

Pirkei Avot

MOSHE KIBEIL TORAH MISINAI...

So begins the first mishna of the first perek of Avot.

Shavuot is called (among other things) Z'MAN MATAN TORATEINU, the time of the giving of our Torah.

Note well the different verbs. MATAN is the giving of (okay, it's a gerund noun but it comes from the verb).

KIBEIL is to receive. Big difference.

At Sinai, HaShem gave us the Torah. Actually, He gave us the down payment in the form of His verbal statements. The hard cop, engraved in stone, didn't come to us until forty days later, when Moshe came down from Har Sinai with the Luchot, but he broke them because of Cheit HaEigel, the sin of the golden calf. We actually got the Luchot on the original Yom Kippur - more than four months after the Sinai Experience.

And we didn't get the whole Torah in written form until the end of the forty years of wandering.

During much of the time between hearing G-d at Sinai and getting the Torah in hand, B'nei Yisrael spent a lot of time learning the mitzvot of the Torah and reviewing what they were taught.

Back to Sinai. The process begins with G-d giving us the Torah.

During the 40 days and 40 nights Moshe Rabeinu spent on Har Sinai, he RECEIVED the Torah from G-d.

Hence, Moshe KIBEIL Torah MiSinai.

The mishna continues, that Moshe gave over the Torah to Yehoshua - and, we should add, to the whole generation of the Midbar and the younger generation who would soon be entering Eretz Yisrael.

The outline of the Chain of Transmission of the Torah, as described in Avot 1:1, the process was many people of the earlier generation giving the Torah to the children and students AND they receiving it.

Torah is an issue of give and take, from parents to children, from teachers to students. Children and students then grow to become parents and teachers of Torah, and the give and take continues.

Pirkei Avot (and all of Mishna and Gemara, and more) is filled with teachings our our great Tana'im - not only to their children and students, but to Jews of every generation from then until now, and beyond.

The official Chain is G-d to Moshe to Yehoshua to the Z'keim (Sho-f'tim) to the Nevi'im to the Anshei Knesset HaGedola, and on. We are part of that 'on'.

Pirkei Avot

Some background...

Somewhere in the past, the custom developed to learn a chapter of Mesechet Avot each week between Pesach and Shavuot. Slight problem - there are 5 p'rakim in Avot and there are six Shabbatot between Pesach and Shavuot. (In Israel, there can be seven, but that's another story.) A sixth chapter was formed from mishna-like writings known as B'raitot. Whereas the five chapters of Avot deal with ethical teachings for a good and proper life, the sixth chapter focuses on Torah and the life of those dedicated to Torah study. This is particularly appropriate for the Shabbat before Shavuot, the Auf Ruf Shabbat of the People of Israel and HKB"Y, so to speak.

Further down the line, the custom modified in some (many) communities to continue learning a chapter each Shabbat throughout the long days of summer.

We now read/learn Pirkei Avot each Shabbat from after Pesach until the Shabbat before Rosh HaShana.

This allows us to learn through Avot four times each year - with each time having a different background and atmosphere.

The first time around, the background is the Omer period, the time that Bnei Yisrael improved and grew from the depths of impurity in Egypt to be worthy of standing at Har Sinai to receive the Torah. In the spirit of B'CHOL DOR VADOR, in every generation..., we study Avot as a way of undergoing a similar self-improvement, as did that first generation of the Jewish Nation.

Then comes the second round that happens to have a neutral background or no specific background - take your pick. In the six weeks that follow Shavuot, we review the teachings of Avot, let's say, for their own value. The calendar is not focusing us in any particular direction.

The third round of Avot is divided between the Three Weeks of mourning the Churban, as well as the other tragic events that are also associated with the period from 17 Tammuz to Tish'a b'Av. When we study the teachings of Avot this time, we cannot help but try to apply the teaching to effect a TIKUN - repair - of the various causes of the Churban and tragedies. The second half of Avot during that third round falls during the rest of the month of Menachem Av, weeks of comfort and consolation. Thoughts of the

destroyed Batei HaMikdash now point us in the direction of the Geula - provided we internalize and apply the lessons of Avot towards the improvement of each of us as individuals and of all of us collectively, as part of Klal Yisrael.

The fourth time we study Avot is during Elul. The approaching Yamim Nora'im become the backdrop for that review.

Each different part of the calendar colors the way we understand what we are learning.

It is interesting that the fourth time around, in Elul, we do not have enough Shabbatot to do a perek each week, so we double up the last couple of weeks before Rosh HaShana. That adds a frenzied pace to our learning, which seems to fit with the Slichot period.

This year (5781), Shabbat Chazon is erev Tish'a b'Av, and the custom is NOT to learn a perek on that Shabbat.

Some years find Israel and Chutz LaAretz out of sync for Pirkei Avot - either from the beginning, when Pesach is Shabbat to Friday in Israel, and Shabbat to Shabbat in Chutz LaAretz. And in some years, we get out of sync because Shavuot is on Friday for us and Friday-Shabbat in Chu"l.

This year, we are in sync throughout the Avot period.

AVOT 1:2

שְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הָיָה מְשִׁירֵי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חַסְדִּים:

Shimon HaTzadik was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly (K'NESET HAG'DOLA). He used to say, Upon three things the world is based: upon the Torah, upon Divine service (AVODA), and upon the practice of kindness (G'MILUT CHASADIM).

Some commentaries see this teaching of Shimon HaTzadik to mean - the World was Created because of these three things (that the Jewish People will do and live by).

TORAH can be understood as the learning of Torah and/or the practice of Mitzvot.

We can then see the next two items in broad terms of those mitzvot that are between G-d and Jew, and of Bein Adam LaChaveiro, Mitzvot between people.

AVODA, service of G-d - korbanot in the Beit HaMikdash, prayer at all times can represent the Mitzvot between the Jew and G-d.

G'MILUT CHASADIM covers a wide range of interpersonal mitzvot.

We need to study and live by the Torah in all its facets.

Pirkei Avot

Perek Rishon, Mishna 3

אַנְטִיגְנוֹס אִישׁ סוֹכּוֹ קִבֵּל מִשְׁמְעוֹן
הַצַּדִּיק. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר: אַל תְּהִי
כְּעֹבְדִים הַמְשַׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב עַל מְנַת
לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס, אֲלָא הֵווּ כְּעֹבְדִים
הַמְשַׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב שְׂלֵא עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל
פְּרָס, וַיְהִי מוֹרָא שָׁמַיִם עֲלֵיכֶם.

Antignos of Socho received the tradition from Shimon HaTzadik. He used to say, Be not like servants who minister to their master upon the condition of receiving a reward; but be like servants who minister to their master without the condition of receiving a reward; and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.

Reviewing this Mishna, a story about Willie Mays came to mind. (If you don't know who Willie Mays is and was, either Google him or just skip this paragraph. It is said that in 1951, his first season in Major League Baseball, when he received his first paycheck, he exclaimed (something like) You mean I get paid for this also.

I feel personally blessed, and I thank G-d for it, that I have separated my teaching career from any paycheck I received for it. Money was not the reason I have been teaching for over 70 years, in one form or another.

I think that this is what Antignos was

saying. Yes, there is Reward and Punishment in this world. Yes, one's mitzvot accrue reward, in this world or the next, or both. But that should not be one's motivation.

One of the Rambam's 13 Principles is our complete belief in Reward and Punishment. And while fear of punishment might be a deterrent from sinning, thoughts of reward should not be our motivation to do mitzvot.

Belief that there is reward, but study Torah and do mitzvot - live a Torah Life - because that is what the Master of the Universe wants from us.

A friend shared this quote with me, when we discussed what I was writing about in the Avot column:

“Never do for money what you would not do for nothing.”

Not exactly the same as what Antignos was saying, but the sentiment is reflected in what motivates us.

The Baal Shem Tov is quoted as saying: **S'CHAR MITZVA, SIMCHAT MITZVA** - the reward of a mitzva is the joy one derives from doing the mitzva. Even though mitzvot are officially not given to us for joy or any other benefit, Imchat Mitzva is definitely a bonus.

I must repeat - because of the serious misunderstanding that two of Antingnos's students had (with devastating effect on Jewish History) - that there is definitely Reward and Punishment, and Antignos was not suggesting otherwise. He was addressing the issue of motivation.

Pirkei Avot

Israel and Chutz LaAretz have been out of sync Pirkei Avot-wise since their second day of Shavuot and our regular Shabbat that followed our one day of Shavuot.

This week, we read/learn the second perek and in Chutz LaAretz, they double up and read/learn 1 & 2.

That will leave Ki Tavo with 3 & 4 for all of us and 5 & 6 for Nitzavim-Vayei-lech. And that's it for the Pirkei Avot season that began right after Pesach.

By the time RH rolls around, we will have learned four cycles of Avot. Noteworthy is the fact that during Elul we step up the learning by doubling up twice or thrice, as the case may be. It give us the experience of going into high gear as the Yamim Nora'im approach.

The opening words of Rabi (R' Yehuda HaNasi) in Avot 2:1 are -

רַבִּי אֹמֵר, אֵיזוֹהֵי דֶרֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂיִבֹר לוֹ
הָאָדָם, כֹּל שֶׁהִיא תִפְאֶרֶת לְעוֹשֶׂיהָ
וְתִפְאֶרֶת לוֹ מִן הָאָדָם.

Rabi said, Which is the right course that a man should choose for himself? That which is an honor to him who does it, and which also brings him honor from mankind.

The word L'OSEHA (to him who does it) is interpreted two different ways

by commentators - it either refers to the individual who chooses the path of Torah, or it refers to G-d as the OSEHA - to Him who makes it.

There is a variant reading of the mishna for the word L'OSEHA - L'OSEH, to the one who does.

Leaving aside small grammatical issues with the wording of Rabi's statement, we can combine the different opinions into one concept.

A person (a Jew) should choose a path in life that is pleasing and honorable to G-d, to other people, and to himself.

Bnei Reuven and Gad needed to fulfill their oaths in order to be 'clean' in G-d's eyes and in Israel's.

It is not enough to stick to the strict letter of halacha. One's behavior must always conform with the dictates of Torah and Mitzvot - with a pleasant, healthy attitude.

Torah, Service of HaShem, and G'milut Chasadim are the pillars of the world.

Satisfying G-d (so to speak) and being admired among one's fellows is wonderful, but it is only 2/3 of the challenge for each of us. We each must be happy with ourselves. Each aspect of this challenge sometimes takes different feelings, thoughts, and actions.

Pirkei Avot

Perek BET, Mishna 16 (partial)

הוא הִיָּה אֹמֵר, לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה
לְגִמּוֹר, וְלֹא אֶתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבַטֵּל מִמְּנָה.

He (Rabi Tarfon) used to say: It is not up to you to finish the job, nor are you free to stop doing the work.

The Rambam, in Hilchot M'lachim, describes the three main tasks of Melech HaMashi'ach - the tasks whose completion will establish for us the certainty that the individual in question is truly the Mashi'ach.

They are: The restoration of the Torah to the Jewish People, the return of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel, and the building of the Beit HaMikdash.

Each one of these tasks of the Mashia'ch can and must be begun and worked on by us, the Jewish People and by us, each individual Jew.

Let's apply Rabi Tarfon's words: We are challenged in our lives to increase our own Torah learning and Mitzvot observance - it is an ongoing, dynamic process, that each Jew should undertake, on his own level. This challenge continues with trying our best to inspire, instill, encourage,

and help our fellow Jews to do the same. We are definitely not expected to 'finish the job', but we are definitely not allowed to stop trying.

The same goes for the return of the Jewish People to Eretz Yisrael. This means personal Aliya and it also means doing what we can to encourage our family and friends who are still in the Diaspora to include Aliya in the priorities. It also means strengthening ourselves and our children, family, and friends who are in Israel, so as to enhance the k'lita (absorption) into Israeli life. Rabi Tarfon was right on the mark with this task, as well. We cannot expect to complete the job - that's the Mashi'ach's job. But we must work hard towards Mashi'ach's goals. This will hopefully hasten his coming.

As to building the Beit HaMikdash - that's his job. But we can get ready for the Beit HaMikdash. We can learn about the mitzvot which are now dormant and which will be restored in the Messianic era. We can - and do - prepare for the Beit HaMikdash with the making of vessels and garments - to the best of our knowledge, that can be used in the next Mikdash. We all don't do this aspect personally, but we should know that it is being done. And it is exciting. The Temple Institute for one. Yeshivot for

kohanim to study Temple service. And our job as individuals is to prepare ourselves educationally and psychologically, for the coming of the Mashi'ach and the restoration of the Sanhedrin and Mikdash and everything that is related.

We yearn and pray for the Geula Sh'leima, but we cannot sit on our hands, as the expression goes. LO ALECHA HAM'LACHA LIGMOR, AVAL LO ATA BEN CHORIN LIBATEIL MIMENA.

Pirkei Avot

Perek Sheini, Mishna 17

רבי יוסי אומר: יהי ממוזן חברך חביב עליך כשליך. והתקן עצמך ללמוד תורה, שאינה ירשה לך. וכל מעשיך יהיו לשם שמים.

Rabi Yosi said, Let the property of your fellow-man be as dear to you as your own; qualify yourself for the study of the Torah, since the knowledge of it is not an inheritance of yours; and let all your deeds be done for the sake of Heaven.

R' Yosi made three statements; I'd like to focus on the second of the three:

qualify yourself for the study of the Torah, since the knowledge of it is not an inheritance of yours;

Not an inheritance? What about -

TORAH TZIVA LANU MOSHE, MORASHA K'HILOT YAAKOV (D'varim 33:4) - The Torah that Moshe commanded us is a legacy for the congregation of Yaakov.

Legacy is something inherited from a predecessor; a heritage.

The Mishna says that Torah is not an inheritance. The Torah says it is a heritage or legacy.

Same thing? No.

With a source in Talmud Yerushalmi, the difference looks like this:

When a person passes away, his estate goes automatically to his heirs. Whether they are ready for it or not. Whether they deserve it or not. It is automatic. That's YERUSHA and that's what Rabi Yosi says the Torah is not.

In the passing down of a heritage or legacy - a MORASHA - the heirs have a claim to that which is passed down, but whether they actually possess it, depends on them. The Torah is the legitimate heritage for the Jewish People, and no one else. But each Jew has to want and work towards holding on to Torah. If one deserves it, he will have made the Torah his own. But if one does not work properly to make it his own - through Torah learning and practice, then it is not his on a silver platter.

There is one other thing that the Torah calls a MORASHA. And the same guidelines apply. Sh'mot 6:8 -

"I will bring you to the land regarding which I raised My hand, [swearing] that I would give it to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; I will give it to you as a MORASHA - I am God."

The Land of Israel has been given to us - and to no other nation. But in

order for it to really be our heritage, our legacy, our MORASHA, we must deserve it. We must work hard for it. It should go without saying that we must be here.

Torah and Eretz Yisrael. That's the whole story.

Pirkei Avot

Finally, all Avot-learning Jews will have the same p'rakim this Shabbat and next - the final two Shabbatot of 5780.

Doubling up is not just the way to complete the fourth cycle of Avot; it also speaks to the urgency of using Elul well as a preparation for the Yamim Nora'im, which a very close.

The mishnayot of Avot are probably the most well-known mishnayot of SHAS. And the first mishna of Perek Gimel might be the best known of the mishnayot in Avot, because we hear them at funerals, often repeated a few times.

עֲקֵבְיָא בְּנֵי מַהֲלֵלָאֵל אוֹמְרִי: הִסְתַּכַּל
בְּשְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים וְאִין אַתָּה בָּא לְיַדִּי
עֲבֵרָה. דַּע מֵאַיִן בָּאתָ, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ,
וְלִפְנֵי מִי אַתָּה עֹתִיד לֵתֵן דִּין וְחֲשׁוּבוֹן.
מֵאַיִן בָּאתָ, מִטְּפָה סְרוּחָה, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה
הוֹלֵךְ, לְמָקוֹם עֶפְרָר רְמָה וְתוֹלְעָה. וְלִפְנֵי
מִי אַתָּה עֹתִיד לֵתֵן דִּין וְחֲשׁוּבוֹן, לִפְנֵי
מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא.

Akavya, the son of Mahalalel, said, Reflect upon three things, and you will not come within the power of sin: know from where you came, to where you are going, and before whom you will in future have to give account and reckoning. From where did you come? From a fetid drop; to where

are you going? to a place of dust, worms and maggots; and before whom will you in the future have to give account and reckoning? Before the Supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

One famous question on this mishna is the asking of the questions, and then repeating the questions with answers. Seems unnecessarily wordy.

But it is not. Because before hearing what Akavya had to say, we are given a chance to ponder the questions on our own. The union of a sperm and an egg and the grave is one way to look at the questions.

But so is - what kind of home and background did I come from? To where am I going with that background? It is what a person does with his life - between his origin, however one interprets MEI-AYIN BATA and where he ends up in life, again however you understand that - that a person will give an account and be judged after 120 years.

From where? A religious home, a non-religious home, Brooklyn, poverty, wealth... Lots of ways to understand 'from where you came'. So too with 'to where are you going?' A Torah life, happy family, Aliya, values... We are challenged variously in this life. And the ultimate question is how we'll be judged by The Judge.

The second mishna of Perek Dalet says:

בן עזאי אומר: הוי רץ למצוה קלה, ובורח מן העברה. שמצוה גוררת מצוה, ועברה גוררת עברה, ושכר מצוה מצוה, ושכר עברה עברה.

Ben Azzai said, Run to do even a slight mitzva, and flee from transgression; for one good deed draws another good deed in its train, and one sin, another sin; for the reward of a good deed is a good deed, and the wages of sin is sin.

In the first mishna of Perek Bet, Rabi said that one should be enthusiastic to do a light mitzva like a heavy one, because we don't know 'how G-d keeps score'. Earlier (1:3), Antignos taught that we should serve G-d as a servant who is not doing what he does for the reward...

Ben Azzai, Rabi, and Antignos are not saying the same thing, but the common factor is to be enthusiastic in the performance of all mitzvot - big or small.

Eagerly observing mitzvot leads to a life of mitzvot. Sin, on the other hand, leads one down the path of sin.

In Ben Azzai's words, the reward for doing a mitzva is the opportunity to do more mitzvot, and to become a Torah & Mitzvot person.

The Baal Shem Tov added to Ben

Azzai's words that the reward for doing a mitzva is the joy of doing a mitzva.

This implies that our main motivation for doing mitzvot is AHAVAT HASHEM, Love of G-d. Motivated only by fear, or observing mitzvot on automatic pilot, will not necessarily lead to the real SIMCHA that one can find being an EVED HASHEM, a servant of G-d. Not a slave, but a happy and content servant who loves his Master.

Approaching Rosh HaShana, Aseret Y'mei T'shuva, and Yom Kippur, one can find it easier to operate in the fear mode. But that is selling oneself short. Yes, Yir'at HaShem is essential - and perhaps first (but not necessarily so), but Ahavat HaShem is such a higher spiritual goal and a great incentive to improve oneself.

Not easily accomplished. That's one of the reasons that Sukkot, Z'man Simchateinu, comes so soon after Yom Kippur.

However, we should remember the last mishna in Taanit that tells us that there was no greater joyous day than Yom Kippur (and TU b'Av).

RH and YK combine joy and trepidation. We must find the right balance between the two emotions. Maybe the keys are to be emotional and not be like automatons.

Pirkei Avot

AVOT 3:3

רְבִי חַנְיָנָא בֶן תְּרַדְיוֹן אָמַר: שְׁנַיִם שְׂוֵי שְׂבִין וְאִין בִּינְיָהוֹן דְּבִרֵי תוֹרָה, הֲרִי זֶה מוֹשֵׁב לְצִיִּים, שְׁנַאֲמַר: וּבְמוֹשֵׁב לְצִיִּים לֹא יֵשֵׁב. אֲבָל שְׁנַיִם שְׂוֵי שְׂבִין וְיֵשׁ בִּינְיָהוֹן דְּבִרֵי תוֹרָה, שְׂכִינָה שְׂרוּיָה בִּינְיָהוֹן, שְׁנַאֲמַר: אֲזוּ גְדַבְרוּ יִרְאֵי יְיָ אִישׁ אֶל רֵעֵהוּ, וַיִּקְשֹׁב יְיָ וַיִּשְׁמַע, וַיִּכְתֹּב סֵפֶר זְכוֹרֹן לְפָנָיו, לִירְאֵי יְיָ וּלְחֹשְׁבֵי שְׂמוֹ. אִין לִי אֵלָא שְׁנַיִם, מִנֵּין שְׁאַפִּילוּ אֶחָד שְׂוֵי שְׂבִין וְעוֹסֵק בְּתוֹרָה, שְׁהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא קוֹבֵעַ לוֹ שְׂכָר, שְׁנַאֲמַר: יֵשֵׁב בְּדָד וַיִּדַּם כִּי גִטַּל עָלָיו.

R' Chananya, the son of T'radyon, said, If two sit together and interchange no words of Torah, they are a meeting of scoffers, concerning whom it is said, The godly man sits not in the seat of the scoffers; but if two sit together and interchange words of Torah, the Divine Presence abides between them; as it is said, Then they that feared HaShem spoke one with the other: and HaShem hearkened and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before him, for them that feared HaShem, and that thought upon his Name. Now, the Scripture enables me to draw this inference in respect to two persons; from where can it be deduced that if even one person sedulously occupies himself with the Torah, the Holy One, blessed be he, appoints unto him a reward? Because it is said, Though he sit alone, and meditate in stillness, yet he takes it (the reward) upon him.

At first glance, the Mishna seems to be saying that two people who sit together and are not occupied with Torah learning, they constitute a MOSHAV LEITZIM, a mini-group of time wasters.

But a closer reading of the words in the Mishna now seem to be saying something else, something more.

Two people who are sitting together and each one is learning Torah, yet there is no Torah interchanged between them, this is a MOSHAV LEITZIM. Yes, each one is engrossed in Torah learning. And even if they are learning different texts or topics, they each should be enthused and excited by what they are learning, to want to share a Torah word or idea with the other. Sometimes, it could be a question whose answer one of them seeks, or a clarification of a point, that can result in an interchange.

If they are both so absorbed in their own learning that it is as if the other isn't there, or worse, if the one does not consider the other worthy of discussing a Torah point - then they might as well each be alone. Their sitting together is considered a MOSHAV LEITZIM.

TOVIM HASH'MAYIM MIN HA-ECHAD - two are (often) better than one. This points to the value of a chavruta, a study partner. And even if this is not an ongoing relationship, sharing of Torah between two people is a precious thing, to be utilized and appreciated. It is nice to learn something on your own & from each other.

Pirkei Avot

Perek Gimel, Mishna Dalet

רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר: שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁאֲכְלוּ עַל שְׁלֶחֶן אֶחָד וְלֹא אָמְרוּ עָלָיו דְּבַרֵי תוֹרָה, כָּאֵלוּ אֲכָלוּ מִזְבְּחֵי מֵתִים, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי כָּל שְׁלֶחֶנוֹת מְלֵאוּ קִיא צֹאָה בְּלִי מָקוֹם. אֲבָל שְׁלֹשָׁה שָׁאֲכְלוּ עַל שְׁלֶחֶן אֶחָד וְאָמְרוּ עָלָיו דְּבַרֵי תוֹרָה, כָּאֵלוּ אֲכָלוּ מִשְׁלַחְנוֹ שֶׁל מָקוֹם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וַיְדַבֵּר אֵלַי, זֶה הַשְּׁלֶחֶן אֲשֶׁר לִפְנֵי ה'.

R. Simeon said, If three have eaten at a table and have spoken there no words of Torah, it is as if they had eaten of sacrifices to dead idols, of whom it is said, For all their tables are full of vomit and filthiness; the All-present is not (in their thoughts). But if three have eaten at a table and have spoken there words of Torah, it is as if they had eaten at the table of the All-present, to which the Scripture may be applied. And he said unto me, This is the table that is before the Lord.

Spiritual is spiritual and physical is physical - right? WRONG. Not in Torah Judaism. Physical is also spiritual. Or maybe a better way to put it is, Physical is physical AND spiritual.

That idea is certainly what makes humans different from animals. But it also makes Jews different from other humans.

Food is a necessity of all living

creatures. A physical necessity. However, it is our challenge to inject and invest in things as basic as eating, with a spiritual dimension.

Let's take bread as an example. It is the Staff of Life. True. But Man does not live by bread alone... Also true.

Therefore, Torah and Mitzvot guide us in the growing of crops - no melacha on Shabbat; no plowing with an ox and a donkey together; no muzzling an animal when it is working with food; the care for the less fortunate in our society with several gifts to the poor from our fields. T'ruma for the Kohein; Maaser for the Levi; Maaser Ani for the poor; Maaser for us to eat in holiness... We process our grain into flour, mix it with water and other ingredients - take challa from the dough, then bake it.

Done? Not even close. Wash for HaMotzi, b'racha. B'racha on the bread. Benching after a meal.

All this is the spirituality we add to the physical act of eating.

Not to eat gluttonously. Strict adherence to the laws and practices of kashrut. Even table manners are part of halacha.

And the Divrei Torah at a meal rounds out our challenge to raise the mere act of eating into a way to serve HaShem. AND enjoy our food, too.

Pirkei Avot

Perspectives on the Study of Nature

We in Israel read/learn the 3rd perek of Avot this Shabbat. In Chutz LaAretz, they have the 3rd perek next week. Let's look at the 9th mishna (some texts number the mishnayot differently). This mishna is sometimes attributed to a R' Yaakov.

R' Shimon says: He who walks on the road and is reviewing (his Torah learning in his mind), and stops his learning and says - How beautiful is this tree, how beautiful is this field - the verse considers him to have put his life in jeopardy.

The obvious question is what is so terrible about admiring a tree or a field while walking on the road? The admiration of nature is the admiration of G-d's World. We even have brachot for different elements of nature.

The standard explanation is that when one is engrossed in Torah study, nothing should cause him to interrupt himself - even the beauties of nature. Studying Torah is above all.

There is another way to understand this mishna. The key words to this understanding is UMAFSIK MIMISH-NATO, and he stops his learning to admire nature. Admiration of nature

must be part of the Torah in which we are engrossed as we walk on the 'road of life'.

The study of nature, of the life sciences, needs a very special perspective. On the one hand, to view nature as something different from G-d is problematic. It short changes G-d. This attitude manifests itself with making a sharp distinction between Limudei Kodesh and Limudei Chol - studying holy matters and mundane matters. The Torah way of life does not recognize the pursuit of any area of knowledge as being outside the Jew's lifetime challenge of Knowing G-d, better and better. This, says the Rambam, leads to a deeper and richer Love of G-d.

When one studies biology or chemistry or physics or astronomy... (any topic, really), he should close the part of his mind and heart that is reserved for Torah Learning, and open up a different part for other disciplines. A beloved biology professor I was privileged to have for several courses at Yeshiva University - Dr. William Etkin z"l - said to us once, a Torah person's mind must always be open (he would have said 24/7, but that phrase wasn't popular yet) and everything that he learns, sees, experiences, should be seen within a Torah perspective.

The above touches on one side of this issue. MAFSIK MIMISHNATO is problematic.

There is another side of the study and admiration of nature, that is just as problematic.

When admiration of nature, of the Sun and the Moon, of lofty mountains and magnificent animals and trees, leads to veneration and worship. This is the dire concern Moshe Rabeinu expresses in the beginning of next week's sedra (Va'etchanan) about seeing various impressive elements of G-d's Creation, and either making the grave mistake of worshipping them, even in the misguided thinking that it is a way to serve and worship G-d.

If a person is rightly impressed with the Sun (for example), its light, warmth, energy, life-force, and this leads to Sun-worship (as it did in generations of long ago), then that is a very serious situation, to say the least.

But being equally impressed with the Sun as a ball of fiery plasma with internal convective motion that creates a magnetic field... that it is 109 times the diameter of the Earth and 330,000 times as massive... The Sun currently fuses about 600 million tons of hydrogen into helium every second, converting 4 million tons of

matter into energy every second as a result... Wow, look at what G-d created - that's fine. What does G-d have to do with the Sun which formed about 4,600,000,000 years ago from the collapse of part of a giant molecular cloud that consisted mostly of hydrogen and helium and that probably gave birth to many other stars. - that's the problem!

Study of nature can and has led some people and societies to forget about the one G-d and worship many other things. Study of nature has led other people and societies to leave G-d to the spiritual matters in the world (if that) and consider nature as we know it and are still learning about, to have nothing to do with G-d at all.

Wikipedia's entry on the Sun is huge. I did a search for God in the entry - gods and goddesses were mentioned numerous times in the article. Not G-d as Creator of All.

If the study and admiration of nature is so fraught with pitfalls for the G-d-fearing person, may it be better not to study nature.

No, says the Navi Yeshayahu in next week's haftara of Nachamu. He says, S'U MAROM EINEICHEM UR-U MI VARA EILEH..., lift your eyes heavenward and see (and understand and appreciate) Who created it all.

Pirkei Avot

AVOT 3:18

הוא הִיָּה אֹמֵר: חֲבִיב אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא
בְּצַלְמֵךְ, חֶבְהָ יִתְּרָה נֹדַעַת לוֹ שֶׁנִּבְרָא
בְּצַלְמֵךְ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי בְּצַלְמֵךְ אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה
אֶת הָאָדָם. חֲבִיבֵינּוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ
בְּנֵי לְמַקּוֹם, חֶבְהָ יִתְּרָה נֹדַעַת לָהֶם
שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ בְּנֵי לְמַקּוֹם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: בְּנֵי
אֲתָם לֵה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם. חֲבִיבֵינּוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל
שֶׁנִּתְּנוּ לָהֶם כָּלִי חֻמְדָּה, חֶבְהָ יִתְּרָה
נֹדַעַת לָהֶם שֶׁנִּתְּנוּ לָהֶם כָּלִי חֻמְדָּה,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי לָקַח טוֹב נִתַּתִּי לָכֶם, תּוֹרַתִּי
אֶל תַּעֲזֹבוּ.

He used to say, Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God; but it was by a special love that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God; as it is said, For in the image of God made He man. Beloved are Israel, for they were called children of the All-present; but it was by a special love that it was made known to them that they were called children of the All-present; as it is said, You are children unto HaShem your God. Beloved are Israel, for unto them was given the desirable instrument; but it was by a special love that it was made known to them that that desirable instrument was theirs, through which the world was created; as it is said, For I give you good doctrine; forsake you not My Law.

Let's put it all together. We, the Jewish People are human beings,

created in the image of G-d. So are all human beings. This idea puts us first into the human race as different from the rest of the animal kingdom. It give us privilege and responsibility. And it also gives us a common factor with our fellow humans. This is something we should never forget.

But as Jews, we are especially loved by G-d - because we are His chosen people and His children. And because He gave us the Torah. These two last items are probably entwined. We are His children because of the commitment to Torah. And because of the Torah, we are His children.

The issue of CHAVIVIN and CHIBA Y'TEIRA - a love and a greater love - this is true in our relationship with G-d and it is so in the various relationships we have with each other. Spouses, parents and children, siblings, friends - wherever there is CHIBA between people, we each should turn it into a CHIBA Y'TEIRA, a greater love, by telling the others (often) that we love them and that they are loved. That's one of the things we learn from HaShem and His treatment of us, His loving and loved children.

Pirkei Avot

Avot 4:20

רַבִּי מַתִּיָּא בֶּן חֶרֶשׁ אָמַר: הָיִי מִקְדָּיִם
בְּשָׁלוֹם כָּל אָדָם. וְהָיִי זָנָב לְאֲרִיּוֹת, וְאֵל
תְּהִי רֹאשׁ לְשׁוֹעָלִים.

R. Matya, the son of Cheresh, said,

Be beforehand in the salutation of
SHALOM to all people;

and be rather a tail to lions than a head
to foxes.

Seems to be two separate teachings.

This might not work in certain
countries outside of Israel. Sad, but
true.

But let's look at the first teaching as
applicable when one lives in Eretz
Yisrael.

I remember in my early days in Israel,
I was walking with my 5 year old
daughter. A man was coming down
the street, and as we passed each
other, I said SHALOM.

My daughter asked with a puzzled
expression, if I knew the man. I told
her no, but that he was a fellow Jew
and why should we not greet him.

Over the 40 years of our Aliya, I have
made it a habit to say BOKER TOV to
bus drivers, SHALOM to security
guards in front of stores and building.

So too, to greet street cleaners (Jew
and non-Jew) and store keepers. And
many more people.

It is amazing how just a simple
gesture like that can put a smile on
someone's face. And maybe even
help to 'make someone's day'.

It doesn't always work well, but it is
worth the try.

And if you don't get the first
greeting, be sure to answer the one
you get. BOKER TOV, gets a BOKER
OHR as a response. Shalom Aleichem,
of course, gets and Aleichem Shalom.

Getting of the bus or out of a taxi,
leaving a store (with or without
purchases) - wish people a YOM TOV
or a YOM NA'IM. EREV TOV, if it is
that time of day.

It is nice to receive a reply to one's
greeting that goes a step further.

SHABBAT SHALOM is often met with
a SHABBAT SHALOM UMOVORACH.
Sometimes, just UMOVORACH.

I remember Reb Yaakov Umlas z"l,
who would answer an AGUTEN
SHABBIS with a BESSEREN. Have a
good Shabbat - Have a better
Shabbat.

Greeting one's neighbors and any
fellow Jew is a good reminder that
KOL YISRAEL CHAVEIRIM.

As to the second teaching, a memory comes to mind.

Way back in a previous life, I taught Junior High level in a Yeshiva day school in Queens, NY. I taught Limudei Kodesh (Jewish Studies) and math, science, and introduction to computers.

For the 8th graders, we had two levels of math - regular 8th grade math and a faster track which was called Grade Eight Regents Math - GERM, for short. One third of the students took regular 8th grade math; two thirds were GERMS (S for students).

The students were divided at the beginning of the school year and they (and we, their teachers) had until Chanuka to re-evaluate the borderline students, which resulted in switching levels for some - in either direction.

Fast forward to my life as a educator in informal adult education and as editor of Torah Tidbits and now, PhiloTorah. Over the years, former students - either Olim, themselves, or visitors, would pop in to say Hello, do you remember me? And I usually did remember.

(The youngest of my former students are in their forties; some of the older

ones are grandparents.)

Sorry for the long background story, but...

One such former student came into my office and reminded me that he was one of the borderliners. He was in a real quandary. Should he opt for the non-regents class, in which he would shine as a top student and breeze through the year with little effort.

Or should he opt to become a GERM and face real hard work and classmates who were stronger students than he.

I quoted this Mishna to him and recommended that he become a tail of the GERMS and not the head of the foxes. He took my advice, did pretty well, got a good start on High School math, and thanked me these many years later for helping him decide.

It's usually, a good piece of advice. But, be warned - it doesn't work for everyone.

With that said, you have a mishna from each of the two p'rakim for this Shabbat. We left ourselves three Shabbatot to go through the six chapter Pirkei Avot, necessitating our doubling up to finish this fourth cycle before Rosh HaShana.

Pirkei Avot

AVOT 4:19

רַבִּי יַנַּי אָמַר: אֵין בְּיַדֵּנוּ לֹא מַשְׁלוֹת
הַרְשָׁעִים וְאֵף לֹא מִיִּסוּרֵי הַצַּדִּיקִים.

R. Yannai said, It is not in our power to explain either the prosperity of the wicked or the afflictions of the righteous.

TZADIK V'RA LO; RASHA V'TOV LO.

Here's a righteous person who has suffering during his life; and there is a wicked person who seems to have a good life.

This is another way of putting R' Yanni's statement.

I might suggest that we can understand this phenomenon at little bit, but not completely.

A major factor in trying to understand R' Yannai's statement is our firm belief in the World to Come.

If this world were all that there was, then it would make no sense that wicked people sometimes have a better life than righteous people.

But with the belief that mitzvot are rewarded in this world and/or in the world to come, and than sin is punished in this world and the next one - it begins to make sense.

A famous analogy to this a worker's salary and benefits, especially, retire-

ment plan.

A person who thinks only of now, wants to get paid as much as he can, without his thinking about retirement.

Why does that person take home a larger weekly wage than I do, if I work just as hard or even more?

The answer is often the benefits, which reduce the take-home pay, but will be a greater benefit in the future.

If we really believe in Olam HaBa, Olam HaEmet, then question of TZADIK V'RA LO; RASHA V'TOV LO, can be explained and understood.

But not completely. And that's frustrating sometimes. It doesn't seem fair that good people sometimes have a tougher life than not so good people.

Belief in G-d and the Worlds He created for us should take the sting out the question. It won't always be a satisfactory answer, but we always need to be humble and accept that we are finite, and that only HKB"H is infinite.

This is part of the meaning of ANI MAAMIN B'EMUNA SH'LEIMA... I believe with a complete faith...

Perhaps, no to, is thinking too much of oneself and too little of G-d - or a bit of both.

Pirkei Avot

Perek R'vi'i, Mishna 23

רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר אוֹמֵר: אַל תִּרְצֶה אֶת חֵבְרֵךְ בְּשַׁעַת כְּעָסוֹ, וְאַל תִּנְחַמְהוּ בְּשַׁעַת שְׂמִתּוֹ מִטַּל לְפָנָיו, וְאַל תִּשְׁאַל לּוֹ בְּשַׁעַת נִדְרוֹ, וְאַל תִּשְׁתַּדֵּל לְרֵאוֹתוֹ בְּשַׁעַת קִלְקָלְתּוֹ.

Rabi Shimon ben Elazar, says,

Do not appease your fellow in the hour of his anger,

and do not comfort him not in the hour when his dead lies before him,

and do not challenge him in the hour of his vow,

and strive not to see him in the hour of his disgrace.

Want it in two words?

BE SENSITIVE

A bit more?

Be sensitive to others, especially when they are most vulnerable and stressed.

A very wise Rav and teacher, taught that the first burst of anger of a person, is natural and not sinful. And maybe R' Shimon is telling us to back away and don't try to calm your angry friend right away. That will most often backfire and feed the anger,

and add you to the list of people to be angry with.

After the initial burst of anger, the one who holds onto the anger is displaying a very bad character trait and he must learn to rein it in. Then, perhaps, you as a good friend and sensitive person, can help the person calm down. This takes skills, which not everyone possess. Part of being sensitive is getting the timing right, not dismissing the anger as not warranted, and not patronizing the angry person.

One of my least favorite scenes in movies and TV shows, is when someone parts the other on the back and says, "It's all right." Because, at the moment, it isn't all right.

On the comforting a grieving person, there is a reason that NICHUM AVEILIM, comforting a mourner, does not begin until after the funeral and burial. Beforehand, at the moment of greatest grieve, attempted comforting is usually highly insensitive.

On the third point, I had an experience many years ago, when I over-teased an individual and she proclaimed in anger - I'll never speak to you again. To which I responded - say B'LI NEDER. To which she responded - No, I will not say B"N. I thus violated the third

point of R' Shimon's and it took a while to repair the damage.

As to the fourth teaching - no matter how great a friendship is, people do not like to be seen at the moment of their humiliation.

As to all of the above, in addition to being sensitive, one needs great patience and insight to know when to say something and when not to.

There is so much more to be said about this Mishna, but hopefully, enough was said here to start the mind and heart rolling in sync with each other.

Pirkei Avot

The first mishna in Avot ch.5 states:

With ten (Divine) Sayings, the world was created...

Most often (with some exceptions) when the mishna says there is a list of a certain number of items, we do not find the list itself in the mishna.

Commentaries provide us with the list.

Number 1 on this list is B'REISHIT BARA ELOKIM EIT HASHAMAYIM V'EIT HAARETZ. This is counted as a MAAMAR (Divine saying) based on the pasuk in T'hilim (33:6) - BIDVAR HASHEM SHAMAYIM NAASU... By the word of G-d were the heavens made; And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.

After this slightly oblique first item, we are told that the rest of the list consists of the easier to find Divine sayings. They would begin with VAYOMER ELOKIM... And G-d said...

We find VAYOMER ELOKIM... let there be light, Raki'a amidst the waters, let the waters gather (forming seas and dry land), vegetation, heavenly bodies, sea life and birds, land animals, and humans.

If you've counted, there are 8 VAYOMER ELOKIMs. That makes 9 Divine sayings.

As to the 10th saying, there are three candidates.

B'reishit 1:29, VAYOMER ELOKIM... whereby He gives humans dominance over nature. This too can be seen as part of Creation of the World - since without this Divine statement, we wouldn't survive for too long.

Or - 1:28, And G-d blessed them (the humans), VAYOMER LAHEM ELOKIM... be fruitful and multiply... this can be seen as the climax of Creation, by giving humans (and all animals) the ability to procreate, so that the world continues to exist. G-d's Creation has 9 statements and the 10th allows the world to continue to exist. This deviates slightly from the format of VAYOMER ELOKIM. Close enough.

Or - 2:18, VAYOMER HASHEM ELOKIM... it is not good that ADAM should be alone... This, of course, led to the formation of WOMEN, the culmination of Creation. This one, too, deviates from the format VAYOMER ELOKIM, but it is close enough. So which is the tenth item on the list? It doesn't really matter, because each candidate completes the list meaningfully.

Pirkei Avot

Final week of the Pirkei Avot season - but don't let that stop you from learning Pirkei Avot anytime you want. It is a wonderful text to study and explore with different m'forshim - any time of the year.

On this Shabbat before Rosh HaShana, we learn the 5th and 6th p'rakim of Pirkei Avot.

Avot 5:3 (numbering might vary):

עֲשֶׂרָה נְסִיּוֹנוֹת נִתְּנָסָה אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ
וְעָמַד בְּכָלֶם, לְהוֹדִיעַ כְּמָה חֲבָתוֹ שֶׁל
אַבְרָהָם אָבִינוּ עָלָיו הַשָּׁלוֹם.

With ten trials, our father Avraham was tried, and he stood firm in them all, to make known how great was the love of our father Avraham.

The exact list of the ten trials of faith of Avraham Avinu is disputed by commentaries, but all consider his going down to Egypt because of a famine and posing as brother and sister with Sara to be on the list (as one or two items).

The Ramban states that Avraham committed a serious sin (albeit b'shogeg) by leaving the Land to which G-d had sent him, and by endangering Sara Imeinu to protect himself.

How can the Ramban say that? A Rishon cannot contradict a Mishna.

The Ramban might not be contradicting a Mishna, but might be teaching us a very important lessons in Life's tests.

Perhaps Avraham should have 'toughed it out' during the famine, feeling that if G-d sent him to the Land, then He surely would watch over him during the famine. Perhaps. But that means that Avraham made the wrong decision concerning the famine. If this was a test of faith, the test was not what he would do, but what effect the experience would have on his faith in G-d. Had Avraham reacted (which he didn't) by saying What kind of G-d would send me away from my birthplace and my father's house to an unknown destination and then subject me and the Land to a famine? THAT would be a failure of a test. Avraham did what he thought he must do, and the Ramban thinks he was in error. Not a faith-test failure. Rambam also doesn't think Avraham acted in the best way, but he says that we learn that a person may temporarily leave Eretz Yisrael in certain dire circumstances.

Our faith, belief, trust in G-d must be able to withstand whatever curves are thrown our way.

The first mishna of Perek Shishi, a.k.a. Perek Kinyan HaTorah says:

רַבִּי מֵאִיר אָמַר: כָּל הָעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה לְשִׂמְחָה, זֹכֶה לְדַבְרִים הַרְבֵּה, וְלֹא עוֹד אֲלֵא שְׂכָל הָעוֹלָם בְּלוּ כְּדַאי הוּא לוֹ. וְקָרָא רַע, אֲהוּב, אֲהוּב אֶת הַמְּקוֹם, אֲהוּב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת, מְשַׂמַּח אֶת הַמְּקוֹם, מְשַׂמַּח אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת, וּמְלַבְּשָׁתוֹ עֲנוּה וְיִרְאָה, וּמְכַשְׂרָתוֹ לַהֲיוֹת צַדִּיק, חָסִיד, יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְנֶאֱמַן, וּמְרַחֲקָתוֹ מִן הַחַטָּא, וּמְקַרְבָּתוֹ לַיַּדֵּי זְכוּת, וְנֶהְיִין מִמֶּנּוּ עֲצָה וְתוֹשִׁיָּה בִּינָה וְגִבּוֹרָה, שְׁנֵאמַר: לִי עֲצָה וְתוֹשִׁיָּה, אֲנִי בִּינָה, לִי גִבּוֹרָה. וְנוֹתַנָּה לוֹ מַלְכוּת וּמְשָׁלָה וְחֻקוֹר דִּין, וּמְגַלִּין לוֹ רְזִי תוֹרָה, וְנַעֲשֶׂה כְּמַעֲיָן הַמְּתַגְבֵּר וְכֹנֵהר שְׂאִינוּ פּוֹסֵק, וְהוּא צָנוּעַ וְאֶרֶךְ רוּחַ, וּמוֹחֵל עַל עֲלֻבוֹנוֹ, וּמְגַדְּלָתוֹ וּמְרוֹמְמָתוֹ עַל כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים.

R. Meir said, Whosoever labors in the Torah for its own sake, merits many things; and not only so, but the whole world is indebted to him: he is called friend, beloved, a lover of the All-present, a lover of mankind: it clothes him in meekness and reverence; it fits him to become just, pious, upright and faithful; it keeps him far from sin, and brings him near to virtue: through him the world enjoys counsel and sound knowledge, understanding and strength; (as it is said, Counsel is mine, and sound knowledge; I am understanding; I have strength): and it gives him sovereignty and dominion and

discerning judgment: to him the secrets of the Torah are revealed; he is made like a never-failing fountain, and like a river that flows on with ever-sustained vigor; he becomes modest, patient, and forgiving of insults; and it magnifies and exalts him above all things.

Remember that this sixth perek is not part of Masechet Avot, although it completes the work known as Pirkei Avot. It is a collection of B'raitot, written by Tana'im, as is all of Avot, and its special focus is immersion in all aspects of TORAH. This was purposely done because the original Shabbat for its study was the one right before Shavuot, Z'man Matan Torateinu. The five chapters of Avot also extoll the importance of Torah study and observance, together with many ethical teachings - in light of Derech Eretz Kodma LaTorah. Being a prerequisite to Torah learning and values, these ethical teaching help us grow during the weeks between Pesach and Shavuot - and then the intense emphasis on Torah of the sixth perek.

This same idea fits well with the month of Elul. Generally, all of Pirkei Avot is learned a fourth time through during Elul, and the TORAH perek brings us into Rosh HaShana, as it did with Shavuot. The whole book helps us prepare for the Yamim Nora'im.

Pirkei Avot

Perek Chamishi, Mishna 10 (or 13)

אַרְבַּע מִדּוֹת בְּאָדָם. הָאוֹמֵר שְׁלִי שְׁלִי וְשֶׁלְּךָ שְׁלְךָ, זֶה מִדָּה בִּינוּנִית. וְיֵשׁ אוֹמְרִים, זֶה מִדַּת סְדוֹם. שְׁלִי שְׁלְךָ וְשֶׁלְּךָ שְׁלִי, עִם הָאָרֶץ. שְׁלִי שְׁלִי וְשֶׁלְּךָ שְׁלִי, רָשָׁע. חֲסִיד.

There are four characters among people:

(1) he who says, What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours, his is a neutral character

some say, this is a character like that of Sodom;

(2) he who says, What is mine is yours and what is yours is mine, is a boor;

(3) he who says, What is mine is yours and what is yours is yours, is a saint;

(4) he who says, What is yours is mine and what is mine is mine, is a wicked person.

(1) When a person respects your right to what is yours and he considers that what is his is his - this can be seen as a middle of the road attitude.

But some see this as a characteristic of the wicked people of S'dom, who were not interested or motivated to help one another.

I heard a novel twist on this first type

of person from Rabbi Moshe Atik z"l. When a person (singular) has this attitude, we can accept it as neutral. But V'YEISH OMRIM, when many have this attitude, we are in danger of the S'dom-like society.

(2) What's mine is yours and vice versa is a mixed up situation, which cannot produce a smooth running society. This attitude implies that a person has no respect for the boundaries from person to person and this can result in HEFKEIRUT, lawlessness.

(3) This describes a person who is generous to others, willing to help - without strings attached. Without expecting anything in return. This is a high virtue.

(4) This one is a description of a selfish person who wants everything and is not interested in giving to others. A great recipe for a thief.

Pirkei Avot

Intro to Perek Shishi

שְׁנוּ חֲכָמִים בְּלִשׁוֹן הַמִּשְׁנָה, בְּרוּךְ
שֶׁבָחָר בָּהֶם וּבְמִשְׁנָתָם.

The Sages taught the following in the style of the Mishna – Blessed be He that chose them and their teachings.

To review - once upon a time (I have no idea how long ago), it was suggested that it would be a good idea to learn something special on the Shabbatot afternoons, between Pesach and Shavuot. This would help us relive the experience of rising from the depths of Tum'at Mitzrayim to the spiritual heights of the Sinai Experience. Just as we must relive - not just retell - Y'tzi'at Mitzrayim; and just as we must feel as if Torah we just received the Torah anew (BAYOM HAZE, not bayom hahu); so too must we relive the experience of spiritual growth from the Exodus to Matan Torah. And part of that was to be the special learning on Shabbat afternoon.

Masechet Avot was chosen as the text for this task, because of the ethical and moral messages it contains.

Slight problem. Avot has only five chapters and there are six Shabbatot between Pesach and Shavuot. (In

Israel, there can be seven, in some years - but that's for a different time.)

To solve this 'problem', our Sages collected a series of Mishna-like writings - called B'RAITOT - and compiled a sixth chapter of Pirkei Avot. Avot has 5 p'rakim; Pirkei Avot has six.

Since this chapter was meant to be read on the Shabbat before Shavuot, its predominant theme is Torah and a Torah way of Life.

Consequently, the chapter was nicknamed PEREK KINYAN HATORAH.

Sometime later (I don't know when), it was decided to review the six chapters of Pirkei Avot three more times during the long Summer Shabbatot afternoons - and that is the custom of many communities, today.

The opening line, as above, carries with it a very important, vital message. The first part is the fact - Our Sages taught in the style of the Mishna - i.e. in the writings of that time that were not included by Rabi Yehuda HaNasi in the formal Shisha Sidrei Mishna. The Gemara makes heavy use of the B'raitot for comparison with the Mishnayot.

The second part of the opening

sentence is a bracha-like acknowledgement and thanks to HKB"H, Who has chosen the Talmidei Chachamim who are faithful to Him and His Torah, and their teachings.

Pirkei Avot - and all of Mishna - tries to always tell us who said what. The teachings don't just float in the air. They are anchored to people of sterling character in addition to Torah scholarship.

This idea becomes a message throughout the generations that in order to accept and live by the teachings of Chazal, we need to trust them, not just what they said.

First time around, Perek Kinyan HaTorah brought us into Shavuot. This time, it brings us into the mourning period for the Churban. Shavuot (referring to the seven weeks) and The Three Weeks are very different experiences, but we are challenged to learn and internalize the lessons of Pirkei Avot, to reconfirm our commitment to Torah - and - to use those teachings to bring about the positive change in ourselves and our society, so that the prophecies of Zecharya - that the fast days for the Churban will become Yamim Tovim - Bimheira V'yameinu - AMEIN.

Pirkei Avot

There are only five chapters (p'rakim) in Masechet Avot. When it was decided that Avot would be the best text to study during the period between Pesach and Shavuot, as a way of elevating us to better relive Matan Torah, a sixth chapter was needed, so that there would be one chapter each Shabbat during the Omer period. Whereas the five chapters of Avot contain many teachings for living a Torah life, this sixth chapter was to focus on Torah Learning, to be read/ learned on the Auf Ruf Shabbat of Bnei Yisrael. The five chapters of Avot are part of the body of the Shisha Sidrei Mishna. The sixth chapter, nicknamed KINYAN HATORAH - the acquisition of Torah, is a collection of Mishna-contemporary writings, known collectively as B'RAITA.

The original practice of reading/ learning Pirkei Avot during the Omer weeks was subsequently extended to all the Shabbatot (except when 9 Av is Shabbat) until Rosh HaShana. This is considered a constructive practice for the longer Shabbatot of the summer.

As it turns out, we do one cycle of Avot during the Omer period, one cycle during a 'neutral' period

between Shavuot and 17 Tamuz, another cycle split between the Three Weeks of mourning for the Churban and the first three weeks of Nechama, and a fourth cycle during Elul. This fourth cycle requires doubling up chapters the last two weeks, or so. This gives us a feeling of a crowded agenda for us all during the days leading up to the Yamim Nora'im.

[Because the 8th day of Pesach and the 2nd day of Shavuot in Chutz LaAretz can sometimes fall on Shabbat, the above description of the cycles of Avot does not always fit perfectly.]

Each cycle, as described above, gives us a different background to our Pirkei Avot learning. This makes it less repetitive, and allows for different insights each time we study Avot. The perek of KINYAN HATORAH is introduced with the statement: SHANU CHACHAMIM BILSHON HAMISHNA - BARUCH SHEBACHAR BAHM UVMISHNA-TAM - Our Sages taught us in the style of the Mishna, blessed are THEY and their Teachings - what our Sages teach us is important and so is the quality and character of our teachers. It's not just the learning; it's who teaches us.

Pirkei Avot

Perek Shishi, Mishna 6

גְּדוּלַּהּ תּוֹרָה יוֹתֵר מִן הַכְּהֻנָּה וּמִן
הַמְּלָכוֹת, שֶׁהַמְּלָכוֹת נִקְנִית בְּשִׁלְשִׁים
מַעֲלוֹת, וְהַכְּהֻנָּה נִקְנִית בְּעֶשְׂרִים
וְאַרְבָּעָה, וְהַתּוֹרָה נִקְנִית בְּאַרְבָּעִים
וּשְׁמוֹנֶה דְּבָרִים.

וְאֵלוֹ הֵן: בְּתִלְמוּד...
...
הַמְּכִיר אֶת מְקוֹמוֹ...
...
וְהָאוֹמֵר דְּבָר בְּשֵׁם אוֹמְרוֹ, הָא לְמַדְתָּ:
כָּל הָאוֹמֵר דְּבָר בְּשֵׁם אוֹמְרוֹ מְבִיא
גְּאֻלָּה לְעוֹלָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְתֹאמַר אֶסְתֵּר
לְמֶלֶךְ בְּשֵׁם מְרֻדְכָי.

The Torah is greater than the Kehuna and than royalty, seeing that royalty demands thirty qualifications, the kehuna twenty-four, while the Torah is acquired by forty-eight.

And these are they:

By audible study...

by recognizing one's place,

and reporting a thing in the name of him who said it. So you have learned, Whosoever reports a thing in the name of him that said it brings deliverance into the world; as it is said, And Esther told the king in the name of Mordechai.

This mishna is very long and its commentaries are very considerably longer.

The 48 ways are divided in two - the first 24 beginning with BET, meaning with or by. The second 24, in the Hebrew begin with HEI, the one who.

One can say that the first half of the list are traits and activities that combine to make the person a Torah person; the second half contains descriptions of one who is a Torah person.

Skipping to the last item on the list, we find that it is the only Torah-person-trait that includes a source 'supporting' the quality mentioned.

With that said, let me ask a question. Many years ago, I heard a D'var Torah (on the number of angels that visited Avraham), from the host of a Melave Malka I attended at the home of Dr. Paul and Shifra Slater. He got the DT from MAAYANA SHEL TORAH (Wellsprings of Torah), which quoted the Chidushei HaRim.

If I want to tell over that D'var Torah (which I did as one of the very first Divrei Torah in Torah Tidbits before it was Torah Tidbits, the weekly Torah publication in its 30th year), who do I quote if I want to conform to the last of the 48 ways the Torah is acquired?

I was privileged to have a wonderful Rebbi in seventh and 8th grade in Crown Heights Yeshiva (60 years

ago) - Rabbi Chaim Segal z"l. When one of the boys in the shiur would come up with a point raised in one of the commentaries, the Rebbi would insist that we wrote the Chidush in our notebooks, attributing it to the MARSHA (for example) and to Yaakov - the boy from who we heard the Chidush.

I might suggest that however long the chain of 'sources' is, we should give credit to all who brought that particular D'var Torah to us.

In my example above, I was very enthused by the words of the Chidushei HaRim. But I would never have known his words of Torah had it not been for Maayana Shel Torah. I doubt I would have read it straight from the published Torah of the Chidushei HaRim - I have none of those s'farim. And even though I do have the five volumes of Maayana Shel Torah - who knows if I would have noticed that particular vort had I not heard it from Dr. Slater, those many years ago (close to 40).

And even if I had subsequently read it on my own, I still owe Paul hakarat hatov for sharing that beautiful DT on that particular Motza"Sh.

I might be overdoing my explanation of the last statement in the mishna, but with the possibility of bringing

GEULA to the world, as Esther did (even longer ago), I hope it has been worth your time to read these words.

Pirkei Avot

Makot 3:16

רַבִּי חַנְּנִיָּא בֶּן עֲקָשְׁיָא אָמַר: רְצָה
הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְזַכּוֹת אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל,
לְפִיכָךְ הִרְבֵּה לָהֶם תּוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ה' חָפֵץ לְמַעַן צְדָקוֹ, יַגְדִּיל
תּוֹרָה וַיֵּאדָר.

Rabbi Chananya son of Akashya said, The Holy One, blessed be He, was pleased to make Israel worthy; wherefore he gave them a copious Torah and many commandments; as it is said, It pleased HaShem, for his righteousness's sake to magnify the Torah and make it honorable.

Officially, this mishna is not in Avot, however, we read/learn it six times to once for all the mishnayot in Pirkei Avot.

It is the last mishna in Masechet Makot, and it was borrowed by - I have no idea; if you do, please share the information.

R' Chananya b. Akashya presents as a given, that HKB"H wants the people of Israel to have much merit. He therefore did not just give us Torah and Mitzvot, but he heaped them upon us.

Of course, that sharpening, deepening, and heightening of mitzvot - qualitatively and quantitatively, is a

double-edged sword. If we keep Torah and Mitzvot and remain faithful to and loving of G-d, then the merits accrue greatly. But if we don't, then...

Here's an illustration of the idea of the mishna.

Among the 7 Noahide Laws - Sheva Mitzvot Bnei No'ach, we find GEZEL. A three letter word, GIMEL-ZAYIN-LAMED, which includes whatever it includes.

This on mitzva for B'nei No'ach does not correspond to one mitzva of our 613, but rather to approx. 19 mitzvot of Taryag. We have prohibitions of G'NEIVA, G'ZEILA, fraudulent business practices, finders-keepers when the found object must be returned, HASAGAT G'VUL, not paying workers and time... and many more.

If all people are forbidden to steal, why subsume all the details under a heading, for the nations of the world, but spell them out and multiply them for us?

Part of the answer is RATZA HKB"H L'ZAKOT EL YISRAEL...

We should not view the mitzvot and the whole body of halacha as a burden, but rather as a special gift from HKB"H to His People.

This is an uplifting message for all who learn Pirkei Avot - or any Torah.

Pirkei Avot

AVOT 5 & 6

This Shabbat is the end of Pirkei Avot for this year. We have gone through four cycles, with this last one reading/learning two p'rakim each of the three Shabbatot before Rosh HaShana. There have been 22 Shabbatot between Pesach and Rosh HaShana, not including either. Since Tish'a b'Av was a Sunday this year, we did not do a perek on Shabbat Chazon, Erev Tish'a b'Av. That's why the fourth cycle was done with three doublings up, rather than only two.

Since Avot 5 & 6 bring us into Rosh HaShana - as does Parshat Nitzavim - let's say something from the two chapters that will allow us to ease into Rosh HaShana, with a good feeling.

Here are mishnayot 4 and 7 of the fifth perek. (Remember that the numbering of mishnayot in Avot varies, depending upon where you look.

עֲשָׂרָה נִסְיוֹנוֹת נִתְּנָה אֲבִרָהּ אָבִינוּ
וְעָמַד בְּכֻלָּם, לְהוֹדִיעַ כְּמַה חֲבָתוֹ שֶׁל
אֲבִרָהּ אָבִינוּ.

With ten trials, our father Avraham was tried, and he stood firm in them all, to make known how great was the love of our father Avraham.

And...

עֲשָׂרָה נִסְיוֹנוֹת נִסּוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֶת הַמָּקוֹם
בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּמִדְבָּר, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: ...וַיִּנְסוּ אֹתִי
זֶה עָשָׂר פְּעָמִים, וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי.

With ten trials did our fathers try the Holy One, blessed be He, in the wilderness; as it is said, 'And they have put Me to the proof these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice (Bamidbar 14:22, partial).

The similarities in the wording of these two diametrically opposed mishnayot cannot just be coincidental.

B'ASARA NISYONOT, with ten trials; NITNASA and NISU have the same root; AVINU and AVOTEINU - same root.

The first reminds us of the greatness of Avraham Avinu. And for pre-RH, specifically the 10th test of faith (according to many of our sources, but not all) - AKEIDAT YITZCHAK. This mishna is an inspiration for us to take with us into YOM HADIN. The AKEIDA connects the davening, the Torah reading, and the Shofar blowing of Rosh HaShana.

In stark contrast are the ten times our ancestors who came out of Egypt and into the Midbar, tested G-d and His Divine Patience, so to speak.

So these two mishnayot both usher us into Rosh HaShana - the one on

our credit side and the other, a sharp warning against treating G-d as was done in the Midbar.

Comes the sixth perek, which is nicknamed KINYAN HATORAH, the acquisition of the Torah. Its theme is a Torah Life. It was appropriate the first time we read it, on the Shabbat before Shavuot. And it is no less significant to read it on the Shabbat before the ASERET Y'MEI T'SHUVA.

As Parshat Nitzavim presented us with two different paths to choose from, and recommends UVACHARTA BACHAYIM, choose life, so too the two mishnayot we quoted from perek chamishi gives us the choice of emulating Avraham and Yitzchak... or complaining and challenging G-d all the time.

No contest. The prize at the end of the Avraham Avinu path is a Torah Life. We won't mention what awaits us at the end of the other path.

The choices are presented to us. Let us be smart enough to choose Life and Good - following G-d and keeping His Torah and Mitzvot.