

Pirkei Avot

Text and Hevruta Study

INTRODUCTION

Leader: *In this statement, Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel establishes the essence of Judaism? What is it?*

1:17 Rabban Gamliel's son, Shimon, taught:

Throughout my life, I was raised among the scholars, and I discovered that there is nothing more becoming a person than silence; *not study, but doing mitzvot is the essence of virtue*; excess in speech leads to sin.

Leader: *Let's read the following biblical statements about the relationship between God and Israel.*

- *Genesis 15:6:* And because he [Abram] put his trust in the LORD, he reckoned it to his merit.
- *II Samuel 22:29ff:* You, O LORD, are my lamp; The LORD light up my darkness...The way of God is perfect, the word of the LORD is pure. He is shield to all who take refuge in Him.
- *Isaiah 9:13:* None but the LORD of Hosts shall you account holy; Give reverence to Him alone, hold Him alone in awe.
- *Psalms 31:2ff:* I seek refuge in You, O LORD; may I never be disappointed; as You are righteous, rescue me... (15) But I trust in You, O LORD; I say 'You are my God!'
- *Deuteronomy 10:12:* If you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will....

Leader: *What do these statements suggest about that relationship? What [variety of] actions is God commanding of the Jews?*

[Answers might include: trust, protector, reverence, obey]

- *Would you consider the relationships (described above) as different from relationships with a parent or a political leader?*

For your consideration:

1. Judaism is not interested in professions of faith; its primary emphasis is on how we act: "Not study is the chief thing but action" (*Pirkei Avot 1:17*). Thus, from a Jewish perspective, the most significant question is **not** "What are we expected to believe?" but "What are we expected to **do**?" And so, even a Jew who's not sure God exists is required to behave in accordance with Jewish ethical teachings.

2. Judaism's early emphasis—in the Bible and in the teachings of our ancient rabbis—is on honoring our covenant with God rather than speculating about the nature of God.

Question: *As an example of this, consider our first Hebrew ancestor, Abraham (originally known as Abram). What does God first command of Abram?*

Question: *How might we understand this comment: “Abram doesn’t believe **in** God; he **believes** God.”*

It has been maintained by many Jewish theologians and philosophers (from Moses Mendelssohn to Franz Rosenzweig and even Abraham Joshua Heschel) that “deed trumps creed.” It is within this framework that mitzvot become central to the practice of Judaism, and through the performance of mitzvot we demonstrate our commitment to the covenant with God and the people Israel. Unlike many other religions, where belief is central to practice, commitment to Judaism is action-based.

Leader: *Do you agree with this?*

Part II: Hevruta Study

Break into smaller groups and read through these rabbinic statements from *Pirkei Avot*. Think about the following questions:

1. What mitzvot are emphasized?
2. What is meant by “one sin leads to another; one mitzvah leads to another”? Do you agree with this concept? What do they mean “the reward for a mitzvah is another mitzvah”?
3. The rabbis in *Pirkei Avot* are primarily focused on ethical prescription, *mitzvot ben adam l'chavero* (commandments between the individual and other human beings), rather than ritual prescription, *mitzvot ben adam l'Makom* (commandments between human beings and God). How do you think they address the issue of priority of mitzvot?
4. Do **you** think that there should be a hierarchy of mitzvot?
5. Are the rabbis consistent in their pronouncements? Should they be?
6. How do you address the following statement: “It is not as important for me to [pick one]: (a)keep kosher (b)attend synagogue (c)observe Shabbat. It is more important that I am a good person.” How would the rabbis of *Pirkei Avot* respond to this statement?

1: 2 Shimon Ha Tzaddik was one of the last members of the Great Assembly. This was a favorite teaching of his:

The world rests on three things: on Torah, on service of God (*al ha-avodah*), on acts of loving kindness (*al gemilut hasadim*).

1:5 Yose ben Yohanan, of Jerusalem, taught:

Open wide the doors of your home and make the poor welcome as members of your household...

2:1 Rabbi taught:

... Be as attentive to a minor mitzvah as to a major one, for you do not know the reward for each of the mitzvot...

Consistent with this, consider the following rabbinic statement:

Pesikta:

“You must heed what Torah commands you, since you do not know from which commandment you will gain life. There are mitzvot for which the reward is in this world, while other mitzvot are to be rewarded in the world-to-come, and for yet others you may have been rewarded in the past.”

2:5 Hillel taught:

Do not withdraw from the community...
Do not judge you fellow human being until you stand in his situation...
Do not say ‘when I have leisure, I will study,’ for you may never have leisure.

2:13 Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai posed this question to his disciples:

Look about you and tell me, which is the way in life that one should embrace?
Rabbi Eliezer said: a generous eye
Rabbi Yehoshua said: a good colleague
Rabbi Yose said: a good neighbor
Rabbi Shimon said: foresight
Rabbi Elazar said: a generous heart...

3:4 Rabbi Shimon taught:

Three who dine at a table and do not exchange words of Torah are considered as having eaten of idolatrous sacrifices, as it is written, 'For all the tables are filled with vomit and filth, when God is absent' (Isaiah 28:8)

However, three who dine at a table and exchange words of Torah are considered as having eaten at God's table, as it is written, "and He spoke to me, 'This is the table before the Lord.'" (Ezekiel 41:22)

3:22 Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah taught:

When a person's wisdom exceeds his good deeds, to what may he be compared? To a tree with many branches but few roots. A wind blows, uproots it and topples it over as it is written, "He shall be like a desert scrub that never thrives but dwells unwatered in the wilderness, in a salty, solitary land." [Jeremiah 17:6]

However, when a person's good deeds exceed his wisdom, to what may he be compared? To a tree with few branches but with many roots. All the winds of the world may blow against it, yet they cannot move it from its place, as it is written, "He shall be like a tree planted by the waters that spreads its roots by the stream. Untouched by the scorching heat, its foliage remains luxurious. It will have no concern in a year of drought and will not cease from bearing fruit" [Jeremiah 17:8]

4:2 Ben Azzai taught:

Pursue even a minor mitzvah and flee from an aveirah; for one mitzvah generates another...thus the reward for a mitzvah is another mitzvah...

4:21 Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar taught:

Do not pacify your colleague when his anger is raging
Do not comfort him when his dead lies before him
Do not challenge him at the time he makes his vow
Do not intrude upon him at the time of his disgrace.

4: 15 There are four types among those who give tzedakah:

One who wants to give but does not want others to give—he begrudges the mitzvah to fellow human beings;

One who wants others to give but does not himself give—he begrudges the mitzvah to himself.

One who wants to give and wants others to give—this is a saintly person.

One who does not want others to give and does not himself give—this is a scoundrel

6:1 Rabbi Meir taught:

Whoever engages in the study of Torah for its own sake achieves a host of merits; moreover, it was worth creating the world for his sake alone.

Mishna Peah 1:1

The following are the activities for which a person is rewarded in this world, and again in the world-to-come: honoring one's father and mother, deeds of loving kindness, and making peace between a person and his neighbor. The study of Torah, however, is as important as all of them together.

A Prayer for Woman Studying Torah

This prayer is from *Laws of Women*, a 19th century work by Rabbi Yose Haim of Baghdad, known as Ben Ish Hai. It is a book of teachings, prayers and parables exclusively for women. In Baghdad, women customarily gathered on Shabbat and on *chol ha-moed* in private homes, where they would read chapters of *Laws of Women* to one another. They would read aloud to a melody, often completing (by heart) entire chapters of the book. Thus we know that in late 19th century Iraq, women were gathering regularly to study Torah.

ay Your Name be praised, Lord our God and God of our fathers, and
 may Your remembrance be glorified and exalted, our King—the King
Who is great and holy in the heavens and on earth—without Whom
we have no King, Redeemer or helper, Liberator, and Savior; Who
answers and is merciful at all time of trouble and distress; we have no
King Who helps and supports except for You.

conducting Your world with kindness and Your creations with mercy,
 You are the God of righteousness; You neither slumber nor sleep.
You revive the dead and heal the sick, cause the blind to see, and
the bowed to be upright; the wordless to speak, and the secret things to
be revealed. You clothe the naked, free the imprisoned, and help the
needy.

 am Your maidservant, my Maker, I call out to You, my eyes
look to You.

From: *A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book* by Aliza Lavie (2008), pgs. 18-19