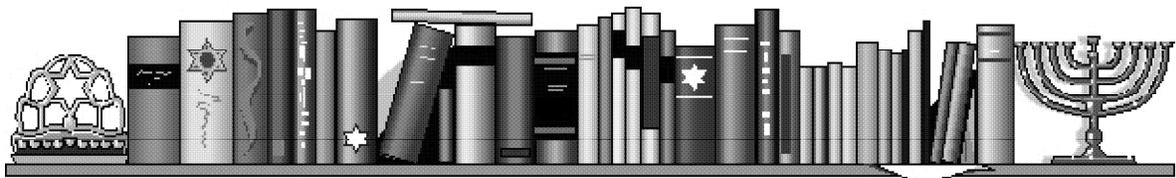


מסכת אבות

Pirke Avot The Wisdom of the Sages



Valley Beth Shalom Bar/Bat Mitzvah Program



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Introduction

One of the most important symbols of becoming an adult in Jewish tradition is the opportunity to teach the community. This why each Bar and Bat Mitzvah at Valley Beth Shalom reads a portion of the Torah and Haftarah. This is also the reason for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah speech. This speech is a personal statement and reflection on the experience of becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. It is also an opportunity to stand before the adult community as a teacher and to share an interpretation of Jewish wisdom.

For many years, we asked each Bar/Bat Mitzvah to prepare an interpretation of their Torah or Haftarah reading. We are now beginning a new congregational custom. We want our community to know that Jewish wisdom continued after Bible. We want to celebrate the rich sources of Jewish wisdom that come from the Rabbis of the Mishna and Talmud. So we are asking each Bar/Bat Mitzvah to do some family study - with parents and grandparents - in a very special book of Jewish wisdom - **Pirke Avot, The Wisdom of the Sages**.

Set some time aside to study this book together as a family. Pirke Avot presents a wonderful opportunity to begin a conversation about what it means to be a Jewish adult, about issues of character and responsibility, about living a full and happy life. Go slowly. Think. Discuss. This booklet presents a selection from Pirke Avot together with translation and questions for discussion.

When it comes time to prepare a Bar/Bat Mitzvah speech, choose one selection -- one *mishna* -- that is meaningful to you. Instead of preparing an interpretation of the Torah or Haftarah, as we have done previously, we would like the Bar/Bat Mitzvah to present his/her selection -- their *mishna* from Pirke Avot to the congregation. Explain it, interpret it, argue with it, tell us how it speaks to life today. This will be the first section of your Bar/Bat Mitzvah speech. Think about how the saying of the Rabbis might guide our choices today: What choices lead to a happy and full life? There is no one right interpretation or meaning. We're interested in hearing your thinking on these important ideas.

What is Pirke Avot?

Pirke Avot, the Wisdom of the Sages, is a book of the Mishna. It was collected and written down in the year 200 CE (after 0) by Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi in Israel as a statement of the principles of Jewish religion. Rabbi Judah was the leader of the Jewish community. He went back to the teachings of his great- great- great- grandfathers, together with the teachings of other rabbis who lived from about 200 BCE (before 0) through 200 CE (after 0). He put them together in a book of wise sayings. They are ideas to live your life by, the Jewish way to lead a good life. He called it **Pirke Avot, Wisdom of the Sages**. It has been one of the favorite books for all the generations of Jewish tradition. Pirke Avot is part of the Mishna, the first code of Jewish law. But unlike all the other books of the Mishna, Pirke Avot has no law in it. It is made up of short, wise sayings or lessons. Each one of these sayings is called a "*mishna*."

Where can we get some more help?

There are many excellent commentaries on Pirke Avot available. You'll find a good selection in the synagogue library. We suggest: [Pirke Avot - A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics](#), by Rabbis Leonard Kravitz and Kerry Olitzky published by UAHC. You can buy this book online, or you can buy or borrow a copy from our office. If you need immediate help, call one of the rabbis at VBS. We'd be glad to guide you through your learning.

Chapter 1

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשׁ לָהֶם חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שְׁנַאֲמַר (ישעיה ס) וְעַמּוּךָ כָּלָם צְדִיקִים לְעוֹלָם
יִירְשׁוּ אֶרֶץ נֶצֶר מִטְעֵי מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֵי לְהַתְּפָאֵר.

Prologue. All Israel have a place in the world-to-come. As it is written: A Your people shall all be righteous, they shall possess the land forever; they are a shoot of My planting, the works of my hands in whom I shall be glorified. (Isaiah 60:21)

Questions for Discussion: This statement is the introduction to the Talmud, the great book of Jewish wisdom. It begins by including everyone in God's promise. The most important word is "all" -- which includes everyone. God's blessing are not reserved for just one kind of Jewish person. There is room in our community for many different opinions, ideas, ways of being Jewish. What does it mean to include everyone? Why do some religions and even some Jews exclude people from God's favor and love? Why do you think did the rabbis choose to begin the book with this idea?

מִשָּׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, וּמִסָּרָה לְיְהוֹשֻׁעַ, וְיְהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים, וְזִקְנִים לְנְבִיאִים, וְנְבִיאִים
מִסָּרוּהָ לְאֲנָשֵׁי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים, הָיוּ מְתוּנְנִים בְּדִין, וְהֶעֱמִידוּ
תְּלָמִידִים הַרְבֵּה, וְעָשׂוּ סִיג לְתוֹרָה:

Chapter 1, Mishna 1. Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly.

They taught three things:

Be patient in making judgements,
raise up many students,
and make a fence around the Torah.

Questions for Discussion: We're holding the same book that Moses got from God. This is the meaning of the word "tradition." We didn't make this stuff up, we received it. But we've always added to it, interpreted it, made it new. Each generation passed to us what they received, plus what they learned and discovered about life, about God, about truth. Can you think of something new that's been added to Judaism since Moses' time?

You are holding the same Torah that Moses received at Mt Sinai. What responsibility does that give you?

The three things the "Men of the Great Assembly" teach tell us what rabbis do: The judge, they teach and they make fences around the Torah. Making a fence around the Torah means that we add laws to the Torah to make sure that no one will ever come close to breaking the Torah's law. Shabbat starts at sundown. The rabbis tell us to light our Shabbat candles 20 minutes before Shabbat. That way, no one will get close to violating the Shabbat. Can you think of other cases where a rule is extended to help keep people far away from doing the wrong thing?

שְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הָיָה מִשְׁיָרֵי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוֹלָה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חַסְדִּים:

Chapter 1, Mishna 2. Shimon the Righteous was one of the last of the Men of the Great Assembly. He taught: The world stands upon three things: Torah, worship, and the practice of kindness.

Questions for Discussion: How do these three things - Torah, worship and kindness - hold up the world? What would you add to Shimon's list? What else keeps the world going? How do these three things get expressed in Jewish life? Shimon teaches that the world "stands" on these three things. If one of these things were removed, the world fall over. How? What have these three -Torah, worship, kindness - done for the Jewish people during our history?

אַנְטִיגֶנוֹס אִישׁ סוֹכּוֹ קִבֵּל מִשְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אַל תְּהִיוּ כְּעֹבְדִים הַמְּשַׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס, אֲלֵא הוּוּ כְּעֹבְדִים הַמְּשַׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב שְׂלֵא עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס, וִיהִי מוֹרָא שָׁמַיִם עֲלֵיכֶם:

Chapter 1, Mishna 3. Antigonus of Socho received [the oral tradition] from Simeon the Righteous. He taught: Be not like servants who serve their master in the expectation of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve the master without the expectation of receiving a reward. Let reverence for heaven be upon you.

Questions for Discussion: What difference does it make if you do good expecting a reward, or if you do good for its own sake? For example, how do you feel when you do a chore because of a bribe or a reward vs. doing something because it's the right thing to do? Look up the word "reverence" in the dictionary. Is this the proper feeling to have in the presence of God?

יוֹסִי בֶן יוֹעֶזֶר אִישׁ צִרְדָּה וְיוֹסִי בֶן יוֹחָנָן אִישׁ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם קִבְּלוּ מֵהֵם. יוֹסִי בֶן יוֹעֶזֶר אִישׁ צִרְדָּה אוֹמֵר, יְהִי בֵיתְךָ בֵּית דָּבָר וְעַד לְחֻכָּמִים, וְהוּוּ מִתְאַבֵּק בְּעַפְרֵי רַגְלֵיהֶם, וְהוּוּ שׁוֹתֵה בְּצַמָּא אֶת דְּבָרֵיהֶם:

Chapter 1, Mishna 4. Yosi son of Yo'ezer of the town of Zeredah, and Yosi son of Yohanan of Jerusalem learned from them. Yosi ben Yo'ezer taught: Let your house be a house of meeting for the sages. Let yourself be covered by the dust of their feet, and drink in their words with thirst.

Questions for Discussion: For the Rabbis, the highest value was learning. What does this passage say about the lengths you should go to surround yourself with learning? Is this a kind of hero worship? Do you think that's ok? What are the qualities of the kind of people you would want to surround yourself with in your life? What would you hope to learn from them?

יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן פְּרַחְיָה וְנִטַּי הָאֲרֵבֶּלִי קִבְּלוּ מֵהֵם. יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן פְּרַחְיָה אָמַר, עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רֵב, וְקַנֵּה לְךָ חֵבֵר, וְהָיִי דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת:

Chapter 1, Mishna 6. Joshua ben Perahiah and Nittai the Arbelite learned from them [i.e. the ones mentioned before]. Joshua ben Perahiah taught:

Get yourself a teacher. Find yourself a friend. Judge all people positively.

Questions for Discussion: How are these 3 pieces of advice related? What are the qualities of a good friend? What are the qualities of an excellent teacher? Are friends also teachers? Are teachers also friends? How do they influence you? How can you tell whether your friends are good influences or not? How do you influence others?

נִטַּי הָאֲרֵבֶּלִי אָמַר, הִרְחַק מִשָּׂכֵן רָע, וְאַל תִּתְחַבֵּר לְרָשָׁע, וְאַל תִּתְיַאֵשׁ מִן הַפְּרָעָנוֹת:

Chapter 1, Mishna 7. Nittai the Arbelite taught: Keep a distance from an evil neighbor.

Do not make yourself a friend of the wicked. Do not give up faith in God's justice.

Questions for Discussion: What's an evil neighbor? Why should one avoid an evil neighbor or a wicked friend? Why is it important to choose your friends carefully and wisely? What can bad neighbors and friends do to you?

הִלֵּל וְשַׁמַּי קִבְּלוּ מֵהֵם. הִלֵּל אָמַר, הָיִי מֵתְלַמִּידָיו שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן, אוֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם, אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמְקַרְבֵּן לַתּוֹרָה:

Chapter 1, Mishna 12. Hillel and Shammai learned from them.

Hillel taught: Be one of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace.

Be loving to all people and bring them closer to the Torah.

Questions for Discussion: In the Torah, Aaron was Moses' brother. Aaron was beloved by the people because he always tried to settle conflicts and bring peace. How can you be a person who bring peace to the world? What's the difference between loving peace and pursuing peace?

How does bringing people close to Torah show that you love them?

Has this happened in your life? How?

הוא הִיא אומר, אם אין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּבְשָׂאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי. וְאִם לֹא עֲבָשׁוּ, אִמְתָּי:

Chapter 1, Mishna 14. Hillel taught:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

If I am only for myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?

Questions for Discussion: Being selfish is a bad thing. But respecting yourself is a good thing. What's the difference between the two? Are the first two questions contradictory? How can I be sure I'm "for myself" but not only for myself? How do we balance the attention we give to our own needs and attention we give to others? Are these rhetorical questions or do they have answers? How do we balance our own needs with those of others? If not now when - for what?

שִׁמְאֵי אומר, עֲשֵׂה תוֹרַתְךָ קָבַע. אֱמֹר מְעַט וְעֲשֵׂה הַרְבֵּה, וְהוּי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם
בְּסִבָּר פָּנִים יְפוֹת:

Chapter 1, Mishna 15: Shammai taught:

Make your study of the Torah a regular part of your life.

Speak little, but do much.

Receive all people with cheerfulness.

Questions for Discussion: If something is not a "regular part of your life," what happens to it? Have you ever tried to add something to your life? How hard is that to do? We have our habits, our routines, our ways of doing things. How hard is it for us to change?

Why is cheerfulness so important? What happens to people who are always mean or sad?

שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּנוֹ אומר, כָּל יְמֵי נְדַלְתִּי בֵּין הַחֲכָמִים, וְלֹא מְצָאתִי לְגוֹף טוֹב אֲלֵא שְׁתִּיקָה. וְלֹא
הַמְדַרְשׁ הוּא הָעֵקֶר, אֲלֵא הַמַּעֲשֵׂה. וְכָל הַמְרַבֵּה דְבָרִים, מִבֵּיא חַטָּא:

Chapter 1, Mishna 17. Rabbi Shimon son of Gamliel used to say:

All my days I grew up among the sages and I have found nothing better for a person than silence.

Study is not the most important thing, rather the deed is most important.

Too much talking leads a person to sin.

Questions for Discussion: When is it a good idea to keep silent? Do most people talk too much?

How does a person learn to listen?

We think of rabbis as people who study all the time. But Rabbi Shimon says there is something more important than study. What "deed" does he have in mind? Why is this more important than learning?

How is doing a deed a way of learning?

רַבֵּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַדִּין וְעַל הָאֱמֶת וְעַל הַשְּׁלוֹם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמָר (זְכַרְיָה ח) אֱמֶת וּמִשְׁפַּט שְׁלוֹם שִׁפְטוּ בְּשַׁעְרֵיכֶם

Chapter 1, Mishna 18. Rabbi Shimon son of Gamaliel used to say:

The world stands on three things: On justice, truth and peace, as it is said: “Judge truthfully and a judgment of peace will rest in your gates.” (Zechariah ch. 8)

Questions for Discussion: What would happen to us if we exclude one of these - justice, truth or peace - from our lives, our society our world?

Do justice, truth and peace ever contradict? What happens if you have to lie to keep peace? What else might Rabbi Shimon have included?

Chapter 2

רַבִּי אוֹמֵר, אִיזוּהִי דַרְךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁבּוֹר לֹא הָאָדָם, כֹּל שֶׁהִיא תִפְאָרֶת לְעוֹשֶׂיהָ וְתִפְאָרֶת לֹא מִן הָאָדָם. וְהוּי זְהִיר בְּמִצְוָה קְלָה כְּבִתְמוּרָה, שְׂאִין אֶתָּה יוֹדֵעַ מִתֵּן שְׂכָרָן שֶׁל מִצְוֹת. וְהוּי מִחֻשָׁב הַפֶּסֶד מִצְוָה כְּנֶגֶד שְׂכָרָהּ, וְשִׁכָר עֲבָרָה כְּנֶגֶד הַפֶּסֶדָּהּ. וְהִסְתַּכַּל בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְבָרִים וְאִי אֶתָּה בָּא לְיַדֵּי עֲבָרָה, דַּע מָה לְמַעַלָּה מִפְּנֵי, עֵינַי רּוֹאֶה וְאֵזֶן שׁוֹמֵעַת, וְכָל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ בִּסְפָר נִכְתָּבִין:

Chapter 2, Mishna 1: Rabbi [Judah Ha-Nasi] said:

What is the proper way of life that one should follow?

One that brings pride to our Maker and respect from others.

Be as careful with small mitzvot as with big mitzvot - you can never tell its reward.

Balance the cost of doing a mitzvah against its reward, and the reward of a sin against its cost.

Keep three things in mind, and you'll never be tempted to do wrong: Remember what is above you -- an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your acts are written into a book.

Questions for discussion: How could we behave so that our parents, our friends and even God would be proud of us?

What does a mitzvah cost? (What do you have to give up to do a mitzvah?) What is its reward? Is it worth it?

If you walk around thinking that someone is watching, listening, and recording everything you do, how would it make you behave? Is someone watching and listening? Is there a part of you that watches, listens, and records what you do and say?

הֵלֵל אוֹמֵר, אַל תִּפְרוֹשׁ מִן הַצְּבוּר, וְאַל תֵּאֱמַן בְּעַצְמְךָ עַד יוֹם מוֹתְךָ, וְאַל תִּדְרִין אֶת חֵבְרֶךָ עַד שֶׁתִּגְיַע לְמְקוֹמוֹ, וְאַל תֹּאמֶר דְּבַר שְׂאֵי אֶפְשָׁר לְשִׁמוּעַ שְׁסוּפוֹ לְהִשְׁמַע. וְאַל תֹּאמֶר לְבִשְׂאֵפְנֶה אֲשַׁנֶּה, שְׂמָא לֹא תִפְנֶה:

Chapter 2, Mishna 4: Hillel taught: Do not separate yourself from the community.

Don't be satisfied with yourself until the day you die.

Do not judge another person until you have stood in that person's place.

Do not say something you shouldn't say, just because you think no one is listening -- someone is always listening.

Do not say, "When I have free time, I'll study and learn!" What if you never have free time?

Questions for discussion: How important is community in Jewish life? Is it possible to be Jewish all by yourself?

There is a difference between liking myself and being satisfied with myself. When a person is satisfied, they stop trying to grow and improve. What happens to a person who stops growing, stops learning?

Why must you stand in a person's place before you judge them?

Why is it dangerous to wait for the free time before we sit down and study the Torah? Or to do anything that's really important?

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אֵין בּוֹר יֵרָא חָטָא, וְלֹא עִם הָאָרֶץ חָסִיד, וְלֹא הַבֵּישָׁן לְמוֹד, וְלֹא הַקְּפָדוֹן מְלַמֵּד, וְלֹא כָּל הַמְרָבָה בְּסַחֲוֹרָה מַחֲפִים. וּבְמְקוֹם שְׂאֵין אֲנָשִׁים, הַשְׁתַּדֵּל לְהִיּוֹת אִישׁ:

Chapter 2, Mishna 5: [Hillel] taught: An empty person cannot stay away from sin.

A fool will never be holy.

A shy person can never learn.

An angry person can never teach.

A person who spends time only on business will never be wise.

If you find yourself in a place where there are no human beings - try to be one.

Questions for discussion: An empty person doesn't have the strength to say 'no' to bad things and bad people. This person will always fall into doing wrong. What kind of person should we try to be?

The fool doesn't think before he/she acts. Why can't the fool be holy?

The shy person has trouble asking questions. How important are questions in learning?

What kind of place is a place without human beings? How does one try to be a human being?

אָמַר לָהֶם, צֵאוּ וּרְאוּ אִיזוּהֵי דֶרֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁיִּדְבַק בָּהּ הָאָדָם. רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר, עֵין טוֹבָה. רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אָמַר, חֵבֵר טוֹב. רַבִּי יוֹסִי אָמַר, שָׂכֵן טוֹב. רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן אָמַר, רוֹאֵה אֶת הַנּוֹלֵד. רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר, לֵב טוֹב. אָמַר לָהֶם, רוֹאֵה אֲנִי אֶת דְּבַרִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֶרְךָ מִדְּבָרֵיכֶם, שֶׁבְּכֹל דְּבָרָיו דְּבָרֵיכֶם.

Chapter 2, Mishna 9: [Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai] told his students: Go out and see - What does one need for a good life? Rabbi Eliezer answered: An eye for the good.

Rabbi Joshua answered: A good friend. Rabbi Yosi answered: A good neighbor.

Rabbi Shimon answered: To see the consequences of your actions. Rabbi Elazar answered: A good heart. [Rabbi Yohanan] replied: I like the answer of Rabbi Elazar, for all your answers are included in his.

אָמַר לָהֶם צֵאוּ וּרְאוּ אִיזוּהֵי דֶרֶךְ רָעָה שֶׁיִּתְרַחַק מִמֶּנָּה הָאָדָם. רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר, עֵין רָעָה. רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אָמַר, חֵבֵר רָע. רַבִּי יוֹסִי אָמַר, שָׂכֵן רָע. רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן אָמַר, הַלּוֹה וְאִינוּ מְשֻׁלָּם. רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר, לֵב רָע. אָמַר לָהֶם, רוֹאֵה אֲנִי אֶת דְּבַרִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֶרְךָ מִדְּבָרֵיכֶם, שֶׁבְּכֹל דְּבָרָיו דְּבָרֵיכֶם:

Chapter 2, Mishna 9 continued: [Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai] continued: Go and see:

What must one stay away from in order to live a good life?

Rabbi Eliezer answered: An eye for the bad.

Rabbi Joshua answered: A bad friend. Rabbi Yosi answered: A bad neighbor.

Rabbi Shimon answered: One who borrows money and never pays it back.

Rabbi Elazar answered: An evil heart.

[Rabbi Yohanan] replied: I like the answer of Rabbi Elazar, for all your answers are included in his.

Questions for discussion: What are each of these and how would each be the secret to a good life: The eye for the good, a good friend, a good neighbor, foresight, a good heart?

Did the rabbis mean having a good friend and neighbor or being a good friend and neighbor?

Why is it important to see that your actions have consequences?

What does it mean to have a good heart? How does it include all the others? Have you ever known someone that you'd describe as having a good heart?

רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר, יְהִי כְבוֹד חֲבֵרְךָ חָבִיב עֲלֶיךָ כְּשִׂשְׁךָ, וְאַל תְּהִי נוֹחַ לְכַעֲוִם. וְשׁוּב יוֹם אֶחָד לְפָנַי מִיַּתְתְּךָ.

Chapter 2, Mishna 10: Rabbi Eliezer taught: Let your friend's honor be as important to you as your own. Don't be a person who angers easily.

Do teshuva (repentance) one day before you die.

Questions for discussion: Most of us are mostly concerned for ourselves - how we look, how well we do. What would you have to do to make your friend's honor as important as your own? Why is anger a problem for some people? How is this a religious problem?

Teshuva means repentance, repairing all the mistakes we make. No one knows the day they're going to die. So, when should we do teshuva?

רַבִּי יוֹסִי אוֹמֵר, יְהִי מָמוֹן חֲבֵרְךָ חָבִיב עֲלֶיךָ כְּשִׂשְׁךָ. וְהִתְקַן עֲצֻמְךָ לְלִמּוּד תּוֹרָה, שְׂאִינָה יִרְשָׁה לְךָ. וְכָל מַעֲשֶׂיךָ יִהְיוּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם:

Chapter 2, Mishna 12: Rabbi Yosi taught:

Let your friend's possessions be as important to you as your own.

Decide that you're going to learn Torah, because it doesn't come to you as a gift.

Do everything in the name of God.

Questions for discussion: What would you have to do in order to treat other people's things as you own? If we treat each other's stuff as if it were our own, how would this lead to a better world?

You must work to learn Torah, it doesn't come to you like a gift. What else in life do you have to work for because it doesn't come as a gift? How would you have to behave if everything you did was "in the name of God?"

הוּא הֵיךָ אוֹמֵר, לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לְגִמּוֹר, וְלֹא אֶתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבָטֵל מִמְּנָה.

Chapter 2, Mishna 15: [Rabbi Tarfon] taught:

You don't have to finish the work, but you are not free to give up and not do it.

Questions for discussion: What work could Rabbi Tarfon be talking about? This is work we start but never finish. How about the work of raising children, the work of learning Torah, the work of improving the world, the work of giving charity. Would these fit his description?

If I can't finish this work, why should I start it? Who will finish it for me?

But if you give up on it, and never start it, what will you lose?

What things in life do we start even though we know we'll never finish?

Chapter 3

רַבִּי חַנְנִיָּא בֶּן תֶּרְדִּיּוֹן אָמַר, שְׁנַיִם שְׂוֹשְׁבֵינָא וְאִין בִּינְיָהֶן דְּבִרֵי תוֹרָה, הֵרִי זֶה מוֹשָׁב לְעֵימָם, אֲבָל שְׁנַיִם שְׂוֹשְׁבֵינָא וְיֵשׁ בִּינְיָהֶם דְּבִרֵי תוֹרָה, שְׂכִינָה שְׂרוּיָה בִּינְיָהֶם,

Chapter 3, Mishna 2: Rabbi Hananiah ben Teradion taught:

When two sit together and don't share words of Torah - this is a wasted moment.

But when two sit together and share Torah - the Presence of God is with them.

Question: Why is this a wasted moment? Make a list of what you consider to be wasted moments. (Bad TV, dumb homework assignments, what else?) How does God show up when people talk Torah?

What's the difference between holy conversation and ordinary conversation? What kind of conversation do you usually find yourself part of?

הוּא הָיָה אָמַר, כֹּל שְׂרוּיָה הַבְּרִיּוֹת נוֹחָה הַיָּמֵנוּ, רֵוַח הַמָּקוֹם נוֹחָה הַיָּמֵנוּ. וְכֹל שְׂאִין רֵוַח הַבְּרִיּוֹת נוֹחָה הַיָּמֵנוּ, אִין רֵוַח הַמָּקוֹם נוֹחָה הַיָּמֵנוּ

Chapter 3, Mishna 10: [Rabbi Hananiah ben Dosa] taught:

Whomever people like, God likes. And whomever people don't like, God doesn't like.

Questions for discussion: Why does God like those whom people like, and dislike those people don't like? If we want to be close to God, what would Rabbi Hananiah recommend we do?

Is this the same as being "popular" or does it point to something different?

רבי אלעזר בן עזריה אומר, אם אין תורה, אין דרך ארץ. אם אין דרך ארץ, אין תורה.
 אם אין חכמה, אין יראה. אם אין יראה, אין חכמה. אם אין בינה, אין דעת. אם אין
 דעת, אין בינה. אם אין קמת, אין תורה. אם אין תורה, אין קמת.

Chapter 3, Mishna 17: Rabbi Elazar taught:

Where there is no Torah, there is no right conduct.

And where there is no right conduct, there is no Torah.

Where there is no wisdom, there is no reverence.

And where there is no reverence, there is no wisdom.

Where there is no intelligence, there is no knowledge.

And where there is no knowledge, there is no intelligence.

Where there is no bread, there is no Torah.

And where there is no Torah, there is no bread.

Questions for discussion: What's the relationship between these pairs of things?

How do Torah and good conduct go together?

How do reverence and wisdom go together? (look up reverence in the dictionary if you don't know what it means)

Knowledge means knowing facts. Intelligence is something else. What is intelligence? Is it possible to know lots of things, but really know nothing?

Bread here is a symbol for support or wealth or livelihood. Maybe it's hard to learn Torah if there's no bread -- if you're starving and cold -- but why is there no "bread" if there is no Torah? What happens to people who have lots and lots of money but have no idea how to live their lives?

הוא היה אומר, כל שחכמתו מרבה ממעשיו, למה הוא דומה, לאילן שענפיו מרבין
 ושרשיו מעטין, והרוח באה ועוקרתו והופכתו על פניו,
 אבל כל שמעשיו מרבין מחכמתו, למה הוא דומה, לאילן שענפיו מעטין ושרשיו
 מרבין, שאפלו כל הרוחות שבעולם באות ונושבות בו אין מזיזין אותו ממקומו

Chapter 3, Mishna 17 continues: He taught: The one who knows much but does little, what is he like? He is like a tree with many branches but few roots. One gust of wind will come and knock it down. But one who does much, even more than he knows, what is he like? He is like a tree with many roots and few branches. If all the winds in the world blew, they could not move it from its place.

Questions for discussion: Learning Torah is so important in Judaism. But something is more important. What is it? Why? Is it possible to be a really smart person who does nothing important with all that intelligence? One person is like a tree that can be blown over easily. One is like a tree rooted deeply that is never blown over. What does this mean? What kinds of things happen to us in our lives that can "blow us over"? What are the things we hang onto to help us when we're facing tough times?

Chapter 4

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר (תהלים קיט), מכל מלמדי השכלתי כי עדותיך שיחה לי. איזהו גבור, הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר (משלי טז), טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומשל ברוחו מלכד עיר. איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו, שנאמר (תהלים קכח), יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך. אשריך, בעולם הזה. וטוב לך, לעולם הבא. איזהו מכבד, המכבד את הבריות, שנאמר (שמואל א ב), כי מכבדי אכבד ובני יקלו:

Chapter 4, Mishna 1: Ben Zoma taught:

Who is wise? One who learns from every person. As the Bible teaches: "From all who would teach me, have I gained understanding." (Psalms 119:9)

Who is powerful? One who conquers his impulses. As the Bible teaches: "One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one who rules one's spirit than one who conquers a city." (Proverbs 16:32)

Who is rich? One who is satisfied with what he has. As the Bible teaches: "When you eat what your hands have provided, you shall be happy and good will be yours." (Psalms 128:2)

Who is honored? One who honors all others. As the Bible teaches: "Those who honor Me will I honor, and those who insult me will be disgraced." (I Samuel 2:30)

Questions for discussion: The questions are questions we ask all the time. But Ben Zoma's answers are surprising. What's the usual answer to these questions? How are Ben Zoma's answers different from the usual answer? Do you like his answers better? Is it possible for a person to have lots of money but still be a really poor, needy person? Is it possible for person to have lots of muscles, but still be really weak?

הוא היה אומר, אל תהי בז לכל אדם, ואל תהי מפליג לכל דבר, שאין לך אדם שאין לו שעה ואין לך דבר שאין לו מקום:

Chapter 4, Mishna 3: [Ben Azzai] taught:

Treat no one lightly, and think nothing useless.

For everyone has his moment, and everything has its place.

Question: What does Ben Azzai mean by "everyone has his moment?" What is your "moment?" There's always a kid in school who is ignored by everyone, never chosen for a sports team or a part in the play. According to Ben Azzai, how should we treat this kid? Why?

רבי יוסי אומר, כל המכבד את התורה, גופו מכבד על הבריות. וכל המחיל את

הַתּוֹרָה, גּוֹפּוֹ מְחַלְל עַל הַבְּרִיּוֹת:

Chapter 4, Mishna 6: Rabbi Yosi said:

One who honors the Torah will be honored by others.

But one who dishonors the Torah will be dishonored by others.

Questions for discussion: How do most people get honor in their lives? How does Rabbi Yosi suggest you find honor? How do we honor the Torah?

רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר, יְהִי כְבוֹד תְּלַמִּידָךְ חָבִיב עָלֶיךָ כְּשִׁלְךָ, וְכְבוֹד חֵבְרָךְ כְּמוֹרָא רַבָּךְ, וּמוֹרָא רַבָּךְ כְּמוֹרָא שָׁמַיִם:

Chapter 4, Mishna 12: Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua taught:

Show respect to your student as you would have others respect you.

Respect your friend as much as you respect your teacher.

Respect your teacher as you would respect God.

Questions for discussion: How should a teacher treat a student? What respect is due a teacher? What respect is due a student? Why do teachers deserve this kind of respect? Why do friends? What kind of teacher shows this kind of respect? Have you ever had such a teacher?

רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר, אַל תִּרְצֶה אֶת חֵבְרָךְ בְּשַׁעַת בְּעָסוֹ, וְאַל תִּנְחַמְנוּ בְּשַׁעַת שְׁמִיתוֹ מִטָּל לְפָנָיו, וְאַל תִּשְׁאַל לוֹ בְּשַׁעַת נִדְרוֹ, וְאַל תִּשְׁתַּדֵּל לְרֵאוֹתוֹ בְּשַׁעַת קְלָקְלָתוֹ:

Chapter 4, Mishna 18: Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar taught:

Don't try to calm your friend at the moment he is angry.

Don't try to comfort another at the moment his loved one has died.

Don't ask your friend questions once he's signed a contract.

And don't visit your friend right after he has been embarrassed.

Questions for discussion: Why not calm an angry friend? Why not comfort a person who has just lost a loved one? Why not ask questions if the contract is already signed? Why not visit the embarrassed friend? Will your friend hear you at these times? Is this advice to save your feelings or the feelings of your friend? Is it possible for people who act with good intentions to end up hurting feelings?

שְׁמוּאֵל הַקָּטָן אָמַר, (משלי כד) בְּנִפְל אוֹיְבֶיךָ אַל תִּשְׂמַח וּבְכַשְׁלוֹ אַל יִגַּל לְבָבְךָ, פֶּן יִרְאֶה יי וְרַע בְּעֵינָיו וְהִשִּׁיב מֵעַלְיוֹ אָפוֹ:

Chapter 4, Mishna 19: Shmuel ha-katan taught a verse from the Bible's book of Proverbs: "Don't celebrate the defeat of your enemy, and don't be glad at his failure. God may see and disapprove and do to you what has happened to him."

Questions for discussion: It is natural to celebrate an enemy's defeat. After all, what could be bad about seeing something bad happen to someone you hate. Why is it wrong?

A commentary on this Mishna teaches: Who is a winner? One who has turned an enemy into a friend. How does our Mishna teach this same idea? Would celebrating the enemy's failure bring him closer to being a friend? What would bring him closer?

רבי אלעזר הקפ"ר אומר, הקנאה והתאוה והכבוד מוציאים את האדם מן העולם:

Chapter 4, Mishna 20: Rabbi Elazar ha-Kappar taught:

Jealousy, uncontrolled desires and pursuing glory take a person out of the world.

Questions for discussion: What effect do these three qualities - jealousy, desire and the need for glory - have on a person's life?

What do they do to family, friends, community?

What does the rabbi mean by saying that they "take a person out of the world"?

Have you ever been so jealous or so mad that you were "out of your world"?

Chapter 5

שבעה דברים בגלם ושבעה בהכם. חכם אינו מדבר בפני מי שהוא גדול ממנו בהכמה ובמנין, ואינו נכנס לתוך דברי חבירו, ואינו נבהל להשיב, שואל פענין ומשיב כהלכה, ואומר על ראשון ראשון ועל אחרון אחרון, ועל מה שלא שמע, אומר לא שמעתי, ומודה על האמת. וחלופיהן בגלם:

Chapter 5, Mishna 7: There are seven characteristics of a fool, and seven characteristics of a wise person:

The wise person does not speak in the presence of one who is wiser.

The wise person does not interrupt when another is speaking.

The wise person never gives an answer in a hurry.

The wise person asks good questions and gives direct answers.

The wise person begins with what's first and ends with what's last.

The wise person will say "I don't know" when he/she doesn't know.

The wise person admits that something is true when it's true.

The fool does the opposite of all these.

Questions for discussion: How do each of these make a person wise? How do their opposites make a person a fool? How many of these describe you? Have you ever been the fool? Describe a time when you were the wise person. Describe a time when you were the fool.

ארבע מדות באדם. האומר שלי שלי ושליך שליך, זו מדה בינונית. ויש אומרים, זו מדת סדום. שלי שליך ושליך שלי, עם הארץ. שלי שליך ושליך שליך, חסיד. שלי שלי ושליך

שְׁלֵי, רָשָׁע:

Chapter 5, Mishna 10: There are four kinds of people:

There is one who says, "What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours."

This one is ordinary. Some say this is the character of the people of Sodom.

There is one who says, "What is mine is yours and what is yours is mine."

This one is a fool.

There is one who says, "What is mine is yours and what is yours is yours."

This one is righteous.

There is one who says, "What is mine is mine and what is yours is mine."

This one is evil.

Questions for discussion: If the first is just ordinary, why would this be the character of Sodom, a city destroyed for its evil? Is there something evil in this? We believe in privacy - people have a right to "their own space." But can our love for privacy turn evil?

Why is the second one a fool? Why is the third righteous? Why is the last evil?

Since the time we're very young, we are taught to share. Why is it so hard for people, even adults, to share? Why is sharing so important?

Which one of these best describes you? Which one would you like for a friend?

אַרְבַּע מִדּוֹת בַּיָּדְעוֹת. נוֹחַ לְכַעֵס וְנוֹחַ לְרַצוֹת, יֵצֵא שְׂכָרוֹ בְּהַפְסָדוֹ, קָשָׁה לְכַעֵס וְקָשָׁה לְרַצוֹת, יֵצֵא הַפְסָדוֹ בְּשְׂכָרוֹ. קָשָׁה לְכַעֵס וְנוֹחַ לְרַצוֹת חֲסִיד. נוֹחַ לְכַעֵס וְקָשָׁה לְרַצוֹת רָשָׁע:

Chapter 5, Mishna 11: There are four kinds of people:

There is one who gets angry easily but is easy to calm.

This one's gain is cancelled by his/her loss.

There is one who is hard to anger but is also hard to calm.

This one's loss is cancelled by his/her gain.

There is one who is hard to anger but easy to calm. This is a righteous person.

There is one who is easy to anger but hard to calm. This is an evil person.

Questions for discussion: Do you recognize any of these people? What's it like to be with such a person? How powerful is anger? Can anger be controlled? How?

Which one of these best describes you? Which one of these would you like for a friend?

אַרְבַּע מִדּוֹת בְּתַלְמִידִים. מַהֵר לְשָׂמוֹעַ וּמַהֵר לְאַבֵּד, יֵצֵא שְׂכָרוֹ בְּהַפְסָדוֹ. קָשָׁה לְשָׂמוֹעַ

וְקָשָׁה לְאֵבֶד, יֵצֵא הַפְּסֹדוֹ בְּשִׁכְרוֹ. מִהָרַר לְשִׁמוּעַ וְקָשָׁה לְאֵבֶד, חָכָם. קָשָׁה לְשִׁמוּעַ וּמִהָרַר לְאֵבֶד, זֶה חֵלֶק רָע:

Chapter 5, Mishna 12: There are four kinds of students:

One who learns quickly and forgets quickly.

This one's gain is cancelled by his/her loss.

One who learns with difficulty but never forgets.

This one's loss is cancelled by his/her gain.

One who learns quickly and never forgets. This one is wise.

One who learns with difficulty and forgets quickly. This one has bad luck.

Questions for discussion: If you were their teacher, how would you teach each one of these students? How can they be helped? What kind of student are you?

אַרְבַּע מִדּוֹת בְּיוֹשְׁבִים לְפָנֵי חֲכָמִים. סְפוּג, וּמְשִׁיבָה, מְשַׁמְרֵת, וְנִפְהָ. סְפוּג, שֶׁהוּא סוֹפֵג אֶת הַכֹּל. מְשִׁיבָה, שֶׁמְכַנֵּס בָּזוּ וּמוֹצִיא בָּזוּ. מְשַׁמְרֵת, שֶׁמוֹצִיאָה אֶת הַיֵּינִן וְקוֹלְטָת אֶת הַשְּׂמֵרִים. וְנִפְהָ, שֶׁמוֹצִיאָה אֶת הַקֶּמַח וְקוֹלְטָת אֶת הַפֶּלֶת:

Chapter 5, Mishna 15: There are four kinds of students who sit before their teacher:

The sponge, the funnel, the strainer, the sifter.

The sponge soaks up everything.

The funnel - it all goes in one end and come out the other.

The strainer - the good stuff goes through while it collects the bad.

The sifter - the bad goes through while it collects the good.

Same questions as before: How should each one be taught? Which one are you?

כָּל מַחְלוּקֵת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שְׂמִים, סוֹפָה לְהַתְקִים. וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שְׂמִים, אֵין סוֹפָה

לְהִתְקַיֵּם. אֵיזוֹ הִיא מַחְלֹקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זוֹ מַחְלֹקֶת הַלֵּל וְשַׁמַּיִי. וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זוֹ מַחְלֹקֶת קָרָח וְכָל עֲדָתוֹ:

Chapter 5, Mishna 17: Any argument which is for the sake of Heaven has a lasting value.

But an argument which is not for the sake of Heaven is worthless and destructive.

What kind of argument is for the sake of Heaven? Like those between Hillel and Shammai.

And what kind is not for the sake of Heaven? Like those between Moses and Korah.

Questions for discussion: What makes for a good argument? Think about the last argument you had. Maybe it was with a friend, a teacher or with your parent. Why did you have this argument? Was it ego or personal gain or principle? How did it start? How did you talk in the argument? Did you disagree with respect or were you out to hurt the other person? How was it settled? When Hillel and Shammai disagreed, the tradition teaches, they disagreed with the greatest respect for one another. Even though Hillel won most of the arguments, the opinions of Shammai are always written first in the Talmud, as a sign of respect. And even though they disagreed about very important matters, they were still friends outside of the court. Does this sound like your last argument? What's different?

יְהוּדָה בֶּן תֵּימָא אוֹמֵר, הָיִי עוֹ כְּנֶמֶר, וְקַל כְּנֶשֶׁר, וְרֵץ כְּעֵבִי, וְגַבּוֹר כְּאַרִי לַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹן אָבִיךָ שֶׁבְּשָׁמַיִם.

Chapter 5, Mishna 20: Yehuda ben Tema taught: Be as strong as a leopard, fly as high as an eagle, run as fast as a deer, be as brave as a lion, to do God's will.

Questions for discussion: When you do a good deed, do you ever feel that you've taken on special powers? If you did everything that way, how would you feel?

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, בֵּין חֲמִשׁ שָׁנִים לְמִקְרָא, בֵּין עֶשֶׂר לְמִשְׁנָה, בֵּין שְׁלֹשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה לְמִצּוֹת, בֵּין

חֲמִשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה לַתְּלֻמוֹד, בֶּן שְׁמוֹנֶה עֶשְׂרֵה לְחֶפֶה, בֶּן עֶשְׂרִים לְרִדּוֹף, בֶּן שְׁלֹשִׁים לְכַח, בֶּן אַרְבָּעִים לְבִינָה, בֶּן חֲמִשִּׁים לְעֵצָה, בֶּן שִׁשִּׁים לְקִנְיָה, בֶּן שִׁבְעִים לְשִׁיבָה, בֶּן שְׁמוֹנִים לְגְבוּרָה, בֶּן תְּשַׁעִים לְשׁוֹת, בֶּן יָמֵה כְּאֵלוֹ מֵת וְעֵבֵר וּבָטֵל מִן הָעוֹלָם:

Chapter 5, Mishna 21: [Yehuda ben Tema] taught:

At five years old, one begins learning Bible; At ten, one learns the Mishna;

At thirteen, one is Bar/Bat Mitzvah, obligated to do mitzvot; At eighteen, one gets married;

At twenty, one earns a living; At thirty, one is strong;

At forty, one gains understanding; At fifty, one can offer advice;

At sixty, one is an elder; At seventy, one is reaching old age;

At eighty, one is mighty; At ninety, one is bent over;

At one hundred, it is as if one is on the way out of this world.

Questions for discussion: At each age, we gain something and we lose something. For example, as a new Bar/Bat Mitzvah, you're no longer a little kid. You can do new things. But you also can't do something. What do we gain and what do we lose at each age? What is the special joy of each age of life? Make a chart of your life - with the ages of the important events that have already happened, and the ones yet to happen. How is it different from this chart?

בֶּן בַּג בַּג אוֹמֵר, הִפְךָ בָּהּ וְהִפְךָ בָּהּ, דְּכֻלָּא בָּהּ. וּבָה תִּחְיֶי, וְסִיב וּבְלָה בָּהּ, וּמִנָּה לָא תִזְוַע, שְׂאִין לָךְ מִדָּה טוֹבָה הֵימָנָה:

Chapter 5, Mishna 22: Ben Bag-Bag taught: Go through it [Torah] and go through it again, for everything is in it. Study it. Grow old with it. But never let it go. Because there is nothing better than it.

Questions for discussion: Unlike other reading, Torah has to be learned in a special way. We learn it slowly and carefully. We find many, many lessons in it. And we're never finished learning it. Have you ever read a book or seen a movie the second or third time and found new things in it? Why is it important to go over Torah again and again? Why is it important to learn it even when we're old?

Chapter 6

רבי מאיר אומר כל העוסק בתורה לשמה, זוכה לדברים הרבה. ולא עוד אלא שכל העולם כולו בדאי הוא לו. נקרא רע, אהוב, אוהב את המקום, אוהב את הבריות, משמח את המקום, משמח את הבריות, ומלבשתו ענוה ויראה, ומכשרתו להיות צדיק חסיד ישר ונאמן, ומרחקתו מן החטא, ומקרבתו לידי זכות, ונהנין ממנו עצה ותושיה בינה וגבורה.

Chapter 6, Mishna 1: Rabbi Meir taught:

Those who study Torah (just for the joy of learning) will receive many rewards. For such people was the whole world created. They will be called beloved friends of God, they will love God and they will love humanity. They will bring God joy and they will bring joy to the world. They will be covered in modesty and respect. They will be righteous, honest and loyal, far from sin, and ready to do right. Torah will give them good advice, strength, understanding and courage.

Questions for discussion: How does study of Torah bring all these rewards? What rewards has Torah brought you? How has it effected your family? your character?



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