah 1 / משנה א

Commentary by: Steven Lieberman

There is a tremendous amount to unpack here: the impermanence of life, the inevitability of death, the need for humility, the fact that no matter how successful we have been in a material sense “you can’t take it with you.” But for me, this passage in Pirkei Avot provides a powerful incentive for following all of the other principles set forth in Pirkei Avot specifically, and the Torah more generally. That is, if you view life through the lens that each person is destined to give an account and reckoning to Hashem, and you overlay on top of that the assumption that Hashem sees everything, then there is the greatest incentive to behave both properly and with an understanding that each of us has only a limited amount of time on the earth, and that we are each responsible for how we use – or waste – that time.

Mishnah 2 / משנה ב

Commentary by: Judry Subar

“You better hope your government succeeds,” says Rabbi Hanina, “so that you and your neighbors don’t eat each other alive,” foreshadowing Hobbesian political theory. Of course, in teaching that the power of a sovereign protects human beings from the dangers of the state of nature, Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* presented just one perspective on the purpose that a government serves. So, too, Rabbi Hanina’s advice constitutes just one Jewish viewpoint regarding governmental activity. Indeed, in Pirkei Avot 2:3 we’re told something a little bit different: that government officials befriend the common person only to serve their own interests but don’t otherwise help people in need. The author of that rabbinic warning didn’t trust the state to protect its citizens, apparently considering the cynical actions of politicians to be more worthy of comment than the theoretical underpinnings of government itself.

How do the different Mishnahic ideas about the origins and operation of political systems translate into twenty-first century Jewish ideas regarding political theory and the operation of the state? I can’t provide anything like a real answer, but here are a few points that we might keep in mind in considering how challenging a question this is. We live at a time when thinking about the role of government in general is far from straightforward. On the one hand, we read about some billionaires who are generally identified as left-of-center pledging huge percentages of their fortunes to NGOs which by definition act as alternatives to government. At the same time, politicians who have typically championed small government don’t blink as they approve massive government spending, debt and deficits. And regarding the concept of statehood for Jews, we debate all the time how to navigate the tension between Jewish identity and democratic values. Even among theorists who identify with the Orthodox world, we have significant thinkers who don’t seem to consider sovereignty to be the be-all and end-all -- people such as Donniel Hartman, who considers North America to be a home for its Jews (clearly a group that doesn’t exercise sovereignty the way a government generally does) on a par with the home that Israel provides for its Jews, and Professor Daniel Boyarin, for whom diasporic, non-sovereign Jewish identity is more of a positive value than Modern Zionism can be. One more Jewish thinker, Michael Walzer, gives us one more Jewish perspective on statecraft when in his *Exodus and Revolution* he argues that the Book of Exodus “is certainly the first description of revolutionary politics.”

All of this is to say, as Pirkei Avot itself does, that different Jews (and sometimes even the same ones) think different things about the substance and practice of politics. One easily overlooked element of that reality is that even as we disagree, so many of us share an understanding that political thought and action make up an important part of who we are. That seems to be Rabbi Hanina’s ultimate point: as crucial as it is for us to work as individuals toward the goal of getting along with each other, we need to applaud any attempt to develop a common set of rules that will help us as local and national human communities achieve that end.

Chapter 3 / פרק ג

Mishnah 3 / משנה ג

Commentary by: The Shorr Family

As a family, we would like to dedicate our learning of this Mishnah to Lissa's father, Stanley Malcom Cohen z"l, Shimon Melech HaKohen Ben Tzvi Hirsch HaKohen VeMerka. We chose this Mishnah because we feel that it offers suggestions for maintaining strong Jewish practice during the strange times in which these words are written -- during the Covid-19 crisis of 2020 -- suggestions which Stanley often put into practice himself.

In many places throughout Rabbinic literature, we find discussions surrounding metaphorical "replacements," or maybe more accurately "spiritual reincarnations," of the Beit HaMikdash, the Temple, after it was destroyed. Not surprisingly, a very common resolution to these discussions is that nowadays, a shul is like our Mikdash Me'at, a little Temple. The reasons behind this conclusion make a lot of sense. We daven and gather at our shuls, just like what was done at the Beit HaMikdash. Though these reasons might seem obvious to us, the practical ramifications might not be: many Halachic sources hold that a shul today actually has a status of Kedusha, holiness, similar to the sanctity of the Beit HaMikdash. As a result, there are certain specifications for how we should build and beautify a shul, and also stringencies regarding selling a shul. In fact, some say that a shul must be the highest building in town! Clearly, the discussions comparing a shul to the Beit HaMikdash are not just metaphorical, but practical as well.

Another common image offer as a metaphor explaining a reincarnation of the Beit HaMikdash is in the form of our tables, where we eat with our families. At first glance, this comparison seems strange. But thinking about it more deeply, we realize that at our tables, we eat, pray, share words of Torah, and build relationships, all important aspects of Temple life. When we extend this comparison from the purely spiritual to the practical, we start to arrive at the lesson of our Mishnah: To fail to act with Kavod, honor, around our tables is akin to desecrating the Beit HaMikdash with meaningless sacrifices. On the other hand, if we do act at our tables with respect for others, learning, and gratitude, then we merit having the Shechinah dwell among us, as if we were standing in the Beit HaMikdash.

This lesson about our tables is so important for us at any moment when we don't only miss the Beit HaMikdash, but are for whatever reason unable to attend our shuls as well. Though not easy, we have a tremendous opportunity in front of us: to take all of the Torah and dignity that we might save for shul, but instead manifest it inside our homes, with our families. Our family luckily has Stanley's memory to serve as a strong example of how to fulfill this opportunity. Many friends and relatives have remembered Stanley for his legendary Seders, for two reasons. We feel this first, because of how meticulous he was in making sure that we left no stone unturned in discussing the story of the exodus, and second, because he always made sure to invite people from far and wide and to make everyone feel welcome. Stanley never let anyone leave a gathering without discussing Jewish life, and everyone always felt that they had truly been heard. At a time when it may seem that we are at risk of being disconnected from our Judaism, we actually have the chance to bring the Divine Presence directly into our homes. We truly have the opportunity to turn our tables into our own Mikdashim Me'atim.

Chapter 3 / פרק ג

Mishnah 4 / משנה ד

Commentary by: Martin Weiss

Rabbi Hanania ben Hakinai lived during the early Tannaic era. He was a dedicated student of Rabbi Akiva. He uses idioms in this Mishnah. Idioms are phrases in common usage not derivable from the literal meaning. For example, 'I have to hit the hay now' means 'I want to go home to sleep'.

There are, at first glance, three causes (waking at night, traveling alone, thinking idly) and one result (making you morally guilty). Commenters have thought the phrase against traveling alone on the road might mean that you should use your travel time to study. (Many times I've seen people studying their heavily underlined bible while riding on the Metrorail and sometimes I've read the LeKutai Torah that Alan Fisher provides while on the Metrorail). Or it might mean that you should help other people study Torah. Commentators have also thought the first phrase about being awake at night means that if you do wake at night you should study Torah or that if you don't apply yourself during the day you will wake at night. If you translate the result phrase **מִתְחַיֵּב בְּנַפְשׁוֹ** as 'endanger your soul' which seems plausible given the warning against idleness in the third causal phrase (idleness), it could arguably refer to something called Sleep Paralysis.



This illustration by Angelica Alzona for lifehacker.com in an article by [Beth Skwarecki](#) published in December 2016 depicts the helplessness and anxiety felt by people who suffer from this condition. There are two types of Sleep Paralysis: in the first you are unable to move at a critical point in your dream (which sometimes leads to night terror); in the second you are just barely awake and unable to move.

Rabbi Hanania ben Hakinai may have thought that, in fact, sleep paralysis is an early warning of continuing failure to use your time properly, eventually endangering your soul. If so, being awake at night is the warning of the two causes (walking alone and idleness) and endangering your soul is a result.

Chapter 3 / פרק ג

Mishnah 5 / משנה ה

Commentary by: Stephen Bashein

What is the source of the restraints on our free will? Torah? The government? Our job?

R. Nechunia, one of the early mystics, and perhaps more of that world than the practical world, promises us that there is no room for all three. On the one hand there are Torah's demands. On the other hand there is the government's and the job's (worldly affairs) demands. He says, choose Torah and avoid the other two. WOW! Not in this world. Maybe in a cave with Shimon ben Zakki, R. Nechunia's contemporary. R. Nechunia goes on to say avoid Torah and be subject to the other two - now that sounds realistic. What's going on here?

Rabbi Nechunia uses the word "על" (which is Hebrew for "burden") regarding the limits on our free will that are imposed by Torah, government, and the job. In fact in this Mishnah he uses the word על six times . . . in a 24-word statement! In every direction we face burdens. But in the Mishnah על is typically translated as "yoke" not "burden."

Yoke is more than a "burden" - and so the translators understood על to mean more than carrying something that is heavy. A yoke joins two like animals together to move forward in order to pull a loaded wagon. Both animals have to work in unison . . . one can't move without the other. But the yoke guides the animals in the right direction, says Rabbi J. H. Hertz. He goes on to say that absorption in the yoke of Torah relieves the mind from dwelling on the oppressive demands of the government and worldly affairs.

Rabbi Marc D. Angel expands on this. He notes that Jacob, in his dream, saw the angels going up and then down - counterintuitive. But the angels were ascending to gain spiritual strength with which to sustain them when they descended to earth to cope with difficult situations.

It seems to me that R. Nechunia is telling us that in all situations, whether under the "yoke" of Torah, or government, or our jobs, we have a say . . . we have to agree to work in unison with one set of values or the other. So our free will is not compromised. It all starts with exercising our free will. . . do we follow the path of Torah rule? or government rule? or the rules of the workplace?

Likely R Nechunia is talking about fundamental values - i.e. the morality and ethical principles by which we live. . . as Jews, as citizens, as members of the marketplace.

Then what he says is true. There is no room for eternal Torah values and for situational political and market place values to coexist. Choose Torah values and apply them to all aspects of your life. Do not leave room for the situational values of politics, secular society, or the marketplace.

Rabbi Nechunia was a leading mystic - a contemporary of Shimon ben Zakki - living in the first and second centuries of the Common Era. Besides being the author of this Mishnah, Rabbi Nechunia is best known to us as the author of the hymn ". . . אָנָּה בָּכָה" sung on Kabbalat Shabbat just before we sing "לכל דודי," and is recited during the Sefira period by many, right after doing the daily count of the Omer.

R. Nechunia was extremely wealthy, and was known for his humility (as expressed in אָנָּה בָּכָה) and his dedication to study and learning. He interpreted the entire Torah using the analytical principle of "general and particular". He is said by some to have authored a basic kabalistic text, "Bahir".

Chapter 3 / פרק ג

משנה ו / Mishnah 6

Commentary by: David Weisel

This perek is especially relevant to our current crisis, the Covid-19 crisis of 2020. Clearly, many activities -- social, religious, professional, personal -- are, during normal times, enhanced when shared with others. This observation by Rabbi Halafta teaches that we still can experience the Shechinah alone.

Side note: The modern community K'far Hananyah is located in Israel's southern Galil, about five miles southwest of Tzfat and about one mile south of the K'far Hananyah of Mishnahic times. It is small -- population today is about 750 -- which might explain why Rabbi Halafta was concerned with the spiritual legitimacy of very small groups! View of K'far Hananyah:



Another side note: The grave of Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya -- author of the one-sentence Mishnah recited to allow for a kaddish d'rabanam to be recited by mourners -- is located just outside K'far Hananya.

משנה ז / Mishnah 7

Commentary by: Rabbi Haim Ovadia

I always wondered why Rabbi Shimon was so harsh. Why did he say that one should be punished for appreciating the beauty of nature and the handiwork of the creator. This question especially bothered me because I love nature and because my most powerful Tefila experience was connected to it. I was walking with my grandfather to shul on Shabbat, and we were talking, when he stopped all of a sudden, looked at the flocks of birds which were dancing and gliding above, and started chanting Psalm 104, in praise of nature. I was therefore perplexed by this Mishnah, until I realized that R. Shimon's emphasis is on the word **ומפסיק** - stops learning. If one considers nature to be separate from faith and Torah it is a problem. Contemplating nature is the greatest act of faith, and one should not consider it as causing him to be detached from his learning.

Chapter 3 / פרק ג

Mishnah 8 / משנה ח

Commentary by: Brian Foont

In Pirkei Avot 6:8 Rabbi Shimon ben Manasya relates a saying of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai and then, in his own name, comments on it. With that exception, Avot 3:8 is the only Mishnah in Pirke Avot where one rabbi reports what another said. That begs the question, why not just quote Rabbi Meir as is done at Avot 4:10 and 6:1? Or, for that matter, as Rabbi Dostai's father, Rabbi Yannai, as at Avot 4:15? This appears to be a reflection of Rabbi Dostai's humility. While appearing several times in the Talmud Bavli, only homiletical teachings appear in his name. On halacha, he quotes his teacher, the same Rabbi Meir that he quotes here.

While various pieces of Tanach are quoted in Pirke Avot, citations to the Torah are rare. Up to this Mishnah there is just one (Avot 3:6) and there are just eleven more with seven of those in the last chapter. In a book of Torah with 108 Mishnahyot, that seems sparse. Perhaps even more interesting, Rabbi Dostai begins with an exhortation in the name of his teacher, Rabbi Meir, that "whoever forgets one word of his study, scripture accounts it to him as if he were mortally guilty" or "it comes from its soul." That "rule," is, of course, impossible to follow. Forgetting, with few exceptions, is part of how the human brain works. The method of learning at the time, which involved constant repetition, was an effort to avoid forgetting. That generations-long game of "telephone" was far from perfect as borne out by many passages in the Talmud where the precise text of what was to be remembered has been corrupted. Thus, Rabbi Dostai reports Rabbi Meir providing a helpful "out," first quoting more of the same pasuk "that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live" and explaining, "thus, he is not mortally guilty unless he deliberately removes them from his heart." That same teaching, this time attributed to Rabbi Dostai without reference to Rabbi Meir, appears in the Talmud Bavli (Menachot 99B). The "out," however, is also impossible. Humans, outside the realm of science fiction, cannot deliberately erase a memory. The Mishnah also omits the last four words of the pasuk, "and make them know to your children and your children's children."

We are dealing here not with halacha, but homily. The pasuk from the Torah, in context, is Moshe Rabbenu exhorting the people. He tells them to be diligent, to make sure, all of the days of their life, not to forget the things that they saw with their own eyes just in case they would leave their memory – and tell them over to their children and their children's children. From here we have a source for the halacha to teach Torah to our children (*e.g.*, Sefer HaChinuch 419), but we do not (fortunately) count forgetting as a negative commandment. Rabbi Dostai is reminding us to be diligent in our studies as an aid to avoid forgetting and at the same time demonstrating humility by attributing the idea to his teacher.

Chapter 3 / פרק ג

Mishnah 9 / משנה ט

Commentary by: Leah and Steve Kreisler

Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa said: anyone whose fear of sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom is enduring, but anyone whose wisdom precedes his fear of sin, his wisdom is not enduring. He [also] used to say: anyone whose deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom is enduring, but anyone whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, his wisdom is not enduring.

As some context to this passage, it is important to understand a little of the life of Hanina ben Dosa, one of the Tannaim who lived in the latter half of the first century C.E. Rabbi Hanina was extremely pious and was looked on even by his contemporaries as one to be admired for his conduct. There are a number of stories of Rabbi Hanina and the power of prayer, including two from Berachot (34b). In the first, Rabbi Gamliel sent two scholars to Rabbi Hanina's house requesting that he seek divine mercy for Gamliel's ill son. After praying, Hanina told the messengers that Gamliel's son was cured by stating that "if my prayer is fluent in my mouth, then I know that it has been well received." In the second story, Hanina similarly prays for the son of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, who also recovers. Zakkai tells his wife that Hanina "is like a servant before the King, who comes and goes freely and is on intimate terms with Him, while I am like an important officer before the King, appearing in the palace only on important occasions, and am therefore on less intimate terms with Him."

This passage in Pirkei Avot emphasizes the important idea that knowledge, in and of itself, is not a means to an end. It can only endure if it is gained for serving a higher purpose. Those who understand the significance of the mitzvot have not only demonstrated their knowledge of them, but also recognize their humility before G-d. Similarly, wisdom will only endure if it is used for the purpose of fulfilling mitzvot in the service of man and Hashem. The verse precisely reflects the kind of person Rabbi Hanina was; although his wisdom was not as great as that of the leaders of the Sanhedrin, he meritoriously used his knowledge and devotion for helping others.

Mishnah 10 / משנה י

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

Some people do everything right, yet never seem to receive any credit for doing so. Whether they are hard working individuals with thankless jobs, or "silent heroes" who help support everyone around them in hidden ways- we cannot live without these people. While it may seem that such individuals are underappreciated, this Mishnah reassures us that G-d sees their actions. In a way, G-d takes cues from us, so to speak... if we are pleased with people, G-d is also pleased with them.

Another interpretation: This Mishnah reinforces the importance of treating others in a way that they will find "pleasing." The reward for doing so is not only a positive relationship between us as people, but also a positive relationship with G-d.

Chapter 3 / פרק ג

Mishnah 11 / משנה יא

Commentary by: Tanya Lampert

If one is a learned Torah scholar and knows the mitzvot but dislikes or speaks against what is holy as well as diminishing the joy of the festivals by talking in negative terms about them, he does not get credit for his knowledge of Torah in the world to come. Moreover if he treats others so that they perhaps are embarrassed by the lack of depth of their Torah knowledge, the same fate awaits him. It is interesting to note that Rabbi Elazar from Modiin includes embarrassing someone in public in the same sentence, and speaks about that practice in terms just as serious, as profaning what is holy, the Torah, mitzvot and festivals.

Mishnah 12 / משנה יב

Commentary by: Nat Lewin

Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha – strikingly handsome in his youth -- was released for an enormous ransom when he was discovered in a Roman prison and concluded, from memory, the text of a prophetic vision of Yeshayahu. It may have been that experience that led him to advise equal respect and gladness for all.

Act happy towards all who you greet

In an office, a gym, or the street

Show equal respect and joy

In meeting a geezer or a boy

Or a scholar or a cop on the beat.

Mishnah 13 / משנה יג

Commentary by: Toby Berman & Hannah Marill

Rabbi Akiva was afraid that “jesting and frivolity would lead to promiscuity.” To protect against this prediction, he warned that fences were needed to protect against interference with the then-current Jewish lifestyle. In today’s world we desperately need fences to serve as barriers against penetration of our Jewish values by “foreign and unacceptable” ideas. With so many differing interpretations of what is “allowed and permissible” within the framework of the current “Jewish way of life,” we need walls, barriers, separations between what can be changed and what cannot be changed. These fences provide protection against change and provide permanence to Jewish values and beliefs.

If tradition changes or is altered by current acceptable practices and halachic rulings, does it still provide a fence around the Torah and its teachings? If the current generation cannot or does not abide by the tithe requirements, is wealth still protected? Considering all the stimulating influences in our world today, how effective is a mere personal vow as a barrier against promiscuity? Does silence truly create a wall around wisdom?

We learn and teach by doingbecause actions speak louder than words. We must create and foster an environment for the young and old within our community which provides positive Judaic influences and offers opportunities to experience the beauty of “the Jewish way of life.” When this venture is successful, Torah-true Judaism will pass Dor L’dor, from generation to generation, and the fences, barriers, walls and separation strategies will not be as necessary as Rabbi Akiva suggested.

Toby Berman and Hannah Marill, grandmother and granddaughter, studied Chapter 3.13 of Pirkei Avot as our contribution to the Beth Sholom Pirkei Avot Project

Chapter 3 / פרק ג

Mishnah 14 / משנה יד

Commentary by: Dita Cooper

Mishnah Avot 3:14 juxtaposes three divine elements of the human condition: creation in the image of G-d, being the children of the All-Present, and possessing a “precious vessel,” namely, the Torah. The Mishnah states that each condition is an expression of G-d’s love for humankind. Juxtaposed to each phrase is a statement that humankind is *especially* beloved because G-d made these conditions *known* to us through verses in the Torah. We *know* that we were created in the image of G-d because it is written so in the creation narrative of Genesis. We *know* that we are children of the All-Present because it is written so in Deuteronomy, in reference to preserving the sanctity of our bodies against self-destruction. We *know* that we are in possession of the precious vessel that is the Torah because it is written so in the Book of Proverbs (and sung as a preamble to the return of the Torah to the Ark each Shabbat.)

I find this Mishnah to be particularly fascinating for the hierarchy it constructs between simply existing and having knowledge of one’s existence. While our status as “beloved” would remain unchanged without recognition of our divine condition, we are that much more beloved, sanctified, and divine by virtue of full knowledge and understanding of that which G-d has given us. Implicit in the Mishnah is a call to cognizance beyond simply living, and a charge to living a religious life that melds the mundane, the intellectual, and the spiritual aspects of who we are as human beings.

Mishnah 15 / משנה טו

Commentary by: Bashi Packer

The concept expressed in this Mishnah has always bothered me. How can Hashem know what we will do ahead of time, and yet we still have free will? Why are these phrases grouped together?

הכל צפוי: This is usually translated as everything is foreseen. I looked up the word, and I also found the definition expected.

These words seem very different. To foresee an event seems more passive, to expect an event is more active.

וְהַרְשׁוּת נְתוּנָה: and/yet freedom of choice is granted - Note that some translate the vav in וְהַרְשׁוּת as and, while others translate it as yet. Looking at the פשט, the plain meaning, the vav means "and" - implying that there is no contradiction here. I prefer that interpretation.

וּבְטוֹב הָעוֹלָם נִדוֹן: and the world is judged with goodness - If people have done both good and bad things, Hashem judges them based on their good deeds. Does one good deed outweigh many bad deeds? Which way is the scale tipped?

וְהַכֹּל לְפִי רֵב הַמַּעֲשֵׂה: and everything is in accordance to the majority of the deed - This is related to the previous phrase; will any person whose majority of deeds are good be judged as good?

11:26 דְּבָרִים: Words from this פסוק are displayed in the Hall of Memory at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, where I volunteer (see photo):

רְאֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרֵכָה וּקְלָלָה:

See, this day I set before you blessing and curse.

It's an intense setting for the message of free will, which was exercised in a horrific way by the Nazis and their collaborators.



Chapter 3 / פרק ג

Mishnah 16 / משנה טז

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

This Mishnah is actually somewhat frightening. It talks about G-d as store owner. The store is open and the owner lets us enjoy the wonderful merchandise on credit. The merchandise refers to the good in the world but we must repay it with our own good deeds. This means that if we enjoy the blessings of life without paying our debt, we are essentially stealing from G-d and from the world.

Mishnah 17 / משנה יז

Commentary by: Debra Band

In this painting of one of my favorite Mishnahyot in Pirkei Avot, I surround the image of the two trees with imagery that contrasts the riches of the life that balances words or skills and actual deeds, and the emptiness of the life in which deeds do not follow upon skills. There are two ways in which we may understand the use of the word, “wisdom,” or *hochma*, in this passage. One may understand “wisdom” as fine “wise,” or intellectual, words, but in the early books of the Tanakh “wisdom,” or *hochma*, indicates specialized practical skills or capacities, rather than the more intellectual quality.

The tree representing the man whose wisdom exceeds his deeds has fallen in the background, its shallow roots pulled up from the soil. Hollowed out by decay, its leaves have fallen away leaving bare stubs of branches. The thriving tree in front grows at the water’s edge—and throughout Tanakh, rabbinics and kabbalah, flowing water symbolizes divine energy and wisdom, most directly available to humankind in the Torah. The tree’s strong and broad roots—drawing sustenance directly from that flowing water—nourish and anchor its canopy, fruitful with pomegranates. One branch has been lost to some kind of adversity, but it continues to flourish unimpeded. At its roots, wheat and lilies grow. The wheat alludes to the flour of the passage, and to human sustenance. The single stalk of pink lilies brings to mind a midrash in which a single stalk of fragrant, rose-colored lilies growing in a ruined orchard symbolizes the value of the Ten Commandments in the corrupt human world. The Burning Bush is compared, in other midrash, to a humble thornbush with lovely flowers, a rose bush.

The image of the heavens above is adapted from a famous Hubble Space Telescope image of the deep sky, showing us lights that have been traveling toward us since shortly after the Big Bang, 13.7 billion years ago. All energy and matter in the universe has been produced and processed over and over in the stars since that moment of Creation, hence I use the image of the deep sky to allude to G-d’s unseen, but all pervasive presence in Creation.



רבי אלעזר בן עזריה אומר
אם אין תורה אין דרך ארץ אם אין דרך ארץ אין תורה
אם אין חכמה אין דעה אם אין דעה אין חכמה
אם אין בינה אין דעת אם אין דעת אין בינה
אם אין קטנה אין תורה אם אין תורה אין קטנה
הוא היה אומר כל שחכמהו מרובה מבינתו
למה הוא דומה לאילן שענפיו מרובין ושורשיו מעשין
וקרוח באה ועוקדו ורופקתו של עניו
שנאמר והיה כערער בערבה ולא יראה כי יבוא טוב
ושכן חררים במדבר ארץ מלחה ולא תשב
אבל כל שמעשיו מרובין פהקמתו למה הוא דומה
לאילן שענפיו מעשין ושורשיו מרובין שאפילו כל הרוחות
שבעולם באות ונשבות בו אין מזיון אותו במקומו
שנאמר והיה כעץ שתול על מים
ועל היבל ושלח שורשיו ולא יראה כי יבוא חם
ורוח עליהו רענן ובשנת בצורת לא ידאג ולא יגיש מעשות בדי:

Chapter 3 / פרק ג

Mishnah 18 / משנה יח .

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

A few observations related to this Mishnah:

1. The study of Halacha can be highly technical, and sometimes dry and difficult to access. This is often the case when studying, for example, the laws of bird offerings and calculations of menstruation days (to determine if a woman is eligible to go to the mikveh).
2. As challenging as it may be to study these areas of halacha, R' Eliezer informs us that they are in fact *central*. These areas of halacha should not be viewed as tangential to study
3. Everyone is invited to study these areas of halacha - the Mishnah does not specify that they are meant for only rabbis or judges to study.
4. Our study of the technical and dry halachot must be accompanied by something that is "sweet" and entertaining. The example given here, Gematria (where each Hebrew letter has a corresponding numerical value), is not an essential area of Halacha, but is still important nonetheless in order to ensure our study of Torah is balanced!

Chapter 4 / פרק ד

Mishnah 1 / משנה א

Commentary #1 by: George Max Saiger

Ben Zoma asked “Who is wise” and answered “He who learns from all people.” He was considered quite the *chacham* himself, the *Talmud* (*Berachot* 57b) opining that anyone who sees Ben Zoma in a dream is approaching wisdom. His idea resonates among New Agers, since it undermines the more conventional wisdom, expressed in the Book of Job (12,12) that wisdom is correlated with getting old:

“Wisdom is to be found in the aged; And length of days implies understanding”

Old folks like this idea of linking age and wisdom. Wise Ben Zoma didn’t buy it. He died young.

In the *Haggadah* we meet a “wise” son. He is not necessarily old, and he does not seem to want to learn from all his peers: he is busy memorizing all the laws of Pesach, and learning how to categorize them into *Eidot*, (testimonies) *Hukim* (statutes), and *Mishpatim* (laws). What a grind! That kind of wisdom is wisdom satirized—when my Yiddish-speaking forebears called someone a “*chochem*” there was more than a bit of a mockery in their tone. I surely prefer ben Zoma’s idea to the *Haggadah*’s. (Although in Rabbi Shmuel Goldin’s new edition of the *Haggadah*, he cites the Abravanel’s idea that you have to have a decent factual base before you can begin to think abstractly.)

Modern psychologists have struggled to define wisdom. Most of the early tries were based on the notion that wisdom (like obscenity, as described by the late Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart) was clear when you saw it. Most of these writers eventually gave up. More recently, the study of wisdom centered in the Berlin Wisdom Project at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development. This project was directed by Paul Baltes, a developmental psychologist who died in 2006, and Ursula Staudinger, who currently leads the National Longevity Center at The Robert N. Butler Columbia Aging Center in New York. What has come to be known as the Berlin Wisdom Paradigm is a knowledge-based model, leading to Baltes’s pithy definition of wisdom: “[Knowing] the ‘fundamental pragmatics of life.’

Whatever does that mean? Baltes and Staudinger defined it as “knowledge and judgement about the essence of the human condition and the ways and means of planning, managing, and understanding a good life.” That is, knowing how humans think and act gives people the ability to understand alternative viewpoints on life’s problems. Their wise subjects have learned from overcoming tough life situations --and from wise teachers. Such a teacher may be anyone, ben Zoma reminds us.

PS: One of the findings of the Berlin Wisdom project was that, like ben Zoma, you don’t have to be old to be wise.

Chapter 4 / פרק ד

Mishnah 1 / משנה א

Commentary #2 by: Julie Skolnick

In this time of distance learning students must be open to learn from many sources. They must also be flexible in giving their teachers the benefit of the doubt and have patience as teachers learn along with students on how to best teach online. Likewise, teachers find themselves learning from students – digital natives – who may understand technology in a deeper more organic way. As we all navigate this unknown, we find ourselves looking back at other pandemics, at how other countries and states are handling the pandemic and transitioning back – those who will be most successful are those who open themselves up to learn from others.

Who is strong? He who subdues his personal inclination, as it is said, He who is slow to anger is better than a strong man, and a master of his passions is better than a conqueror of a city (proverbs 16:32).

Commentary: During this time of perpetual fear and uncertainty, it is easy to allow emotions to rue the day in our communications and patience with others. From shortages at grocery stores to technology glitches, now is the time to demonstrate calm and consistency and to offer gratitude and grace.

Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot, as it is said: When you eat of the labor of your hands, you are praiseworthy and all is well with you (Psalms 128:2). You are praiseworthy in this world: and all is well with you in the World to Come."

Commentary: This time is not short on challenges; fear, discomfort, and inconvenience are daily occurrences. However, typical complaints of cleaning our houses or the less than perfect school situation, work challenges, etc. pale in comparison to many others who are suffering through abuse, homelessness, illness and loneliness. Noticing the quiet, the natural beauty of Spring and the blessings you do have in the face of this unprecedented time allows perspective and connection through oneself to the rest of the world and allows for renewal of spirit. It is important during this time to notice beauty but not forget those who are immensely challenged physically and emotionally during this time.

Who is honored? He who honors others, as it is said: For those who honor Me I will honor, and those who scorn Me shall be degraded (I Samuel 2:30).

Commentary: Showing honor may mean supporting endeavors that one no longer benefits from, whether an employee or a service, so that their past work is honored and their future work is secure. Honoring others may mean virtually visiting elderly who are alone and it may mean dealing gently with those who are compromised by the situation we are all in at this time.

Chapter 4 / פרק ד

משנה ב / Mishnah 2

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

This Mishnah offers an important insight into human psychology: We are creatures of habit. Once a certain activity becomes part of our routine - whether it is a mitzvah or a transgression - it will become difficult to cease the activity ("old habits die hard."). It is for this reason that it is so important that we create healthy habits in our lives - as this will inevitably (according to our Mishnah) lead to continued positive behavior!

משנה ג / Mishnah 3

Commentary by: Ken, Joy, Mia, Adam, and Jack Drexler

There are many layers to this Mishnah and many lessons to be learned. The Mishnah tells us simply that it is not useful to judge or to hate any person or being. Also, some translations interpret the second phrase, "do not discriminate against anything," to be "consider nothing impossible." So what does all of this mean? We see at least four lessons. First, there is no benefit to be gained from dwelling on the negative; negative thinking places a heavy weight on us and prevents us from appreciating and focusing on the abundant good in the world around us and in everyone. Second, harboring ill will might cause us to mistreat a person, which is unacceptable. Third, the phrase "there is no man that has not his hour" suggests that we should never write off another person, because everyone will, at some time, rise to a higher level and be able to contribute in a meaningful and positive way. Fourth, Rashi notes that alienating any person could undermine our own personal interests over time. It is never clear what our relationship to others will be in the future and what position we or others will have. Best to keep good relations and not burn bridges. Chag Sameach!!

משנה ד / Mishnah 4

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

So often we are concerned about how we present ourselves as Jews in public - and for good reason. There is so much Anti-Semitism in the world, and so important that we combat this by doing our part to represent the Jewish people as best as we can. We strive to all make a *Kiddush Hashem* in our actions - to make G-d's name holy. And at the same time, we try as best we can to avoid creating a *Chilul Hashem* - a desecration of G-d's name.

This Mishnah raises the stakes. Not only must we be concerned about how we act in public, but we must also be careful about how we act in private. We must strive to view the privacy of our own homes just as we view being out in public.

משנה ה / Mishnah 5

Commentary by: Elliot Pinta

The Mishnah distinguishes between two types of people: those who learn solely to teach and those who learn in order to perform mitzvot. Both, the Mishnah says, will be successful in meeting their goals. But the second one's goal is clearly much preferred by both the text of the Mishnah itself and by the commentators. Learning just to teach, suggest the commentators, is an acceptable but incomplete goal. The ultimate goal of learning is to more fully understand, and thereby fulfill, observance of mitzvot and ritual obligations. And that can best be achieved by one whose goal is to learn in order to practice. Such learning will of necessity result in a stronger commitment to Torah and mitzvot but serve as a model to others so that they may learn from the learner's example. That, say both the Mishnah and commentators, is the ultimate goal of limmud Torah and the ultimate goal of one who seeks to teach.

Upon reading the Mishnah I immediately thought of my father. My dad was such a person. He was educated both at the Mesivta Chaim Berlin and at Columbia University. He spent his career as a teacher and administrator in both public schools and Jewish day schools and yeshivot. His feet were firmly planted in both worlds. But he never wavered in his commitment to Torah and Jewish education. I think of him daily.

As an aside, this curious episode. In looking for a Mishnah to claim, I used an edition of Pirke Avot that my father had used, and when I opened it a loose piece of paper fell out. It was a Talmud homework assignment sheet given to my son Stephen when he was a student at the Hebrew Academy. Each student was assigned a group of Mishnahyot to learn. Stephen was assigned Perek 4 of Avot. And so it goes.

Chapter 4 / פרק ד

Mishnah 6 / משנה ו

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

Why should honoring the Torah lead to others honoring us? And why should dishonoring the Torah lead to others dishonoring us? One may suggest, on a simple level, that through honoring the Torah, we receive a divine reward -- that others will honor us. Perhaps, though, there is something deeper to be said: Through honoring the Torah, we cultivate within ourselves characteristics that make us honorable. And, conversely, when we dishonor the Torah, we cultivate within ourselves the opposite characteristics - leading those around us to feel we are not worthy of any honor.

Mishnah 7 / משנה ז

Commentary by: Nina F. Schor

There is something quite poetic
About the pigeon masquerading as a dove.
Perhaps it is his abject failure.
(Or perhaps not.)

Mishnah 8 / משנה ח

Commentary by: Nat Lewin

Rabbi Yishmael ben Rabbi Yossi ben Chalafta may have been skeptical about decisions that a single judge makes because of his own experience. He was assigned, over his objection, to turn over Jewish thieves to the Roman government.

A judge who sits all alone
Is probably dumb as a stone
To make justice work
We give him a clerk
To confer in person or on the phone.

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Chapter 4 / פרק ד

Mishnah 9 / משנה ט

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

On the surface, this Mishnah is challenging to read. Dedicating our lives to a profession - and earning a good living in so doing - is a dream that many of us wish to pursue. We are seemingly instructed here to do the opposite - to pursue a life of Torah study in a state of poverty. Can't someone be devoted both to earning money and to Torah simultaneously?

The Rambam provides a closer reading of the text. He suggests that anyone who is poor and needy and *at the same time* is occupied with Torah will be able to learn free from any professional distractions that may disturb him. In this way, the person is "wealthy." Conversely, anyone who does not study Torah because they are preoccupied with their wealth will eventually feel "poor" (not necessarily monetarily speaking). The lesson for us is to make room in our lives - whether are wealthy or not - to study Torah.

Mishnah 10 / משנה י

Commentary by: Judry Subar

Marcus Jastrow, the author of the classic dictionary of rabbinic literature known by his name, translates the sixth word of this Mishnah consistently with the translation above, to mean "in business." The Mishnah tells us, then, that we should avoid spending too much time on worldly affairs (or maybe on commercial transactions, in particular) lest they distract us from living a life of Torah. But Jastrow gives a second definition as well to the word עסק: "controversy." Read with that meaning, our Mishnah would be telling us to be humble and consummately agreeable if we want to progress in our Torah learning. That might sound like great advice to a mussarnik, an adherent of the moralism advocated by works such as the eighteenth century treatise on moral living known as the *Messilat Yesharim*. (As that book says, "humility leads to fear of sin." Introduction:49.) But that's not necessarily the dominant approach to the study of Torah. After all, what's the Talmud if not a celebration of controversy? And the experience of learning in a Beit Midrash, with all the mental -- and often verbal -- pushing and shoving undertaken to resolve seemingly impossible contradictions, might be imagined as swimming in the middle of a giant human dialectic. Perhaps the end of the Mishnah helps us to remember that both approaches are appropriate. We can work hard to keep our debates calm and civil so that we don't get so caught up in the process of argument that we lose interest in finding answers to our questions. And we can also recognize that our attempts to come to terms with the challenges inherent in Torah-based ideas might fall flat if they are tied too tightly to questions of practicality and worldliness.

Chapter 4 / פרק ד

Mishnah 11 / משנה יא

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

Everything we do has meaning. There is no such thing as an action that is “neutral” or meaningless. We must be very intentional and careful about how we act.

This message may be difficult for some to internalize or act upon. The Mishnah recognizes this fact in offering us a solution: Teshuvah and good deeds. Even if we make mistakes in how we act (which we inevitably will), there is always a path back.

Mishnah 12 / משנה יב

Commentary by: The Siegel family

Students: Teachers have an awesome responsibility to their students and to do anything less than honoring them is to act against the divine spark within them and to abrogate the duty a teacher has to the transmission of the material.

Colleagues: One must show reverence for those who have achieved the status of a colleague because one can challenge and question a colleague in a way that allows for the open and honest exchange of ideas as equals.

Teachers: A teacher (particularly, but not exclusively, one teaching Torah) allows us to become closer to HaShem. Therefore one must revere a teacher as one has reverence of heaven because that teacher is the conduit through which we may learn to live our lives in accordance with heaven.

Mishnah 13 / משנה יג

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

How could an error be considered something deliberate? Bartenura comments that this Mishnah is aimed at those who are rabbinic judges. If someone makes a mistake in a legal judgement because they were not careful in their study, G-d considers it to be an intentional sin. While this may seem unfair, this Mishnah emphasizes for us the importance of proper study of the Torah. The stakes are high when it comes to Torah, especially when we apply it to “real world” legal cases.

Mishnah 14 / משנה יד

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

The Mishnah talks not about moving to a place of Torah but of “exiling” oneself to a place of Torah! Why exile? I think this refers to the idea that in order for us to learn we must go to a place of vulnerability where we are not too comfortable. Comfort is great for many things but not for spiritual growth which requires one to expand oneself in ways that are almost impossible from the comfort of your living room! So, go into exile whether this is a physical space or a mental space. It is essential for spiritual growth.

Chapter 4 / פרק ד

Mishnah 15 / משנה טו

Commentary by: Tsippora Rosenberg

The first bit of wisdom offered by this Mishnah by Rabbi Yannai is one we know well as the age-old question of why do the evil prosper and the righteous suffer. I especially like the simple explanation given here – it is not for us to know. Instead of detailing reasons and explanations to aid us to understand, as that is the easier path, I prefer this explanation – it is simply beyond our capabilities and not Hashem's will for us to know the reasons why.

From a personal perspective, this brings to mind a pivotal moment in my life. My Mother ל'ט passed away at the early age of 62 from internal bleeding. I had been with her the previous evening at her home, as she complained that her stomach was bloated and we attributed it to medication. As she fell asleep, I left and went home to my family. During the Shivah, I was feeling so very guilty and questioning - why my Mother, a truly giving person, and why had I not known better and acted earlier, and so on. My Father took me aside and said six words that stopped me cold and I will never forget them. He did not try to assuage my guilt or tell me how she was no longer in pain – he said “that is the path to insanity.” In other words, there is no answer and we were not meant to know, just do not go down that train of thought. I take the same brilliant and comforting idea from this Mishnah.

Mathia ben Harash shares two thoughts at the end of this Mishnah. They can be understood in a similar context of humility and being proactive. His first idea is we should initiate a greeting when meeting someone. One interpretation is to be humble and reach out to others rather than waiting for them to speak first. The second thought of Mathia ben Harash is that it is better to be the tail, the last or lowest of a group, than the first and best. We can all learn from others and it is better to surround yourself with smarter and kinder people, so as to grow, than to be the best among lesser and feel superior. Midrash Shmuel makes an interesting note on this saying. A lion waves its tail above his head whereas a fox puts it between his legs. In the same manner, righteous people honor those who are lesser than them and are not concerned with their own honor, whereas dishonorable people belittle those lesser in order to increase their own import.

Mishnah 16 / משנה טז

Commentary by: Sarah Antine

What does it mean this world is like a vestibule? It reminded me of the courtyard of Ahashverosh where Queen Esther stood after galvanizing the Jewish community to pray and fast for their redemption. She herself took on the fasting and praying for several days, and while she stood in Ahashverosh's 'vestibule' she was probably hungry and physically weak, and terrified. What she did was to prepare herself by turning inward to find all the hidden reserves of courage and favor from G-d that she would need to face an all-too-powerful human being who had the ability to save or murder a whole ethnic group in his midst.

We can also prepare to become the best versions of ourselves, to improve our character, to grow in Torah knowledge and skill through practice, to make a difference for others.

In order to relate to 'the world to come' I often think of how we can make our own destiny by doing the next right action, and when we fail, to have resilience to try again. Eventually, Esther not only enters the banquet hall, but she makes the banquet that others enter. If I take this as a metaphor, it means one regular person who does the next right thing actually merits to host the banquet for the next generation.

Mishnah 17 / משנה יז

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

This Mishnah reminds me of a Yiddish song we used to sing in Yeshiva - “*Oilam Haba iz a gutta zach, learning Torah is a besser zach.*” (The world to come is a good thing, but learning Torah is a better thing!). In Judaism, maybe we are somewhat motivated by a share in the world to come. But oh how enjoyable is a life of Torah and Mitzvot!

Chapter 4 / פרק ד

Mishnah 18 / משנה יח

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

This Mishnah teaches us that there is a time for everything. Trying to ask forgiveness can sometimes backfire if the victim is not ready to accept the request. Comforting a mourner when the pain is too raw will also not be helpful. The very same act at the appropriate time would be most helpful. So we learn that sometimes our mistakes do not emerge from bad actions but from bad timing.

Mishnah 19 / משנה יט

Commentary by: Dan Prywes

This Mishnah repeats a verse from Proverbs (24:17) without additional commentary. Why then is this included as a Mishnah in Pirkei Avot? The value added must come from the fact that the Mishnah reports that Shmuel Ha’Katan would repeat this verse. He is the Rabbi who was chosen as worthy to compose the Birkhat HaMinim (curse on heretics and enemies) prayer that is part of the Amida. (See Brachot 28b-29a.) The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot is therefore telling us that even though Shmuel Ha’Katan recognized that enemies (heretics, informers, others) should be destroyed, he similarly stressed that we must take pleasure only in our own survival and not in their death or destruction. A similar thought can be found in Ezekiel 33:11: “As I live, says Hashem, I do not wish for the death of the wicked, but for the wicked to repent of their way, so that they may live.”

This is a recurrent tension over the joy of survival vs. taking pleasure in the enemy’s downfall. While Proverbs 24:17 cautions against celebrating the downfall of one’s enemy, another verse (Proverbs 11:10) states: “When the wicked perish there is singing.” Similarly, when Pharaoh’s army was destroyed in the Red Sea, the Israelites sang Shirat Ha’yam (Shmot 15:3), which appears inconsistent with the theme of Proverbs 24:17. But the Midrash tells us that Ha’Shem forbade the angels from singing because the Egyptians were also created by Ha’Shem, suggesting that Shirat Ha’yam was not the optimal response in the Israelites’ reaction before receiving the Torah.

The bottom line: We must always guard against turning the joy of survival into the joy of revenge.

Chapter 4 / פרק ד

Mishnah 20 / משנה כ

Commentary by: Michael, Libby, and Tani Hurwitz

This Mishnah is the only one featuring Elisha ben Abuyah, the infamous apostate -- he who cannot be named in the Mishnah (the “aher,” the “other”). It features three sets of similes, each adding complexity to the question of how best to learn and at what stage of life.

In the first simile, Elisha ben Abuyah says that learning in youth is like ink written on fresh paper, whereas learning as an older person is like ink written on blotted or erased paper. For someone who was so radical and notorious, on the surface this seems like a rather pious, cliché, and obvious observation. Of course, it is easier to inculcate Torah to those who know nothing and are literally impressionable; much harder to teach those who are older and are set in their ways. But the surface simplicity shows depths when considering two questions: Is this necessarily the case? And what are the implications of this truism? Elisha ben Abuyah of course would know very well that this is not the case. He was a contemporary of Akibah (they are two of the four who entered Pardes), and Akiba famously did not begin studying Torah until age 40. Surely this counterexample would come to mind for everyone who heard this truism at the time. And it suggests that, although in most cases the ink will be bolder on a fresh page, in other cases, the ink may be more permanent if it is first set upon life experience. In addition, as retold in the Yerushalmi Talmud, one of Elisha Ben Abuyah's greatest acts of blasphemy was to enter a beit hamidrash where youth were learning Torah and to urge them to give up studying in order to pursue various trades, which many of them did. This adds a certain dark insight to the Mishnah. Because youth are so impressionable -- are clean slates -- they may be susceptible to indoctrination of one sort or another. Elisha ben Abuyah was able to profoundly change their lives (for the better, in his estimation) with ease. Blotting away newly set ink appears to be almost as easy as putting the ink on fresh paper.

In the second simile, Rabbi Yosei ben Yehuda changes the perspective to that of the student rather than the teacher. It is better to be taught by someone who is old rather than young. Learning from the young is like eating unripe grapes and drinking new wine; whereas learning from the old is like eating ripe grapes and drinking aged wine. Even though an older person may be set in their ways -- may be like blotted paper -- those layers contain a wealth of both life and teaching experience. It turns out it is more fulfilling -- and more pleasurable, to follow the grapes/wine simile -- to read from a blotted page than one that was more recently inscribed. Of course, this is not a hard and fast rule either. Sometimes younger teachers can inspire more passion because they relate better to kids.

Finally, in the third simile, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi adds a paradox that unites the various strands. Do not look at the pitcher but at its contents; some new pitchers are full of aged wine, whereas some older pitchers do not even contain new wine (i.e, they contain nothing). There are no hard and fast rules. Some people certainly do get set in their ways, and their openness to new learning narrows over time. Other people may only start experiencing youthful curiosity for the first time as they get older, gain some life experience, and realize all there is to learn. As Bob Dylan put it memorably, “I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now.” Both Elisha ben Abuyah and Akiba show in their own ways that radical transformation between youth, middle age, and old age is possible.

Chapter 4 / פרק ד

Mishnah 21 / משנה כא

Commentary by: Martin Weiss

Rabbi Eleazar HaKapor lived at the end of the Tannaic era. The Golan Archeological Museum has a lintel that, based on the inscription, was once part of his or his followers' beit midrash. Here's a picture of it:



Avot 4:21 is about controlling desire. It is easier said than done. It reminds me of a song, "I Walk the Line" written by Johnny Cash in 1956, two years after he was married to his first wife, Vivian Liberto, as he was tempted by the opportunities that come with fame.

The song was, as we now know, was Johnny's prayer to control lust. He was, at the time the song was composed, also abusing alcohol and drugs.

The lyrics for the first verse are:

*I keep a close watch on this heart of mine
I keep my eyes wide open all the time
I keep the ends out for the tie that binds
Because you're mine, I walk the line*

Recording the song did not instantly end Johnny's problems. (Instant success is not common with prayer.) By the early 1960s, he was in an affair with fellow singer June Carter. Johnny and Vivian divorced in 1967. In 1968 he married June.

He performed "I Walk the Line" many times. He and June recorded many songs together. One of the songs was "Ring of Fire" which was overtly a confession of adultery and indirectly a prayer of repentance. Johnny slowly achieved sobriety and reportedly never committed adultery after his second marriage. I like to think this was partly through the prayer that is in the song which deals with the second of the desires mentioned by Rabbi Eleazar HaKapor -- lust -- and perhaps also through the confession.

Johnny and June remained married from 1968 until they both died in 2003 a few months apart.

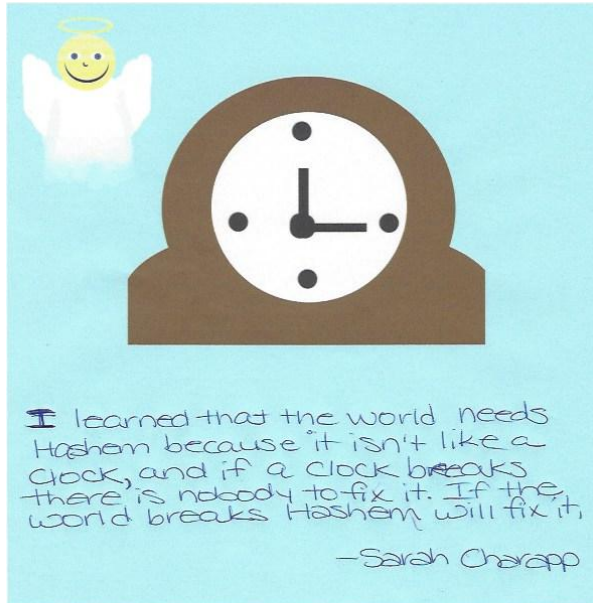
Each of them has a verse from Tehillim on their grave.



Chapter 4 / פרק ד

Mishnah 22/ משנה כב

Commentary by: Sarah Charapp



Mishnah 1 / משנה א

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

One of our biggest challenges in life is noticing the details. When we walk into a supermarket, we just see a box of pasta. Do we ever pause to consider the farmer who planted the grain, all the workers who harvested, produced and transported that pasta to the supermarket down the block from my house? The same thing could be true of our relationship with the world and with G-d. We might think that we only need to say “thank you” one time to G-d for creating the world. Well the Mishnah reminds us that there were ten steps in creation. Not only must we be grateful for all aspects of creation but we are responsible (and will be rewarded or punished) if we don't take that responsibility seriously.

Mishnah 2 / משנה ב

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

According to Rabeinu Yona, this Mishnah teaches us that just as G-d had patience and did not punish all of the generations from Adam until Noah, so too the Jewish people's enemies who cause us so much suffering will eventually be punished. It is hard to live in a world where it seems like oppressors get away with their crimes. This Mishnah reminds us that sometimes G-d has the long view and there will eventually be consequences.

Chapter 5 / פרק ה

Mishnah 3 / משנה ג

Commentary by: Michael Diamond

Strange Dividend

It was twilight. The Boss had asked me to step outside with Him. Into the cool of the evening. Something spooky was about to happen. I could feel it. I had done everything the Big Guy had asked for. I would hold nothing back. Some years later, even my own son, for G-d's sake. I still regret that. My wife never forgave me. I tried to explain to her that our boy would be in the business too, just like his old man. But by the time we got back from the job she was gone. Checked out. There was a rumor she took her own life, or that she kicked from the shock of knowing what the job was I took little Izzy on. I'll never know. How I loved her. I still have Izzy, sickly little boychik he turned out to be. I call out her name some nights. But back to that weird evening, outside on the lawn with the Boss. He wasn't much for words. I kind of had to read the tea leaves, always looking for a sign on His face of what He was really thinking. He gave hints, made mysterious gestures. But that night beat all. I'm telling you. He'd already had me pull up stakes and leave my previous gig. Pop had a good business, but I got all my people to go in on the deal. You see, I always work by persuasion, more flies with honey, etcetera etcetera. I had already taken some flak from a local big shot. Seems he had eyes for my gal. The Boss got a message to him one night and the guy laid off after that. So there I was, standing out on the high desert with the Boss, feeling a weird mix of gratitude and cold fear. Funny thing is I didn't feel any resentment. In spite of all the fast moves and the risk, I had put all my chips on the Boss. I was waiting for His next move.

He just stood there and sighed and looked out at the long shadows that crossed the property, the glow of the sun just below the horizon. It was beautiful, but something was making the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. Then He told me. We were all going to work for some real heavy on the other side of the border. It really wasn't what I had in mind, but the Boss knew I was in. Then came the real shocker. More than likely we'd have to work for peanuts and put up with all kinds of abuse for a pretty long time. Said we'd get used to being strangers. What the? But I said nothing. The Boss got real quiet. He told me when the time was ripe He'd bring us back to this same spot, suitcases filled with gold. I could see He was dead serious. He said when we got back He'd help us rub out all the other mobs and we'd stake out the whole territory for ourselves. He almost smiled. I kinda relaxed a bit, G-d knows what reason. Then He said we were going to seal the deal. What came next was pure Harry Houdini.

Somehow the Boss got the barbecue going without my seeing how. Only then did I notice, as my eyes got used to the dim light, that the Boss had hacked a bunch of critters in half and lined up the halves in two straight rows. Man it was gruesome. I kept having this feeling that at any moment the parts would leap up and recombine themselves into some kind of horrible monster. But I was in no mind to pass judgment right then. I had to shoo away a couple of buzzards that thought they'd found a free buffet. He made like he wanted to stroll with me between those two rows of half carcasses. I gotta say it gave me the creeps. Nearly passed out, to tell the truth. Maybe that was the idea. It sure was unforgettable, etched in my memory like it happened yesterday. That's when He swore on anything that meant anything to me that He'd make good on his promise. It was like some kind of seance. Maybe he slipped me a Mickey Finn. I dunno. I turned and the barbecue and a burning torch were moving down the aisle between the parts, coming right at us. I swear there were either little guys moving the stuff or some kind of rope and pulley set-up. Search me. With the Boss anything was possible. He always had a flair for the dramatic. Too dark to see how He did it. By the time it was all over I was exhausted from the sheer emotional whiplash of the whole experience. He nodded goodbye. I went home and slept like I was dead.

Chapter 5 / פרק ה

Mishnah 4 / משנה ד

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

When we think about the plagues, we usually think of them as punishments for Egypt. But this Mishnah is asking to think about them as miracles performed for the Jewish people. Every plague was not only a punishment for the oppressors but was also a cause of celebration for the Jews who had been victimized for so many years.

Mishnah 5/ משנה ה

Commentary by: Rena Ableman

I grew up in Jerusalem, in a quiet, modern neighborhood. From my parents' home to the Old City is a 45 minute walk (depending on how fast you walk). The neighborhood rabbi would always say that when the Mikdash is built we would be able to sacrifice and eat the Korban Pasach at home because we are so close.

When I was in high school I liked walking to the Old City and maybe davening Mincha at the Kotel. It was always so interesting to see such different people from all over the world gather in the Old City -- hearing the different languages and accents, seeing the excitement. There was always also something weird about it. I was so used to the city. I belonged and lived a normal life in what others see as a holy city. Other people's experience helped me see where I had small islands of holiness in my day-to-day life.

It was on Tisha B'Av Mincha at the Kotel, as I read the prayer for Tisha B'av, seeing all the Jerusalemites there that I realized that we have to change the prayer because we cannot honestly say that the city is "אבלה מבלי בניה" (mourning because she is bereft of her children).

When I was in tenth grade, on Shavuot after learning Torah (mostly for an exam) all night with a friend, we started walking towards the Kotel for Shacharit at sunrise. The walk to the Kotel on Shavuot was powerful. You are one among the masses, all heading the same way from all over the city. When we arrived at the Kotel we found a minyan at the back that we knew and joined. There were probably a few hundred thousand people. I've never returned to Shacharit at the Kotel on Shavuot again. As powerful as the walk was, the davening wasn't really possible. I could barely hear the reading of Megilat Ruth. As I stood straight for Amida I was squished on all ends and still people managed to bump into me.

My mother always jokes about the tenth miracle that our fathers and mothers had at the Mikdash, וְלֹא אָמַר אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ צֵר לִי, הַמְקוֹם שְׂאֵלִין בִּירוּשָׁלַיִם (and no man said to his fellow: the place is too congested for me to lodge overnight in Jerusalem). It doesn't necessarily mean that there was room for everyone to be and to stay; the miracle is that no one complained.

Chapter 5 / פרק ה

Mishnah 6 / משנה ו

Commentary by: Judry Subar

Give Rhythm To Legions

Moonlight ice.

Stars on fire.

Plumbable depth.

Dazzling sun.

Sculpted outlines.

Not any doubt.

But as the second becomes the first,
as pastel cascades melt farthest ocean precipice
upward into swirls of ether,

I have no idea.

No idea how to touch the bit of knowledge that teaches me:

where there is no mouth but I might perceive a mouth,

why gold coins in a cauldron roll always beyond reach,

how hardest rock is split with softest touch.

And then, when tool begets tool and we find it here in our hands,

we might begin to understand how to reach sweet spots

between unsustainably rickety and palatial.

Let's take up the baton that was fashioned from what was fashioned

and we'll see what we achieve.

Mishnah 7 / משנה ז

Commentary by: Michael, Libby, and Tani Hurwitz

This Mishnah recites seven attributes of someone who is “wise”; one who does the opposite of these things, by contrast, is a “golem” or uncultivated person. Each of these attributes is about self-restraint, respect, and humility. Several of the early ones focus on the methodology of learning and are certainly useful tips applicable to classroom learning (and perhaps especially Zoom learning). Don't interrupt, prioritize your thoughts and get to the point, etc. The last set of attributes is the most important, however: Concerning what the person hasn't heard, the wise person says, “I haven't heard it.” There is no artifice in order to maintain appearances, and no shame in saying you don't know something, or else how will you learn? The wise person isn't afraid to acknowledge the “emet” or truth. That said, it is also the case that “golem”-like attributes can advance learning. Students who press their teachers may sometimes gain more insight than those who always politely wait their turn; even “rushing to reply” and “interrupting” teachers may have its place on occasion. But by and large it is not productive to be disruptive for the sake of being disruptive; you have to let people finish their trains of thought -- especially older teachers from whom you can potentially gain the most.

Chapter 5 / פרק ה

Mishnah 8 / משנה ח

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

This Mishnah affirms the Rabbinic idea of *Midah C'neged Midah* - measure for measure. This concept suggests that punishments are meted out to correspond to the sins that they punish. The final line deals with the sin of those who teach Torah not in accordance with the accepted law. While Torah study is an open intellectual pursuit and one must try to always discover new interpretations and meanings, if a teacher misleads students in terms of the bottom line Halacha then this will be considered a grave sin.

Mishnah 9 / משנה ט

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

This Mishnah continues to list punishments that are in a certain way “poetic justice.” One fascinating example is that exile will come on account of not following the rules of the sabbatical year. During the sabbatical year we are not allowed to plant and harvest the fields. If we don't follow this, the Torah says that during the years of exile, “the land will have its sabbatical rests.” In other words, when there is painful and hard work to be done and we try to delay, it usually still is there but is only more difficult.

Mishnah 10 / משנה י

Commentary by: Yoel Tobin

There are four types of people, the Mishnah declares. I will focus here only on the first type: “One who says ‘what's mine is mine, and what's yours is yours.’” The Mishnah records a fascinating *machloket*, disagreement, on the question of how we characterize such a person.

The *Tanna Kamma*, the author of the first-stated opinion, says “*zo medah vainonit*” – this is average. Not amazing, not terrible, but passable, typical. This person may not be very generous, but does recognize boundaries, and acknowledges that other people have rights too. But then comes the shocking opinion of the *Yesh Omerim*:

zo medat s'dom – this type of person has the same character as the evildoers of S'dom, the city that G-d destroyed, the archetypal symbol of evil and injustice. How to explain this argument? How to explain the chasm between the two views? And how to understand the opinion of the *Yesh Omerim*, those who hold a different opinion?

Consider this possibility: The *Tanna Kamma* is addressing the person who says “what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours.” But the *Yesh Omerim* are addressing the person who says “WHAT'S MINE IS MINE and what's yours is yours.” So it's not so much a *machloket* as that the two opinions are addressing a spectrum of inflection, of emphasis, and ultimately of behavior.

Alternatively, consider another way of understanding this Mishnah. The *Tanna Kamma* is addressing the situation where everyone basically has enough. In that case, it's reasonable, it's acceptable to say “what's mine is mine, and what's yours is yours.” But the *Yesh Omerim* are addressing a different situation – where you are doing okay, but other people are dying and suffering because they lack food, or clean water, or medical care. In that case, “what's mine is mine and what's yours is yours” is no longer acceptable; instead, it is monstrous.

Chapter 5 / פרקה

Mishnah 11 / משנה יא

Commentary by: Lynn Charytan, Marc Zweben, Noah and Jesse



Mishnah 12 / משנה יב

Commentary by: Natalie Billington

This Mishnah talks about a person's ability to learn. Is your virtue to be quick to comprehend new information or can you retain information once learned? Is your flaw, that it takes longer to understand or that you are quick to forget all you learned? As a teacher and a parent, you must learn what your student/child's needs are to be successful. By understanding how they learn (and teaching them how to learn), you can help a person reach their full learning potential.

A person who finds understanding a concept hard, may also retain that information for life. Give them a little more time, they will get there.

Another who learns quickly could forget the knowledge quickly. Use reinforcement to help them to retain the information – remind them to write down concepts for later use.

A student who finds learning easy and retains information well may not be an academic risk-taker, fearful of taking subjects that would affect their perfect 4.0. It is okay not to be perfect and to enjoy the process of learning for its own sake.

To the ones who find it hard to understand and retain knowledge – guide them and support them. It is not their fault that this is hard. They may be quick to give up. Their brains may not be ready for the new information. Break work into chunks and encourage them to use different strategies (pictures, movement etc.). For teachers, it is this group of students whose achievement often gives us our greatest feelings of success.

Chapter 5 / פרקה

Mishnah 13 / משנה יג

Commentary by: Jonathan Brodie

Pirkei Avot holds personal meaning to me. Leading up to each of our children's bnai mitzvah, I studied Pirkei Avot with each of them. It was eye-opening to see how often their intuition and open curiosity led them in the direction of so many of our Sages – and how often they came up with some novel ideas! I was always the beneficiary.

Our Mishnah is part of the first 15 verses of Chapter 5 which enumerates lists of things, from lists of “tens” to “sevens” and “fours”. Here we deal with four types of charity givers. We can visualize this Mishnah in a magic quadrant (the lifeblood of so many management consultants):

		I Give	
		Yes	No
You Give	Yes	[3] Pious	[2] eye is evil towards that which is one's own
	No	[1] eye is evil to that which belongs to others	[4] Wicked

The second half of this Mishnah presents perhaps the two most clear-cut cases, the Pious [3] and the Wicked [4]. The Pious one desires that both “I” and “You” give, while the Wicked desires that neither do so. These cases would have, respectively, the best and worst impacts.

However, the way in which the Mishnah evaluates the first two cases, where “I” is seen to have an evil eye (i.e. one begrudges something) reveals just why the four categories differ. It is NOT because of the impact on recipients. In fact, what is most striking is that, unlike many other teachings regarding tzedakah, such as Rambam's hierarchy, this Mishnah does not overtly mention recipients at all. Its focus is on what the primary giver/would-be giver (“I” in the matrix) desires in respect of their and the secondary giver's (“You”) actions and the effect it has on their resources.

So the one who “wishes to give, but that others should not give” [1] has an evil eye to others' belongings. Such a person is evil because despite wanting to give, they begrudge the uplifting of the resources of others that comes about through their acts of tzedakah. And the one who wishes others to give, while they do not give [2] has an evil eye to their own resources – they do not allow even their own resources to be uplifted.

This is a transformative way of thinking about one's resources. They are not just your belongings, but properly used, they are a way of transforming ourselves. The mindset of the Mishnah is that we should see ourselves as custodians of whatever resources have been entrusted to us – with a responsibility *to those resources* to ensure that they are used in the best way possible.

As a footnote, I would add that the translation of the word tzedakah as “charity” is not ideal. Tzedakah implies justice and a move towards what “should be.” In many ways our resources themselves can guide us.

Chapter 5 / פרקה

Mishnah 14 / משנה יד

Commentary by: Michael, Libby, and Tani Hurwitz

We love this Mishnah because it is an interesting logic puzzle (like something you might see on the LSAT) and mathematical formula. It says there are four attributes of those who go to the beit hamidrash. But it turns out there are combinations of two attributes that make up four different kinds of people (i.e., 2 times 2). It can be laid out as follows:

	Reward for Going	Reward for Practicing	Chasid	Rasha
Goes to Beit Hamidrash to study?	Yes	No	Yes	No
Practices mitzvot in daily life?	No	Yes	Yes	No

Pirkei Avot is full of binary distinctions and sometimes seems pretty black and white. This Mishnah demonstrates that there can be different steps we take each day, week, or month that contribute to a more nuanced picture of our character. If you don't do a mitzvah, you can at least study. If you don't study, you can at least do mitzvot. Thus, most of us will fall into one of the first two columns on most days. While it's hard to be a "chasid" (a truly pious person), it hopefully is even harder to be a "rasha" (a truly bad person) and literally neither do nor study. In short, you get some points just for showing up.

Chapter 5 / פרקה

Mishnah 15/ משנה טו

Commentary #1 by: Fred Kranz

Mishnah 15 describes the functions of four common implements. They are implements that function and look today pretty much as they did in the 3rd Century C.E. when Pirkei Avot was presumably written. Based on our limited knowledge of daily life at that time, it is reasonable to assume that these implements were considered important, because they were essential in agriculture which, in the pre-industrial age, was a critical activity for many people. These were man-made contraptions, including the sponge which had to be cut to size. These implements extended the reach and capacity of people who sowed, worked and harvested the fields and the vineyards, in order to produce food in sufficient quantities to sustain life. Even today, our daily bread still comes from grain milled into flour and wine from fermented grapes.

Unlike these man-made contraptions, soil, water, air, sun, grains, grapes etc. are part of Creation and were given to us by Hashem as our eternal inheritance. Jointly and separately, they sustain life. While the range of the human mind is infinite and fully capable of inventing additional contraptions, questions of purpose arise:

1. What purpose would a sponge, a funnel, a strainer and a sieve serve without grains to mill into flour and without grapes to ferment into wine?
2. How do we choose the right implement for a given purpose, since each would result in a distinct outcome, as Mishnah 15 implies?

Sustaining life is a tough and never-ending chore. All of mankind faces many daily chores. Jews, in particular, face additional chores: a total of 613 eternal commandments (mitzvot) from Hashem. These additional chores consist of 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments. Just as soil, water, air, sun, grains, grapes, etc. sustain life in a physical sense, the 613 mitzvot sustain life in a spiritual sense and answer the question of: "what's-it-all-about".

Mishnah 15 lists four of the implements that sustain our physical existence. So, where can we find implements to sustain our spiritual existence? In Exodus XXXI, we are commanded "to bear in mind that the Sabbath must be observed in all its sanctity... no manner of work may be performed on the Sabbath."

Several Sabbath agendas regarding this commandment are conceivable:

- i. Turning the Sabbath into a day of complete rest.
- ii. Sitting through prayers and Torah reading, enjoying Sabbath meals and resting.
- iii. Participating in prayers and Torah reading, while dreading next week's deadlines.
- iv. Praying and learning from the Torah reading and observing the sanctity of Sabbath.

Exodus XII not only prohibits eating leavened bread on the days of Passover but goes further by requiring specifically that "in all your habitations shall you eat unleavened bread." Again, observance of this commandment may be approached in different ways:

- i. Substituting not only matzo for bread but eating only food that is permitted on Passover.
- ii. Being aware of matzo as the bread of affliction in the hasty Exodus from Egypt.
- iii. Appreciating matzo as one of several customs observed during this holiday, which relate to spring, harvest, sacrifices, plagues, the Exodus from Egypt and more.
- iv. Understanding that matzo is also symbolic of our battle for freedom which is permanent.

In summary, the implements that sustain our spiritual existence are always in our hands. They are our attitudes toward the mitzvot and they can be called collectively: "kavanah" (devotion). Like the four implements listed in Mishnah 15 that sustain our physical existence, our choices may vary from case to case and time to time, and varying along with them, the outcome.

Chapter 5 / פרקה

Mishnah 15/ משנה טו

Commentary #2 by: Merry Lymm

I created a piece of art illustrating Pirkei Avot 5:15.
The background is a sponge, which absorbs everything.
In the lower right hand corner there is a funnel, which retains nothing.
In the center is a strainer inside a decanter--wine pouring into it.
The strainer passes the wine and retains the dregs.
In the upper left hand corner is a sifter, which removes the chaff and retains the groats (in this case the gems).

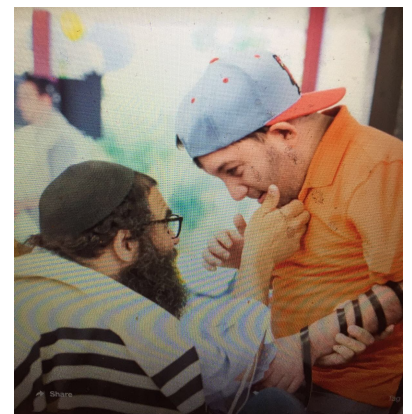


Mishnah 16 / משנה טז

Commentary by: Abe Cherrick

This Mishnah attempts to characterize limitations that might exist in “loving” relationships among individuals or couples. I would frame this Mishnah in terms of barriers (not just pre-conditions) that impact our relationships. I am not convinced that “unconditional love” uniformly exists between parent and child. (If so, that would have been an obvious choice for the authors; they are interested in relationships among individuals.)

I present below some images from CAMP HASC, the Hebrew Academy for Special Children, where my son Efram has been a camper for many summers. I believe these pictures represent love without limitations.



1. Rabbi Judah Mischel putting tefillin on Efram;
2. Efram with his buddy Yehudah from Santa Monica;
3. Efram receiving a bracha.



Mishnah 17 / משנה יז

Commentary by: Rabbi Eitan Cooper

What does it mean that a dispute will endure? Bartenura suggests that this means that the *people* engaged in that argument will survive (i.e. Hillel and Shammai). In a way, this implies that a good, healthy argument can be just that: literally, healthy. At the same time, I wonder if the Mishnah is also suggesting something deeper: Not only can a healthy argument be good for us sometimes, but also, if we want our ideas to endure and to be passed down from generation to generation, we must engage in disputes and arguments about them. It is only through such discussions that we give our ideas life. If we do not argue about and grapple with our tradition, we run the risk of it **52** enduring.

Chapter 5 / פרקה

Mishnah 18 / משנה יח

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

One of the foundational teachings of Judaism is that one has an opportunity to repent and change his or her life. Yet this Mishnah teaches us that there is even a limit to the power of Teshuva, repentance. The one who causes others to sin will not be given an opportunity to repent. This is because the Torah understands that we are all human and subject to temptation and sin. The Torah therefore gives us the chance to make amends. But one who tries to get others to sin will not even personally benefit from the sin. It is as if the sinner just wants company. This particular sin is considered so egregious that Teshuva is no longer possible.

Mishnah 19 / משנה יט

Commentary by: The Freeman Family

This Mishnah follows the advice and life lessons of many Mishnahyot before it, for example being humble of spirit, having a good eye, and limiting one's physical desires (moderate appetite). However we felt that one key point stood out - this was where the Mishnah mentions how the disciples of Avraham "enjoy this world and will inherit the world to come." Yet when referring to Balaam, no such mention is made of "enjoying this world." It is interesting to note this difference because certainly anyone would agree that the evil disciples of Balaam would "enjoy this world" with all of its physical pleasures as they feed their baseless desires such as having a "limitless appetite." Why then would the Mishnah only state this as to Avraham specifically? We believe it is because the Mishnah is trying to tell us that in truth, only those who live a life based on the teachings of our Torah and who follow the framework of values established within Judaism will "enjoy this world." Our mission in this world is not solely to immerse ourselves in the physical of this world, but rather we should enjoy these physical pursuits with moderation, guided by Torah values, so that we will both "enjoy this world" and "inherit the world to come."

Chapter 5 / פרקה

Mishnah 20 / משנה כ

Commentary by: Annette Lakein

The organization of this Mishnah is compelling. The admonition of how we are to behave is clear, as is the reward for that behavior. Judah ben Tema begins with four majestic animals as models for our behavior toward HaShem:

Be strong as a leopard, and swift as an eagle, and fleet as a gazelle, and brave as a lion, to do the will of your Father who is in heaven.

The strength of leopards is a known characteristic; they stay safe, take care of their own, and are solitary beasts. Eagles have almost mystical characteristics; they are symbols of courage, beauty, and power. Gazelles move in groups and are known to be agile, as well as fast. And lions, also social animals, are known for their bravery.

Why, though, use animals as models of behavior? All the more so, why is the encouragement to mimic majestic, proud animals coupled with an exhortation to be humble? In fact, this is a reminder of how we are part of the natural world. These animals act to survive, following the laws of their nature. We are taught that people should not consider themselves better than the animals:

The Sages taught in a baraita (Tosefta 8:7): Adam the first man was created on Shabbat eve at the close of the six days of Creation. And for what reason was this so? So that the heretics will not be able to say that the Holy One, Blessed be He, had a partner, i.e., Adam, in the acts of Creation. Alternatively, he was created on Shabbat eve so that if a person becomes haughty, G-d can say to him: The mosquito preceded you in the acts of Creation, as you were created last. Alternatively, he was created on Shabbat eve in order that he enter into the mitzvah of observing Shabbat immediately.

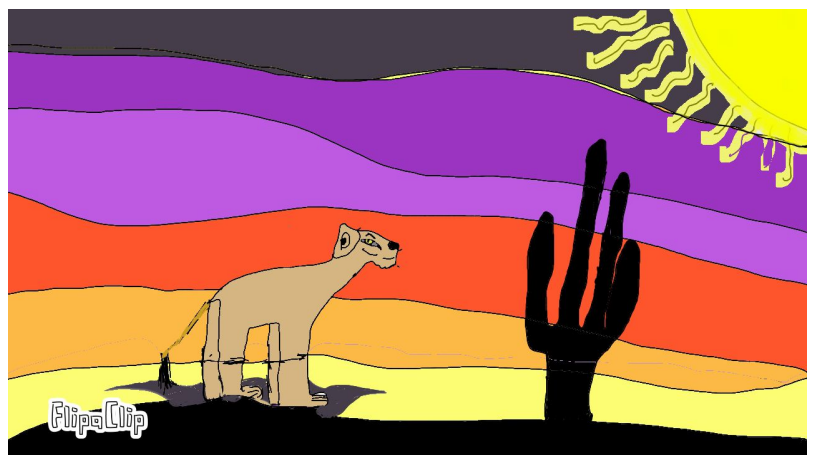
Perhaps the citing of the attributes of the animals should remind us that although people, not animals, are created in the image of HaShem, our instincts do not always serve us as well as the instincts of animals serve them.

And so, Judah ben Tema admonishes us that even though we should be strong, swift, quick, and brave, our actions should not be arrogant/haughty/"strong of face." In fact, we are to show "shame of face/be humble" in our actions with others and in our relationship with HaShem. The Tur, in commenting on this Mishnah, says,

And he began with 'strong as a panther' since it is a great general principle of service to the Creator, may He be blessed, since sometimes a person desires to perform a mitzvah but is prevented from performing it because of people who mock him; therefore he warned that he should have fortitude against the mockers and not refrain from performing the mitzvah.

The Tur continues that a lion always rises swiftly in the morning while a human being, rather than getting up swiftly, can talk himself into staying in bed. The strength of the animals lies in their ability to follow their nature, not letting it be impeded by their own doubts or worries or arrogance - and aren't doubts and worries the flip side of arrogance? It may be in human beings' nature to follow HaShem, but we often are not strong enough to clear a path for that nature. Ben Tema posits that our greatest strength may be our humility, because that will enable us to ignore the distractions and not worry about others' scorn.

What is human nature and what are instincts? The leopard, eagle, gazelle, and lion follow their instincts, not their need to worry about what others think or how their connection to HaShem is viewed by other people. They do not shame others or worry about how they look or how what they do looks. We are taught that our behavior not only affects us and our ability to do mitzvot, but also affects others. Arrogant behavior can feed on itself and create suffering. Judah ben Tema says that if we do emulate the animals and if we do it humbly, then we will be rewarded. It is this final prayer, variations of which come in our tefilot, that shows our reward. *May it be the will, O Lord our G-d, that your city be rebuilt speedily in our days and set our portion in the studying of your Torah.*



Chapter 5 / פרק ה

Mishnah 21/ משנה כא

Commentary by: Arnie Hiller

Credit to Pete Seeger for the lyrics and the Byrds for my favorite recording...but our lives can truly be looked at as a finite amount of TIME that has certain hopes, expectations, and purpose.

To everything	A time to build up	A time to gain
There is a season	a time to break down	a time to lose
And a time to every purpose	A time to dance	A time to rend
under heaven	a time to mourn	a time to sew
A time to be born	A time to cast away stones	A time for love
a time to die	a time to gather stones together	a time for hate
A time to plant		A time for peace
a time to reap		I swear it's not too late
A time to kill	A time of love	
a time to heal	a time of hate	
A time to laugh	A time of war	
a time to weep	a time of peace	
	A time you may embrace	
	a time to refrain from embracing	

Chapter 5 / פרקה

Mishnah 22 / משנה כב

Commentary by: Marci Serfaty

What do you think of when you imagine tidbits of insignificance in your life? If you're like me, there are many things that come to mind: dryer lint, a smudge on the coffee table, advertisements in my mailbox, a sigh from one of the kids, yesterday's coffee grounds. What do we do with the tiniest, seemingly insignificant events that happen to us on a daily basis? It's easy to ignore or toss away those unimportant pieces of life that greet us, whether they are objects, actions, or words.

I recently encountered a snail during a lawn cleanup with my family. What could be more insignificant than a snail? In a 1607 essay by Giovanni Angelita titled, "On the Snail and That It Should Be the Example for Human Life," the snail is praised for the creature's thoughtful pace and good morals. He credits the spiral shape of its shell for inspiring everything spiral, including the invention of drill bits and the architecture of Europe's most famous staircases. Snails were not insignificant to this author, who probably spent hours upon hours observing the little guys.

People are often fascinated by shells they find on the beach. They pick them up, hold them to their ears, and bring them home. This Mishnah in Pirkei Avot reminds us that sometimes we need to pick up something seemingly insignificant in our life, and look at it again. We need to hold it up to the light, shake out the sand, and approach it in a new way. And as time goes by---as we grow in our experiences and wisdom, we should look at it again and appreciate it even more.

Judaism reminds us to elevate every task and bring meaning to the mundane. We do these things to stretch our humanness, and become closer to Hashem. Every blessing we say, every mitzvah we do, every conscious restraint that we manage strengthens our connection to the Almighty. We are reminded to appreciate all that we have, because we have exactly what we need.



Chapter 5 / פרקה

Mishnah 23 / משנה כג

Commentary by: Nat Lewin

Who is Rabbi ben Hay-Hay? Maybe he is Rabbi ben Bag-Bag (the gematria of Bag equals five, which is Hay). Was he the son of converts (parents' named Avrohom and Sarah, because the letter "hay" was added to their names). His Aramaic consolation – measure of reward equals measure of suffering – may have been limited to Torah study, but it is now quoted as a general promise of relief for times of distress, and could, therefore, apply to Coronavirus tribulation.

Some die, and others feel ill

We all pray for the magic pill

Quarantined with the horde

So where's the reward

Matching the pain that has been our fill?

Chapter 6 / פרק ו

Mishnah 1 / משנה א

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

The sixth chapter of Pirkei Avot is not really part of Avot. It was added because there are six Shabbatot between Pesach and Shavuot and there is a custom to study one chapter of Avot each shabbat. So this final chapter (which is really material taken from Masechet Kallah) is all about studying Torah. It is therefore appropriately studied on the Shabbat before Shavuot. It is often called the Chapter of *Kinyan Hatorah* (Acquisition of Torah).

This Mishnah lists many benefits that come from Torah study. One apparent contradiction is that Torah study is said to make one modest but at the same time “makes him great and exalts him above all things.” How can Torah make one modest and exalted above all things at once? I think that this speaks to the beauty of Torah which can simultaneously make us feel humble and with awe before G-d and at the same time exalted from having the words of the Torah animating our lives! Learning Torah is really that awesome!

Mishnah 2 / משנה ב

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

I love this Mishna because the *Bat Kol* (heavenly voice) is actually quite surprising in its definition of those who are in contempt of the Torah. We would normally associate this attitude with Chilul Hashem, profaning Hashem’s name. One who does things in the name of the Torah that are distasteful or unethical and thereby shames the Torah is profaning Hashem.. But the Bat Kol teaches us that the greatest shame is not when people engage in Torah in an inappropriate manner. It is when we disregard the Torah. The Torah is able to withstand fights and arguments about what it means even when one side accuses the other of causing a Chilul Hashem. But the Torah cannot withstand becoming irrelevant and useless. On Shavuot, we commit to engaging with the Torah as deeply as possible.

Mishnah 3 / משנה ג

Commentary by: The Glashofers

Mephorshim, commentators, teach us that Achitophel taught David Hamelech two things: the importance of studying Torah with a group and the importance of worshipping as part of a congregation. Given our current situation in the midst of the pandemic of 2020 of not meeting physically in the shul, this would seem to be a difficult concept for us to relate to. However, upon learning and discussing this Mishnah, we felt quite the opposite.

It has been such a source of comfort, meaning and belonging to be part of our shul during this difficult time. Whether it be through virtual learning, reading shul emails, connecting with friends or taking a walk (particularly on Shabbat), the sense of community that being part of Beth Sholom brings to us all during this time is something that we have come to treasure and appreciate. Were we not a part of this group studying Torah and coming together, how alone and lost we might feel right now. Furthermore, whether it be the daily classes, weekly Oneg Shabbat or Havdalah or even our zoom shivas, we continue to learn Torah and feel a spiritual connection and a sense of spiritual growth.

This Mishnah reminds all of us not only how lucky we are, but how we have to show hakarat hatov to our hardworking Rabbis, Rabbi Antine and Cooper, and to the staff and volunteers behind the scenes that are putting all of this together. From each of you, we have learned far more than one thing, and so we would like to use this forum to thank you. You have made a seemingly unpleasant situation be one filled with growth, meaning and hope. Kol Hakavod. With much appreciation.



Chapter 6 / פרק ו

Mishnah 4 / משנה ד

Commentary by: Nat Lewin

The “road of Torah” may not be a luxurious highway. Poverty in this world may lead to riches in the World-to-Come.
If you want to starve and sleep on the floor

Learn Torah now and forever more

It won't make you rich

You'll die without a stitch

But it'll bring you to Gan Eden's door.

Mishnah 5 / משנה ה

Commentary by: Freida Paskow

This particular verse, regarding being humble, really speaks to how one should conduct oneself and how one's behavior can also have an effect on others. One who is humble is one who is secure in the knowledge of his own achievements and does not need to seek affirmation and glory. That person knows how to give to others and while doing so, does not make others feel condescension or embarrassment. Therefore, humility is more to be admired than self-aggrandizement.

Learning is important, but using what one has learned is paramount. It does not serve anyone to be surrounded by people who are learned, but who fail to implement the lessons that they have learned.

The statement about not trying to want for the table of kings mirrors the previous ideas of humility in that an individual will not need to seek glory by surrounding himself with kings or other people who have power, money, or fame. Rather, the person will be content with what he has, what he has accomplished, and what he gives to others.

Chapter 6 / פרק ו

Mishnah 6 / משנה ו

Commentary by: Bruce Wiener

The first Jewish learning I engaged in as an adult was Mishnah 6:6 in Pirkei Avot. I had gone to Hebrew school, but cheerfully quit after my bar mitzvah and never looked back. It was not until I was a senior at the University of Michigan that I finally went to the Hillel for a reason other than catching a quick seder during finals week.

My Christian roommates acted as the impetus for this nascent journey. Our discussions about religion quickly proved me to be woefully lacking in any real Jewish knowledge. I still carried on the traditions that I grew up with, such as keeping (a very modified) kashrut and going to High Holiday services. There was, however, limited substance behind it.

At Hillel, I found a class called "The 48 Ways to Wisdom" taught by Elisha Prero, who happened to be both a third-year law student and an Orthodox rabbi. My first impression was that he was too young and modern to be an Orthodox rabbi. But that helped draw me in.

The title of the class came from this Mishnah's declaration that "the Torah is acquired by 48 qualities." The Mishnah lists these attributes, most of them intuitive, such as "love of justice" and "deliberation in study." The last one, however, is surprising: "saying something in the name of its speaker."

Unlike its 47 predecessors, this Mishnah offers additional praise to the 48th attribute: "One who says something in the name of its speaker brings redemption to the world, as is stated (Esther 2:22): 'And Esther told the king in the name of Mordechai.'"

Commentators offer multiple reasons for this injunction:

- To avoid stealing by falsely taking credit for someone else's statement (Tiferes Israel)
- To prevent you from seeking to impress others by passing off someone's insights as your own (Rabbi Joseph Telushkin)
- To display the attribute of humility (The Mussar Institute)
- To give context to the ideas you are presenting (The Mussar Institute)
- To honor those whose ideas you are citing (The Mussar Institute)
- To honor truth, the most basic foundation of spiritual growth (The Mussar Institute)

Queen Esther reports to King Achashverosh about the plot against his life in the name of Mordechai. The king later raises Mordechai to prominence when he is reminded of Mordechai's good deed. Queen Esther's seemingly meaningless act of attribution helped save the Jews. Simple acts, like my eventually showing up at Hillel, can have big consequences.

Mishnah 7 / משנה ז

Commentary by: Ellen Werner

"Torah. Tree of Life. Trees. Birth. Breath. Healing. The body of Torah knowledge is the source of human life and healing."



Chapter 6 / פרק ו

Mishnah 10 / משנה י

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

This Mishna lists five things that Hashem acquires in this world; Torah, Avraham, Israel, heaven and earth, and the Bet Hamikdash. The latter two seem to be in contradiction. The verse quoted to support the notion that G-d “owns” heaven and earth is a posuk from Isaiah that questions what purpose would there be to build G-d a Temple if the heaven is G-d’s throne and the earth is G-d’s footstool. But yet the next line of the Mishna indicates that G-d loves the Temple as a precious possession! The Mishna really forces us to live with the spiritual tension of G-d both being everywhere and being concentrated in holy space at the same time.

Mishnah 11 / משנה יא

Commentary by: Rabbi Nissan Antine

At first glance, it seems a little strange that G-d would say that everything that G-d created was for G-d! Don’t we believe that G-d is a G-d of compassion who acts on our behalf? But when analyzing the Mishna a little closer (and other related teachings), we see clearly that it is only when we honor G-d and G-d’s mission on this Earth that we ourselves will achieve honor. What a beautiful teaching to conclude Pirkei Avot.