CHAPTER III

1 Akaviah ben Mahalalel taught:

Ponder three things and you will avoid falling into sin:

Know your origin, your destination,

and before whom you will be required to give an accounting.

Your origin? A putrid drop.

Your destination? A place of dust, worms, and maggots.

Before whom will you be required to give an accounting?

Before the Ruler of rulers, the Holy Exalted One.

2 Rabbi Hananiah, the Deputy High Priest, taught:

Pray for the welfare of the Government, for if people did not fear it,

they would swallow each other alive.

3 Rabbi Hananiah ben Tradyon taught:

When two persons meet and do not exchange words of Torah,

they are regarded as a company of scoffers; as it is written:

"Who joins not in the company of scoffers" (Psalm 1:1).

However, when two persons meet and exchange words of Torah,

the Shekinah hovers over them; as it is written:

"Then those who fear Adonai conversed with one another; Adonai listened and heard,

and a book of records was made before God,

of those who fear Adonai and cherish His name" (Malachi 3:16).

This verse implies two persons.

Where do we learn that even one person sitting alone,

studying Torah, is rewarded by the Holy Exalted One?

From the verse: "God shall sit alone and meditate quietly,

yet take a reward for it" (Lamentations 3:28).

4 Rabbi Shimon taught:

Three who dine at a table and do not exchange words of Torah

are considered as having eaten of idolatrous sacrifices;

as it is written: "For all the tables are filled with vomit and filth,

when God is absent" (Isaiah 28:9).

However, three who dine at a table and exchange words of Torah

are considered as having eaten at God's table; as it is written:

"And God spoke to me: 'This is the table before Adonai'

" (Ezekiel 41:22).

5 Rabbi Hananiah ben Hakhamai taught:

Those who stay awake at night,

or who travel alone and turn their thoughts to trivial matters,

endanger their lives.
6 Rabbi N'hunia ben Ha-Kanah taught:
Whoever accepts the yoke of Torah will be spared
the burdens of citizenship and of earning a livelihood; but whoever
throws off the yoke of Torah will have to bear the burdens of citizenship and of earning a livelihood.

7 Rabbi Halofa, of K'far Hananyah, taught:
When ten persons sit together and study Torah, the Shekhinah hovers over them; as it is written: “God is present in the divine assembly” (Psalm 82:1). Where do we learn that this applies also to five? From the verse: “God has established His band on earth” (Amos 9:6). Where do we learn that this applies also to three? From the verse: “God judges in the midst of the judges” (Psalm 82:1). Where do we learn that this applies also to two? From the verse: “Then those who fear Adonai conversed with one another, and Adonai listened and heard” (Malachi 3:16). From where do we learn that this is true even of one? From the verse: “In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you” (Exodus 20:24).

8 Rabbi Elazar of Bartota taught:
Give God what is God's, for you and yours are God's.
This is also expressed by David: “For all things come from You, and we give You only what is Yours” (I Chronicles 29:14).

9 Rabbi Ya'akov taught:
One engaged in study while strolling, who interrupted to remark, “What a beautiful tree,” or “What a lovely field,” is considered as having committed a capital offense.

10 Rabbi Dostai bar Yanai, in the name of Rabbi Meir, taught:
Whoever forgets a single word of the law is considered as having committed a capital offense; as it is written: “Take heed and guard well your soul lest you forget the things your own eyes have seen” (Deuteronomy 4:9). Does this apply to one who finds laws too difficult? No, for the verse continues, “Lest they be removed from your heart all the days of your life” (Deuteronomy 4:9). This means that one is not guilty unless one deliberately forgets.

11 Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa taught:
When one gives priority to reverence over wisdom, that wisdom will be enduring; but when one gives priority to wisdom over reverence, that wisdom will not be enduring.

12 Literally, “liable even (at the cost) of life.”

10 Literally, “the yoke of the Kingdom.”
11 The rabbinitc metaphor יַד דּוּד refers to “a worldly occupation.”
12 This was a favorite teaching of his:
When one’s good deeds exceed one’s wisdom,
that wisdom will be enduring;
but when one’s wisdom exceeds one’s good deeds,
that wisdom will not be enduring.

13 This was another favorite teaching of his:
When one pleases one’s fellow creatures, God is pleased;
when one does not please one’s fellow creatures,
God is not pleased.

14 Rabbi Dosa ben Harcinas taught:
Morning sleep, midday wine, children’s prattle,
loaﬁng in the meeting places of the vulgar —
all these will ruin a person’s life.

15 Rabbi Elazar Ha-Modai taught:
A person who profanes the sacred,
despises the Festivals,
shames others publicly,
annuls the covenant of our father Abraham,
and contemptuously perverts the meaning of Torah —
though steeped in learning and the performance of good deeds
shall have no share in the world-to-come.

16 Rabbi Yishmael taught:
Be compliant with your seniors, be afﬂable with your juniors,
and greet every person with a cheerful manner.

17 Rabbi Akiva taught:
Jesting and levity lead a person to lewdness.
Tradition is a protection for Torah;
tithing is a protection for wealth;
vows are a protection for abstinence;
silence is a protection for wisdom.

18 This was a favorite teaching of his:
Humans are beloved, for they were created in the image of God.
They are exceedingly beloved, for it was made known to them
that they were created in the Divine Image;
as it is written: “In the image of God were mortals made” (Genesis 9:6).

Israel is beloved, for they are called God’s children.
They are exceedingly beloved for it was made known to them
that they are God’s children; as it is written:
“You are children of Adonai your God” (Deuteronomy 14:1).

13 Literally, “people of the land” — a rabbinic metaphor for peasant, ignoramus.
14 This refers to the rite of circumcision and the practice, in ancient times,
to remove surgically the sign of the covenant.
15 Literally, “chief” or “head person.”
16 Literally, “time of one’s youth.”
Israel is beloved, for a precious instrument was given to them. They are exceedingly beloved for it was made known to them that they were given a precious instrument with which the world was created; as it is written: "For I give you good doctrine; forsake not My Torah" (Proverbs 4:2).

19 Another teaching of Rabbi Akiva:
Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted. The world is judged favorably, yet all depends on the preponderance of good deeds.

20 Yet another teaching of his:
Everything is a loan against a pledge; a net is spread over all the living. The shop is open, the shopkeeper extends credit, the ledger is open, the hand records, whoever would borrow may do so; the collectors make their rounds daily, they exact payment from everyone, with or without consent; they have a reliable record. The verdict is a just one, and everything is ready for the final accounting.

21 Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah taught:
No Torah, no worldly occupation; no worldly occupation, no Torah; no wisdom, no piety; no piety, no wisdom; no knowledge, no understanding; no understanding, no knowledge; no sustenance, no Torah; no Torah, no sustenance.

22 This was a favorite teaching of his:
When one’s wisdom exceeds one’s good deeds, to what may such a person be compared? To a tree with many branches but few roots. A wind blows, uproots it and topples it over, as it is written, “Such a one is like a desert scrub that never thrives but dwells unwatered in the wilderness, in a salty, solitary land” (Jeremiah 17:8).

However, when one’s good deeds exceed one’s wisdom, to what may that person be compared? To a tree with few branches but many roots. All the winds of the world may blow against it, yet they cannot move it from its place; as it is written: “Such a one is like a tree planted by waters, spreading its roots by a stream. Untouched by scourching heat, its foliage remains luxurious. It will have no concern in a year of drought and will not cease to yield fruit” (Jeremiah 17:8).

23 Rabbi Elazar Hisma taught:
The laws relating to sacrifices of birds and to the calculation of menstrual days are the essentials of halakhah; the study of equinoxes and mathematical calculations constitute peripheral knowledge.

At the end of each chapter of Pirkei Avot, the passage on page 280 is often read.
CHAPTER IV

1 Ben Zoma taught:
Who is wise? Those who learn from everyone; as it is written: “From all my teachers have I gained understanding” (Psalm 119:99).

Who is mighty? Those who conquer their evil impulse; as it is written: “One who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and one who rules over his spirit, than one who conquers a city” (Proverbs 16:32).

Who is rich? Those who are content with their portion; as it is written: “When you eat the labor of your hands, happy will you be and all will be well with you” (Psalm 128:2). (“Happy will you be” refers to this world; “all will be well with you” refers to the world-to-come.)

Who is honored? Those who honor all people; as it is written: “Those who honor Me, I will honor, but those who scorn Me will be despised” (I Samuel 2:30).

2 Ben Azzai taught:
Pursue even a minor mitzvah and flee from an aveirah (sin); for one mitzvah generates another and one aveirah generates another. Thus, the reward for a mitzvah is another mitzvah, and the penalty for an aveirah is another aveirah.

3 This was a favorite teaching of his:
Do not disdain any person; do not underrate the importance of any thing — for there is no person who does not have his hour, and there is no thing without its place in the sun.

4 Rabbi Levi of Yavneh taught:
Be exceedingly humble, for a mortal’s only prospect is the grave.17

5 Rabbi Yoḥanan ben B’roka taught:
Whoever profanes God’s name in secret will be punished in public. Whether it was done knowingly or unknowingly, it is all the same when God’s name is profaned.

6 Rabbi Yishmael, his son, taught:
A person who studies in order to teach is given the opportunity both to study and to teach.

A person who studies in order to observe the mitzvot is given the opportunity to study, to teach, to observe the mitzvot, and to perform them.

17 Literally, “the worm.”

The grave is referred to as a place of “worms and maggots.” See Pirke Avot 3:1.
7 Rabbi Tzadok taught:
Do not make Torah an ornament for self-aggrandizement nor a means for livelihood.
for this is precisely what Hillel warned against:
“a person who uses Torah for personal gain perishes.”
We may infer from this that a person who derives profit from the words of Torah is foolishly self-destructive.

8 Rabbi Yose taught:
Whoever honors Torah will in turn be honored by others;
whoever dishonors Torah will in turn be dishonored by others.

9 Rabbi Yishmael, his son, taught:
A person who shuns the office of judge avoids enmity, theft, and perjury; but one who treats the judicial process lightly is a fool, wicked, and arrogant.

10 This was a favorite teaching of his:
Do not render decisions alone; there is but One who judges alone.
Never say to your colleagues: “You must adopt my view”; the prerogative is theirs, not yours to coerce.

11 Rabbi Yonatan taught:
Whoever, when poor, fulfills the obligation to study Torah,
will someday be wealthy and will continue to study; but whoever, having wealth, neglects to study Torah,
will eventually be poor, and will still neglect to study.

12 Rabbi Meir taught:
Decrease your absorption in business and study Torah.
Be humble before all persons.
If you are idle in the study of Torah,
many idle things will distract you;
but if you toil in the study of Torah,
God has a rich reward in store for you.

13 Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov taught:
A person who performs a single mitzvah
acquires an advocate;
but a person who commits a single aveirah (sin)
acquires an accuser.
Repentance and good deeds serve as a shield against punishment.

14 Rabbi Yohanan Ha-Sandlar taught:
Every assembly whose purpose is to serve God will, in the end, be established:
but every assembly whose purpose is not for God’s sake,
will not, in the end, be established.

18 Literally, “a crown.”
19 Literally, “a spade to dig with.”
20 Literally, “a fence.”
15 Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua taught:
The dignity of your student
should be as precious to you as your own;
the dignity of your colleague
should be as precious to you as your reverence for your teacher;
your reverence for your teacher
should be as great as your reverence for God.

16 Rabbi Y'hudah taught:
Study with great care,
for to err in teaching may be considered a deliberate sin.

17 Rabbi Shimon taught:
There are three crowns: The crown of Torah,
the crown of Priesthood, and the crown of Royalty.
The crown of a good name surpasses them all.

18 Rabbi N'horai taught:
Uproot yourself to live in a community where Torah is studied;
do not delude yourself that the Torah will come to you.
Only with colleagues can your studies be fortified.
Do not rely on your own understanding.

19 Rabbi Yannai taught:
The tranquility of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous —
these are beyond human understanding.

20 Rabbi Mattia ben Harosh taught:
Be the first to extend greetings to every human being.
Be a tail to lions rather than a head to foxes.

21 Rabbi Yaakov taught:
This world is compared to a foyer that leads to the world-to-come.
Prepare yourself in the foyer,
that you may be worthy to enter the main hall.

22 This was a favorite teaching of his:
Repentance and good deeds in this world, even for one hour,
are better than eternal life in the world-to-come;
nevertheless, one hour of bliss in the world-to-come
is more exquisite than all of life in this world.

23 Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar taught:
Do not pacify your colleague when his anger is raging;
do not comfort him when his dead lies before him;
do not challenge him at the time he makes his vow;
do not intrude upon him at the time of his disgrace.
24 Shmuel Ha-Katan quoted this verse:
"Rejoice not when your enemy falls;
let not your heart be glad when he stumbles,
lest Adonai see it and be displeased —
and divert His wrath from your enemy to you” (Proverbs 24:17, 18).

25 Elisha ben Abuyah taught:
To what may we compare one who studies as a child?
To ink written on fresh paper.
To what may we compare one who studies in old age?
To ink written on blotted paper.

26 Rabbi Yose bar Y'hudah, of K'far Bavli, taught:
To what may we compare one who learns from the young?
To one who eats unripe grapes and drinks from the vat.
To what may we compare one who learns from the old?
To one who eats ripe grapes and drinks wine that is aged.

27 Rabbi²¹ taught:
Do not look at the flask but at its contents.
You can find a new flask with old wine
and an old flask that does not hold even new wine.

28 Rabbi Elazar Ha-Kappar taught:
Envy, lust, and pursuit of honor will ruin a person's life.²²

29 These were favorite teachings of his:
Those who are born will die; those who are dead will be revived.
The living will stand in judgment,
to make it known and have it acknowledged that it is God —
Designer, Creator, Discerner, Judge, Witness, Plaintiff —
who will render judgment in time to come:
The Exalted — with whom there is no iniquity, no forgetfulness,
no favoritism, and no bribery — for everything belongs to God.
Let it further be known that it (the judgment) is based
on an accounting of one's deeds,
and let not your imagination assure you
that death will provide you with an escape from judgment.

It was not your will that formed you,
nor was it your will that gave you birth;
it is not your will that makes you live,
and it is not your will that brings you death;
nor is it your will that some day in the future
you will have to give an accounting and a reckoning
before the Ruler of rulers, the Holy Exalted One.

At the end of each chapter of Pirkei Avot,
the passage on page 280 is often read.

²¹ Some manuscripts attribute this saying to Rabbi Moiz.
²² Literally, “takes a person out of the world.”