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Pirkei Avot: A Survey of Interpretation Through the Circles of Relationships

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Abstract

This capstone is a text immersion looking at select mishnayot from Pirkei Avot and select commentaries on those mishnayot throughout history through the lens of four different circles of relationships starting with the individual and moving outward to the world. These categories move from the personal through the stages of relationship building to the fully external relationship with the outside world.

This text immersion contains three primary elements. The first is a background paper on Pirkei Avot, including its history, structure, genre, and commentaries used in this capstone. The second is an analysis paper exploring the connections and findings from my translations and commentary research looking at how each commentator interprets the mishnayot during their time and how the commentaries and the categories relate to each other. The final element is my translations of the select mishnayot from Pirkei Avot and the commentary on those mishnayot in Avot D'Rabbi Natan and Rambam's commentary on Avot.

The goal of this text immersion is to look through a survey of interpretation at how each category is understood and explained in their time, as well as see the overarching connections throughout history. This is done through understanding the historical and social context of each commentary while analyzing their work.

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Background

In this section, I will be giving a background on Pirkei Avot, explaining its history, structure, and genre. I will then give a background on the commentaries of Pirkei Avot I will be using for my text immersion, and lastly, in the next paper, I will address connections that have arisen from my translations of commentaries, looking at how each commentator interprets the mishnayot during their time.

History

Pirke Avot appears in our codified Mishnah today as the second to last tractate of Seder Nezikin, or damages. Many scholars believe its composition to be Mishnaic in origin.¹ Pirkei Avot has been found in four important complete Mishnah manuscripts, as well as Maimonides' Mishnah, and has been mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud. In addition, existing manuscripts of the Talmud and other early rabbinic works refer to mishnayot from Avot with the same terminology they use to refer to Mishnaic citations. In Bava Kama 30a, tractate Avot is also mentioned by name. Although these manuscripts are written after the Mishnaic period, finding evidence of Avot in these manuscripts strengthens the belief that Avot is Mishnaic in origin. Because early Amoraim recognized Avot as a tractate of the Mishnah, according to Amram Tropper, traditionalists conclude that Avot was most likely codified during the codification of the Mishnah as a whole.² In addition, the language of Avot is majority Mishnaic Hebrew and the

¹ Amram Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography: Tractate Avot in the Context of the Graeco-Roman Near East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 89.

² Tropper, *Wisdom, Politics, and Historiography: Tractate Avot in the Context of the Graeco-Roman Near East*, 90.

style of writing is simple and straightforward which points to an earlier redaction date within or immediately following the tannaitic period.³

There are many different interpretations for the title of the tractate, “Avot.” Some say that Avot is a shortened form of either “avot ha-olam,” the fathers of the universe, or “avot harishonim,” the first fathers. Avot could also come from the word “av” which represents an important person.⁴

Traditionalists have assumed that Pirkei Avot was edited with the rest of the Mishnah by Rabi, Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi. Some scholars, however, believe that Avot was edited in the early third century, during the time of Rabi, or maybe his son. They base their assertions on the text’s mentions of later sages.⁵ In his book, *Pirke Aboth, The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers*, Herford argues that Pirkei Avot was compiled by Rabi and was placed in the Mishnah to serve as an epilogue of sorts. He argues that the Mishnah at the time was not codified into the order we know today, and Seder Nezikin could have been the last order of the Mishnah, making Pirkei Avot one of the last tractates of the entire Mishnah.⁶

The authorship or editorship of Avot is unknown, but scholars argue that it was edited by one body, either an individual or an editorial team, from many individually authored statements. This is because Avot is viewed as an anthology of rabbinic sayings, rather than the sayings of one single author or editor. Amram Tropper explains that it could have been created randomly piece by piece, statement by statement, chapter by chapter, as different literary materials came

³ Tropper, 98.

⁴ M. B. Lerner, “The Tractate Avot,” in *The Literature of the Sages: Part I*, ed. Shmuel Sarfrai and Peter J. Tomson (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1987), 263.

⁵ Tropper, 102.

⁶ Herford, *Pirke Aboth, The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers*, (New York: Schocken Books Inc, 1962), 9-10.

together. He also suggests that there might not have even been a single original edition of Avot and if it had existed, it might be lost to us.⁷ In addition, there are sayings from multiple time periods which could show that some of Avot might have gone through many different editions. However, Tropper argues that despite all this evidence, he believes that a single rabbinic editor, or editor team, selected these sayings written by different authors, and arranged them together in an organized fashion sometime in the early third century.⁸ R. Travers Herford agrees with Tropper, writing that Avot was arranged by one editor or compiler to create the order we now read, but they are not all written by one author.⁹

Whoever the editor was, they hoped to emphasize the importance of Rabi and sages in general.¹⁰ They presented the teachers of Torah as wise men, reinforcing their teachings and offering compelling motives to follow their lessons. The teachings of the sages were also viewed as evidence of the rabbis' moral sensitivity which was seen by the rabbis as an important value.¹¹

Many scholars have sought to interpret why Pirkei Avot exists. Maimonides sees Avot within the framework of Seder Nezikin as a "moral and spiritual guide for magistrates." Seder Nezikin includes many tractates related to civil and criminal law and this could have been meant to serve as the ethical teachings to support the sages' rulings.¹²

⁷ Tropper, 17.

⁸ Tropper, 19, 102.

⁹ R. Travers Herford, *Pirke Aboth, The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers*, 2.

¹⁰ Tropper, 105.

¹¹ Tropper, 50.

¹² Lerner, "The Tractate Avot," 273.

Today, Pirkei Avot is included in the traditional Jewish prayer book to “provide matter for edification in connection with worship.”¹³ It is also seen as one of the most important texts for study regarding rabbinic teaching and theology.¹⁴

Structure/Theme

Pirkei Avot as we see it today is made up of six chapters, however, it seems that the sixth chapter was a later addition during the Geonic period.¹⁵

Individual scholars organize and divide the original 5 chapters of Avot into structures and themes. For example, Rosen-Zvi divides Avot into three main sections which are easy to understand: the chain of tradition in chapters one and two, a list of statements of sages chronologically arranged in chapters three and four, and then a final list of numerical sayings in chapter five.¹⁶

Chapter one includes the succession of the oral Torah, passed down from generation to generation starting with Moses and continuing through the beginning of the first century CE.¹⁷ The content of this chapter includes wisdom instructions, or ethical maxims, attributed to different teachers by name.¹⁸ The number three can also be seen throughout chapter one. Many

¹³ Herford, 12-13.

¹⁴ Lerner, 273.

¹⁵ Tropper, 21

Lerner, 274.

¹⁶ Ishay Rosen-Zvi, “The Wisdom Tradition in Rabbinic Literature and Mishnah Avot,” in *Tracing Sapiential Traditions in Ancient Judaism*, ed. Hindy Naiman, Jean-Sebastien Rey, and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2016), 181-182.

¹⁷ Lerner, 264.

Herford, 5.

¹⁸ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Scholastic Rabbinism* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 13.

Herford, 6.

of the sayings in this chapter include tripartite sayings where each saying has three phrases or three things that the given author said.¹⁹ This shows chapter one has a literary structure, relating to the format of the sayings, as well as an organizational and linear structure, regarding the chronological order of the authors.

Chapter two continues the chain of tradition with a statement attributed to Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi. These sayings seem to be longer than the sayings in chapter one and they also highlight the number five in different ways. Thematically, chapter two focuses on the paths of evil versus righteousness and on perfecting one's character.²⁰

Chapter three focuses on the importance of Torah study.²¹ Chapter three also has a shift from wisdom instructions to wisdom sentences, moving away from commands or instructions to sayings.²² This chapter also moves away from a chronological sequence or rule of who is included.²³

Chapter four diversifies the thematic collection of sayings compared to the previous chapters. It continues the theme of Torah from chapter three, but it also includes themes of sin, judgment, and social relations. In addition, chapter four is less unified than the previous chapters, leading scholars to believe that it was also edited less than the other chapters, showing that the editing body spent less time organizing this chapter into a cohesive structure.²⁴

Chapter five changes the structure. It is organized according to enumeration. The first sayings are based on the number ten, with later statements orienting around the number seven

¹⁹ Tropper, 26.

²⁰ Tropper, 27.

²¹ Rosen-Zvi, "The Wisdom Tradition in Rabbinic Literature and Mishnah Avot," 182. Lerner, 266.

²² Saldarini, 13.

²³ Herford, 7.

²⁴ Saldarini, 14.

and then four.²⁵ This is the only chapter that does not attribute any of the sayings to sages.²⁶ It then adds some miscellaneous sayings at the end, presumably ones that had not found a place somewhere else within the book.²⁷

Chapter six, called *Kinyan Torah* or the “Acquisition of Torah,” includes teachings praising the Torah and those who study it. This chapter was added on at a later date, likely during the Geonic Period when it was customary to study Avot and this extra chapter on Shabbat at the synagogue.²⁸

Avot is primarily concerned with two general categories, Torah and good behavior.²⁹ Many of the sayings are instructional by nature, using words in the imperative tense.³⁰

Unlike other tractates of the Mishnah, the chapters of Avot have not been organized around topics or concepts, but rather, the statements within the chapters seem to follow the chronological order of the sages they are attributed to. However, chapter five is not organized in chronological order, rather it is a series of lists organized in descending order of the size of the list with no explicit reasoning as to why.³¹

Wisdom literature

Most scholars place Pirkei Avot in the category of Wisdom literature.

Wisdom literature is a category that is hard to define. According to Encyclopedia Judaica, Wisdom literature is a “way of thinking and an attitude to life that emphasized experience,

²⁵ Saldarini, 15.

²⁶ Tropper, 31.

²⁷ Herford, 7.

²⁸ Lerner, 274.

²⁹ Saldarini, 21.

³⁰ Saldarini, 10.

³¹ Lerner, 272.

reasoning, morality, and general human concern.” It is interested in individuals and their social relationships rather than a large religious group as a whole; however, it does have religious elements. “The wisdom teachers sought to provide rules and examples of personal morals and, on a theoretical level, meanings and values through reflection, speculation, and debate.”³²

Avot is unique in that unlike other tractates full of halachic legal content, Avot mostly includes non-halachic, aggadic material. It also consists of more stylized language than the normal Mishnaic prose, and many traditional wisdom literary forms.³³ Direct language offering advice and guidance as well as usage of the second person and numerical groupings are also prevalent in Pirkei Avot.³⁴ Finally, it includes many essential wisdom themes, including seeking life’s secrets and having a social responsibility for justice.³⁵

Pirkei Avot also exhibits characteristics of specifically biblical wisdom literature. It is a collection of distinct sayings that are put together and given some type of form and theme. However, Avot also has its own characteristics that are not seen in Biblical wisdom literature such as the tripartite form when a saying is made up of three clauses.³⁶

Rosen-Zvi argues that Avot exists as both wisdom literature and rabbinic literature. It is part of the Mishnah and it was placed there on purpose, as the Mishnah is one of the most structured books in Jewish literature.³⁷ Lerner also explains that although the sayings and teachings in Avot have characteristics of wisdom literature, many of them also are derived from

³² Robert B.Y Scott, “Wisdom; Wisdom Literature,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. vol. 21 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 95.

³³ Tropper, 51 & 61.

³⁴ Lerner, 268-269.

³⁵ Tropper, 58.

³⁶ Saldarini, 18.

³⁷ Rosen-Zvi, 189.

the Tanakh.³⁸ This further proves Rozen-Zvi's argument that Avot can exist as both wisdom literature and rabbinic literature simultaneously.

Commentaries

There have been many commentaries on Avot throughout its history, starting with Avot d'Rabbi Natan.

Avot d'Rabbi Natan (ARN) is not a direct commentary built around Avot going line by line, rather it includes much of Pirkei Avot in one form or another. Not all of Avot is included and not all that is included has a larger explanation or commentary.³⁹ For example, in ARN there are mishnayot from Avot that are not found at all, there are mishnayot that are in ARN just as they are in Avot, and there are mishnayot that are in ARN which have a larger commentary that expands the original mishnah text. Additionally, ARN contains aggadic material in addition to ethical sayings that are not directly related to Avot but in the category of aggadic midrash, including traditions, stories, and folklore.⁴⁰

ARN exists today in two different versions, known as Version A and Version B. Version A has been printed as a minor tractate of the Babylonian Talmud and therefore it is the more well-known version. Version B was first discovered and published by Solomon Shechter in 1887 and is not as well-known.⁴¹ Scholars have noted that both versions of ARN are based on a

³⁸ Lerner, 268.

³⁹ Saldarini, 1.

⁴⁰ M. B. Lerner, "The External Tractates," in *The Literature of the Sages: Part I*, ed. Shmuel Sarfrai and Peter J. Tomson (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1987), 369.
Menahem Kister, "Avot de-Rabbi Nathan," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. vol. 2 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 750.

⁴¹ Saldarini, 1.

Menahem Kister, "Avot de-Rabbi Nathan," 750.

version of the Mishnah before the official codification of the text we see today. This is seen by differences in the Avot text between our current mishnah and ARN as well as the omission of large chunks of text that are the Avot text we know today.⁴²

Scholarship has doubted that Rabbi Natan authored ARN, it is most likely the work of multiple authors and potentially completed in stages, although it does have an overall organizational structure.⁴³ There is also no universal date of when ARN was completed, however, most of the content is Tannaitic material.⁴⁴

ARN Version A, which is the more well-known version and the version used and translated for this text immersion, has 40 chapters which can be roughly divided into six sections.⁴⁵ Its themes ARN are similar to those in Avot, focusing on the study of Torah and how to behave ethically.⁴⁶ It also shows us evidence of its social milieu, the rabbinic school as its message is directed toward scholastic life.⁴⁷

Many commentaries were then written on Avot in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Era. The two that this text immersion focuses on are the commentaries by Moses Maimonides (Rambam) and Obadiah ben Jacob (Sforno).

Rambam was born in 1135 in Cordoba, Spain and was forced to leave his home at a young age. He traveled with his family for many years through Spain and Israel, eventually settling in Cairo, Egypt. He was a philosopher and physician for the royal family and more as well as a rabbinic authority who wrote many well-known rabbinic works. These works included

⁴² M. B. Lerner, "The External Tractates," 370-371.

⁴³ Saldarini, 135.

⁴⁴ Lerner, 378.

⁴⁵ Saldarini, 25.

⁴⁶ Lerner, 373.

⁴⁷ Saldarini, 135.

his commentary on the Mishnah which was completed in 1168 and included his commentary on Avot.⁴⁸

Sforno was born in Cesena, Italy in 1470 and lived in Rome and Bologna throughout his life. He was also a philosopher and a physician and a confidant of higher authority as well as a Torah commentator. He published commentaries on He lived throughout the time of the Renaissance which impacted his work greatly. His commentary on Avot, Machzor Roma, was published in 1540, however, it never became as popular as other commentaries on Avot by his contemporaries.⁴⁹

Commentaries continued to be written throughout history into the Contemporary Modern Era and today. The three contemporary commentaries that this text immersion focused on are Ethics of the Sages Pirkei Avot Annotated & Explained by Rabbi Rami Shapiro (2006), Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary by Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz (2018), and Pirkei Avot Lev Shalem with commentaries by Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum (2018).

⁴⁸ Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, Jacob I. Dienstag, Arthur Hyman, Suessmann Muntner, and Bernard R. Goldstein, "Maimonides, Moses," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, edited by Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. vol. 13. (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 381-382.

⁴⁹ Raphael Pelcovitz, *Sforno: Commentary on Pirkei Avos* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1996), vii & ix.

Analysis

For this project, I will do a deep dive into four categories of mishnayot in Pirkei Avot how they are interpreted and understood in Jewish tradition through a survey of commentaries. I am interested to see how Pirkei Avot speaks to an individual in the world through these categories throughout our history.

The four categories include personal relationships and growth, interpersonal relationships, teacher-student relationship, and ethical relationships with the world. I have selected 8-10 mishnayot for each category and looked at how the mishnayot were interpreted in the historical and social context of the commentators.

The categories start with the individual, with personal relationships and growth, *ben adam l'atzmo*. This category includes mishnayot that explain ways to better the self and the qualities needed to be a respectful and responsible person. The next category expands one step beyond the individual to a person's relationships with others, *ben adam l'chavero*. This category includes mishnayot that explain how to interact with your fellow human and how to be a good person to others. Within interpersonal relationships, there is a special circle, a teacher's relationship with their student and a student's relationship with their teacher. This category includes mishnayot on what makes a teacher-student relationship and how to behave and interact when in that relationship. The last circle of relationships is the broadest and includes an individual's ethical relationship with the greater world. This category includes mishnayot on action, and how to interact within the greater world for good.

Each commentator was a product of their time in terms of worldview, theology, and focus. Therefore, their points of view and frameworks differ.

For instance, the rabbinic period and medieval commentators focused to a large extent on God and Torah. ARN has a similar focus to Pirkei Avot, focusing on Torah and how to behave ethically in the rabbinic time period. Sforno, writing in the late medieval period, focuses much of his commentary on God and Torah. Rambam, also writing in the medieval period, looks both toward God and Torah as well as starting to shift the focus toward moral attributes that can be learned from Pirkei Avot.

The contemporary commentators shifted their focus significantly toward a larger worldview and humankind. Rabbi Rami Shapiro sees Pirkei Avot as a book that is for all of humanity, teaching us how to be holy. Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz also interprets Avot in a more holistic way, looking at the larger world with a focus on spirituality. Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, an Israeli rabbi writing her commentary in Hebrew, focuses on humankind, especially what it means to be both a student and a teacher.

Personal Relationships and Growth

The first category is personal relationships and growth. This category focuses on the individual and includes mishnayot on what it means to foster positive personal qualities and look for ways to grow as an individual. In other words, this category is about learning how to cultivate the best character traits possible. This category includes Avot 1:14, 2:1, 3:4, 3:9, 4:1, 4:6, 4:21, 5:7, and 6:4b (6:5).⁵⁰

Avot 1:14 is one of the most popular Hillel quotes. Our commentators see it based on a person and their work. Initially, it was focused on the world to come for ARN and Sforno. ARN explained that this mishnah is saying that no one else can help a person in the world to come, one

⁵⁰ Translations of all the mishnayot can be found in the translation section.

must acquire all their merit in the present world. Sforno adds to that saying that a person cannot acquire a portion of the world to come through someone else, they must earn it themselves. Rambam and Shapiro see this mishnah a little differently through the lens of good traits and caring for yourself. Rambam explains that this mishnah implies that you need to acquire virtuous traits earlier in life because it is harder the older you get. Shapiro, coming from a modern mindset, says that this mishnah means caring for your body, heart, and mind and that no one else can do it for you. Yanklowitz adds to Rambam and Shapiro explaining that this mishnah is trying to find a proper balance between self-preservation and self-sacrifice and we need to be gentle with ourselves because a person cannot transform overnight.⁵¹

The first half of Avot 2:1 about the straight path is interpreted in two ways, the first is as an occupation or a job which is seen in the medieval commentaries, and the second is as the question of what is the “right” way to live as seen in the contemporary commentaries. This shift shows the shift in focus and in the scope of the question, starting with a smaller scope and a more literal answer into a larger more existential question.

Rambam sees the straight path as good work because you acquire an important disposition and have good manners. Sforno writes that the right path is the one that brings joy to the one who takes it, and a person should choose an occupation where they earn the esteem of their fellow person since they will have more success.⁵²

⁵¹ Shmuly Yanklowitz, *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary* (New York, NY: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2018), 44.

ARN Chapter 12.

Sforno and Raphael Pelcovitz, *Sforno: Commentary on Pirkei Avos* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1996), 21.

Rambam on Avot 1:14.

Rami Shapiro, *Ethics of the Sages: Pirke Avot - Annotated & Explained* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2006), 14.

⁵² Rambam on Avot 2:1. Sforno and Raphael Pelcovitz, *Sforno: Commentary on Pirkei Avos*, 32.

Moving away from the focus of work, Shapiro sees the right path as one that “honors the senses, celebrates love, promotes reason, affirms diversity, and recognizes unity.” Yanklowitz however, looking at this mishnah from a global modern lens, explains that this mishnah poses the big question, “what is the good of life? What is the virtuous path?” He says that living a good life is asking this question over and over trying to find the straight path. Finally, Elad-Appelbaum believes that this mishnah assumes that a person can identify for themselves a proper path in the world, and they have the ability to choose that path. Not everyone knows what the straight path is, and even more, people might not have the ability to choose that path at every moment in their life. Elad-Appelbaum ends by bringing this concept back towards God, saying that as Jews we should seek out “the path of uprightness that will lead to dwelling in God’s presence.”⁵³

The second half of this mishnah is about commandments and reward/punishment. Rambam and Sforno explain this section in direct relation to God, showing their medieval interpretation of a God who directly gives reward and punishment to a person. Rambam says that you don’t know for sure which commandments are important commandments, meaning that you surely need to keep them, and which are less important commandments according to God so everyone needs to be aware of all commandments. Sforno explains that God’s punishment for a transgression might not come right away so know that all are recorded in a book and a reward or punishment will come later. Yanklowitz and Shapiro, contemporary commentators, shift their focus, asserting that actions or non-actions matter. Yanklowitz says that every moment matters, which is why it is recorded in the Book of Life. Shapiro looks at the non-actions saying that

⁵³ Rami Shapiro, *Ethics of the Sages: Pirke Avot - Annotated & Explained*, 18.
 Shmuly Yanklowitz, *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*, 63-64.
 Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, and Gordon Tucker, *Pirkei Avot Lev Shalem: The Wisdom of Our Sages*, ed. by Martin S. Cohen (New York, NY: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2018), 57.

everything has consequences, including the non-actions, and we should think about what will benefit others and what will not cost others. This is a more modern approach to Jewish thought, that the actions of an individual matter, which is something that the medieval commentators did not think about in the same way. Elad-Appelbaum goes in a different direction, departing from the importance of reward, saying that focusing on reward is a negative thing and people should avoid it, rather one should establish a partnership with God who is beyond a reward/punishment compensation system.⁵⁴

During the time of the Mishnah, nighttime is to be feared and travel was dangerous. In the commentaries on Avot 3:4, the commentators from every era emphasize that this time is best used for God or Torah. Sforno was the one who explained it most specifically, quoting Psalms 119:126, explaining that creating a time for God and Torah will revive one's soul. Shapiro explains that you can repeat the name of God to separate from bad thoughts or behaviors when your mind wanders instead of chasing your negative thoughts. Yanklowitz explains that in these situations we need to focus on God and faith to help us get back up and overcome challenges. In this mishnah, the translation of nefesh could be either "life" or "soul." In the past, these things could have been a matter of life or death, but Elad-Appelbaum translates it as "soul," explaining that it isn't a person's life at risk, but there are "spiritual dangers" concerning the vulnerability of darkness.⁵⁵

Sforno gives us an explanation for what he believes the keywords mean in Avot 3:9. He explains that the fear of sin deters people from harming others, wisdom refers to social and communal conduct, and good deeds refer to actions performed for the benefit of others. Each

⁵⁴ Rambam on Avot 2:1. Sforno, 33. Yanklowitz, 64. Shapiro, 18. Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, and Gordon Tucker, *Pirkei Avot Lev Shalem: The Wisdom of Our Sages*, 59.

⁵⁵ Sforno, 71. Shapiro, 40. Yanklowitz, 137. Elad-Appelbaum, 121-122.

contemporary commentator focuses on wisdom and how wisdom is understood. Shapiro says that “wisdom is not the supreme good and is held second to just engagement.” Yanklowitz sees wisdom as a means to an end, not necessarily the end itself. He says that wisdom “aspires to take the best elements of the world and turn them back into points of spiritual light.” Elad-Appelbaum writes that wisdom cannot be counted on as a source of meaning, someone needs to develop a moral conscience before attaining wisdom, or else the wisdom will be nothing. In addition, she writes that wisdom also has no value if it isn’t used for action.⁵⁶

Each commentator interprets the next mishnah, Avot 4:1, in their own way. Sforno quotes Jeremiah 9:22-33: “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom; Let not the strong man glory in his strength; Let not the rich man glory in his riches. But only in this should one glory: In his earnest devotion to Me.” He explains that this quote shows the wise, strong, and rich should only feel joy if they are preceded by the understanding of God’s greatness because then they can use those exclusively for the honor of God. Sforno is focused on the honor of God and how this mishnah explains that honoring God allows one to have all the other traits.⁵⁷

Shapiro interprets each section differently, without connecting them to each other. The one section where he is similar to Sforno is about honor, saying “honoring the One honors all, and honoring all honors the One; there is no separation between the two.” He also says that to be happy one should observe others and learn what brings peace and what brings conflict, and that wealth is not based on what you can hold, but on what you can receive. Yanklowitz sees these all as noble values, including “humility, spiritual introspection, and honoring the other instead of oneself.” He sees this mishnah as teaching the ethics of relationships. Finally, Elad-Appelbaum sees this as an explanation for how people can “best negotiate their life-journey in the world.”

⁵⁶ Sforno, 78. Shapiro, 46. Yanklowitz, 155. Elad-Appelbaum, 138.

⁵⁷ Sforno, 102.

She interprets this mishnah as saying that before everything, a person should develop a sense of themselves as a learner which is the opposite of what society tells us to be. Therefore, everyone and everything around us becomes our teacher, meaning that everyone is both a teacher and a learner.⁵⁸

Again, Sforno's commentary on 4:6 is focused on God, which is characteristic of the rabbinic and medieval period commentaries. He illustrates that by honoring the Torah one brings others closer to serve God, and by dishonoring the Torah one takes people farther from God. The three contemporary commentaries see this about other people rather than about God, transitioning into the modern lens of the world and humanity. Yanklowitz interprets this by saying "being a person of valor is the essence of what it means to 'honor the Torah.'" He sees this mishnah as an explanation of what it means to honor and be honored. Shapiro connects honoring Torah to engaging others with "justice, compassion, and humility". He articulates that one honors Torah by embodying Torah's wisdom which is done by respecting others which is done by showing others "justice, compassion, and humility. He continues by saying that anything less than these actions dishonors both a person and Torah. Elad-Appelbaum teaches that Torah is a special teacher and instructor for human beings. She explains that if one allows Torah into their lives they will always be both a scholar and a student and will be honored by being mentioned in others' conversations about Torah.⁵⁹

Both Rambam and Sforno regard the traits in Avot 4:21 as having the potential to drive one away from either God or Torah. According to Rambam, if someone has even one of these traits, they will lose their faith in Torah and not be able to have "rational or moral virtues."

⁵⁸ Shapiro, 60. Yanklowitz, 189-190. Elad-Appelbaum, 171-172.

⁵⁹ Sforno, 113. Yanklowitz, 214. Shapiro, 64. Elad-Appelbaum, 186.

According to Sforno, these traits have no limit and they do not follow the idea of “it is a time to act for God.”⁶⁰ He says that instead, they prevent a person from attaining eternal life.⁶¹

The three contemporary commentators shift their focus and understand this mishnah as a way of self-improvement. Yanklowitz interprets this mishnah as showing how to be present in this world, which is to “ground oneself in one’s own situation.” Wanting something that someone else has does not allow for one to be present, instead, they are focusing on something else. Shapiro explains that these traits are examples of a narrow mind and a narrow mind sees the world as other, or something to conquer and defeat. Elad-Appelbaum interprets this mishnah as a directive for teachers to an important task in their lives, working on their own personal qualities which can be accomplished through self-improvement.⁶²

Mishnah 5:7 provides seven attributes of a wise person and then explains that the opposite of those attributes exists in a *golem*, an unfinished person. Rambam uses this mishnah as an opportunity to explain five different types of people, the *boor* (“empty”), *am ha’aretz*, *golem* (“unfinished”), wise person, and pious person. Both ARN and Sforno give examples of biblical characters who either embody or don’t embody each phrase of the mishnah. ARN gives examples of people who exhibit the characteristics of a wise person. Sforno however, mostly gives examples of biblical characters who acted in ways that display the characteristics of a *golem*. Sforno also explains that this mishnah encourages us to not follow the ways of an uncultivated person because those ways “deter a person from attaining the intended goal of mankind.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Psalms 119:126.

⁶¹ Rambam on 4:21. Sforno, 137.

⁶² Yanklowitz, 274. Shapiro, 74. Elad-Appelbaum, 220.

⁶³ Rambam on Avot 5:7. ARN Chapter 37. Sforno, 153-157.

Yanklowitz interprets this mishnah as saying to become a cultivated person, the opposite of a *golem*, an unfinished person, one needs to know their potential. He also explains that he believes a cultivated person is someone who is intentional in both their relationships and their communication. He continues explaining that one trait of a learned person is to convey large ideas, but another important trait is the ability to take a step back and listen to those with more experience than them. Elad-Appelbaum explains that “a wise person is [raw] material carefully shaped and refined, and elevated to the supernal idea hiding within it, while the dolt is that material left unrefined and unshaped.” For her, all these qualities relate to a person’s ability to direct themselves away from their instinct toward something that is more refined, “to grow from raw material to well-crafted form.”⁶⁴

For Avot 6:3, all of our commentators explain that the employer is God. Yanklowitz explains that God will make sure that those who missed out or experiences an injustice will be paid. Shapiro shares that the theme of “effort is rewarded, not the ends” is reflected throughout Pirkei Avot. He acknowledges that even though not everyone will become a sage, everyone can seek wisdom, and the effort you put in is the reward.⁶⁵

The category of a personal relationship and personal growth is seen in Avot as something to work on in order to be the best version of yourself and for Avot, that includes acquiring positive traits such as wisdom, and ignoring negative traits such as jealousy and desire. Avot also explains that to be the best version of yourself you need to honor those around you as well as Torah which connects this relationship with the next two in this project.

For the rabbinic and medieval commentators, much of this comes in relation to God, Torah, commandments, and personal merit. For example, Rambam expands on the concept of

⁶⁴ Yanklowitz, 304-306. Elad-Appelbaum, 248.

⁶⁵ Yanklowitz, 387. Shapiro, 120.

following the commandments as a way of personal growth in his commentary on Avot 2:1. The mishnah says, “Be careful with a lenient commandment as with a strict one, for you don’t know the gift of the reward of the commandments.” Rambam explains that one should be aware of all commandments because one doesn’t know which are the most important and therefore, one needs to be aware of all commandments and keep them successfully. In his commentary on Avot 1:14, both ARN and Sforno explain that it is up to a person to do the work in order to merit their portion in the world to come. For me, this means that it is up to a person to be the best person they can be in this world. Whether or not one believes in the world to come or not today, it is still important to act in the best way possible and strive to be the best person one is able to be.

Contemporary commentators see this in relation to self-care, self-knowledge, ethics, and values. They use their modern lens to see Avot as explaining what it means to them to become the best version of oneself and to be a good human being in the world. Rabbi Shapiro interprets Avot 1:14 differently than both ARN and Sforno, saying that Hillel’s quote means that one needs to care for one’s body, heart, and mind and that no one else can do it for you. Rabbi Shapiro sees this mishnah in relation to self-care and ensuring that you are in the best state that you can be, physically, emotionally, and mentally. In his commentary on 4:1, Rabbi Yanklowitz explains that this mishnah is teaching ethics and values such as humility and spiritual introspection. Yanklowitz implies that having strong ethics and values as well as self-knowledge helps you become the best person you can be in this world.

For me, I believe that Avot is trying to show us how to work to be the best person we can be. This includes understanding what it means to be a good person, looking within ourselves to

see how we are acting, and then adjusting our thoughts and actions to give us the best chance to be the best person we can be.

Interpersonal Relationships

The second category is interpersonal relationships. This is one step out from one's personal self, looking at what it means to have a relationship with other people. This can include friends, neighbors, and social commerce. This category explains how to be a good person to others. The mishnayot included in this section are 1:7, 1:15, 2:4, 2:11, 2:12, 3:12, 4:3, 4:15, and 4:18.

The first section of Avot 1:7 talks about distancing oneself from an evil or wicked person. Each commentary gives a different example of why one should do so. According to ARN, the plague can come from the guilt of an evil person. Rambam says that one should not join the wicked because they do not want to learn their vices. Sforno states one should also physically distance oneself from them because they are “a confirmed menace” and they will hurt you. Yanklowitz explains this section to mean that you can't even associate with a wicked person, not as a friend or even in business. Elad-Appelbaum warns that one should not underestimate creating ties with evil people because they can be dangerous in many ways. Shapiro defines a bad neighbor as one who “sows discord through gossip, slander, and lies” and clarifies that evil cannot succeed alone, so if we don't engage, justice will ultimately prevail.⁶⁶

The last section of this mishnah talks about divine retribution. ARN, coming from the rabbinic period, explains this to mean that one should not assume that because everything is good now, it will be good in the world to come. Our contemporary commentators move away from

⁶⁶ ARN Chapter 9. Rambam on 1:7. Sforno, 13. Yanklowitz, 28. Elad-Appelbaum, 26. Shapiro, 8.

the world to come focusing more on the individual. Looking at the mishnah as a whole, Elad-Appelbaum says that Nittai the Arbelite cautions us to not put our faith in every person and resist trying to get close to every person because there are people who are not ready for a reciprocal relationship. Yanklowitz sees this mishnah as teaching a lesson that a person must take responsibility for their actions.⁶⁷

Avot 1:15 is split into three statements. Both ARN and Rambam explain each statement specifically. For the first statement, “make your Torah fixed,” ARN explains that a person should make fixed what they learn and they should also do it, teach it to others and those others should do it. Rambam explains this phrase to say that Torah study should be one’s foundation, and all the work will continue after. Both ARN and Rambam agree about the second phrase, “speak little do much.” They explain that the righteous speak little and do much, but the evil speak much and do nothing. Yanklowitz explains this phrase as meaning that we need to observe and digest what we learn. We need to listen to others and understand what others are saying before we can speak, and we need to act and not do nothing. The third statement is, “receive every person with a friendly expression.” ARN explains if someone is friendly to another, even if he did not give him anything, scripture says it is like he gave him all the good presents in the world. Rambam says that this is when a person interacts with others with comfort and pleasant words.⁶⁸

Shapiro understands all three of these statements as one overall teaching in the “way of wisdom.” Yanklowitz explains that this mishnah shows that just like we are to look inward, we must also look outward and spread love and joy. He continues by saying some of the most important Torah we teach others is the Torah closest to our hearts, and this is why the mishnah

⁶⁷ ARN Chapter 9. Elad-Appelbaum, 26. Yanklowitz, 27.

⁶⁸ ARN Chapter 13. Rambam on 1:15. Yanklowitz, 48.

says “your Torah.” We should learn and understand our own personal Torah, the one that we own and cultivate for ourselves. Elad-Appelbaum interprets this mishnah similarly, explaining that one should feel primarily responsible for themselves, but they cannot ignore others; they should take responsibility for themselves while still showing others respect and concern. She writes “in a world that acts according to its own rules, people must establish for themselves a modest, fixed routine of internal, personal work that includes a constant, unflinching regard for every human being.”⁶⁹

Hillel’s first statement in Avot 2:4 is do not separate from the community. Yanklowitz explains that we shouldn’t separate ourselves from the community because we need communal support and challenge. Shapiro says that one shouldn’t separate because our task is to move our community forward to justice. Our commentaries all agree that the next statement, “do not trust in yourself until the day of your death” means that one should not stop trying to make themselves better. Sforno interprets it as never being certain that you will not change your beliefs. Shapiro sees it as always questioning yourself and your motives. Yanklowitz writes, “we should never believe in ourselves to the extent that we are a finished product. We should never feel complete with our achievements or growth.”⁷⁰

Hillel then teaches “do not judge your friend until you have come to their place.” Elad-Appelbaum says one should never tell another how to act because it is impossible to know the other’s full story. Yanklowitz connects this statement with the next statement and the first statement saying that to create a healthy community, we can’t judge our fellow or say something that is unable to be understood.

⁶⁹ Shapiro, 14. Yanklowitz, 47-48. Elad-Appelbaum, 43.

⁷⁰ Yanklowitz, 75-76. Shapiro, 20. Rambam on 2:4. Sforno, 38.

The final statement regards one's study during their free time. Sforno focuses on Torah study and says that one should designate time for study since one might not study during their free time. Shapiro continues this idea but broadens it through a modern lens by saying "time is never found, only made." One must make time for the things that are important to them. Yanklowitz agrees with this saying that we need to live our priorities now and not say we will do something in the future.⁷¹

Three of our commentators explain how they interpret the three aspects that remove a person from the world in Avot 2:11. ARN gives larger examples and ideas for each aspect. Regarding the evil eye, ARN says a person should see his friend's house the same way he sees his own house. One should not look down upon something that another has. About the evil inclination, ARN explains that the impulse to do evil is more deeply rooted than the impulse to do good, which means you have to intentionally do good over evil. ARN quotes the Torah, "love your neighbor as yourself"⁷² when explaining hatred of others. Sforno gives specifics about what he thinks each aspect means. For him, the evil eye is envying others and coveting their money; the evil inclination is lusting after physical pleasures, and the hatred of other people refers to jealousy-induced hatred. Elad-Appelbaum also gives specifics about what she thinks each aspect means. For her, the evil eye is a look that unfairly criticizes what a person sees in reality; the evil inclination is a desire for evil that aims to destruct one's reality; and the hatred of others is going about the world wanting everyone else to disappear from it.⁷³

Yanklowitz sees this as a direct challenge related to what negatively influences us the most. He says that we need to be aware and not accept the anger within or the hatred toward

⁷¹ Elad-Appelbaum, 68. Yanklowitz, 74-75. Sforno, 39. Shapiro, 20.

⁷² Leviticus 19:18.

⁷³ ARN Chapter 16. Sforno, 55. Elad-Appelbaum, 90.

others. If we are removed from the world, we would no longer live to achieve our potential. Shapiro says that if you only focus on yourself, you treat the world as a means to your own needs which isolates you from others and exiles you from the world.⁷⁴

ARN sees the first statement of Avot 2:12 clearly; one should see their friend's wealth just as one sees their own wealth. Sforino interprets this statement as saying that an act of piety happens when one is truly concerned for another's wellbeing. For the second statement, Sforino explains that inheritance requires little effort to receive, and Torah study does not. You need to put effort into Torah study and therefore you should study Torah more than you would intend to do because it does not come easy. For the third statement, different commentators have different answers. ARN says that for the sake of heaven means for the sake of Torah. Sforino believes it is related to God saying, "always intend to fulfill the will of your Creator, and to walk in His ways." Shapiro says that "acting for the sake of heaven is acting for the good of the whole." ARN and Sforino keep with the focus on Torah and God while Shapiro widens the scope, moving away from Torah and God towards the larger world around us.⁷⁵

Yanklowitz sees this mishnah as a mishnah about humility. He says that we should be humble and not take Jewish wisdom for granted as an inheritance. We need to study and learn, and we should not assume that we will just receive Jewish wisdom with no effort. He sees this mishnah as humility applied to three realms: the public realm relating to financial matters, the private realm relating to Torah study, and the inner realm relating to acting for the sake of heaven. Elad-Appelbaum believes similarly, writing that the "language of faith is the language

⁷⁴ Yanklowitz, 105. Shapiro, 32.

⁷⁵ ARN Chapter 17. Sforino, 55-56. Shapiro, 32.

of morality.” She says we cannot wait until Torah becomes an inheritance for all, we need to act responsibly towards others and then we can find a home in God’s Torah.⁷⁶

Avot 3:12 talks about how we should act around those older and wiser than us as well as those younger than us. Rambam explains when you are in front of someone with great virtue, stand back, make yourself unimportant do not seek honor for yourself from them. If you are with someone younger, seek honor for yourself, but do not yearn for him. Yanklowitz summarizes this well by saying that we are expected to treat those older than us with respect as well as be nice to the young. Shapiro sees this as saying one shouldn’t pick a fight that they know they cannot win, and they also should not get angry over the behavior of the youth. The end of the mishnah says “accept every person in happiness”. This relates to all people no matter who they are or where they are in their life. Rambam sees this as an addition to Shammai’s statement earlier in Avot 1:15, “receive every person with a friendly expression.” Elad-Appelbaum brings this mishnah all together by writing, “even when we are weighted down by our own misery, it is possible that we will not find meaning in life unless we are able to help sustain the life of others.” We should be respectful and bring comfort to others no matter who they are.⁷⁷

For Avot 4:3, Sforno shares that the phrase “not a person” includes those whom you do not know and those who don’t deserve honor and therefore you must honor every person and not despise anyone. Yanklowitz takes that one step further and says that we should see the value in every being, which includes all life, not just human beings, but animals and plants as well. Seeing the value in every being no matter its status will lead to compassion for all. He sees this mishnah as a call for empathy to understand others’ pain and struggles. Shapiro sees this as an

⁷⁶ Yanklowitz, 107. Elad-Appelbaum, 92-93.

⁷⁷ Rambam on 3:12. Yanklowitz, 165. Shapiro, 48. Elad-Appelbaum, 146.

example of fate. He explains that everything at one moment is a result of the conditions that created that moment which means there is a reason behind everything that happens. Therefore, you can't despise anyone because things are random or extraneous, that would deny the validity of what is. Elad-Appelbaum sees this mishnah as saying we should not elevate ourselves in relation to others or disengage from events. Arrogance can be dangerous and it should be something that is avoided.⁷⁸

Regarding "be first to greet every person," in Avot 4:15 Shapiro explains that when greeting another, one should assume they are a friend and greet them with honor and kindness rather than hesitate and ask oneself if they are a friend or a foe. Elad-Appelbaum writes that one should use their power of speech to greet everyone they encounter as they are, in their reality. As simple as it sounds, being the first to greet someone is not easy. It is not easy to greet an enemy, a stranger, or someone you would normally not talk to. Yanklowitz brings this mishnah in relation to small talk. This is a conversation that might not be deep but is an important conversation that can be shared by two people who might not know each other well.⁷⁹

Rambam explains the second half of the mishnah, "be a tail for a lion, and do not be a head for foxes." He says that it is better to be a student of someone wiser than a teacher to someone lesser because you will gain in the first situation, but decrease in the second. Sforno continues this idea and explains by associating with a lion you will increase your worth and become a lion, but if you are a head to foxes, you might teach them, but you will not grow and you might even worsen. Shapiro explains this section differently. He explains that a lion is

⁷⁸ Sforno, 106. Yanklowitz, 199-200. Shapiro, 62. Elad-Appelbaum, 176.

⁷⁹ Shapiro, 70. Elad-Appelbaum, 208. Yanklowitz, 247-248.

brave and a fox is only clever. He says it is better to be courageous and see what is than to be clever and mask over the truth with fantasy.⁸⁰

ARN gives three new teachings in the commentary to Avot 4:18. The first teaching is to love the friends who judge you and hate the ones who praise you because those who judge you bring you into the world to come and those who praise you take you out of the world. Second, everyplace that a person goes, his heart goes. And third, anyone who has alerted himself to the words of Torah, watchful people turn to his side; anyone who neglects the words of Torah, neglectful people turn to his side.⁸¹

Sforno explains that even though one would normally try to help his fellow, it is not proper to do so under these circumstances because the person is not in control of their emotions and might not have the ability to accept your help which might worsen the situation. Shapiro shares a little differently, saying that every moment has a purpose and a correct response and if one rushes into changing that, it benefits them rather than seeing the moment play out on its own. Yanklowitz sees this mishnah as an example of emotional intelligence. He also thinks that this shows that we should not rush to identify with the one who is suffering because we might not understand their suffering. Elad-Appelbaum sees this in the context of a teacher, saying that sometimes you should not always be a teacher, sometimes some people just need a friend.⁸²

Avot sees interpersonal relationships as the way one interacts with others and the way one thinks about others, both in the positive and the negative. Avot explains what one should do and what one should not do in relation to another human being and what some of the consequences might be of your behavior.

⁸⁰ Rambam on 4:15. Sforno, 131. Shapiro, 70.

⁸¹ ARN Chapter 29.

⁸² Sforno, 133-134. Yanklowitz, 259. Elad-Appelbaum, 213.

All the commentators see this in a similar way, looking at one's interactions with other people and how they should treat another or not treat one another. Contemporary commentators also go one step further and explain how one's actions towards another can affect the individual directly.

For example, Rabbi Elad-Appelbaum, in relation to Avot 1:7, "distance from an evil neighbor," says that one has to be cautious when interacting with and putting faith in others because some people are not ready for that strong relationship. Elad-Appelbaum wants us to be aware of our needs and not put ourselves in a relationship that might not be healthy. In Avot 2:4, Hillel says that one should not distance themselves from their community. Rabbi Yanklowitz reads this to mean that we as individuals need our community just as much as our community needs us. We are social beings at our core, and we need our community in order to live a good, healthy life. Rabbi Shapiro sees Avot 2:11 to mean that if you only focus on yourself, you look at the world as a means to your own end and as a result, you are isolated from others around you and the world as a whole. Shapiro is cautioning people to be aware of how they interact with those around them. Similar to Yanklowitz, Shapiro sees others as essential parts of life in order to not lose focus on those around you and the overall world.

For me, I see Avot explaining how to best interact with others, both in actions we should take and actions we shouldn't take. I agree with the contemporary commentators in the way that I believe it is important to think about how our actions affect us as individuals as well as those around us. Avot is telling us that it is important to be in a community and that social interaction is necessary for everyday life, but to also be cautious because unfortunately, not everyone is also going about their lives in a positive way.

Teacher/Student Relationships

The third category is teacher-student relationships. This category is a specific type of interpersonal relationship looking at what it means to have a relationship with one's teachers and one's students. This includes mishnayot on how to learn, how to exhibit *kavod*, how to teach, and how to be a good person in a power dynamic. The mishnayot included in this section are 1:6, 1:16, 4:5, 4:12, 4:14, 5:12, 5:14, 5:15, and 6:3.

ARN, Rambam, and Sforno all give different explanations for each of the three sections of Avot 1:6. ARN explains that make for yourself a teacher means, making a fixed relationship with your teacher and studying scripture, mishnah, midrash, halachot, and aggadot. He explains that you should focus only on one teacher. Even though a teacher might forget something at one stage they will add it at another stage. He gives a parable explaining how one should avoid the confusion of multiple viewpoints, further showing that a person should only focus on one teacher. Acquire for yourself a friend according to ARN means that you should find a friend who will eat, drink, study, and help uncover secrets with them. ARN explains that if someone makes a mistake in their study, their friend will correct them which shows the importance of stability in the study process. For the section about judging every person with the scale of balance in their favor, ARN gives a story where it looked like something bad could have happened, but one is supposed to judge the person favorably instead of jumping to negative conclusions. Rambam explains that make for yourself a teacher means that even if someone is not fit to be your teacher, make them your teacher because studying with another person is better than studying alone. Rambam noted the language in the second section, it is the language of acquire rather than make. Rambam says that you should acquire yourself a friend so you will repair your deeds and matters through them. This means that a friend can help a person better

themselves. When both parties of the friendship have this intention, they will work together to better each other and work toward their goal. He then explains situations where one would judge a person with a balanced scale. He said that if you do not know if a person is good or bad and they do an act that you can interpret both ways, assume it is good. If you know a person who you know is good, it is not permitted to suspect them. In the same idea, if you know a person is bad and they do an action that could be good, it is hard to say if it is good since they are normally bad. Sforno agrees with ARN for the first section. He emphasizes making yourself only one teacher so that all of your Torah knowledge comes from them. Sforno continues by saying acquire a friend similar to you so they can be your companion. He says that one should judge everyone favorably because “without this trait friendship will not endure.”⁸³

Shapiro also gives a commentary and explanation for each section of this mishnah. He says that three things make you worthy of being a teacher: “the capacity to listen in the beginning, the ability to question in the middle, and the courage to go your own way in the end.” He continues by saying acquire yourself a friend because a friend helps you clarify what you know, rather than a teacher who knows what they know. Regarding judging everyone favorably, he says don’t assume you know everything about someone, there is a lot that you might not know. Yanklowitz sees this whole mishnah as showing that even though humans live alone in the world, being alone and independent is not always positive. He brings the first two sections together saying that formal teachers are important, but strong, close friends can support and challenge us more meaningfully. He also shares that this mishnah reminds us that we can’t learn Torah in isolation or pure independence. We need teachers and friends to guide, support, and challenge us in our learning. He explains that the use of the word “make” in the first section

⁸³ ARN Chapter 8. Rambam on 1:6. Sforno, 11-12.

teaches that more active involvement is required of one in relation to their teacher. He connects the final section to the earlier two saying that we should greet everyone warmly because they could be a teacher or a friend in the future. Elad-Appelbaum brings the mishnah altogether sharing that it shows a “fundamental assumption that there is another human being who can be one’s friend -- one’s colleague and one’s partner -- in the world.”⁸⁴

Rambam explains that in the context of Avot 1:16, make for yourself a teacher is not for the matter of study, but rather instruction so you can rely on them for what is permitted and forbidden and remove yourself from doubt. Sforno agrees with him explaining that a person should choose one teacher whose rulings you will follow so you can remove yourself from doubt regarding halachic decisions. Yanklowitz shares that in life-or-death matters, having doubt is not sufficient and therefore, we need a teacher who can provide both critique and guidance. He continues by saying that we also need to have moral clarity in order to remove the barriers, our doubts, that might block us from taking important and necessary action.⁸⁵

Sforno explains the first half of Avot 4:5 saying that even though a person who studies Torah to teach might have the wrong motives, they might want to gain honor or success, they are nevertheless able to learn and teach. This is from the quote, “he who performs a mitzvah for ulterior motives will eventually do so for its own sake.”⁸⁶ However, a person whose objective is only to “fulfill the will of his Maker” will be given the opportunity, from God, to study and teach others, to observe and guard themselves against sin, and to practice the mitzvot of God. Shapiro paraphrases this first half by saying “if you study in order to teach, your life is secondhand. if you study in order to practice, your life is firsthand, immediate. When you live in the immediacy

⁸⁴ Shapiro, 8. Yanklowitz, 22-23, 25-26. Elad-Appelbaum, 24.

⁸⁵ Rambam on Avot 1:16. Sforno, 23-24. Yanklowitz, 50.

⁸⁶ Psachim 50b.

of life, you find the means to study, teach, practice, and also to observe: to step back from the fleeting and see the eternal at its core.” Yanklowitz explains this mishnah saying that for Jewish life to survive, it cannot just be studied and taught, it must also be lived.⁸⁷ Sforno, from the medieval period sees this as an opportunity from God, while Shapiro and Yanklowitz, contemporary commentators, see this more broadly, looking through the lens of life as a whole.

In the commentary on Avot 4:12, ARN gives biblical examples of whom we learned these concepts from, Moses, Aaron, and Joshua respectively. Sforno explains that we should honor Torah scholars on an ascending scale. The honor of your student (who is inferior to you) should be as dear as your own; the honor of your fellow (who is equal to you) should be the same as the honor of your teacher (who is superior to you); and the honor of your teacher (who is superior to you) should be the same as your honor of heaven (which is the highest honor). Both Yanklowitz and Shapiro see this as saying that all relationships matter and students, teachers, and colleagues all deserve respect from one another. Elad-Appelbaum sees this a little differently, sharing that a teacher is part of a chain, they had a teacher and they have students. She continues by saying, “all teachers personally embody the best qualities of student, colleague, and teacher, thus stepping outside of time and into history -- to embrace a mission that exists both within the flow of historical moments but also outside of past and future time as we know it.”⁸⁸

Our commentators differ in the way they explain the phrase “exile to a place of Torah” in Avot 4:14. Rambam believes that it means finding a place for reading and studying of Torah. Sforno says that it means when you want to leave your current community, make sure that you choose to move to a place of Torah. Elad-Appelbaum explains it to mean that “everyone who

⁸⁷ Sforno, 110. Shapiro, 64. Yanklowitz, 209.

⁸⁸ ARN Chapter 27. Sforno, 121. Yanklowitz, 231. Shapiro, 68. Elad-Appelbaum, 200-201.

lives a life of Torah must always be ready for the possibility of travel.” For her, Torah doesn’t stay in one place, it wanders around the world.⁸⁹

For the second half of the mishnah, our commentators explain it similarly. Rambam says that you should say you don’t need friends and students that will wake you up or get you moving. Sforno says that you should not assume that your understanding will endure without learning with your colleagues - you may forget some of your Torah. Yanklowitz says that “acquiring friends and allies not only nurtures the soul, but also is indispensable for the continuing progression of humanity.” All these commentaries show that friends and colleagues are important in your life and you should not ignore them.⁹⁰

Avot 5:12 gives four characteristics of students. Sforno explains that all these are natural traits that can’t be changed by choice, only through diligence and concentration one can limit the damage of these traits. Therefore, Avot doesn’t call the person who doesn’t have these traits wicked because it is not his choice. Instead, he calls it a bad portion since they will have to work harder to avoid the consequence of their fate. Rambam agrees with Sforno saying that these traits are not possible to gain. Elad-Appelbaum gives examples of each characteristic, using the language of learn and forget. Quick to learn and quick to forget, this person needs time to process and put skills into practice. Slow to learn and slow to forget, for this person the process of struggling will leave them with something; one who learns with difficulty will eventually learn. Quick to learn and slow to forget, for this person, “others’ words become distilled into one’s own personality and remain there.” Slow to learn and quick to forget, there is no way for this person to recognize the wisdom in others, so their wisdom is always diminishing.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Rambam on 1:14. Sforno, 123. Elad-Appelbaum, 205.

⁹⁰ Rambam on 1:14, Sforno, 124. Yanklowitz, 241.

⁹¹ Sforno, 163. Rambam on 5:12. Elad-Appelbaum, 257-258.

In Avot 5:14, Sforno interprets that the mishnah teaches that going to the beit midrash gains one merit. By learning and participating in Torah study with others, one “performs a kindness [חסד] by increasing [one’s] wisdom, as well as theirs.” This is why they are called pious [חסיד]. It is a play on words between the Hebrew words for kindness and pious which are from the same root. Yanklowitz sees this as exploring the importance of attendance. In today’s society, nowadays it is easy to stay home rather than join others learning in person. We saw during covid that virtual learning is not the same and it cannot be a substitute for in-person learning. Shapiro sees this mishnah as saying that learning is a lifelong commitment, but sometimes it is hard to stick to that commitment. He says that “the only way to become wise is to test what you know against what you do not know in a community of learners doing the same.”⁹²

Avot 5:15 gives four characteristics of one who sits before a sage. ARN explains which student type of student relates to each characteristic. The sponge is a faithful student who sits and learns scripture, mishnah, midrash, halachot, and aggadot; they absorb everything. The sieve is a watchful student who sits and hears; they let out the bad and keep the good. A funnel is a stupid student who sits and hears; for them, the information is in one ear, out the other. A strainer is a wicked student who sits and hears; they let out the good and keep the bad. Sforno explains that some of these traits can deter a person from understanding true knowledge so these are taught so one can correct a bad trait if they have one and ultimately become a sieve which is the highest level.⁹³

The contemporary commentators agree that there is a hierarchy, and the sieve is the highest level. Yanklowitz sees this mishnah as saying that we should not absorb everything we

⁹² Sforno, 166. Yanklowitz, 325. Shapiro, 98.

⁹³ ARN Chapter 40. Sforno, 167.

find. Instead, we should find the basic moral principles in each teaching and not take all the information at face value. We have to be selective since one can learn Torah incorrectly. Shapiro says that “the true disciple is one who can discern the true from the merely clever, retaining the former and dropping the latter.” Elad-Appelbaum agrees by saying that there is a place in the beit midrash for everyone since everyone is given attention in these four characteristics, but there is a hierarchy.⁹⁴

This mishnah, Avot 6:3, teaches that anyone who learns anything from another, as small as one letter, should treat the other with kindness and honor them. Sforno explains since a person who does not study Torah should be rebuked, a person who teaches another Torah is worthy of honor. Yanklowitz shares that the “spiritual center of Judaism is learning.” He explains that we can teach and share all day, but if we don’t demonstrate our values, we can’t influence others. He shares, “to teach virtue, one must model virtue.” He believes that acting with kindness inspires others to act with kindness. Shapiro simplifies it by saying, “no matter how much or how little you learn from another, you owe that other your deepest respect.”⁹⁵

The teacher-student relationship is one that is very important to the editors of Avot. Study and Torah are two things that are strong focuses of Avot as a whole and therefore, this relationship is also a large focus. Avot sees this relationship from both sides. It is essential for one to have a teacher and to learn from their teacher, and at the same time, it is essential for one to then go and teach what they have learned. Avot focuses heavily on what it means to be a student and gives many different examples of student characteristics, including which ones are best and allow one to go forward and teach others.

⁹⁴ Yanklowitz, 329. Shapiro, 100. Elad-Appelbaum, 262-263.

⁹⁵ Sforno, 186. Yanklowitz, 380-382. Shapiro, 116.

The phrase “make for yourself a teacher” is seen twice in Avot, in 1:6 and 1:16.

Rambam interprets both in different ways. The first one in 1:6, he sees as saying that everyone needs a teacher, and your job is to go out and find one. He believes that studying with another is better than studying alone. The second one he sees as finding a teacher who can help you know what is right and wrong in relation to halacha so you can be the best regarding the laws as you can be and follow the laws correctly.

The rabbinic and medieval commentators bring up this idea of law and mitzvot regarding study and the teacher-student relationship, while the contemporary commentators focus on what it means to learn and to teach and what can come from those actions.

Avot 4:5 identifies what the best characteristic is in a learner. 4:5 says that one who learns in order to teach can only learn and teach, however, one who learns in order to do can learn, teach, observe, and do. This expands the teacher/student relationship one step further toward the next relationship, the ethical relationship with the world, focusing on the doing and on the action based on one’s learning. It shows the purpose of why one studies. Shapiro says that studying in order to practice allows one to live life in the moment, firsthand, and that allows you to do it all: study, teach, practice, and observe.

Avot 5:15 also offers characteristics of learners. In this mishnah our commentators create a hierarchy of which learner is best. Avot is showing different types of learners and saying that everyone can be in the beit midrash and learn. However, commentaries show that the sieve is the highest level of learning because we can’t absorb everything, we need to take in what is important and ignore what is not. This mishnah gives everyone agency to be in the learning space but also shows which type of learner is the “ultimate” goal.

I think Avot is trying to show the importance of learning and being a student. Judaism puts a strong emphasis on education and curiosity, and it comes from this rich history of study. I don't think there is a right way or wrong way to learn like some of these mishnayot and commentators say, but I do think that being a student and wanting to learn are two very important parts of being Jewish.

Ethical Relationships with the World

The fourth and final category is ethical relationships with the world. This category zooms out the most, looking at what it means to have a relationship with the world. This includes social action, what it means to act in the world to improve it, how to create the conditions for peace, and more. In other words, this category is about how to be a good person in the world. The mishnayot included in this category are 1:2, 1:12, 1:17, 1:18, 2:16, 4:17, and 5:13.

The commentators explain what they believe Torah, work, and acts of loving kindness mean in the context of Avot 1:2. Regarding Torah, ARN shares a story teaching that studying Torah takes precedence over giving a whole offering, showing that Torah study is of utmost importance. Both Rambam and Shapiro see Torah as wisdom. Shapiro translates it as wisdom in his translation, saying, “true Torah is wisdom: knowing that One God manifests as one world, one humanity, and one moral code -- justice and compassion for all.” Elad-Appelbaum explains that Torah is basic to Jewish life, however, it doesn't stand alone, she connects it with the other two ideas, work and acts of loving-kindness.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ ARN Chapter 4. Rambam on 1:2. Shapiro, 6. Elad-Appelbaum, 11-12.

The explanation of work changes over time because of the time period that our commentators are in. ARN believes that work refers to Temple work or sacrifices and it is the most beloved work by God. ARN was written at a time when the Temple was still on people's minds and the destruction was still a recent trauma compared to the other commentators. Rambam moves away from Temple sacrifice and sees work as keeping the commandments of the Torah. These commandments include parts of Temple sacrifice, but it also goes beyond the Temple into other themes. Shapiro sees work as surrendering to God's will, surrendering yourself to reality and how it manifests at every moment. Elad-Appelbaum, writing with a modern lens, takes it away from God and commandments seeing it as the human relationship with the earth and nature. She says that there is no Torah without work, without being close to nature.⁹⁷

Acts of loving-kindness is seen similarly by the commentators. ARN explains that the world was created at the beginning with only kindness. This is seen in the verse, "for I said, the world will be built on kindness, the heavens will be established with your faith."⁹⁸ Rambam sees these acts as moral virtues, virtues that affect our character and how we act. Shapiro sees it as compassion for oneself and others and Elad-Appelbaum agrees and adds to that saying that it is the relationship with others, our connections, community, and covenants. She writes, "g'milut chasadim -- that is, the effort to rescue one's fellow human beings from whatever threatens them -- is one of the great national tasks of the Jewish people."⁹⁹

Yanklowitz puts these three ideas together, explaining that Torah, work, and good deeds are a three-legged stool, and knocking out any leg makes it fall over; all three legs are 100%

⁹⁷ ARN Chapter 4. Rambam on 1:2. Shapiro, 6. Elad-Appelbaum, 12.

⁹⁸ Psalms 89:3.

⁹⁹ ARN Chapter 4. Rambam on 1:2. Shapiro, 6. Elad-Appelbaum, 12.

necessary. He sees all three as part of Jewish learning writing, “Judaism requires the development of one’s intellectual capacity through Torah study, emotional capacity through cultivating the service of God, and performative capacity through kind deeds. These constitute the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of one’s whole being.” He sees these three acts as study, prayer, and giving and all of them interact with one another and while different times throughout Jewish history they might have had different priorities, all three are important religious activities.¹⁰⁰

ARN gives explanations of what Hillel said in this mishnah, 1:12. Love peace means be a person who loves peace between people in Israel. Pursue peace means pursue peace between people in Israel. One should seek it where they are and pursue it in a different place. Love human beings means love humans, don’t hate humans. ARN shares that when communities loved one another, God didn’t destroy them, rather God scattered them like in the story of the Tower of Babel. Lastly, draw them close to Torah means that people should bring others under the wings of the Shechina. Rambam explains the backstory of why Hillel says to be like Aaron. He shares a story about Aaron. Even when Aaron was told someone was bad, he approached that person first with peace in a friendly manner. The person would then be embarrassed and say to themselves if Aaron thinks I am good, I should prove him right and be good. Rambam says that this story is where Hillel got this saying. Sforno sees this mishnah a little differently. In his commentary, he says this mishnah means don’t be as impatient and strict as Shammai. He explains that acting like Shammai threatened to remove people from the world to come, but Hillel brought us under the wings of the divine presence.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Yanklowitz, 7-8.

¹⁰¹ ARN Chapter 12. Rambam on 1:12. Sforno, 18.

The contemporary commentators focus on peace and the relationship between humankind. Shapiro says to be like Aaron is to dwell in “peace, wholeness, and nonduality.” He says that this mishnah means that it is not enough if one prefers peace over conflict, they have to do everything one can to bring out peace within conflict. Yanklowitz sees peacemaking not only necessary for a safe society, but also as a spiritual endeavor. Elad-Appelbaum explains that every person has a responsibility towards human society. She connects that responsibility with Torah saying, “the internal acceptance of responsibility manifests itself externally in encounters with others, and signals an individual’s readiness to draw near to the Torah and its values.”¹⁰²

Avot 1:17 has two main teachings: first, it is good to be silent and listen and second, action is more important than study or speaking. Sforno responds to both teachings by saying that even though speech is important, it is not the expressions of a person’s thoughts that is the most important, but rather the deeds that result from those thoughts as they affect society and the pursuit of knowledge. Shapiro also responds to both saying that action is more important than speech because speech can lead you to think you are acting, “you imagine that you are doing because you are talking about doing.” Yanklowitz explains that practice takes priority over study because as Jews we are committed to mitzvot which are achieved not through text study, but through converting the message of those texts into action. Overall, these commentators show that how we practice and how we act is more important than what we teach and say. It is like the popular saying; actions speak louder than words.¹⁰³

In the mishnah, Avot 1:18, a sage explains again that the world stands on three things, however, they are different things than before. In this mishnah, they are justice, truth, and peace. Our commentators explain how they see each of these aspects. Rambam sees justice as leading a

¹⁰² Shapiro, 12. Yanklowitz, 39. Elad-Appelbaum, 38-39.

¹⁰³ Sforno, 26. Shapiro, 16. Yanklowitz, 53.

country with straightness, truth as rational virtues and peace as moral virtues. He believes that when all three are found, everything will be complete when possible. Shapiro looks at these aspects as what would be if they are lacking. He says that a world without justice is run by fear, a world without truth is run by lies, and a world without peace is driven by division. Sforno explains that truth is when a person can rely on the word of their friend. Sforno also says that these three aspects are the three things that the prophet Zechariah warned Israel about in the verse, “Let every man speak truth to his neighbor; execute the judgment of truth and peace in your gates.”¹⁰⁴ Yanklowitz explains that the Maharal teaches that these three aspects relate to the three parts of the self: justice is our physical possessions, truth is our spiritual possessions, peace is our actual self. Yanklowitz writes, “we are to cling to ‘justice, truth, and peace’ and incorporate them into all of our relationships and ways of being.”¹⁰⁵

Sforno interprets the first section of Avot 2:16, “it is not upon you to finish the work” as saying any part of Torah that a person masters is important and significant even if they do not complete the task in full. He then interprets the second part, “but you are not able to neglect it” as saying even a person who has studied all of it and thinks that they have completed the task, they cannot neglect it “for a person who continues to occupy himself with Torah continually adds to his perfection and earns greater reward.” Yanklowitz, coming from a modern mindset, sees this as communal work rather than Torah study. He says that we can’t stop doing the work even when we know that we might not win. He continues by saying that it is easy to excuse ourselves from communal work because it feels like our contribution is minimal and insignificant, however, the rabbis teach that our actions might be the one to push it over and tip

¹⁰⁴ Zechariah 8:16.

¹⁰⁵ Rambam on 1:18. Shapiro, 16. Sforno, 27. Yanklowitz, 55.

the scales. Shapiro summarizes this first sentence of the mishnah by simply saying, “effort alone is what matters.”¹⁰⁶

Rambam sees this Avot 4:17 as saying there is no completion or addition after death, people can only add to their virtue in this world. This is why a person should put effort into this life and focus on acquiring virtues now rather than later. Sforno adds to this by saying don’t try to shorten your days, instead try to lengthen them as much as possible to acquire your share in the world to come. Yanklowitz interprets this to mean although we don’t know what happens in the world to come, we should try to make this world reflect what we would want to see in eternal splendor. We want to make our current world as good as what we imagine the world to come is. Elad-Appelbaum puts this idea into action saying, “those who wish to work toward a future in the world to come should not sit around all day and night painting imaginary pictures of what that world might look like, but rather should take upon themselves the responsibility, and pay the price of moving their community closer to that distant vision.”¹⁰⁷

Sforno explains that the evil eye in Avot 5:13 represents the trait of begrudging, a person who finds it difficult to accept another person’s good fortune. He says that is why the person who is willing to give charity but is bothered by so many people giving to the poor person is said to have an evil eye rather than be a cruel person. When others give and a person does not, it is also due to the evil eye. Sforno says that the person resents the poor person for getting another gift from him after getting one from so many others. When one wants to give in addition to others’ giving, they are a pious person because both the poor man and others merit from the

¹⁰⁶ Sforno, 60-61. Yanklowitz, 118. Shapiro, 34.

¹⁰⁷ Rambam on 4:17. Sforno, 132-133. Yanklowitz, 254. Elad-Appelbaum, 212.

mitzvah of charity. If one doesn't give and cannot abide that others give, they should be judged as a wicked person who is cruel to the poor and rejects the mitzvah of charity.¹⁰⁸

Elad-Appelbaum gives examples of each characteristic in the mishnah. She says that one who wants to give but does not want others to give is not aware that charity work is done in partnership together with others, not by oneself. One who wants others to give, but not personally give exempts themselves from participating in the generosity of humankind and walls themselves off in their own life. One who wants to give and wants others to give is a kind person who “recognizes the power of shared generosity and expects it of oneself as well as others.” Lastly, one who doesn't want to give and doesn't want others to give is a “mean-spirited miser” and they strip the world of the power of human kindness toward others.¹⁰⁹

Judaism has always looked at the world as larger than just the Jewish or Israelite community. Avot continues this notion by saying that we are not only responsible for ourselves, but we are responsible for the world as a whole. The concept of action is important. As seen in the last section and written in Avot 1:17, “study is not the foundation, rather action.” We can work on ourselves and those around us and study all we want, but none of that matters if we don't use all the positive energy for action. This action includes pursuing peace, justice, and more.

The rabbinic and medieval commentators see action and work in relation to Torah, commandments, and God. Moving towards a more modern lens, the contemporary commentators see action and work as tasks that are meant to make the world a better place. Yanklowitz, in his commentary on Avot 1:17, brings mitzvot and action together. He says that

¹⁰⁸ Sforno, 164-166.

¹⁰⁹ Elad-Appelbaum, 259-260.

practice takes priority over study. As Jews, we are committed to mitzvot which are achieved not only through text study, but through translating the message of those texts into action.

One of the most popular quotes today from this category is by Rabbi Tarfon in Avot 2:16, “It is not upon you to finish the work, but you, a free man, are not able to neglect it.”

Yanklowitz interprets this to mean that it might be tempting for a person to take themselves out of communal work due to a belief that one’s contribution is not important, but this mishnah shows even one act can have more impact than you imagine. According to Shapiro, the effort is what matters. You might not be able to fix everything yourself, but you can make a small difference and multiple small differences make a large difference.

This message is what I take away most from this category. I strongly believe in the importance of social action. I know that one person cannot fix everything, but neither can we ignore the glaring issues all around us.

Conclusion

A person’s role in the world moves from the responsibilities one has to oneself to the role one can and should play in the creation of a better world for all people.

In my own experience, I have always tried to be the best version of myself, but I have not always known what to do to achieve that. Through studying this material, I have learned that the best way to work on myself is through self-care in all its aspects and living life through my values and morals. I resonate deeply with the contemporary commentators, seeing the world through a modern lens. I hope to continue working on these aspects of myself because if you are not at your best, then you can’t be at your best for all the other relationships.

Interpersonal relationships are hard to navigate. There are your acquaintances whom you maybe see once a year, your neighbors whom you are friendly with but you might not consider them your friend, your classmates or coworkers whom you see every day, and then there are your closest friends and family. With so many types of interpersonal relationships, it is hard to know how to act in each situation. Avot gives examples for all different types of situations, but also says in 2:4, “do not separate from the community.” I related to this the most. There are days when one might want to separate themselves from everyone else and ignore everyone around them, but Avot is saying that it is not good to do that. Humans are social animals by nature so we need social interactions. Some people need it more than others, but having that one positive social interaction can brighten one’s day.

The teacher-student relationship category is the one that relates to me most at this point in my life. I have always loved teaching as well as learning. I am about to transition out of being a student full time and I have been thinking a lot about what it means to be a student in a full-time learning environment compared to a full-time employment environment. In this mindset, Avot 5:15 has stood out to me the most. This mishnah explains 4 characteristics, or types, of students who sit before the sages: a sponge, a funnel, a strainer, and a sieve. Reflecting on my academic career, I can see points where I was each of these students. There were days when I was actively listening, taking in everything like a sponge, and others on zoom when it was hard to focus, and things went in one ear and out the other like funnel. The commentators argue that a sieve is the goal, and I want to work going forward in the education opportunities I have to be a sieve and focus on retaining the important information that will help me in the future.

I also relate to Avot 4:5, “The one who learns Torah in order to teach, he has the opportunity to learn and teach. The one who learns in order to do, he has the opportunity to

learn, teach, observe, and do.” I think this also relates to the next relationship, ethical relationships with the world. Education is not only so the next generation can continue to educate generations going forward, but also a pathway to action. One learns to do. Today, we go to school to learn what we want to do in life as well as how to act in life. Learning as a pathway to action allows one to continue learning, doing, and then teaching the next generation as well.

Growing up, I was always taught the importance of tikkun olam, repairing the world. I am fascinated by the environment and the world we live in and it has always been something that is important to me. Activism, in any form, can seem overwhelming and most times, it doesn’t seem like we are making a difference by putting a few plastic bottles in the recycling bin rather than the trash can. This is why I relate to Avot 2:16. As said above at the end of the last category, our small differences add up to make a big difference. If everyone recycles their plastic bottles, then that keeps thousands, or even millions, of plastic bottles out of the landfill and from going into our oceans. This is what I want to remember as I continue working to repair the world in the small ways that I can every day.

Throughout this project, I realized that many of the mishnayot could be put into multiple categories and that the categories aren’t as clear cut as I thought. For example, the commentaries for a mishnah that seemed to be focused on oneself include teachings about one’s relationship with others or the world.

As I was doing my own reflection, I realized that Avot 1:14 is one of those mishnayot. “He [Hillel] used to say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” The commentators saw this in relation to oneself, but also in relation to others. I see this in relation to oneself, others, and the world. If I am not for myself, who will

be for me? This part is all about focusing on yourself. If you don't focus on yourself, no one will. If I am only for myself, what am I? This second part is about others around you. It is saying that you can't be selfish, you need to help others as well. If not now, when? This third part is about the world. If you don't act now, when will you, or who will? This one mishnah helps one move through the circles of relationships starting with oneself and ending with the world.

Reflecting overall, my takeaways are heavily influenced by my Reform Jewish upbringing. Reform Judaism teaches us how to be good people in the world, both to ourselves, others, and the world around us as well as the importance of education and being curious and asking questions. I think each of these relationships working together are essential for every person so they can live their life to the fullest and I hope to bring these teachings with me in the future.

Personal Relationships and Growth

1:14, 2:1, 3:4, 3:9, 4:1, 4:6, 4:21, 5:7, 6:4b¹¹⁰

Mishnah Translations

1:14: He used to say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for myself, what am I?

And if not now, when?

2:1: Rabbi said: Which straight path should a man choose for himself? Anyone that has honor for the one who does it and honor to him from others. Be careful with a lenient commandment as with a strict one, for you don't know the gift of the reward of the commandments. Alas!

Think about the loss of a commandment against the reward and the profit of sin against the loss.

Look at these three things and you will not go near sin, know what is above you; an eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your actions are written in a book.

3:4: Rabbi Chanina son of Chaniya said: The one who wakes up in the night, or walks on the path alone and turns his heart to idleness, behold, this person is guilty in his soul.

3:9: Rabbi Chanina son of Dosa said: anyone whose fear of his sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom rises up. And anyone whose wisdom precedes fear of his sin, his wisdom does not rise up. He used to say: Everyone whose actions are greater than his wisdom, his wisdom rises up. And anyone whose wisdom is greater than his actions, his wisdom does not rise up.

¹¹⁰ Mishnayot numeration according to Kahati.

4:1: Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? The one who learns from every person, as it is said, “from everyone who has taught me I have gained insight, for your testimony is my study” (Psalms 119:99). Who is strong? The one who conquers his inclination, as it is said, “Better the one who lengthens anger from the strong, to control his spirit from capturing a city” (Proverbs 16:32). Who is wealthy? The one who is happy with his share, as it is said, “the product of your hand you shall eat, you shall be happy, and you shall be good” (Psalms 128:2). You shall be happy, in this world, you shall be good, in the world to come. Who is honored? The one who honors human beings, as it is said, “for I those who honor me I honor and those who degrade me I curse” (1 Samuel 2:30).

4:6: Rabbi Yosi said: anyone who honors the Torah, his body is honored by other human beings and whoever dishonors the Torah, his body is dishonored by other human beings.

4:21: Rabi Elazar HaKappar said: jealousy, desire [and the longing for] honor put a person away from the world.

5:7: Seven things in *Golem* and seven in a wise person. A wise person does not speak before one who is greater than him in wisdom and number, does not enter inside his fellow’s speech, is not hastened to respond, he asks about [relevant] matters and he answers properly, and he speaks of the first first and the last last, and on what he has not heard, he says he did not hear, and he acknowledges the truth. And the reverse of these are in *a Golem*.

6:4b: Do not seek greatness for yourself, and do not desire honor. Act more than you learn, and do not desire the table of kings, since your table is greater than their table, and your crown is greater than their crown. Trustworthy is your employer, who pays you the wages of your work.

Avot D'Rabbi Natan Translations¹¹¹

1:14 - Chapter 12

He used to say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? If I do not merit (in my life) who will merit for me. But if I am for myself, what am I? If I do not merit for myself who will merit for me? If not now, when? If I do not merit in my life, who will merit for me after my death. As it says, “for a dog who is alive is better than a dead lion” (Kohelet 9:4). “For a dog who is alive is better” - this is a wicked person who stands in this world. “Than a dead lion” - even than Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who dwell in the dirt. Another thing, “For a dog who is alive is better” - this is a wicked person who stands in this world if he repents, God will accept him, but the righteous when they die, once more he cannot add to his merit.

3:9 - Chapter 22

Rabbi Chanina son of Dosa said: anyone whose fear of his sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom rises up. And anyone whose wisdom precedes fear of his sin, his wisdom does not rise up. As it is said, “the beginning of wisdom is the fear of God” (Psalms 111:10).

¹¹¹ Avot D'Rabbi Natan Version A, translated from the Schechter manuscript.
Solomon Schechter, *Masehet Avot D'Rabbi Natan* (New York, NY: Philipp Feldheim Inc, 1967)

He used to say: Everyone whose actions are greater than his wisdom, his wisdom rises up. And anyone whose wisdom is greater than his actions, his wisdom does not rise up. As it is said, “we will do and we will listen” (Exodus 24:7).

They said before Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, a wise person who fears sin, what are they like? He said to them, behold, like a craftsman with his tools in his hand. A wise person who does not fear sin, what are they like? He said to them, behold this is a craftsman who does not have tools in his hand. A person who fears sin and is not wise, what are they like? He said to them, this is not a craftsman, but he has tools in his hand.

4:1 - Chapter 23

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? The one who learns from every person, as it is said, “from everyone who has taught me I have gained insight...” (Psalms 119:99). Who is the humblest of humble? The one who is humble like Moses our teacher, as it is said, “and the man Moses is very humble” (Numbers 12:33). Who is the wealthiest of the wealthy? The one who is happy with their share, as it is said, “you will eat from the work of your hands, you will be happy and goodness will be upon you” (Psalms 128:2). Who is the strongest of the strong? The one who conquers his inclination, as it is said, “Better the one who lengthens anger from the strong, to control his spirit from capturing a city” (Proverbs 16:32). And the one who conquers his inclination raises upon it like they conquered a city full of heroes, as it is said, “A wise man ascended upon a city of warriors, [and brought down its strength and security]” (Proverbs 21:22). And warriors are only Torah warriors as it is said, “strong warriors observe his words, [listening to the voice of his words]” (Psalms 130:20). And there are some who say it is the serving angels,

as it is said, “his angels, strong warriors” (ibid). And there are some who say it is someone who makes an enemy into a friend.

4:6 - Chapter 27

Rabbi Yosi said: anyone who honors the Torah, his body is honored by other human beings [and whoever dishonors the Torah, his body is dishonored by other human beings.] As it is said, “For those who honor me I honor, and those who despise me I curse” (I Samuel 2:30).

5:7 - Chapter 37

A wise person does not speak before one who is greater than him in wisdom and number. This is Moses, as it is said, “Aaron spoke all the words that God had said to Moses and he acted the signs before the eyes of the people” (Exodus 4:30). And who is worthy to speak, Moses or Aaron? One would say Moses because Moses heard it from the mouth of superiority and Aaron heard from Moses. Rather, thus said Moses, can I speak in a place where my older brother is standing? Therefore he told Aaron to speak. Thus we say, “And Aaron spoke all the words that God said to Moses.”

And he does not enter inside his fellow’s speech. This is Aaron, as it is said, “And Aaron said ... Behold, today they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering...” (Leviticus 10:19). Except he was quiet until Moses finished his words and he did not tell him to shorten his words. After he said to Moses “Behold, today they brought their sin offering and their burnt offering” but we are in mourning. There are some who say Aaron drew him outside from the group and said to Moses, “my brother, tithes of minor value are forbidden to a mourner to eat, a sin offering which is important, all the more so it should be forbidden to a mourner. Immediately he

acknowledged him, as it is said, “And Moses heard and it was good in his eyes” (Leviticus 10:20).

And he is not hastened to respond. This is Eliyahu son of Brachael the Buzite as it is said, “I said let time speak” (Job 32:7). We learn that they were sitting and quiet before Job. When he stood, they would stand, when he sat, they would sit, when he ate, they would eat, when he drank, they would drink. Until he received permission from them [and cursed his day], as it is said, “And after this Job opened his mouth and cursed his day...” (Job 3:1). And he said, “destroy the day I was born and the night it was said a male was conceived” (Job 3:3). Destroy the day that my father came to my mother and she told him I am pregnant. From where do we know that they did not answer at the same time? As it is said, “Job answered and said” (Job 3:2). “Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said” (Job 4:1). “Bildad the Shuhite answered and said” (Job 8:1). “Zofar the Naamatite answered and said” (Job 11:1). “Eliyahu son of Brachael the Buzite answered and said” (Job 32:6). The text arranged them one by one, to show all in the world that a wise person does not speak before one who is greater than him in wisdom and number, does not enter inside his fellow’s speech, is not frightened to respond.

He asks about [relevant] matters. This is Judah, as it is said, “I will pledge myself for him” (Genesis 43:9).

He asks about non [relevant] matters. This is Reuven as it is said, “Reuven said to his father, you may kill my two sons” (Genesis 42:37).

He speaks of the first, first. This is Jacob. And some said this is Sarah.

And the last, last. These are the men of Haran

And he acknowledges the truth. This is Moses, as it is said, “God said to me they have done well in order to speak” (Deuteronomy 18:17). So too God acknowledged the truth as it is said, “the daughters of Zelophehad spoke the truth” (Numbers 27:7).

Rambam Translations¹¹²

1:14

[If I am not for myself, who is for me?] He said, if I myself will not be the one who wakes my soul to virtue, who will wake me as I have no outside people to wake me as explained in the second chapter. [But if I am for myself, what am I?] And since it is in my power to extend my soul to any side that I want, what deed did I do from the good deeds? It is like he was diminishing himself and saying, what am I? This is to say, what is coming from me? I am not complete even if I did this matter. And after he returned and said, [And if not now, when?] if I do not acquire these virtuous traits now in the days of my youth, when will I acquire them? Not in the days of old age, as it is hard to turn from intentions at that time because one's acquisitions and traits have hardened and settled if they are virtues or if they are vices. And the wise one said, “educate a young person according to his way so when he is old he does not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6).

¹¹² Rambam Translation translated from the manuscript in the book with commentary by Mordekhai Dov Rabinovits.

Moses Maimonides and Mordekhai Dov Rabinovits, *Peirush L'Masehet Avot* (Jerusalem, Israel: Mossad Harav Kook, 1961).

2:1

[Which straight path] It Is clear that the straight path is good work as we explained in the fourth chapter, and they are the virtues of the middle because through them one can acquire for their soul an important disposition and he will have a good manner with other people. As it was said, “honor for the one who does it and honor to him from others.” [Be careful with a lenient commandment as with a strict one] After he said that he needs to be careful with a mitzvah that he thinks is lenient like rejoicing the holiday and the study of the holy language, as with a commandment where it is clear to you that they have great weight like circumcision, fringes, and the sacrifice of the Pesach lamb. There is a reason for this, “for you don’t know the gift of the reward of the commandments.” And the explanation of this matter is as I say. And it is that the entire Torah has within it positive commandments and negative commandments. Indeed, Scripture explains the punishment of each negative commandment other than a few of them, and one is obligated for parts of them the death penalty, and on others separation and death at the hands of heaven, and the punishment of lashes. And we know from all the punishments of the negative commandments which of them are large prohibitions and which of them are below them. There are eight levels. But it does not explain the reward for positive commandments, each one what is it according to God, may God be blessed. And all of this is in order that you do not know which commandments requires that you keep it greatly and which commandment is below it. However, it is commanded to do the matter of this and that and to not make known the reward of which of them is greater according to God, may God be blessed. And because of this, one needs to be careful about all of them. And because of this matter they said, the one who is engaged in a commandment is exempt from another commandment (b. Sukkah

25a) without comparing between the commandments that they are engaging in and the other that they are cutting out.

3:9

[Anyone whose fear of his sin precedes his wisdom] Behold, this thing is agreed upon by the philosophers as well: that the habit of virtues precedes wisdom until it becomes a strong possession, and after he will learn wisdom in order that they will speed up to goodness. He will add joy and love in his wisdom, and in diligence he will add to it. Since it wakes him to that which is habit. But when the acquisition of knowledge comes first and after he studies, his wisdom will prevent him from what he wants according to his habit. Wisdom will be heavy upon him and he will leave it.

4:6

[Anyone who honors the Torah] Honor of the Torah is when one shows zealousness in practicing it, and when one will honor the sages that support it and the books that they wrote on it. Thus, desecration of the Torah is the opposite of the three

4:21

[Jealousy, desire [and the longing for] honor put a person away from the world.] He said that jealousy, desire and the love of honor put a person away from the world. This is because in these traits, or even in one of them, one will be forced to lose their faith in the Torah and no rational virtues or moral virtues will reach him.

5:7

[Seven things in *Golem* and seven in a wise person] Here I will explain at first the attributes that are increasingly repeated in the words of the sages and those are *boor*, *am ha'aretz*, *golem*, wise person and pious person. Indeed, a *boor* is a person who does not have rational virtues or moral virtues, meaning to say not wisdom and not ethics. And he also does not have the acquisition of knowledge, it is like he is bare of the good and the bad. And he is called *boor* ("empty") to compare him to a land not sown with anything, and that is called an empty field as it is explained in Zera'im. *Am ha'aretz* is a person who has moral virtues, but does not have rational virtues, meaning to say he has the way of the land but not Torah in his hand. And he is called a person of the land, meaning to say he is good for the settling of the land and the collective of the states because he has moral virtues which will be good for his friends and community like we explained at the beginning of our composition. *Golem* is a person who has rational virtues and moral virtues, but they are not complete and do not go in a proper order. Rather, they have tumult and confusion and are mixed with deficiencies. And because of this he is called *golem* ("unfinished") to compare him to a tool that a craftsman has made that has the angelic form that lacks completion and correction. Like a knife and a sword that the blacksmith made unfinished and their form comes to them before he grinds them and sharpens them and smooths them and engraves them what his way is to engrave and complete its correction. And before this they are called unfinished metal tools like it is explained in Kelim. And it is a Hebrew word, "unfinished your eyes saw" (Psalms 139:16) meaning to say, my substance before it reached the form of humans. And when this form does not reach its completion, it is called unfinished to compare it to a substance that is found prepared to receive a different form through which it will be more complete. A wise person is a person who reached both types of virtues with perfection like is

needed. A pious person is a wise person who increases in virtue, meaning to say, in moral virtues until he inclines a little to the extreme like we explained in Chapter 4 and his deeds will be greater than his wisdom. And because of this he is called pious, in his increase. For the exaggeration in this matter is called wise whether the exaggeration is for good or for bad. He said here that the wise person will have these seven virtues and they are major principles. And because of that he will pay attention to them, since through them knowledge, study, and action are possible. Four of them are moral virtues and they are that he goes not speak before one who is greater than him in wisdom, he does not enter inside his fellow's speech but he is quiet until he finishes his words, he does not glorify himself in what he does not know and on what he has not heard he says he did not hear, and he is not stubborn, but when he hears the truth, he acknowledges it. And even about what he is able to reject, disagree, or mislead, he does not want to do it and this he says, he acknowledges the truth. There are three rational virtues. The first - when a deceiver deceives him with work of deception, he should not panic and remain in doubt about the truth. Rather, he should quickly sense the place of the error. He explains it saying, he is not hastened to respond. And this truly is from ease of understanding and good consideration of what the deceiver said to understand the difference in the words. The second virtue is that he will ask what needs to be asked about the matter and he will not ask for instructional evidence in natural science and not for a scientific argument in the wisdoms of instruction and similar to this. And if he was the one who was asked, he also should answer according to the subject of the question. If he is asked about matters which in by their nature require evidence, he should answer according to the subject of the question with evidence. If he is asked in something that is lower than this, he should answer according to what is his opinion and its nature. Also, he should not be asked about the material reason and give a formal reason

or be asked about a formal reason and give a material reason, rather he should respond from the side of the object, this he says, he asks about [relevant] matters and he answers properly. And this is will only be after extraordinary wisdom. The third virtue is that he orders his study and puts first to what is fitting to put first and after what is fitting to put later, as this is the most useful way in study, and he says, he speaks of the first first and the last last. And all of these are the reverse in an unfinished person because he is not complete like we explained, he has not reached this level.

Interpersonal Relationships

1:7, 1:15, 2:4, 2:11, 2:12, 3:12, 4:3, 4:15, 4:18

Mishnah Translations

1:7: Nattai the Arbelite said: distance from an evil neighbor, and do not join the wicked, and do not give up on divine retribution.

1:15: Shammai said: Make your Torah fixed, speak little and do much, and receive every person with a friendly expression.

2:4: He used to say, do his will as it is your desire, in order that he will do your will as it is his desire. Suspend your will for the sake of his will, in order that he will suspend the desire of others for the sake of your desire. Hillel says, do not separate from the community, and do not trust in yourself until the day of your death, and do not judge your friend until you have come to their place, and do not say a word that is not able to be heard [thinking] that at the end it is understood, and do not say when I shall have leisure I will study, lest there be no leisure.

2:11: Rabbi Yehoshua said: the evil eye, the evil inclination, and the hatred of human beings, these remove a person from the world.

2:12: Rabi Yosi said: Let the wealth of your friend be precious to you like your own. Prepare yourself to study Torah, for it is not your heritage. All your actions shall be for the sake of heaven.

3:12: Rabbi Yishmael said, be easy for your leader, be kind to youth, and accept every person in happiness.

4:3: He used to say: Do not despise any person, and do not divide any matter, for there is not a person who does have his hour and there is not a matter that does not have a place.

4:15: Rabbi Yanai said: it is not in our hands, not the *management* of the wicked, nor the suffering of the righteous. Rabbi Matia son of Harash said: be first to greet every person, be a tail for a lion, and do not be a head for foxes.

4:18: Rabbi Shimon son of Elazar said: Do not appease your friend in his hour of anger, and do not comfort him in the hour where his dead is placed before him, and do not question him in the hour of his vow, and do not make an effort to see him in the hour of his corruption.

Avot D'Rabbi Natan Translations

1:7 - Chapter 9

Nattai the Arbelite said: distance from an evil neighbor, and do not join the wicked, and do not give up on divine retribution.

Distance from an evil neighbor, both a neighbor in your house, outside, or in the field. We learn from this that plagues only come from the guilt of an evil person. The guilt of an evil person causes him to destroy the wall of a righteous person. How? The wall between an evil person

and a righteous person, if it looks like there is a plague on the house of the wicked person, on the wall that is between him and the righteous person, they will find and destroy the wall of the righteous person for the guilt of the evil person. Rabbi Yishmael, son of Rabbi Yochanan son of Brooka said, “Woe to the evil, woe to his neighbor. The guilt of an evil person causes him to destroy the wall of a righteous person.”

...

And do not join the wicked. We learn from this that one should not join a bad person or a wicked person. As we see with Jehoshaphat who joined Ahab and went up with him to Ramot Gilad and upon him came anger from God, as it is said, “Should one help the wicked and love those who hate God? And for this upon you is the anger from before God” (II Chronicles 19:2). Again he joined with Ahaziah and they made ships in Etzion Gever and God broke through his work, as it is said, “since you joined with Ahaziah, God will break your work, and the ships were broken” (II Chronicles 20:37). And thus we find with Amnon who joined Jonadav and he gave him bad advice as it is said, “Amnon had a friend named Jonadav son of Shimah, David’s brother, Jonadav was a very cunning man” (II Samuel 13:3), cunning as evil. Another interpretation of do not join the wicked, even for Torah.

And do not give up on divine retribution. How? We learn from this that a person’s heart should be afraid every day and he should say, Woe to me. Perhaps punishment will come upon myself today, or perhaps tomorrow. And he should find himself afraid every day, as it is said, “I am surely afraid” (Job 3:25). Another interpretation on do not give up on divine retribution. How? At the time a person sees what is in his hand succeed, do not say because I merit it, God has given me food and drink in this world, and the principle will remain in the world to come. Rather, he should say, Woe is me. Perhaps I only have only found one thing to merit for which

he has given me food and drink in this world in order that I will be destroyed in the world to come.

1:15 - Chapter 13

Shammai said: Make your Torah fixed, speak little and do much, and receive every person with a friendly expression.

Make your Torah fixed: How? We learn from this if a person hears a speech from a sage in the Beit Midrash, they should not make it temporary, rather they should make it fixed. And what the person learns, he should do, and then teach it to others and they should do it, as it is said, “learn them and keep doing them” (Deuteronomy 5:1). Also in Ezra it is said, “For Ezra arranged his heart to study the teaching of God and to observe it and to teach the laws and judgment to Israel” (Ezra 7:10).

Speak little and do much. How? We learn from this that the righteous say little and do much but the evil say much and even a little they do not do. And from where do we know that the righteous say little and do much? Because we find in the case of Abraham our father who said to the angels, have a piece with me today, as it is said, “I will get a piece of bread and you can sustain yourselves” (Genesis 18:5). But after, look what Abraham did for the ministering angels. He went and made for them three bulls and nine seahs of flour.

...

Receive every person with a friendly expression. How? We learn from this that if a person gives his friend all the good presents in the world and his face is forced, Scripture says it is like he gave him nothing. But one who receives his friend with a friendly expression, even if he did not give him anything, Scripture says it is like he gave him all the good presents in the world.

2:11 - Chapter 16

Rabbi Yehoshua said: the evil eye, the evil inclination, and the hatred of human beings, these remove a person from the world.

The evil eye. How? We learn from this that just as a person sees his own house, so too should they see the house of his friend. And just as a person does not want a bad name to go out about his wife and children, so too should a person not want a bad name to go out about his friend's wife or his friend's children.

Another interpretation of the evil eye. How? A person should not look hostile during the teaching of his friend. It once happened that one looked hostile during the teaching of his friend and his life was cut short and he departed and went on his way.

The evil inclination. How? They say thirteen years the evil inclination is greater than the good inclination. From the mother's womb, it grows and arrives with him. And when he begins to profane Shabbat, there is nothing to prevent his hand. He kills living beings, nothing there to prevent his hand. He goes out to say a sin, nothing there to prevent his hand. After thirteen years the good inclination is born. As soon as he profanes Shabbat it says to him, empty-headed, it says, "one who profanes it shall surely die" (Exodus 31:14). When he kills living beings it says to him, empty-headed, it says, "the one who spills human blood, their blood shall be spilled" (Genesis 9:6). When he goes out to say a sin it says to him, empty-headed, it says, "the adulterer and adulteress shall surely die" (Leviticus 20:10). When a person heats themselves up and goes to do an evil plan, all his limbs obey him because the evil inclination is king over his 248 limbs. But when he goes to do a mitzvah, his limbs start to be lazy because the evil inclination in his belly is king over the 248 limbs in a man. And the good inclination is only similar to the one

who is imprisoned in the prison house, as it is said, “From the house of prison he came out as king” (Ecclesiastes 4:14). This is the good inclination.

...

Hatred of human beings. How? We learn from this that one should not establish and say, love the sages and hate the disciples, love the disciples and hate the common people. Rather, love everyone and hate the heretics, apostates, and traitors. So too David said, “I hate those who hate you and I will loathe those who rise against you. I surely hate them, they are my enemies” (Psalms 139:21-22). Doesn’t scripture say, “love your neighbor as yourself, I am God” (Leviticus 19:18). What is the reason? Because I created him and if he does your work, you shall love him, and if he does not, you shall not love him. Rabbi Shimon son of Elazar used to say, by a great oath this was said, “love your neighbor as yourself. I am God.” I created him, if you love him, I will be trustworthy to reward you with a good reward, and if not, I am the judge who will uncover you.

2:12 - Chapter 17

Rabi Yosi said: Let the wealth of your friend be precious to you like your own. Prepare yourself to study Torah, for it is not your heritage. All your actions shall be for the sake of heaven.

How? We learn from this that just as a person sees his wealth so should he see his friend’s wealth. And just as a person does not want a bad name to go out about his own wealth, so to should they not want a bad name to go out about his friend’s wealth. Another interpretation of let the wealth of your friend be precious to you like your own. How? At the time when a student scholar enters beside you saying teach me, if you are able to teach him, teach him, if not, dismiss

him immediately and do not money from him as it is said, “do not say you your neighbor go and come back again and tomorrow I will give it to you when you have it with you” (Proverbs 3:28). Prepare yourself to study Torah, for it is not your heritage. How? At the time that Moses our teacher saw that his children had no Torah to rise in leadership after him, he wrapped himself and stood in prayer. He said before God, Master of the world, declare for me who will come in and who will go out as the head of this people as it is said, “Moses spoke to God saying, ‘Let God, source of breath to all flesh, appoint a person upon the community who will go out before them and who will come in before them’” (Numbers 27: 15-17). God said to Moses, Moses, take for you Joshua (Numbers 27:18). God said to Moses, go and stand for him as an interpreter and he will teach before the head of the great men of Israel. At that moment, Moses said to Joshua, Joshua this people I am turning to you. I am not turning to you goats, but kids. And sheep I am not turning to you, rather lambs. For they have still not engaged in the mitzvot and they have still not reached being goats and sheep as it is said, “if you do not know the prettiest of women, go out along the footprints of the sheep, and graze your kids by the dwellings of the shepherds” (Song of Songs 1:8).

...

All your actions shall be for the sake of heaven. For the sake of Torah, as it is said, “in all of your ways know him and he will straighten your paths” (Proverbs 3:6).

4:18 - Chapter 29

Rabbi Shimon son of Elazar in the name of Rabbi Meir said: Do not appease your friend in his hour of anger, and do not comfort him in the hour of his mourning, and do not question him in

the hour of his vow, and do not come to his house on the day of his distress, and do not make an effort to see him in the hour of his corruption.

He used to say: If you have friends, part of whom judge you and part of whom praise you, love the ones who judge you and hate the ones who praise you. Because those who judge you bring you to the world to come and the ones who praise you take you out of the world.

He used to say: Everyplace that a person goes, his heart goes. When he stands, his heart stands. Where he sits, things are seated next to him.

He used to say: Anyone who has alerted himself to the words of Torah, watchful people turn to his side. Anyone who neglects from the words of Torah, neglectful people turn to his side. Such as a lion, wolf, tiger, leopard, snake, robbers, or thieves who come and surround him and collect payment from him as it is said, “indeed, there is a God who judges on earth” (Psalms 58:12).

Rambam Translations

1:7

[Distance from an evil neighbor, and do not join the wicked] Do not join the wicked in any kind of friendship or companionship in order that you will not learn from his deeds. And we have already explained in the previous chapters that a person will learn vices in the company of the wicked. [And do not give up on divine retribution] And he said if you sin or you see one who sins, do not be confident and say that God, may God be blessed, will punish him only in the world to come, and do not despair of quick vengeance from him for this sin.

1:15

[Make your Torah fixed] He said make Torah study the root and foundation and all the rest of your work continue after it. If it occurs, it occurs. And if it doesn't occur, it doesn't occur and there is no loss in its absence. [Speak little and do much] They said, the righteous say little and do much like Abraham our father who designated one piece of bread and brought "curds and milk and a calf" (Genesis 18:8) and three measures of fine flour. And the wicked say much and do not do even a little like Efron who gave everything with his words, but in action did not leave even one small coin from the price. [And receive every person with a friendly expression] This is when he interacts with humankind with comfort and with pleasant and acceptable words.

2:4

[Do not separate from the community] We already indicated in the fourth chapter that there is no need to separate from the community except in accordance with their damage as we explained there. [And do not trust in yourself until the day of your death] He And he said that even if a person has an important character trait in his soul and he has strengthened it, he should not remove his hand from doubling his good deed and adding to its strength. And he should not be confident and say, this virtue has already ascended to my hand and it is impossible for it to turn aside, as it is possible that it will turn aside. And that is his saying, until the day of your death. [And do not say a word that is not able to be heard [thinking] that at the end it is understood] A word that is not able to be heard is that the simple meaning of the word will be very distant and negligible. And when a person observes them properly, he will see the correct words. And he warns against this path of speech as he says, do not have your words need to a distant explanation and extra observation, then the listener will hear them. [And do not say when I shall

have leisure I will study, lest there be no leisure] When I shall have leisure, meaning when I am at leisure from this work. And this is similar to what preceded the commands of Shammai, “make your Torah fixed” (Avot 1:15).

2:11

[The evil eye, the evil inclination, and the hatred of human beings, these remove a person from the world] He said that the diligence for money and great desire and the badness of the soul, and that is the bitter black sickness which brings a person to be repulsed with what his eyes see and he will hate it, and he will be pleased to befriend animals and isolation in deserts and forests and he will choose a place where no one has settled. And this is not from a side of abstaining, but from the weakened desire and their jealousy of others, these will undoubtedly kill him. For his body will become sick and he will die before his time.

2:12

[Prepare yourself to study Torah, for it is not your heritage] We have already explained this in the eighth chapter in the matter of preparation and readiness that a person needs to prepare himself for the virtues. And we explained in the fifth chapter the matter of his saying, all your actions shall be for the sake of heaven.

3:12

[Be easy for your leader, be kind to youth, and accept every person in happiness] Easy, [the meaning] is known. And kind, this is calmness and ease. And he said with this command that when you stand in front of a person with great virtue, make yourself unimportant to them and

serve him and stand before him like he wants and do not seek honor for yourself from him. But when you are with black hair, meaning to say with a young person in years, do not do this, but seek honor for yourself and do not play or yearn for him. After he said, do not think that since I have warned you against yearning for someone young in years, you should receive him with displeasure or an angry face. This is not the intention. Rather, you need to receive every person small and large, free and slave, every person of the human species with happiness. This is more than what Shammai said, with a friendly expression.

4:3

[Do not despise any person, and do not divide any matter, for there is not a person who does have his hour] And he said that it is impossible that there is not a time for every person when they can damage or benefit, even with a small thing.

4:15

[Be a tail for a lion, and do not be a head for foxes] He said that when a person is a student to someone who is wiser than them, it is better for him and more fit than being a teacher to someone lesser than him, for in the first matter he will gain and in the second matter he will decrease. And you should understand it from what we explained in Sanhedrin, that based on the reason we elevate in holiness and do not bring down, they placed the head of the academy of twenty three at the end of the of the seventy one of the great academy, as they saw this as they added rank to him.

4:18

[Do not appease your friend in his hour of anger ...] This is clear and they are matters of ethics in improving relations between people by placing words in its useful place.

Teacher/Student Relationships

1:6, 1:16, 4:5, 4:12, 4:14, 5:12, 5:14, 5:15, 6:3

Mishnah Translations

1:6: Joshua son of Perachia and Nittai the Arbelite received it from them. Joshua son of Perachia said: make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend and judge every person with the scale of the balance in their favor.

1:16: Rabban Gamliel used to say, make for yourself a teacher, remove yourself from doubt, and do not frequently estimate the tithe

4:5: Rabbi Ishmael his son said: The one who learns Torah in order to teach, he has the opportunity to learn and teach. The one who learns in order to do, he has the opportunity to learn, teach, observe and do. Rabbi Zadok said: do not make for them a crown to glorify them, and nor an axe to dig for them. And this is what Hillel used to say: he who makes use of the crown goes to *ruin*. Thus you have learned, all who benefited from the words of Torah, takes his life from the world.

4:12: Rabbi Elazar son of Shamua said: Let the honor of your student be dear to you like your own, and the honor of your fellow as the reverence for your teacher, and the reverence for your teacher as the reverence for heaven.

4:14: Rabbi Nehorai said: exile to a place of Torah, and do not say that it will come after you, for it is your fellow who will build it in your hand and “upon your understanding do not rely” (Proverbs 3:5).

5:12: There are four characteristics of students: quick to understand and quick to lose: his reward goes out in his loss. Difficult to understand and difficult to lose: his loss goes out in his reward. Quick to understand and difficult to lose: wise. Difficult to understand and quick to lose: this is an bad section.

5:14: There are four characteristics of people who come to the beit midrash. The one who attends but does not act: a reward for coming is given to him. The one who acts but does not attend: a reward for acting is given to him. The one who attends and acts: a pious person. The one who does not attend or act, evil person.

5:15: There are four characteristics of people who sit before the sages: a sponge, a funnel, a strainer, and a sieve. A sponge, who absorbs everything. A funnel, who brings it in and lets it out. A strainer, who brings out the wine and retains the sediment. And a sieve, who lets out the flour and retains the sifted fine flour.

6:3: The one who learns from his friend one chapter, or one halacha, or one verse, or one word, or even one letter, needs to behave with honor toward him, for we find in David, king of Israel, who only learned from Achitophel two things, but called him his teacher, his chief, and his friend as it is said, “it is you, a man comparable to me, my chief, my friend.” (Psalms 55:14). Is this

not words of “leniency and strictness” (kal vachomer)? If David king of Israel who only learned from Achitophel two things but called him his teacher, his chief, and his friend; the one who learns from his friend one chapter, or one halacha, or one verse, or one word, or even one letter, all the more so he needs to behave with honor toward him. And honor is only Torah, as it is said, “the wise shall inherit honor” (Proverbs 3:35). “And the complete will inherit good” (Proverbs 28:10), and good is only Torah as it is said, “For I gave you good teaching, do not forsake my Torah” (Proverbs 4:2).

Avot D’Rabbi Natan Translations

1:6 - Chapter 8

Joshua son of Perachia and Nittai the Arbelite received it from them. Joshua son of Perachia said: make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every person with the scale of the balance in their favor.

Make for yourself a teacher. How? We learn from this that one should make a fixed relationship with his teacher and learn from him Scripture, Mishnah, Midrash, halachot and aggadot. The reason for what remains for him in Scripture at the end will be said in the Mishnah. The reason for what remains for him in Mishnah at the end will be said in the Midrash. The reason for what remains for him in Midrash at the end will be said in the halachot. And the reason for what remains for him in halachot at the end will be said in agaddah. The person finds themselves sitting in his place and full of goodness and blessings. Rabbi Meir used to say: The one who learns Torah from one teacher, to what is he like? Like one who had one field and sowed a part wheat and a part barley, and planted a part olives and a part trees. And this person finds

themselves full of goodness and blessings. When they learn from two or three, it is similar to someone who has many fields, one he sows with wheat, one he sows with barley, one he plants olives, and another trees. And this person finds themselves scattered between the lands and without goodness or blessing.

Acquire for yourself a friend. How? We learn from this that one should acquire for themselves a friend that will eat with him, drink with him, read Scripture with him, study Mishnah with him, sleep with him, and uncover all his hidden things, secrets of the Torah and secrets of the way of the land. When two sit and engage in Torah, if one of them makes a mistake in the law or the beginning of the chapter or if they say an impure thing is pure or a pure thing impure, or if a forbidden thing is permitted or a permitted thing forbidden, his friend will correct him. And from where do we know that his friend will correct him and study with him and they will have a good reward from their labor, as it is said, “two is better than one, for they have great reward from their labor” (Ecclesiastes 4:9).

...

Judge every person with the scale of the balance in their favor. It once happened that a young woman was captured and two pious men went after him to ransom her. One of them went into a room of prostitution. As he came out he said to his friend, what did you suspect? He said, perhaps to know how much money to obtain her. He said to him, the work was just that. He said to him, just as you judged me from the hand of merit, so too should God judge you from the hand of merit.

4:12 - Chapter 27

Rabbi Elazar son of Shamua said: Let the honor of your student be dear to you like your own, and the honor of your fellow as the reverence for your teacher, and the reverence for your teacher as the reverence for heaven. From where do we learn that the honor of your student should be dear to you like your own? Every person should learn from Moses our teacher as he said to Joshua, “select people for us” (Exodus 17:9). He did not say select for me, rather, choose for us. We learn from this that he treated him like himself even though he was the teacher and Joshua was the student, he treated him like himself. And from where do we learn that the honor of your fellow should be as dear to you as your teachers? As it is said, “and Aaron said to Moses, please my lord” (Numbers 12:11). Isn’t Moses his younger brother? But he treated him like a teacher. And from where do we learn that the honor of your teacher should be as dear to you as the heavens? As it is said, “And Joshua, Moses’s attendant from when he was young, spoke up and said, ‘my lord Moses, restrain them’” (Numbers 11:28), for his voice is equal to the Divine Presence.

5:15 - Chapter 40

There are four characteristics of people who sit before the sages. One who is like a sponge, one who is like a sieve, one who is like a funnel, and one who is like a strainer. How is one like a sponge? It is a faithful student who sits before the sages and learns Scripture, Mishnah, Midrash, halachot, and aggadot. And just like a sponge absorbs everything, so too he absorbs everything. How is one like a sieve? This is a watchful student who sits before the wise sages and hears Scripture, Mishnah, Midrash, halachot, and aggadot. And just like a sieve lets out the flour and retains the sifted fine flour, so too he let out the bad and retains the good. How is one like a

funnel? It is the stupid student who sits before the wise sages and hears Scripture, Mishnah, Midrash, halachot, and aggadot. And just as a funnel brings it in and lets it out, so too every word was put in one ear and going in from there and going out from there one after the other until they slipped away and departed him. How is one like a strainer? It is a wicked student who sits before the wise sages and hears Scripture, Mishnah, Midrash, halachot, and aggadot. And just as a strainer brings out the wine and retains the sediment, so too he lets out the good and retains the bad. Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov calls them a truncated punctured horn. How it is truncated? It is a baby who is given a pearl, then a piece of bread. They throw the pearl and take the bread. Then they are given a piece of pottery, they throw the bread and take the pottery. Behold, there is nothing found in his hands other than a sole piece of pottery.

Rambam Translations

1:6

[Make for yourself a teacher] Meaning to say, even if he is not fit to be your teacher, indeed make him as a teacher so that you will compare that he is learning and because of this the study of wisdom will come upon your hand. For the study of a person on their own is nothing compared to the study with his fellow. His personal study is good but study with his fellow will last longer in his hand and he can explain it more clear even if he is like him in wisdom or below. And thus they explained it from the interpretation that this is the commandment.

And he said, acquire yourself a friend. He mentioned it in the language of acquire and did not say make for yourself a friend or befriend others. The intention for this is that a person needs to acquire a friend for himself, so he will repair his deeds and all his matters through him, like it is

said, “either friendship or death” (Taanit 23a). And if he does not find him, he needs to make an effort for it with all his heart, and even if he needs to pledge his friendship until his friend settles. And he should not turn aside from continuing to follow his will until the friendship is strengthened. Like the masters of ethics say, when you love, do not love according to your traits, rather, love according to the trait of your friend. And when both friends has the right intention according to the commandment, each of them has the intention to express the will of his friend and both their intentions will become one without a doubt. And how good is the saying of Aristotle, the friend is one, him and you. There are three types of friends, useful friend, comfortable friend, and virtuous friend. Indeed, the useful friend is like the friendship of two partners and the friendship of the king and his army. The comfortable friend is of two types, a friend of enjoyment and a friend of trust. The friend of enjoyment is like a friendship of males and females and those similar to it, and the friendship of trust is when a person has a friend to whom he can trust his soul. He will not keep anything from him not in action and not in words, and he will make known to him all his matters, the good and the offensive ones without fear from him that loss will overtake him, not from him and not from another. For when a person reaches this amount of trust with a man, he will find great comfort in his words and in his great friendship. And a virtuous friend is when the desire of both of them and their intention is for one thing. This is the good and each wants to help the other friend reach the good for both together, and this is a friend who he is commanded to acquire, and it is like the friendship of a teacher to a student and a student to a teacher.

[And judge every person with the scale of the balance in their favor] Its matter is when a person who you do not know if he is righteous or wicked and you see him doing an act or saying something and if you interpret it one way it is good and if you interpret it a different way it is

bad, take it to the good and do not think about the bad. But if it is a person who you know is famously righteous and does good deeds and you see him act and all the matters look rebellious and that it is a bad act, and no person is able to decide if it is good except for with great distress and there is a distant possibility, it is fitting to take it that it is good since there is any side where there is a possibility for it to be good, and it is not permitted for you to suspect him. And on this they said, “anyone who suspects the able will be affected with disease on his body” (Shabbat 97a). And so too when a wicked person and his actions are famous, and after we see him do an action that all indicates that it is good, but there is a side that has a distant possibility to be bad, it is fitting to guard oneself from him and to not believe that it is good, since there is a possibility for bad. And on this they say, even “though his voice is gracious do not trust him, for seven abominations are in his heart” (Proverbs 26:25). But when he is not known and the act is not decisive to one of two extremes, one needs to in the way of piety judge with the scale of the balance in their favor, whichever extreme of the two extremes.

1:16

[Make for yourself a teacher, remove yourself from doubt, and do not frequently estimate the tithe] This that he commanded here to make a teacher is not for the matter of study, but rather instruction. Place for yourself a teacher so you can rely on them in the forbidden and the permissible and you can remove yourself from doubt. Like it is said in the Yerushalmi, go bring me an elder from the marketplace and I will rely on him and allow you (y. Moed Katan 1:10). And thus he commended to flee from bringing forth tithes by estimation, because it is from the doubts.

4:5

[Nor an axe to dig for them...] After I concluded that I would not speak about this testament because it is clear and since according to my opinion, my words would not be agreeable to most great sages of the Torah and perhaps to them all, I went back on my conclusion and I will speak about it without watching out for the previous or the present [sages]. Know that this that he said, that you shall not make a Torah into an axe to dig to them, that is to say, do not intend for it to be a tool to live by. He explained and said, because anyone who benefits in this world from the honor of Torah removes his life from the world, this is explained as the world to come. People twisted this clear language and thrown it behind their backs and they hang onto the literal meaning of the words for they did not understand them and I will explain. They established for themselves laws upon individuals and upon communities. And they brought people to think in their complete stupidity that it is obligatory and fitting that they help the sages and students and the people who engage in Torah, for whom Torah is their craft. All of this is an error and it is not in the Torah or in the words of the sages any words that give truth to this nor any base to lean on. For when we study the words of the sages, may their memory be blessed, we do not find that they asked for money from people and they did not collect money for their honored and precious schools, nor for the heads of the exiles, or the judges, or the teachers of Torah, or to one of the greats, or to the remainder of the people of the nation. Indeed, we see in every generation and in every community, that there are poor in complete poverty, and wealthy in complete wealth. Far be it from me to suspect those generations that they were not doers of kindness and givers of charity. If indeed, this poor man stretched out his hand to take, they would have filled his house with gold and pearls, but he did not want it. However, he satisfied with his work in which he

earns a living, if with relief or distress, and he despised what was in the hands of people because the Torah prevented him from it.

.....

Indeed, the matters that the Torah permitted to Torah scholars are that they should give their money to a person to do buying and selling with according to his choice and the profit will all be for them, if he wants. And the one who does this has a great reward upon him, and this is casting goods into the pocket of Torah scholars. And their goods should be sold before all the other goods, and they should buy them at the beginning of the market. These are the rules that God, may he be blessed, established like God established the gifts for the priests and the tithes for the Levites according to what is in the tradition. For these two actions, merchants should do them little by little on the path of honor, and even if is no wisdom, a Torah scholar is worthy to be like an am ha'aretz in honor. And thus the Torah lightened Torah scholars of the laws of the kingship [regarding] property taxes, quarters of the army, and laws individual to each person and they are called poll taxes, the community pays for them. And so too with the building of walls and similar like them. And even if the Torah scholar is wealthy, he is not obligated in all of this, and Rabbi Yosef HaLevi, may his memory be blessed, already instructed a person in a certain place who had a gardens and orchards who was obligated to pay thousands of gold coins. And he said that he would be exempt from paying a thing for them from all we have mentioned, because he was a Torah scholar, although even a poor person in Israel would give this tax. And this is the law of the Torah like the Torah exempted the priests from the half shekel as we explained in its place and what is similar to it.

4:14

[Exile to a place of Torah...] He said, seek a place for reading and study, for with another you will plan the reading and it will exist. Do not lean on your understanding and say that you do not need friends and students that will wake you up.

5:12

[There are four characteristics of students: quick to understand...] Observe how he did not call the one that is wise and has a good memory a pious one, because this is a rational virtue. So he called him wise. And he did not call the one who has difficulty understanding the matters and forgets much wicked because it is not in his hand and these are not virtues which are possible to acquire like we explained in the second chapter.

5:14

[There are four characteristics of people who come to the beit midrash...] His saying, of those who come to the house of study, meaning to say in the going to the house of study there are four traits. Observe how he called the one who acquires many virtues pious and the one who is lazy in acquiring evil. And when you know the rational virtues and the moral virtues and you know every type of them, if you want, study wisdom and action. And when you know the mean and the way of action, that can be called good. And a small increase of the mean, that is the actions of the famous pious ones. And when you know the increase and the decrease which are both bad, only that one of the sides is more fitting for the name “evil” and the other will be called “sin” or an action that is not correct. And the example of this is that caution is complete good without a doubt. And much of the desire is complete bad without a doubt. And the lack of

feeling of enjoyment even though it is bad, surely is not much like desire and it is called sin or an action that is not correct. And the departure from caution slightly to the side of lack of feeling is fitting for the complete. And when you understand this matter, you will know that anyone who leaves from caution slightly will be called pious like we showed earlier. And lack of feeling is called sinner, and on this it is said about the nazirite, “from that which he sinned upon his soul” (Numbers 6:11), like we explained in chapter four. And of all that we previously explained you will know who among the people is fitting to call empty, and who is fitting to call am ha’aretz, and who is fitting to call unfinished, and who is fitting to call wise, and who is fitting to call evil, and who is fitting to call pious, and who is fitting to call sinner. These are the seven names that fall upon seven people according to what they have of virtues and vices, moral and rational, according to what precedes us from the interpretations. And they already placed names according to the matters of the person like for a person who has moral vices he is called evil, like we explained. But if he doesn’t have rational virtues that he uses for bad, for this he is called by the sages deliberately evil. And if he is an evil person who damages another person, meaning to say that part of his moral vices are matters that damage people, like arrogance and cruelty and those similar to them, this is called an bad evil person. And so too a person who has rational virtues and moral vices who will do damage is called a wise evil person, like it is said in the verse about someone who is like this, “wise people do evil, but to do good, they do not know” (Jeremiah 4:22). Meaning to say, they use the rational virtues to do evil actions, not good. But the person who has gathered all the virtues, rational and moral virtues until there is no rational virtue or moral virtue that is not in him, this is rarely found, and the philosophers say that finding a person like this is very improbable but not impossible. And when he is found, he is called godly man, and so too in our language, man of God. And I say that this person is called a

messenger of God, like it is said, “and a messenger of God came up from Gilgal” (Judges 2:1). And the philosophers said that it is impossible to find a person who has gathered all the vices until the end, without rational [virtues] or moral until he does not have any virtues at all. And when he is found, and this is improbable, they will name him with the name of an animal from the bad and dangerous animals. And thus Solomon called him a bereaved bear, which is the gathering of stupidity and damages. These five are also compound names, four are to disgrace and those are deliberately evil, bad evil person, wise evil person, and bereaved bear. And one is for goodness, and there is nothing greater than it, a man of God, or messenger of God. And Scripture already explained that you call the person who has within him rational virtues and moral virtues messenger of God, and it says, “for the lips of a priest guard knowledge, and they seek Torah from his mouth, for he is a messenger of the God of hosts” (Malachi 2:7). And knowledge includes all rational virtues, for he will not be complete without them. And it says, they seek Torah from his mouth, it is a prove of his completeness in moral virtues, according to what we explained in the fourth chapter, that this is the intention of Torah. And for this it says, and all its ways are peace. We already explained there that peace is moral virtues and it says after, for he is a messenger of the God of hosts.

5:15

[There are four characteristics of people who sit before the sages...] He compared the person with a good memory who remembers all that he hears and does not separate between truth and false to a sponge, and it is wool of the sea which absorbs everything. He also compared the person who understands immediately but does not remember anything, not the truth and not what is not true to a funnel. And he compares the person who remembers bad things and the opinions

that are not true and forgets true things upon which are actions to a strainer that only retains the sediment and lets out what is pure. He compares the person whose matters are the opposite to a sieve that lets out the dirt and dust through holes and the fine flour remains. And only the flour sieve is good as it lets out the thin flour that has no need and retains the thick, the fine flour.

Ethical Relationships with the World

1:2, 1:12, 1:17, 1:18, 2:16, 4:17, 5:13

Mishnah Translations

1:2: Samuel the righteous was one of the remainders of the great assembly. He used to say, on three things the world stands, on Torah, on work, and on acts of loving-kindness.

1:12: Hillel and Shammai received from them. Hillel said, be like the students of Aaron, love peace and pursue peace, love human beings and draw them close to Torah.

1:17: Shimon, his son, said, all my days I grew up among the sages, and I did not find anything good for the body except silence. Study is not the foundation, rather action. And all who multiply their words, bring sin.

1:18: Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said, on three things the world stands, on justice, and on truth, and on peace, as it is said, “judge true and just peace in your gates” (Zechariah 8:16).

2:16: He [Rabbi Tarfon] used to say: It is not upon you to finish the work, but you, a free man, are not able to neglect it. If you have studied a lot of Torah, you will be given a large reward. Trustworthy is your employer to pay you the reward of your work. And know the giving of reward of the righteous is coming in the future.

4:17: He used to say: good is one hour in repentance and good deeds in this world than all the life of the world to come. And good is one hour of satisfaction in the world to come than all the life in this world.

5:13: There are four characteristics of those who give charity. One who wants to give, but others should not give; his eye is evil for the sake of others. One who wants others to give, but does not give; his eye is evil for the sake of himself. One who gives and wants others to give, pious. One who does not give and does not want others to give, wicked.

Avot D'Rabbi Natan Translations

1:2 - Chapter 4

Samuel the righteous was one of the remainders of the great assembly. He used to say, on three things the world stands, on Torah, on work, and on acts of loving-kindness.

On Torah. How? Here it is said, “For I desire kindness, not a peace offering [sacrifice] and the knowledge of God over burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). From here we learn that the burnt offerings were more beloved than peace offerings since the burnt offerings burned entirely in the fire as it is said, “and the priest shall turn it into smoke upon the whole altar” (Leviticus 1:9).

And in another place it is said, “and Samuel took a suckling lamb and offered it as a whole burnt offering to God” (I Samuel 7:9). And the study of Torah is more beloved before God than burnt offerings because if a person learns Torah they know the knowledge of God as it is said, “then you shall understand the fear of God and you shall acquire the knowledge of God” (Proverbs

2:5). From here we learn that when a sage sits and interprets before the congregation Scripture says it is like bringing fat and blood to the altar.

...

On work. How? While the work of the Temple still exists, the world blessed its inhabitants and rain fell at its time as it is said, "To love Adonai, your God, and to serve God with all your heart and with all your soul. I will give rain for your land in its season, early rain and late rain... I will give you grass in your fields for your cattle" (Deuteronomy 11:13-15). And when the work of the Temple no longer exists, the world will not bless its inhabitants and there will not be rain falling at its time as it is said, "Guard yourself lest your heart be open... closing up the skies so there will be no rain (Deuteronomy 11:16-17). So thus it is said, "Set your hearts from this day on, before a stone was placed on a stone in the House of God. If one came to a pile of twenty measures, there would be ten, and If one came to a wine vat to strip off fifty measures, the wine press would have twenty" (Haggai 2:15-16). Why didn't it say for the wine vat twenty measures and there were ten just as it says with the wheat twenty? Because the wine vat is a better symbol than the wheat. To teach you that the entire time the wine is stricken, it is a bad sign for the entire year. Israel said before God, Master of the world, why did you do this to us? A holy spirit answered, "you look for too much and there is little ... because my house is in ruins and you run to your own houses" (Haggai 1:9). And if you work the Temple services, I will bless you like at the beginning as it is said, "Set your hearts ... from the twenty fourth day of the ninth month, from the day that the foundation was laid for the Temple of God ... still the seed is in the granary and the vine, fig tree, pomegranate, and olive tree do not bear fruit. From this day I will bless you (Haggai 18-19). From this we learn that there is not work more beloved before God than the work of the Temple.

On acts of loving-kindness. How? Behold it is said, “For I desire kindness, not a peace offering [sacrifice]” (Hosea 6). The world was created at the beginning only with kindness as it is said, “for I said, the world will be built on kindness, the heavens will be established with your faith” (Psalms 89:3). Once, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai left from Jerusalem and Rabbi Yehoshua followed after him and saw the Temple be destroyed. Rabbi Yehoshua said, Woe to us for this that is destroyed, the place where Israel’s transgressions are atoned. [Rabbi Yochanan] said to him, my son, do not tremble for we have a way of atonement just like it. And what is it? Acts of loving-kindness as it is said, “For I desire kindness, not a peace offering [sacrifice]” (Hosea 6). And thus we find that Daniel, a precious man, engaged in acts of loving-kindness. And what are the acts of loving-kindness that Daniel engaged in? If you say burnt offerings and peace offering [other sacrifices] near Babylon, does it not already say, “Take care, lest you offer your burnt offerings in any place you see rather in the place that God will choose in one of your tribes. There you shall offer your burnt offering” (Deuteronomy 12:13-14). So what were the acts of loving-kindness that he engaged in? He would prepare the bride and make her happy, escort the dead, give money to the poor, and pray three times every day. His prayer was received with goodwill as it is said, “when Daniel knew that the writing was signed, he went to his house and the windows were opened in the roof chamber towards Jerusalem and three times a day he kneeled on his knees, prayed, and gave thanks before his God as he had always done” (Daniel 6:11).

1:12 - Chapter 12

Hillel and Shammai received from them. Hillel said, be like the students of Aaron, love peace and pursue peace, love human beings and draw them close to Torah.

...

Love peace. How? This teaches that one should be a person who loves peace in Israel between each person just like Aaron loved peace in Israel between each person as it is said, “a Torah of truth was on his mouth, injustice was not found on his lips, with completeness and righteousness he walked with me, and brought back many from guilt” (Malachi 2:6).

...

Pursue peace. How? This teaches that one should be a person who pursues peace in Israel between each person like Aaron pursued peace in Israel between each person as it is said, “Turn aside from evil and do good, seek peace and pursue it” (Psalms 34:15). Rabbi Shimon ben Eliezer said if a person sits in this place and is silent, how can he pursue peace Israel between each person. Rather, he should go out from his place, see the world, and pursue peace as it is said, “seek peace and pursue it” (Psalms 34:15). How so? Seek it in your place and pursue it in a different place.

...

Love human beings. How? This teaches that a person should love human beings and not hate human beings, for we find in the people of the generation of the scattering that because they loved one another, God did not want to destroy them from the world, rather God scattered them to the four corners of the world. But the people of Sodom, because they hated one another, God destroyed them from this world and from the world to come as it is said, “the people of Sodom were evil, greatly sinning against God” (Genesis 13:13). Evil - against one another, sinners - this

is sexual transgression, against God - this is the desecration of God's name, greatly - they planned their sins. We learn from this that because they hated one another, God destroyed from this world and the world to come.

Draw them close to Torah. How? This teaches that a person should *prevail* upon human beings and bring them under the wings of the Shechina just as Abraham our father prevailed upon human beings and brought them under the wings of the Shechina. And not just Abraham on his own doing this, rather also Sarah as it is said, "Abraham took Sarah his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all the property he had gathered and the people they had in Haran" (Genesis 12:5). Is it not that all the creatures of the world cannot even create one mosquito so why does the teaching say, "and the people they had in Haran?" We learn from this that God brought it up to them just like they made them.

Rambam Translations

1:2

[On three things the world stands, on Torah, on work, and on acts of loving-kindness] He said that wisdom is Torah, and moral virtues are acts of loving-kindness, and the keeping of the commandments of the Torah is sacrifices, there will be constant improvement of the world and order of its existence will be on the complete path.

1:12

[Like the students of Aaron...] They said, when Aaron, peace be with him, felt that a person inside was bad, or that someone told him that his inside was bad or that he had a transgression in

his hand, he started first with peace and he was friendly towards him and would speak much with him. And this person would be embarrassed about his soul and say, woe is me, if Aaron knew what is hidden in my heart and the evil of my actions, he would not permit himself to look at me even more so to speak to me. Indeed, for him I am considered a proper person and therefore I will verify his works and his thoughts and I will return to good. And he did so from his students and he learned from them. And God, blessed be he, said when God described him with this important trait, “he walked with me in peace and in righteousness and turned many from iniquity” (Malachi 2:6). And it was on this famous matter that Hillel had intended.

1:17

...

[Study is not the foundation, rather action] And the sages said to a righteous person who teaches virtues, as they say, expound, and for you it is befitting to expound. And the prophet said, “cry out for joy, righteous ones to God, to the upright, praise is beautiful” (Psalms 33:1). And another matter is shortness, and that he makes an effort to multiply the matters with few words and not that the matter be the opposite, and this is what they said, a person should always teach his student in a brief way. And know that the composed songs, in any language that is necessary, should be examined for their matters if they are following the path of speech we have assigned. And indeed, I have clarified this, even though it is clear, because I have seen elders and pious people from the people of our Torah who when they are at a wine party, like a wedding or something else, and a person wants to sing an Arabic song even if the subject of the song is praise, might, or generosity and it is from the section of love or the praise of wine, they remove it with every side of removal and it is not permitted to listen to it. But when the poet gives poetry

from any of the Hebrew poetry, they will not remove it and it is not bad in their eyes if there are words that are warned of or rejected. And this is complete folly, for speech is not forbidden or permitted, loved or rejected, or commanded in its saying from the aspect of the language that it is made, only on the aspect of its subject. For if the subject of it is virtue, he would be obligated to say it in whatever language it is in. But if the intention of the song is valueless in any language it is in, it is forbidden to say it. I also something to add to this. When there are two poems and they both have one subject, waking the power of lust and praising it and rejoicing the soul in it, this is valueless and it is from the part of rejected speech because it accelerates and arouses the inferior characteristic as it is explained in our words in the fourth chapter.

...

1:18

[On justice, and on truth, and on peace] Justice is the leadership of a country with straightness. And we have already explained in the fourth chapter that truth is rational virtues and peace is moral virtues. And when all three are found, existence will be found in completeness when possible, without a doubt.

2:16

[And know the giving of reward of the righteous is coming in the future] Coming in the future, meaning to say, in the world to come. And we already explained the matter of the world to come in the tenth chapter of Sanhedrin when it was fitting to mention.

4:17

[Good is one hour in repentance and good deeds in this world than all the life of the world to come...] We already explained in chapter ten of Sanhedrin that there is no completion after death and no addition. Rather, a person completes and adds to his virtue in this world. And about this Solomon hinted when he said, “for there is no action, reasoning, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol which is where you are going” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). But in this matter wherever a person goes, they will remain there for eternity. And this is why a person should put effort into this in this short time and not destroy his time, only use it in acquiring virtues for his loss would be large for his has no substitution and he cannot acquire it. And since the pious ones knew this, they only saw fit to completely spend their time with wisdom and the increase of virtues and their time was spread on the path of truth. And they only dispersed from it on physical matters a very small amount of time and on a thing that was necessary and could not be disregarded. Others departed all their time only in corporeality and they left like they came, all corresponding to when it came, thus it will go, and they lost an eternal loss. And the abundance all switched the truth about this question and said that the first group lost the world, and the last group profited the world, but the matter is the opposite as we have explained. And they put darkness into light and light into darkness, and woe to those that destroy the truth. And Solomon, peace be upon him, made this matter a root in Ecclesiastes, when he praised the profit of the world and disgraced the loss, and explained that there is no gain or other acquisition after death from the thing that was refrained from here. And this is all true. And when you examine the this book from this point of view, the truth will be clear.

5:13

[There are four characteristics of those who give charity] Observe how he calls the one with great mercy and who would not be satisfied that he should only have mercy until others also have mercy, a pious person. And he calls a cruel person, wicked.

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