

Ten problematic sayings in Pirkei Avot

Pirkei Avot

- One-liners from rabbis
- "Crown of Talmud"
- Must study between Pesah and Shavuot

Discussion of Ten Sayings

1:1 Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the Elders; the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly.

- Establishes legitimacy of Jewish tradition. But why is God not mentioned?
 - Dozens of names of God, but Sinai not one of them.
 - "De-emphasis of God" streak in Talmud: Oven at Aknai story.

-What is the meaning of "received it from Sinai"?

Maharal:

- To have written that "Moshe received the Torah from G-d" would have implied that G-d's ability to transmit Torah was limited specifically to Moshe as the receiver, which was not true.
 - When a Rav teaches Torah, the student learns Torah from the Rav, and this creates a bond between them. But saying that Moshe received the Torah from G-d would imply that Moshe was able to create this kind of bond with G-d, which is not respectful to the Almighty.
 - Even though it does say in the Torah (Exodus 31) that G-d gave Moshe the Luchot HaEidut, the two "Tablets of Testimony," and in numerous places "And G-d spoke to Moshe saying...", these were specific communiques, and doesn't imply the bond of Rav to student.
 - Moshe's receiving of the Torah from G-d had a unique quality to it, due to its happening in a designated place, Sinai. A true "receiving" requires the full intention to give on the part of the giver, demonstrated by designating a place for the receiving. Emphasizing that Moshe received the Torah "from Sinai" (not even saying that he received it "from G-d at Sinai") shows how integral the place (Sinai) was in the process of Moshe receiving the Torah, making it completely premeditated.
 - At Sinai, the process of communication was one where G-d appeared to be speaking "to Himself" and it was Moshe's responsibility to strive to receive the Torah. The perception was as if Moshe was receiving the Torah "from Sinai" since G-d was not required to interact with Moshe in the way a normal Rav must interact with his student.
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1.5. ...and do not converse excessively with a woman. They said this even about one's own wife; surely it applies to another's wife. Consequently, the Sages said: Anyone who converses excessively with a woman causes evil to himself, neglects Torah study and will eventually inherit Gehinnom.

2:8 ...the more wives, the more witchcraft.

-Misogyny in Sources? Some. Yet women ARE given credit:

- God endowed woman with more understanding (binah) than man [Niddah 45b]
- Eshet chayil recited on Shabbat: "A woman of valor, who can find?"
- Women have more compassion, more piety, and more responsibility for passing on traditions and keeping family away from sin

-Reason: Men are easily aroused; casual social relations may lead to sex.

- Talmud: "Talking with women [may] lead a man to adulterous behavior." [Nedarim 20a]
- Sex is viewed as main competitor to study of Torah.
- Moment Spicebox joke: Torah (f)or women". Caption: The eternal dilemma.

- Beruriah in Talmud:

- R. Jose the Galilean was once on a journey when he met Beruriah [the scholarly wife of Rabbi Meir]
- 'By what road', he asked her, 'do we go to Lod?'
- 'You stupid Galilean!', she replied, 'did not the Sages say "Do not talk too much with women?" You should have asked: How to Lod?' [Eruvin 53b]

-The more women in a man's household, the more jealousy between the women. Jealous women would resort to magic and spells in order to command the attentions of the one man available to them all. In the Torah we read of such rivalry between Rachel and Leah, two of the four wives of the patriarch Jacob:

"Once, at the time of the wheat harvest, Reuben came upon some mandrakes in the field and brought them to his mother Leah. (Mandrakes were considered to be an aphrodisiac plant.) Rachel said to Leah, "Please give me some of your son's mandrakes." But she said to her, "Was it not enough for you to take away my man, that you would also take my son's mandrakes?" Rachel replied, "I promise, he shall lie with you tonight, in return for your son's mandrakes." When Jacob came home from the field in the evening, Leah went out to meet him and said, "You are to sleep with me, for I have hired you with my son's mandrakes." And he lay with her that night..." [Genesis 30:14-16]

1.10. ...despise lordliness

-Hebrew is "Hate the rabbinate"!

- Hate the rabbinate as a job?
- Hate the status that comes with the rabbinate?

-Full quote: "Love work, despise lordliness". Possible interpretations:

- Love the work but hate the status - don't engage in a pursuit just for the status it confers.

-Whether you are a rabbi or not, hate what a rabbi does most of the time: Judge people in court.

1:10. ...and do not become overly familiar with the government.

2.3. Beware of rulers, for they befriend someone only for their own benefit; they act friendly when it benefits them, but they do not stand by someone in his time of need.

3:2 Pray for the welfare of the government, because if they did not fear it, a person would swallow his fellow alive.

-Relevance today?

-Political intrigue was rife when this was written [as it is today and always].

-Is it wrong to engage in politics, want to be part of the government, to lobby it? To “peaceably assemble for the redress of grievances”?

-Does it require becoming “overly familiar”?

2.1. Be as scrupulous in performing a 'minor' mitzvah as a 'major' one, for you do not know the reward given for the mitzvot.

4.2. Run to perform even a 'minor' mitzvah, and flee from sin; for one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah, and one sin leads to another sin; for the consequence of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the consequence of a sin is a sin.

-Chukkim vs mishpatim. (Cannot vs can understand reasons.)

-Don't really know consequences of doing what's forbidden. (Does pork lower IQ?)

-But is murder same as shaatnez? (10 commandments, Big 3 in pikuach nefesh)

-Other problem: Are we doing mitzvot for “rewards”?

4:7,2:5 Do not separate yourself from the community

-You need them. Don't live alone:

-And the LORD said, It is not good for man to be alone [Gen. 2:8]

-They need you: Help others around you?

-When the community is suffering, one may not say 'I will go to my house, eat and drink, and I will be fine' [Ta'anis 11a]

-But what community? Where do we draw the line?

- Jewish only? What if observance is different? (Even “Jews for Jesus”?)
- What should we do with them? Outreach?
 - Maimonides classifies a heretic as one who keeps all the mitzvot but separates himself from the Jewish people. Without a link to the community, there can be no link to God and Torah. [Teshuva 3:24]

-Another interpretation: Follow halacha without deviation? (No “movements”?)

3.19. Everything is foreseen, and the freedom of choice is given.

- How does all-knowing God allow for ANY choice? Why the Torah and the exhortations if God knows what will happen?
 - God says we have choice:
 - "I have set before you life and death... Choose life so that you and your children may live." [Deut. 30:19.]
 - Evil and good inclinations. Can pursue either.
 - Modern solution: Quantum mechanics. Only probabilities can be predicted. Built into fabric of universe. Quote means: Everything *that can* be foreseen is foreseen. A creator can introduce randomness in his creation: Any game with dice.
 - Common mistranslation: “Everything is foreseen, YET [or BUT] the freedom of choice is given.” It’s AND. Big difference.
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5:11 ...the sword of war comes to the world for the delay of justice, for the perversion of justice, and for interpreting the Torah decision in opposition to the halachah;

- Justice can only follow Jewish law?
 - But 7th Noahide law: Establish courts of justice. May not be according to Torah.
 - Third reason deleted in the Reform Haggadah (!)
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5:25 A five-year-old begins Scripture; a ten-year-old begins Mishnah; a thirteen-year-old becomes obliged to observe the commandments; a fifteen-year-old begins the study of Gemara; an eighteen-year-old goes to the marriage canopy; a twenty-year-old begins pursuit [of a livelihood]; a thirty-year-old attains full strength; a forty-year-old attains understanding; a fifty-year-old can offer counsel; a sixty year-old attains seniority; a seventy-year-old attains a ripe old age; an eighty-year-old shows strength; a ninety-year-old becomes stooped over; a hundred-year-old is as if he were dead, passed away and ceased from the world.

- First few give real information on expected milestones in life. Others make judgments.

-Last statement seems callous and disrespectful. Is it necessary?

-The Lubavitcher Rebbe: This represents a crowning stage in personal development. On the verse "no man will see Me and live," our Sages commented: "While alive one does not see, but when dead one sees." At one hundred, a person can reach a level such that "it is as if he were dead," i.e., he can attain that degree of perception of G-dliness. Similarly, the expression "had departed and ceased connection with the world" also has a positive connotation. It means the person has risen above all worldly matters. His focus and concern are solely spiritual.

-If so, what does "ninety-year-old becomes stooped over" add?

-Is this an injunction to move out of the way when you are too old?

5.26. Delve in it [the Torah] and continue to delve in it for everything is in it

-Everything? What about secular knowledge? (Hidden codes?)

-**Ramban** [introduction to his Torah commentary], the **Vilna Gaon**, and others: Not only are the general outlines of world history contained in the Torah, but the precise details as well.

-**Vilna Gaon** in his commentary on Sifra d'Tzniusa: The rule is that all that was, is and will be, until the end of time, is included in the Torah from [the word] "Bereshit" to "I'eynei kol Yisrael." And not merely in a general sense, but including the details of every species and every person individually, and the most minute details of his life from the day of his birth until his death.

-Yet blessing for Torah scholar is separate from blessing for secular scholar. Why?

-Yet Midrash says: If someone tells you there is wisdom among the nations, believe him. If someone tells you there is Torah among the nations, do not believe him. [Eicha Rabba 2:13]

-So there is wisdom (knowledge) outside Torah.

-Commentator: As much as G-d has blessed mankind with the gates of wisdom, the Torah is G-d's special gift to the Jews. A Gentile may be able to master ancient Hebrew and Jewish texts, but he will never *really* get it.

-R Berel Wein: Knowledge alone does not make for "better" people. It only makes for smarter, perhaps more cunning and devious people. Only spirituality -- the messages and wisdom of G-d's Torah -- can profoundly change people. Intelligence and schooling do not change people's natures. Wisdom is a two-edged sword--may be used for good or for evil. To grow in spirit as well as wisdom requires a certain mindset, a sense of obligation to a Higher Authority and an absolute code of ethics -- what our mishna here refers to as "fear". Knowledge is dangerous. If we want it to endure we must know why we are pursuing it and where we intend to go with it.

But:

-Midrash: God looked into the Torah and created the world. [Genesis Rabbah 1:1]

-The next quote: 'According to the effort is the reward' implies that getting some items out of Torah may require a lot of effort - that all that's in the Torah is not obvious in every case.

Ten problematic sayings in Pirkei Avot
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4:7, 2:5 אל תפרוש מן הצבור,

Do not separate yourself from the community;

3:19 הכל צפוי, והרשות נתונה.

Everything is foreseen, yet the freedom of choice is given.

5:11 חרב באה לעולם

— על ענוי הדין, ועל עוות הדין, ועל המורים בתורה שלא כהלכה;

the sword of war comes to the world for the delay of justice, for the perversion of justice and for interpreting the Torah decision in opposition to the halachah;

5:25

בן חמש שנים למקרא, בן עשר שנים למשנה, בן שלש עשרה למצות, בן חמש עשרה לגמרא, בן שמונה עשרה לחפה, בן עשרים לרדוף, בן שלשים לבח, בן ארבעים לבינה, בן חמשים לעצה, בן ששים לזקנה, בן שבעים לשיבה, בן שמונים לגבורה, בן תשעים לשוח, בן מאה כאלו מת ועבר ובטל מן העולם.

A five-year-old begins Scripture; a ten-year-old begins Mishnah; a thirteen-year-old becomes obliged to observe the commandments; a fifteen-year-old begins the study of Gemara; an eighteen-year-old goes to the marriage canopy; a twenty-year-old begins pursuit [of a livelihood]; a thirty-year-old attains full strength; a forty-year-old attains understanding; a fifty-year-old can offer counsel; a sixty-year-old attains seniority; a seventy-year-old attains a ripe old age; an eighty-year-old shows strength; a ninety-year-old becomes stooped over; a hundred-year-old is as if he were dead, passed away and ceased from the world.

5:26 הפך בה והפך בה, דכלה בה;

Delve in it [the Torah] and continue to delve in it for everything is in it;

1:1 משה קבל תורה מסיני, ומסרה ליהושע, ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים, ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה.

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the Elders; the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly.

1:5 ואל תרבה שיחה עם

האשה. באשתו אמרו, קל וחמור באשת חבירו. מכאן אמרו חכמים: כל המרבה שיחה עם האשה — גורם רעה לעצמו, ובוטל מדברי תורה, וסופו יורש גיהנום.

and do not converse excessively with a woman. They said this even about one's own wife; surely it applies to another's wife. Consequently, the Sages said: Anyone who converses excessively with a woman causes evil to himself, neglects Torah study and will eventually inherit Gehinnom.

2:8 מרבה נשים, מרבה כשפים;

the more wives, the more witchcraft;

1:10 ושנא את הרבנות,

despise lordliness;

1:10 ואל תתודע לרשות.

and do not become overly familiar with the government.

2:3 הוו זהירין ברשות, שאין מקדיבין לו לאדם אלא לזרך עצמו; נראין כאוהבין בשעת הנאתו, ואין עומדין לו לאדם בשעת דחקו.

Beware of rulers, for they befriend someone only for their own benefit; they act friendly when it benefits them, but they do not stand by someone in his time of need.

3:2 הוי מתפלל בשלומה של

מלכות, שאלמלא מוצאה, איש את רעהו חיים בלעו.

Pray for the welfare of the government, because if they did not fear it, a person would swallow his fellow alive.

2:1 והוי זהיר במצוה

קלה כבמורה, שאין אמה יודע מתן שכרן של מצות.

Be as scrupulous in performing a 'minor' mitzvah as in a 'major' one, for you do not know the reward given for the mitzvos.

4:2 הוי רץ למצוה קלה, ובורח מן העברה;

שמצוה גוררת מצוה, ועברה גוררת עברה, ששכר מצוה מצוה, ושכר עברה עברה.

Run to perform even a 'minor' mitzvah, and flee from sin; for one mitzvah leads to another mitzvah, and one sin leads to another sin; for the consequence of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the consequence of a sin is a sin.