

Pirkei Avot

Rabbi Cari Bricklin-Small

WELCOME

BARUCH atah, Adonai
Eloheinu, Melech haolam,
asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי
אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

BLESSED ARE YOU, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us
with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

- (1) Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples and make a fence round the Torah.
- (2) Shimon the Righteous was one of the last of the men of the great assembly. He used to say: the world stands upon three things: the Torah, the Temple service, and the practice of acts of piety.
- (3) Antigonus a man of Socho received [the oral tradition] from Shimon the Righteous. He used to say: do not be like servants who serve the master in the expectation of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve the master without the expectation of receiving a reward, and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.
- (4) Yose ben Yoezer (a man) of Zeredah and Yose ben Yohanan [a man] of Jerusalem received [the oral tradition] from them [i.e. Shimon the Righteous and Antigonus]. Yose ben Yoezer used to say: let thy house be a house of meeting for the Sages and sit in the very dust of their feet, and drink in their words with thirst.
- (5) Yose ben Yochanan (a man) of Jerusalem used to say: Let thy house be wide open, and let the poor be members of thy household. Engage not in too much conversation with women. They said this with regard to one's own wife, how much more [does the rule apply] with regard to another man's wife. From here the Sages said: as long as a man engages in too much conversation with women, he causes evil to himself, he neglects the study of the Torah, and in the end he will inherit Gehinnom.
- (6) Joshua ben Perahiah and Nittai the Arbelite received [the oral tradition] from them. Joshua ben Perahiah used to say: appoint for thyself a teacher, and acquire for thyself a companion and judge all men with the scale weighted in his favor.
- (7) Nittai the Arbelite used to say: keep a distance from an evil neighbor, do not become attached to the wicked, and do not abandon faith in [divine] retribution.
- (8) Judah ben Tabbai and Shimon ben Shetach received [the oral tradition] from them. Judah ben Tabbai said: do not [as a judge] play the part of an advocate; and when the litigants are standing before you, look upon them as if they were [both] guilty; and when they leave your presence, look upon them as if they were [both] innocent, when they have accepted the judgement.
- (9) Shimon ben Shetach used to say: be thorough in the interrogation of witnesses, and be careful with your words, lest from them they learn to lie.
- (10) Shemaiah and Abtalion received [the oral tradition] from them. Shemaiah used to say: love work, hate acting the superior, and do not attempt to draw near to the ruling authority.
- (11) Abtalion used to say: Sages be careful with your words, lest you incur the penalty of exile, and be carried off to a place of evil waters, and the disciples who follow you drink and die, and thus the name of heaven becomes profaned.
- (12) Hillel and Shammai received [the oral tradition] from them. Hillel used to say: be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving mankind and drawing them close to the Torah.
- (13) He [also] used to say: one who makes his name great causes his name to be destroyed; one who does not add [to his knowledge] causes [it] to cease; one who does not study [the Torah] deserves death; one who makes [unworthy] use of the crown [of learning] shall pass away.
- (14) He [also] used to say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for my own self [only], what am I? And if not now, when?
- (15) Shammai used to say: make your [study of the] Torah a fixed practice; speak little, but do much; and receive all men with a pleasant countenance.
- (16) Rabban Gamaliel used to say: appoint for thyself a teacher, avoid doubt, and do not make a habit of tithing by guesswork.
- (17) Shimon, his son, 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, but actions; whoever indulges in too many words brings about sin.
- (18) Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel used to say: on three things does the world stand: On justice, on truth and on peace, as it is said: "execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates" (Zechariah 8:16).

משנה אבות א':א'

מֹשֶׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, וּמָסָרָהּ לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ, וִיהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים, וְזִקְנִים לְנְבִיאִים, וְנְבִיאִים
מִסְרֹוֹהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים, הֵווּ מְתוּנִים בַּדִּין, וְהֵעֲמִידוּ
תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה, וַעֲשׂוּ סִיג לַתּוֹרָה:

Pirkei Avot 1:1

Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be patient in [the administration of] justice, raise many disciples and make a fence round the Torah.

Pirkei Avot 1:1 Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be patient [in the administration of] justice, raise many disciples and make a fence round the Torah.

Bartenura

Since this tractate is not founded on the exegesis of the Torah's commandments, like the rest of the tractates which are in the Mishnah, but it is wholly morals and principles, and whereas the sages of the [other] nations of the world have also composed books according to the fabrication of their hearts, concerning moral paths,..therefore this tractate began "Moses receive Torah from Sinai" to tell you that the principles and morals which are in this tractate were not fabricated by the hearts of the Mishna's sages; rather, they too, were stated at Sinai.

Shmuly Yanklowitz-

The first Mishnah does not state directly that God gave the Torah to the Jewish people. Instead, it begins with Moses receiving the Torah from "Sinai", rather than with the story of communal divine revelation. By beginning in this way the Mishnah describes the Torah's primary focus on human relationships...Ethics become the foundation for a covenantal relationship with the Divine.

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Leonard Kravtitz and Kerry Olitzky-

Men of the Great Assembly...By including the men of the Great Assembly in the chain of tradition, the rabbis found a paradigm for their own work. Just as the men of the Great Assembly had to explain the meaning of Torah, the rabbis would also interpret what the Torah meant generation by generation.

Chaim Stern

Moses received Torah- not the whole Torah but only as much as he was capable of taking in. Each generation receives Torah according to their varying capacities.

Three Pillars Make a Firm Base

1:2 Shimon the Righteous was from the remnants of the Great Assembly. He would say, “On three things the world stands: on the Torah, on the [temple] service and on acts of lovingkindness.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says, “On three things the world stands: on judgment, on truth and on peace, as it is said (Zechariah 8:16) ‘Judge truth and the justice of peace in your gates.’”

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Chaim Stern-the three fundamentals given here are revelation, spiritual inwardness, and love of neighbor. And they are interrelated.

18- Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says, “On three things the world stands: on judgment, on truth and on peace, as it is said (Zechariah 8:16) ‘Judge truth and the justice of peace in your gates.’”

CS- The world sustains itself by obedience to law, but that is not enough, for the judgement of law must be a judgment of truth. And even that is not enough: law and truth will not sustain the world unless there is also peace (after Vitry)

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Rami Shapiro-Shimon Hatzadik was among the last of the Great Assembly. He used to say the world rests on three things: on wisdom, on surrender, on compassion.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says, “On three things the world stands: on judgment, on truth and on peace, as it is said (Zechariah 8:16) ‘Judge truth and the justice of peace in your gates.’”

R.S.- Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel teaches, three things ensure the world’s survival: justice, truth, and peace, as it is said, “Speak truth, establish peace, and render honest judgments in your gates (Zech. 8:16)

The Relationships You Learn From

6- Yeshoshua ben Perachiah and Natai of Arvel received from them. Yohoshua ben Perachiah says, “Make for yourself a mentor, acquire for yourself a friend and judge every person as meritorious.”

16- Rabban Gamliel says, “Make yourself a mentor, remove yourself from doubt and do not frequently tithe by estimation.”

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Avot d'Rabi Natan- a teacher to learn from- a friend to study with.

Chaim Stern- there is no teaching without learning, and learning is as much a creative act as teaching. The student makes the teacher..

A friend-for a real friend is not easily acquired. The coinage paid is effort, interest, responsiveness and tolerance.

16- Rabban Gamliel says, "Make yourself a mentor, remove yourself from doubt and do not frequently tithe by estimation."

Meiri- One should not render decisions by guesswork or conjecture but by careful examination or by consulting others.

Chaim Stern- Gamaliel urges us towards clarity of thought and purpose.

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RS- Yehoshuah ben Perachyah teaches, “make yourself worthy of a teacher, secure for yourself a friend, and judge everyone favorably”

16- Rabban Gamliel says, “Make yourself a mentor, remove yourself from doubt and do not frequently tithe by estimation.”

RS- Rabban Gamliel used to say, “Get for yourself a teacher. Free yourself from doubt. Do not guess when tithing.”

Chapter 2

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2:2

Gamaliel the son of Rabbi Judah Hanasi said: excellent is the study of the Torah when combined with a worldly occupation, for toil in them both keeps sin out of one's mind; But [study of the] Torah which is not combined with a worldly occupation, in the end comes to be neglected and becomes the cause of sin. And all who labor with the community, should labor with them for the sake Heaven, for the merit of their forefathers sustains them (the community), and their (the forefather's) righteousness endures for ever; And as for you, [God in such case says] I credit you with a rich reward, as if you [yourselves] had [actually] accomplished [it all].

Bartenura

"Worldly occupation (*derekh erets*, literally the way of the world)": A craft or business.

2:2

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Rabeinu Yona

And all who work for the community, let them work for the [sake of the] name of Heaven: Not to be honored and not to derive benefit from them and not to lord over them, but rather to lead them in the straight path, and everything should be for the name of Heaven.

MishnehTorah

Nevertheless, whosoever sets his heart to pursue the study of the Torah but do no secular work at all, and permits himself to be supported by charity, behold him, he blasphemed the Name, and degraded the Torah, and shadowed the light of religion, and caused evil to be brought upon himself, and deprived his own life from its share in the world to come; because it is forbidden to enjoy aught in this world in return of the study of the words of the Torah.

Ikar Tosofot Yom Tov

"great reward": Since you are involved with the needs of the community, which are many. And since they are many, you have much reward, as if you had [taken care] of many - Derekh Chaim.

Bartenura

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Likutei Moharan

"And about my bed, that it should be positioned between north and south." As our Sages have said (Bava Batra 25b): "He who wants to become wise, let him face south; to become wealthy, let him face north." And in all matters, the golden mean is good, as is known. For "Torah study is good together with an occupation" (Avot 2:2), {that is, wisdom with wealth}.

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Chovot HaTalmidim

This is the matter about which we must warn you the most. We know very well that you will be careful even on your own against the inciters who explicitly want to push you away, God forbid, from the path of God, to the nethermost pit, the dark place of the other side, God forbid. Their words will be like a stinging fire and like the slings of arrows to you; so you will certainly keep your distance from them and anyone associated with them. Rather we must warn you strenuously about the hypocrites. They will come to you with the guise of innocence, saying, "We also fear the God of our fathers and we serve Him just like you. However this too is the will of God now at this time, that we compromise a little. You have already studied Torah. Now you should study a craft or business." And they will even have the temerity to use our holy words and say, "Even the Mishnah says (Avot 2:2), "It is good for the Torah to be with the way of the world (*derekh erez*, usually understood as work)." And they will even seduce you to compromise about divine service by saying, "The times have changed, and we no longer need to be so particular about all of the commandments and Jewish practices and keep so much distance from murkiness, as we did in the past" - and that which is similar to this. And you should not argue or fight with them. Rather answer your words to them in your heart: "If what you are saying is true that times have changed, they have only changed for the worse. Earlier, even the businessman and the craftsman served God. But now, in almost all cases, as soon as the youth leave the yeshiva to do business or work a trade, they fall into the nethermost pit. Do you want to murder me too, to burn my pure soul in the fire of *Gehinnom*, and to throw my body - the pure young dove - into the cauldron of boiling dung? I will not listen to you! Under no circumstances will I agree to you! I will grab onto the Sefer Torah in which God resides and hug Him - as it were - through it with both of my arms. And I will not release it so long as my soul is within me.

2:4

He used to say: do His will as though it were your will, so that He will do your will as though it were His. Set aside your will in the face of His will, so that he may set aside the will of others for the sake of your will. **Hillel said: do not separate yourself from the community, Do not trust in yourself until the day of your death, Do not judge your fellow man until you have reached his place. Do not say something that cannot be understood [trusting] that in the end it will be understood. Say not: 'when I shall have leisure I shall study;' perhaps you will not have leisure.**

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Tosofot Yom Tov

MAKE HIS WILL AS YOUR WILL [Heb. *kirtzonecha*]. This is the version in our editions. **Midrash Shmuel** writes in the name of **R. Yosef ibn Nahamias** that in an edition of the Mishna from Jerusalem, the text reads “do his will with your will [Heb. *birtzonecha*],” with a *bet*, and the idea is that you shouldn’t perform a commandment in irritation, anger and frustration, but willingly and with a happy heart,

2:4

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Bartenura

"Do not separate yourself from the congregation": but rather share in their troubles. As anyone who separates from the congregation will not [live to] see the consolation of the congregation (Taanit 11a).

"Do not judge your fellow until you come to his place": If you see your fellow come to a test and fail, do not judge him unfavorably until a test like it comes to you and you overcome [it].

"Do not believe in yourself until the day of your death": As behold, Yonatan the High Priest served in the high priesthood eighty years and in the end he became a Sadducee (Berakhot 29a).

2:16

He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it; If you have studied much Torah, you shall be given much reward. Faithful is your employer to pay you the reward of your labor; And know that the grant of reward unto the righteous is in the age to come.

Bartenura

"It is not your responsibility to finish the work": The Holy One, blessed be He, did not hire you to finish it all, so that you would lose your wage if you do not finish it. And lest you say, "I will not study [Torah], and I will not take the wage," [it states,] "but neither are you free to desist " - against your will is the yoke placed upon you to labor.

2:16

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Rabbeinu Yona

He used to say: It is not your responsibility to finish the work That it not come to your mind, "I am not broadhearted and I cannot finish it, and [so] what advantage is there in toil and what will my exertion benefit." As "it is not your responsibility to finish it." Rather since you are toiling in the Torah, you have fulfilled the commandment of your Creator.

Bartenura

"in the future to come": In the world to come.

2:16

He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it; If you have studied much Torah, **you shall be given much reward**.

Faithful is your employer to pay you the reward of your labor; And know that the grant of reward unto the righteous is in the age to come.

Ikar Tosofot Yom Tov

"And know, etc.": Which means to say, my intention is not that you should serve in order to receive a reward - rather, my intention is this: that you should know it intellectually, and as above. And some have the textual variant, "*shematan* (that the giving of the reward") with a [letter,] *shin*. And according to that, one can say that it is coming to say that even the reward which is the gift, 'it is not in this world.' And therefore, do not wonder when you see that the righteous are going from one misfortune to another. So is it written in Midrash Shmuel.

Tosofot Yom Tov

Having said this, we are in a position to understand the mishna in Menachot 13:11: *the Torah calls both the wholly-burnt bird offering and the flour offering “a fire offering, a fragrant smell,” to teach that one who does little is just as one who does much, as long as he directs his heart to Heaven.* This is because the one who brings the flour offering is usually a poor person, as **Rashi** comments on the verse “should one bring a flour offering” (Leviticus 2:1): *who usually brings a flour offering? A poor person.* It is in this case that the tanna considers them equal, for both do as much as their resources and abilities allow, and G-d therefore looks at the little that the poor person gives the same way He looks at the large amount the rich person gives.

2:16

He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it; If you have studied much Torah, you shall be given much reward.

Faithful is your employer to pay you the reward of your labor; And know that the grant of reward unto the righteous is in the age to come.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said: Where there is no Torah, there is no right conduct; where there is no right conduct, there is no Torah. Where there is no wisdom there is no fear of God; where there is no fear of God, there is no wisdom. Where there is no understanding, there is no knowledge; where there is no knowledge, there is no understanding. Where there is no bread, there is no Torah; where there is no Torah, there is no bread. He used to say: one whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, to what may he be compared? To a tree whose branches are numerous but whose roots are few, so that when the wind comes, it uproots it and overturns it, as it is said, “He shall be like a bush in the desert, which does not sense the coming of good. It is set in the scorched places of the wilderness, in a barren land without inhabitant” (Jeremiah 17:6). But one whose deeds exceed his wisdom, to what may he be compared? To a tree whose branches are few but roots are many, so that even if all the winds in the world come and blow upon it, they cannot move it out of its place, as it is said, “He shall be like a tree planted by waters, sending forth its roots by a stream. It does not sense the coming of heat, its leaves are ever fresh. It has no care in a year of drought; it does not cease to yield fruit” (ibid, 17:8).

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Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria: Without Torah there is no social order; without social order there is no Torah. Without wisdom, there is no conscience; without conscience, there is no wisdom. Without knowledge, there is no understanding; without understanding there is no knowledge. Without sustenance, there is no Torah; without Torah there is no sustenance. [AJWS translation]

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says: If there is no Torah, there is no worldly occupation; if there is no worldly occupation, there is no Torah. If there is no wisdom, there is no fear; if there is no fear, there is no wisdom. If there is no understanding, there is no knowledge; if there is no knowledge, there is no understanding. If there is no flour, there is no Torah; if there is no Torah, there is no flour. [conservative yeshiva]

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Jeremiah 17:7-8

(7) Blessed is the one who trusts in the ETERNAL, and whose trust is the ETERNAL. (8) For that one shall be as a tree planted by waters, sending out its roots by a river: it does not notice when heat comes, and its leaves are always fresh; it does not worry in a year of drought, and it does not cease from bearing fruit.

RADAK

It shall be...by water. That it will never be thirsty.

By a stream. And by streams of water it shall send forth its roots, that even if its roots spread out in a distant place, they will [still] be by streams of water.

What Sustains You?

**David Grossman, "Individual Language and Mass Language,"
Writing in the Dark: Essays on Literature and Politics (2008)**

In the Jewish tradition there is a legend...that every person has a small bone in his body called the *luz*, located at the tip of the spine, which enfolds the essence of a person's soul. This bone cannot be destroyed... It stores a person's spark of uniqueness, the core of his selfhood... Those of you who would like to find your own response to the question may, when you go home, choose to gather your thoughts and consider: What is the thing within me that is the true root of my soul? What is the quality, the essence, the final spark that will remain in me even when all other things are extinguished? What is the thing that has such great and concerted power that I will be re-created out of it, in an extremely private sort of "big bang"?

Once in a while I ask people close to me what they believe their *luz* is, and I have heard many varied answers. Several writers, and artists in general, have told me that their *luz* is creativity, the passion to create and the urge to produce. Religious people, believers, have often said that their *luz* is the divine spark they feel inside. One friend answered, after much thought: Parenthood... And another friend immediately replied that her *luz* was her longing for the things and people she missed. A woman who was roughly ninety at the time talked about the love of her life, a man who committed suicide over sixty years ago: he was her *luz*.

Activity

Write [a poem] with according to the following structure of 3:17

Chapter 4

Are you wise?

Are you mighty?

Are you rich?

Are you honored?

4: 1

Ben Zoma says: Who is the wise one? He who learns from every person, as it says, "I have acquired understanding from all my teachers" (Psalms 119:99). Who is the mighty one? He who conquers his desire, as it says, "slowness to anger is better than a mighty person." (Proverbs 16:32). Who is the rich one? He who is happy with his lot, as it says, "When you eat [from] the work of your hands, you will be happy, and it will be well with you" (Psalms 128:2). "You will be happy" in this world, and "it will be well with you" in the world to come. Who is honored? He who honors the created beings, as it says, "For, those who honor Me, I will honor; and those who despise me will be held in little esteem" (I Samuel 2:30).

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Bartenura: **"He who learns from all men"**: And even though [that person that he learns from] is lesser than he. As since he is not concerned about his honor and learns from the lesser ones, [it shows] that his wisdom is for the sake of Heaven and not to boast and revel in.

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Bartenura: "as it says, 'slowness to anger is better than a mighty person' (but it can also be read as, 'good is slowness to anger from might')": Thus is the explanation of the verse: Good is slowness to anger that comes from the angle of the might [involved in] conquering the impulse, and not from the angle of [having] a soft nature." And so [too, the rest of the verse, "and one who governs his passion than the conqueror of a city" which can also be read as, "and one who governs his passion from the conqueror of a city," is to be understood as "good] is the conquering of the spirit when it comes from the conqueror of a city; [meaning] from a king, when after he conquers a city and the people rebelling against him come to his hand, he governs his passions and does not kill them."

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Bartenura: "Who is the rich one": who is fitting to be lauded by his riches? "He who is happy with his lot."

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Who is honored? He who honors the created beings, as it says, "For, those who honor Me, I will honor; and those who despise me will be held in little esteem" (I Samuel 2:30).

Bartenura: "Who is honored": Because [of the fact] that one who merits to have these three things that are mentioned above - which are wisdom, might and riches - is automatically honored in the eyes of God and man, even if the [people] do not [fully] honor him on their account; hence the teacher appended [the following] to this and said, "Someone who has these traits and is honored automatically, what can he do to be [properly] honored by others? He should honor others."

Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanac*

Who is wise? He that learns from everyone.

Who is powerful? He that governs his passions.

Who is rich? He that is content.

Who is that? Nobody.

Professor Carol Dweck, *The power of believing that you can improve* (TED)

I heard about a high school in Chicago where students had to pass a certain number of courses to graduate, and if they didn't pass a course, they got the grade "Not Yet." And I thought that was fantastic, because if you get a failing grade, you think, I'm nothing, I'm nowhere. But if you get the grade "Not Yet", you understand that you're on a learning curve. It gives you a path into the future.