

SINAI BOUND

A Reflective Guide for *Pirkei Avot*



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Every year on Shavuot, as we prepare to re-experience revelation and the encounter at Sinai, the covenant between God and the Jewish people is renewed. It is a bond of mutual obligation between us and God, and also between each of us to one another, where we accept the responsibility of building communities of love and care. This year—as we make the journey from Pesah to Shavuot—we’ll begin the exciting process of developing our own B’nai Jeshurun community covenant to hold ourselves accountable: one rooted in the wisdom of our tradition, framed by the lived experience of our diverse community, and inspired by our voices.

To support you in this journey, we are excited to share **Sinai Bound: A Reflective Guide for Pirkei Avot**. Inside, you’ll find weekly selections from *Pirkei Avot (Teachings of the Sages)*,¹ one for each week between the last day of Pesah and the first day of Shavuot. Each text is followed by commentary²—both on the text itself and on the broader weekly theme—along with guiding questions for journaling, reflection, and discussion.

While the questions, prompts, and study texts in this journal are accessible to you to journey through on your own, we invite you to connect with a *hevruta* (study partner), family member, a few friends, or even a small group to explore and learn together.

Notes

- 1 *Pirkei Avot* is a compilation of ethical and moral teachings written between 200 BCE and 200 CE. Each section from *Pirkei Avot* is called a “mishnah” (plural: “mishnahyot”). All of the translations and verses of *Pirkei Avot* in this journal are taken from *Lev Shalem: Pirkei Avot*, published by the Rabbinical Assembly; please note that other translations may have these selections in different order.
- 2 When applicable, the specific section of the *Pirkei Avot* mishnah referenced by a commentator is bolded in the Hebrew version of the source text.

What are our obligations to one another?

Pirkei Avot 1:14

הוא הִיָּה אֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מֶה אָנִי. וְאִם לֹא עֲכָשְׁיוּ, אֵימָתִי.

[Hillel³ also] used to say: If I am not for myself, then who will be? But when I am [solely] for myself, then what [kind of person] am I? And if not now, then when?

Take a moment to write down any initial questions and reactions you might have to the mishnah.

“If not now, then when?”—Rambam 1:14⁴

And afterwards they went back and said, “If I do not acquire these traits now in the days of my youth, when will I acquire them? Not in the days of old age, as it is difficult to veer from [one’s] characteristics at that time because the acquisitions and the traits have hardened and settled—whether they are virtues or whether they are vices.

אמר אם לא אהיה אני בעצמי המעורר נפשי למעלה מי יעירה שאין לי מעורר מחוץ כמו שבארנו בפרק השני ואחר שברשותי להטות נפשי לאיזה צד שארצה איזה מעשה עשיתי מן המעשי' הטובים כאילו היה מחסר עצמו ואומר מה אני כלומר מה בא ממני ואינני שלם ואע"פ שעשיתי זה הענין: ואח"כ שב ואמר אם לא אקנה עתה המעלות בימי הבחרות מתי אקנה אותן בימי הזקנה לא כי קשה הוא לסור מהתכונות בעת ההיא מפני שהקנינים והמדות נתחזקו ונתישבו אם מעלות אם פחיתות

How does the Rambam’s teaching frame your understanding of the axiom from Pirkei Avot, “If not now, then when?” What does it mean for you on a personal level? On a communal level?

Notes

- Hillel’s aphorisms are often quoted throughout *Pirkei Avot*. He was both an individual living in the time of the Second Temple and the founder of a “house” of scholars, also known as Hillel.
- Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (c. 1138-c. 1204), also known as Rambam and Maimonides, was perhaps the greatest intellectual and spiritual figure of post-Talmudic Judaism.

“If I am not for myself...”—Rabbeinu Yonah⁵

He [Hillel] used to say: If I am not for me, who will be for me? If I don't rebuke myself to be diligent about the commandments, who is there to rebuke me and make me diligent? Since the prompting of others is [only] good on a temporary basis. But when the person motivates themselves each and every day, they increase their thoughts in order to do the work of God. And there is no forgetting before them when [their] heart desires [it], and it is a straight path in front of a person.

הוא היה אומר אם אין אני לי מי לי. אם לא אוכיח עצמי שאזרו עצמי במצות מי לי להוכיח ולזרזני.

When might it make more sense to self-rebuke? When might it be more helpful and appropriate to be held accountable by others? How do you understand our responsibilities to one another?

Mike Schur and Todd May—“What We Believe About Freedom”⁶

Philosophy requires us to interrogate our own beliefs in addition to the beliefs of others. But before we begin that interrogation, we need to locate an “ur-belief,” a principle that underlies or informs all the beliefs that come after. This is ours: As members of a society, we have obligations to others. Why do we need to believe in obligations to others in order to adequately approach many of our other beliefs? Because to believe adequately, we must first understand that our beliefs are inseparable from our responsibility for the safety and happiness of those with whom we share our planet. Without that, we will lose the possibility of a common social existence.



Ideas still percolating? Thoughts you want to share about this week's theme to

help shape the BJ Community Covenant? **Use this QR code or visit bj.org/vcj** to add your voice!

Do you have an “ur-belief” that informs all others? If so, how does that play out in your life? How does this belief interact with the values of your community? What are the obligations that we have to ourselves and each other as we strive to create a community of mutual commitment?

Notes

- 5 Rabbeinu Yonah is a commentary (1200-1260 CE) compiled by the author of *Shaarei Teshuvah*, focusing on the ethical and religious teachings learned from *Pirkei Avot*.
- 6 This article from May 24, 2021, is part of “The Big Ideas” series from *The New York Times*, in which writers respond to a simple question: What do we believe?

How do we show up?



Pirkei Avot 2:4

הלל אומר, אל תפּרש מן הצבור, ואל תאמין בְּעַצְמְךָ עד יום מוֹתְךָ, ואל תדין אֶת חֵבְרֶךָ עד שְׂתִגִּיעַ לְמִקוּמוֹ, ואל תאמר דְּבַר שְׂאֵי אֶפְשֶׁר לְשִׁמְעַע, שְׁסוּפוֹ לְהִשְׁמַע. ואל תאמר לְכַשְׂאֶפְנָה אֶשְׁנֶה, שְׁמָא לֹא תִפְנֶה.

Hillel liked to say: Do not separate [yourself] from the community; do not trust in yourself until the day of your death; do not judge your colleague until you come into his [or her] place; never speak a word that [you] could not [bear to] be heard [by others]—for in the end, it will [surely] be heard; and do not say “When I have leisure I will study,” lest you never have leisure.

Take a moment to write down any initial questions and reactions you might have to the mishnah.

What is the meaning of community for me?
What has community meant during the pandemic?

“Do not separate yourself from the community...”— Bartenura⁷

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).

אל תפּרש מן הצבור. אֶלָּא הִשְׁתַּתַּף בְּצַרְתָּם. שְׁכַל הַפּוֹרֵשׁ מִן הַצְּבוּר אֵינוֹ רוֹאֶה בְּנַחֲמַת הַצְּבוּר (תענית יא).

**What is your responsibility to the community? What is the community’s responsibility toward you?
How do you understand what Bartenura sees as the benefit of being part of a community? Is that what drives you to engage in communal life?**

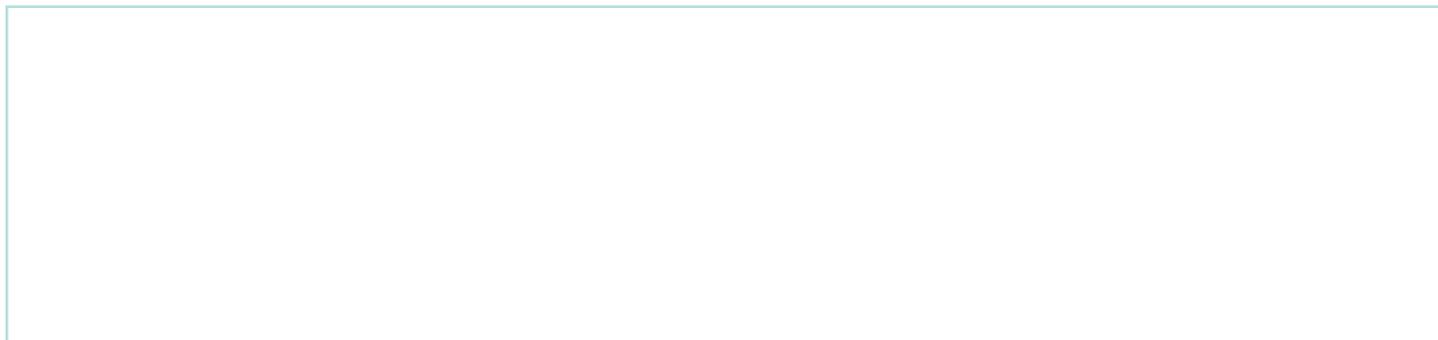
Notes

⁷ Rabbi Ovadiah ben Abraham of Bartenura (c. 1445-c. 1515), commonly known as Bartenura, wrote a commentary of the mishnah, mainly based on discussions in the Gemara and on the Rambam’s mishneh commentary.

Dr. Joshua Kulp—“English Explanation of Mishnah”⁸
“Do not separate yourself from the community...”

This also has been understood as the reason for praying together as a community. For when one prays by himself, they might ask for things that are detrimental to some. But the community only prays for things which are of benefit to everybody. A reed on its own is easily broken but a bundle of reeds standing together cannot be broken even by the strongest winds.

Who strengthens whom in a community? How can we use our presence to strengthen our community? What can this reading of “don’t separate yourself from the community” imply for your prayer practice? What emotions come up for you when you pray in a communal space?



Avot de Rabbi Natan 14:6⁹

When they all left, Elazar said: "I am going to Damasit, a beautiful place with good, sweet water." They said: "We will go to Yavneh, a place where there is an abundance of scholars who love the Torah." So he went to Damasit, the beautiful place with good, sweet water, and his reputation in Torah study diminished. And they went to Yavneh, the place where there was an abundance of scholars who all loved the Torah, and their reputations in Torah study grew.

כשיצאו מלפניו הוא אמר אלך לדמסית למקום
יפה ומים יפים ונאים והם אמרו נלך ליבנה למקום
שתלמידי חכמים מרובים אוהבים את התורה הוא
שהלך לדמסית למקום יפה ומים יפים ונאים
נתמעט שמו בתורה הם שהלכו ליבנה למקום
שת"ח מרובים ואוהבים את התורה נתגדל שמם
בתורה

Masekhet Shabbat 147b¹⁰

The Gemara relates that once Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh happened to come there, to Damasit, his Torah learning was forgotten....The Sages prayed and asked for God to have mercy on him, and his learning was restored. And that is what we learned in a mishnah that Rabbi Nehorai says: Exile yourself to a place of Torah and do not say that it will follow you, as if you are in a place of Torah, your colleagues will establish it in your hands, and do not rely on your understanding alone.

רבי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲרָף אִיְקָלַע לְהֵתָם, אִימְשִׁיף בְּתַרְיֵיהוּ
אִיעֶקֶר תְּלַמוּדֵיהָ. כִּי הָדַר אָתָּא, קָם לְמִיקְרֵי בְּסַפְרָא,
בְּעָא לְמִקְרֵי "הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם", אָמַר "הַחֹרֶשׁ הִיא
לָכֶם". בְּעוּ רַבָּנַן רַחֲמֵי עָלֶיהָ וְהָדַר תְּלַמוּדֵיהָ.

וְהֵינּוּ דִתְנִין, רַבִּי נְהוֹרַאי אוֹמֵר: הָיִי גוֹלָה לְמִקוֹם
תּוֹרָה וְאַל תֵּאמַר שֶׁהִיא תְּבֵא אַחֲרַיָּה, שְׁחַבְרֵיךָ
יְקַיְמוּהָ בְיָדְךָ, וְאַל בִּינְתָךְ אֶל תִּשְׁעֶן.

Continued

Notes

- 8 Dr. Joshua Kulp is one of the founders and the current Rosh Yeshiva (dean) of the Conservative Yeshiva. His entire explanation of the mishnah can be found on Sefaria.org.
- 9 Literally “Fathers of Rabbi Nathan” (c. 650-c. 950), the book is a companion volume to *Pirkei Avot*, presenting maxims of wisdom alongside explanations and stories.
- 10 This text (c. 450-c. 550 CE) is a section of the Talmud that discusses the 39 prohibitions of “work” on Shabbat.

Continued from previous page

In this story, all of the rabbis go to Yavneh, a place full of Torah learning—all except for Rabbi Elazar, who goes to Damasit, presumably because it is a beautiful place to live. But once he becomes separated from the other rabbis and from study, he loses his knowledge of Torah.

For these rabbis, the ultimate issue at stake is Torah learning in the context of community. What are the underlying themes we hold deeply that might get lost if we step away from the community? Why is Torah best learned and sustained in the context of community? Why might stepping away from the community cause us to lose those essential values?



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What are our values?

Pirkei Avot 3:17

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said: In the absence of Torah there can be no decency, [yet] in the absence of decency neither can there be any Torah. In the absence of wisdom there can be no [true] reverence, [yet] in the absence of reverence neither can there be any [real] wisdom. In the absence of knowledge there can be no insight, [yet] in the absence of insight neither can there be any [real] knowledge. In the absence of [adequate] sustenance there can be no Torah, [yet] in the absence of Torah neither can there be [adequate] sustenance.

He [also] used to say: What is one like when one's wisdom is greater than one's [good] deeds? [Such a person] is like a tree whose foliage is abundant but whose roots are few—[when] the wind comes and uproots it, [the wind] overturns it entirely, as it is said: "Such a person shall be like a lonely tree in an uninhabited desert that shall not see the coming of good, and it shall grow in an arid, uninhabited wilderness of salt flats" (Jeremiah 17:6). But what is one like when one's [good] deeds are greater than one's wisdom? [Such a person is] like a tree whose foliage may be scanty but whose roots are many [even if] all the world's winds come and blow [their hardest], they will not [ever] move it from its spot, as it is said, "Such a person shall be like a tree planted by the waters, that spreads its roots by a stream; it does not worry about excessive heat for its leaves are fresh. Nor does it find even a year of drought worrisome, for it will not [even under such dire circumstances] desist from bearing fruit" (Jeremiah 17:8).

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 קמח, אין תורה. אם אין תורה, אין קמח.

הוא היה אומר, כל שחכמתו מרבה ממעשיו, למה הוא דומה, לאילן שענפיו מרבין ושרשיו מעטין, והרוח באה ועוקרתו והופכתו על פניו, שנאמר (ירמיה יז) והיה כערער בערבה ולא יראה כי יבוא טוב ושכן חררים במדבר ארץ מלחה ולא תשב. אבל כל שמעשיו מרבין מחכמתו, למה הוא דומה, לאילן שענפיו מעטין ושרשיו מרבין, שאפלו כל הרוחות שבעולם באות ונושבות בו אין מזיזין אותו ממקומו, שנאמר (שם) והיה כעץ שתול על מים ועל יובל ישלח שרשיו ולא יראה כי יבא חם, והיה עלהו רענן, ובשנת בצרת לא ידאג, ולא ימיש מעשות פרי.

How do you understand the connection between the first and second parts of this text?

Take a moment to write down any initial questions and reactions you might have to the mishnah.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch¹¹—Chapters of the Fathers: Translation and Commentary

“Where there is no Torah...”

Without the Torah, without the spiritual guidance and moral ennoblement communicated by the Teaching of God, any endeavor to establish, maintain, and advance a civilized society on earth will be in vain. Conversely, without *derekh erez* [often translated as “proper behavior”] if an orderly way of life is not fostered, then the guidance and ennoblement inherent in the Torah lack a foundation on the earth.

What does it mean to “foster” the qualities mentioned in this mishnah—wisdom, understanding, knowledge, order, Torah—such that they form the foundation of your world? What other qualities lie at the foundation of our community?

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz¹²—Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary

This mishnah challenges us to exist within the cosmic tensions that pull at us every day and, ultimately, to find balance in our lives. Our actions do not take place in a vacuum. With everything we do, there is constant action and reaction, push and pull, calm and force. Between these extremes of action, there is balance. There is a centeredness that is hard to describe in words. It can only be felt.

What are the opposing or complementary values you hold together and refine in your individual lives and in your community in order to achieve a measure of wholeness? What are the values you want your community to be centered around? What are the essential Jewish values of our community? Which values are in tension with each other? How do they work together to enhance the larger whole?

Notes

11 Page 57, published 1967. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was a German Orthodox rabbi best known as the intellectual founder of the Torah im Derech Eretz school of contemporary Orthodox Judaism.

12 Pages 181-182, published 2018. Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz is a modern-day rabbi, activist, and author.

Rothko | Blue Over Red

Artist Mark Rothko was best known for his paintings of color fields with broad rectangular swaths of color. This particular piece is described in further detail below.



Use this QR code to see the painting.

Sotheby's¹³

Rothko conjures an emotional tension through his strategic use of color, the uplifting and warming glow evoked by orange and red contrasted sharply with the blue band; although the painting comprises overwhelmingly blazing hues, the blue asserts itself intensely, existing “over” the fields of red and orange. Such elemental colors harbor primal connotations of light, warmth, and the natural world, but inasmuch as they invoke liveliness and light, they also insinuate the inevitable cycle of dawn and dusk....

Museum of Modern Art¹⁴

In an interview about his art, Rothko once said: "I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on," he declared. "And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I can communicate those basic human emotions....If you... are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point."

Do the contrasting colors evoke big emotions for you as Rothko suggests? What are the “oranges” and “blues” that come together to make your life, community, and world whole? Can your world ever be whole? How can we balance and highlight the opposing and complementary personalities, ideas, and theology, in order to evoke “big emotions” in our community?



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Notes

13 This quote comes from a Sotheby's catalog describing the painting in preparation for a contemporary art auction.

14 More information about Mark Rothko and his work can be found at moma.org/artists/5047.

How do we honor the Torah of our community?

Pirkei Avot 4:6

Rabbi Yosei liked to say: All those who show honor to the Torah will be personally honored by other people, but those who treat the Torah profanely will be personally disrespected by other people.

רַבִּי יוֹסֵי אָמַר, כָּל הַמְּכַבֵּד אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, גּוֹפּוֹ מְכַבָּד עַל הַבְּרִיּוֹת. וְכָל הַמְּחַלְלֵל אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, גּוֹפּוֹ מְחַלְלֵל עַל הַבְּרִיּוֹת.

What does honor mean in this context? What does honor mean to you?

Take a moment to write down any initial questions and reactions you might have to the mishnah.

“Whoever honors the Torah...”—Bartenura¹⁵

There is no greater honor of the Torah than the one who expounds on all the missing letters and extra letters in the Torah, and gives a reason for each and every embellishment on [its letters]; to say that there is nothing purposeless in it.

כָּל הַמְּכַבֵּד אֶת הַתּוֹרָה. הַדּוֹרֵשׁ הַחֲסֵרוֹת וְהִתְרֻת שְׁבֵתוֹרָה וּמְרָאָה טַעַם עַל כָּל קוּץ וְקוּץ לֹא מְרָאָה שֶׁאֵין בָּהּ דְּבַר לְבִטּוּלָה, אֵין לָהּ כְּבוֹד תּוֹרָה גְּדוֹל מְזֵה.



Why might expounding on all the missing letters and giving reason for each embellishment be the greatest way to honor Torah? What are some of the ways you might go about seeking more meaning in Jewish life and community?

Notes

¹⁵ Rabbi Ovadiah ben Abraham of Bartenura (c. 1445-c. 1515), commonly known as Bartenura, wrote a commentary of the mishnah, mainly based on discussions in the Gemara and on the Rambam's mishnah commentary.

Rabbi Benay Lappe—¹⁶ “An Unrecognizable Jewish Future: A Queer Talmudic Talk”

I once heard my friend, Rabbi Lisa Edwards, teach something to her students that I’ll never forget. She said, “If donkeys read Torah, all of the donkey stories would jump out at them.” Right? Every time they’d see a donkey they’d go, “There’s me! There I am again!” All the donkey stories they’d see. All the donkey stories that we completely miss. When I began to learn Talmud, all the donkey stories, my donkey stories, started jumping out at me. And when I connected the dots, I saw a tradition that was smarter, more sophisticated, more courageous, compassionate, bolder, and more radical than anything I could have imagined. And I fell in love.

Today, for the first time in history, Queer Jews are learning Talmud as Queer Jews, and seeing in it things that our teachers never taught us.

Similar to Bartenura, Rabbi Benay Lappe discusses uncovering what’s missing—not just individual letters but entire missing narratives. In what context and spaces have you felt as though your narrative was missing? How do you go about strengthening and expounding upon your narrative and identity in Jewish spaces?

Rabbi Marc D. Angel—The Koren *Pirkei Avot*¹⁷: “Whoever honors the Torah...”

The ideal...is realized by one who views Torah study as a calling. One is imbued not only with a desire to learn and to teach Torah, but to live one’s life in a manner that overflows with love of Torah. It is not enough to teach about loving-kindness; one must act with loving-kindness. It is not enough to teach business ethics; one must fulfill the Torah’s standards in real life. For those whose Torah study leads to a job or a career, they may well succeed in their jobs and careers. But they lack the grander vision of those who view Torah study as a calling, an all-consuming mission to teach and to fulfill the teachings of the Torah through action.

How do we center Torah in our community so that not only its study, but also its dedication and pursuit, is “all consuming” in our practice?

Notes

16 ELI Talks video recording, 2014. Rabbi Benay Lappe is the founder and Rosh Yeshivah (dean) of SVARA, a yeshivah dedicated to the study of Talmud through the lens of queer experiences.

17 Pages 94-95, published 2015. Koren Publishers Jerusalem is an Israeli publisher of Jewish religious texts. Koren’s *Pirkei Avot* was first published in Hebrew and was translated into English by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, with commentary by Rabbi Mark D. Angel, rabbi emeritus at the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue.

Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum—*Pirkei Avot Lev Shalem Companion*

“Whoever honors the Torah...”¹⁸

The Torah is thus a generous, ancient teacher: whispering text, looking carefully at each student, recounting [their] history, asking existential questions of the student’s soul, and accompanying the student along every step throughout [their] life. One’s relationship with Torah mirrors one’s relationship with humanity itself as well as with oneself, and anyone who disparages the honor due the Torah is effectively undermining the foundations of existence, and will consequently be lost to the world.

In what ways does your relationship with Torah impact your relationship with humanity? How does honoring Torah play out in your spiritual life? How do we honor Torah in our relationships with one another? What does a community that truly honors Torah look like?

What is the "Torah" of our community?



Ideas still percolating? Thoughts you want to share about this week’s theme to help shape the BJ Community Covenant? **Use this QR code or visit bj.org/vcj to add your voice!**

Notes

18 Published by the Rabbinical Assembly, 2018, page 187. Rabbi Tamar Elad-Applebaum is co-founder of the Beit Midrash for Israeli Rabbis, a joint project of the HaMidrasha Educational Center for Israeli Judaism and the Shalom Hartman Institute.

How do we hold sacred disagreement?

Pirkei Avot 5:17

Every dispute [undertaken] for the sake of Heaven will endure in the end, but one that is not [undertaken] for the sake of Heaven will not endure in the end. What is [an example] of a dispute [undertaken] for the sake of Heaven? A dispute [of the kind undertaken by] Hillel and Shammai.¹⁹ And what is [an example of] a dispute not [undertaken] for the sake of Heaven? A dispute of the [kind undertaken by] Korah and his entire group [of followers].²⁰

כָּל מַחְלָקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם.
וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, אֵין סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם. אִיזוֹ
הִיא מַחְלָקֶת שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחְלָקֶת הַלֵּיל
וְשֶׁמַּאי. וְשֶׁאִינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם, זֶה מַחְלָקֶת קֶרַח וְכָל
עֲדָתוֹ.

Take a moment to write down any initial questions and reactions you might have to the mishnah.

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz—*Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*²¹

We dare not retreat in fear when we encounter challenges; and when we argue for what's right, we should do so knowing that our words are heard by the divine ear. While knowing that the world is not just black-and-white, and we must weather the storm of opposition if our ideals are to remain holy.

How can this image of a “divine ear” hearing our arguments influence our communal discourse? How does that framing inform what we identify as what’s right or wrong? Recognizing that living in community takes compromise, how do we honor our diversity and share our differences in order to be seen and grow (for the sake of Heaven)?

Notes

19 During the time of the Second Temple, Hillel and Shammai were two leaders of the high court in Jerusalem. The Tosefta, a collection of oral tradition, teaches us that even though they and their followers often disagreed, they still remained in community together, which is why the disagreements of Hillel and Shammai are held up as a model of good arguments. (Adapted from *Devash*, the Hadar Institute’s weekly magazine for children, September 26-October 2, 2021.)

20 See Numbers 16:1-35.

21 Pages 335-336, published 2018. Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz is a modern-day rabbi, activist, and author.

Rabbi Gordon Tucker—*Pirkei Avot Lev Shalem Companion*²²: “For the sake of Heaven...”

Here, the paradigmatic case of controversy “for the sake of Heaven” is that of the manifold differences between Hillel and Shammai on matters of Jewish law. And the paradigmatic case of controversy for a non-Heavenly purpose—that is, for the sole sake of human aggrandizement—is the mutiny of Korah and his cohorts against Moses.

What is it about any of the circumstances of any controversy—who you are disagreeing with, what you are disagreeing about, the tone and manner in which you are disagreeing with someone—that can make an argument for, or against, the sake of Heaven? Is there ever a useful place for ego in these discussions?

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchok Kook²³

There are those who err [in] thinking that world peace will not be built except by means of one form in points of view and qualities....Yet truthfully this is not so, for the true peace cannot come into the world except by means of the value of a peace of many faces. A peace of many faces means that all sides and approaches are seen; and it becomes clear how there is a place for them all, each one according to its worth, its place, and its content....Therefore Torah scholars increase peace, for just as they broaden, explicate, and give birth to new words of Torah, in [locating new] aspects out of different aspects in which there is multiplication and division of themes, in this they increase peace.

How do you understand a “peace of many faces”? Why is working to achieve a “peace of many faces” so difficult? When in your life do you find it to be most difficult? With whom? How can we as a community cultivate the spiritual practice of striving toward this?



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Notes

22 Published by the Rabbinical Assembly, 2018. Rabbi Gordon Tucker is a prominent, modern-day rabbi. He currently serves as the vice chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

23 Avraham Yitzchok Kook (September 1865–September 1, 1935), known as Rav Kook, was an Orthodox rabbi and the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine. He is considered to be one of the leaders of religious Zionism. This selection comes from his work, *Olat Ra-Ya*, Vol. I. page 330.



How do we get there?

Pirkei Avot 6:6

The Torah is greater than priesthood and royalty, for royal bearing is acquired through thirty qualities of character, and priestly blessings through twenty-four, but the Torah is acquired through forty-eight [distinct] ways. And these are they: Study, listening carefully with one’s ears, speaking clearly with one’s lips, heartfelt understanding, heartfelt insight, fear, reverence, humility, joy, serving sages, bonding with colleagues, argumentation with students, reconciliation of suffering, [study of] Scripture, [study of] Mishnah, minimizing sleep, minimizing conversation, minimizing [physical] pleasure, minimizing levity, minimizing sexual activity, patience, goodheartedness, faith in sages, acceptance of suffering, knowing one’s place, being content with one’s lot, making a fence around one’s words, foregoing pride in oneself, being beloved [by others], loving the Omnipresent, loving other people, loving righteousness....

גְּדוּלָהּ תוֹרָה יוֹתֵר מִן הַכֹּהֲנָה וּמִן הַמְּלָכוֹת, שְׁהַמְּלָכוֹת נִקְנִית בְּשָׁלְשִׁים מַעֲלוֹת, וְהַכֹּהֲנָה בְּעֶשְׂרִים וְאַרְבַּע, וְהַתּוֹרָה נִקְנִית בְּאַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁמֹנֶה דְבָרִים. וְאֵלוֹ הֵן, בְּתַלְמוּד, בְּשִׂמְיעַת הָאָז, בְּעִרְיַת שְׁפָתַיִם, בְּבִינַת הַלֵּב, בְּשִׁכְלוֹת הַלֵּב, בְּאִימָה, בְּיִרְאָה, בְּעֲנוּה, בְּשִׂמְחָה, בְּטַהֲרָה, בְּשִׁמוּשׁ חֻכְמַיִם, בְּדִקְדוּק חֻבְרַיִם, וּבְפִלְפּוּל הַתְּלַמִּידִים, בְּיִשׁוּב, בְּמִקְרָא, בְּמִשְׁנָה, בְּמַעוֹט סְחוּרָה, בְּמַעוֹט דְּרָף אֶרֶץ, בְּמַעוֹט תַּעֲנוּג, בְּמַעוֹט שִׁנְחָה, בְּמַעוֹט שִׁיחָה, בְּמַעוֹט שְׁחוּק, בְּאֶרֶף אַפַּיִם, בְּלֵב טוֹב, בְּאַמוּנַת חֻכְמַיִם, וּבְקִבְלַת הַיְסוּרִין, הַמְּכִיר אֶת מְקוֹמוֹ, וְהַשְׂמֵחַ בְּחֻלְקוֹ...
...בְּחֻלְקוֹ...

 Use this QR code to read the full text.

Take a moment to write down any initial questions and reactions you might have to the mishnah.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch—*Chapters of the Fathers: Translation and Commentary*²⁴ “Torah...is acquired...”

Now [acquiring] cannot be given the same interpretation with all [three of these]. Priesthood, for example, can never be “acquired”; it is a title which can be inherited by birth only. [Royalty,] too, is generally hereditary...The forty-eight [stages] enumerated here in connection with the Torah, however, are not prerogatives associated with the “crown” which the Torah affords, but “qualifications,” moral and spiritual talents and virtues, which [they] who strive after the crown of the Torah must acquire and employ through diligent labor upon [their] own personality before [they] can attain to the goal of the Torah.

Continued

Notes

24 Pages 103-104, published 1967. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch was a German Orthodox rabbi best known as the intellectual founder of the Torah im Derech Eretz school of contemporary Orthodox Judaism.

Continued from previous page

How do you perform “diligent labor” when it comes to your personality? Your moral and spiritual life? How do you cultivate the spiritual qualities listed here? What are the spiritual qualities and practices that help us to live the Torah of our community?

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz—*Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*²⁵

“But the Torah by forty-eight...”

This mishnah lists so many “qualities” needed for spiritual growth because learning is neither mere intellectual activity, nor an automatic route to enlightened bliss. It mirrors the rest of life—sometimes tedious and grueling, always arduous. One stays true to one’s purpose through the necessary engagement with one’s need to grow in one’s spiritual self....

What is the connection and correlation between spiritual growth and learning? If learning isn’t purely intellectual or a way to access enlightenment, what is it? In what other areas of your life do you find spiritual qualities (gratitude, humility, love) showing up in your experiences?

Notes

²⁵ Page 393, published 2018. Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz is a modern-day rabbi, activist, and author.

Below you'll find a selection of the "qualities" listed in Pirkei Avot 6:6. Circle the ones you perceive as your strengths, put a square around the ones you want to continue to cultivate, and use the extra space to take notes on any qualities that you feel a strong pull toward.

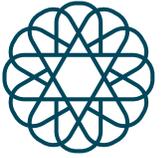
intelligent heart
generosity **study**
minimum of chatter taking no credit for oneself
joy asking and answering
understanding heart reverence
loving the clear thinking Omnipresent
being loved awe
loving fellow creatures
learning in order to teach minimum of frivolity
critical give-and-take with friends
attentive listening rejoicing in one's portion
humility



Looking to go deeper into some of these traits? Use this QR code to explore some sources for further study.



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Manager of Programs and Innovation, Center for Prayer and Spirituality, Spring 2022.

Rabbis:
J. Rolando Matalon
Felicia L. Sol
Rebecca Weintraub

Hazzan:
Ari Priven
Executive Director:
Colin A. Weil

Community House
270 West 89th Street
New York, NY
10024-1705

Tel: (212) 787-7600
Fax: (212) 496-7600
Online: www.bj.org

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