

Pirkei Avot Community Learning Study Resource

Chapter 1: Mishnayot 1-4

Questions to Consider

Mishna 1: Beginning quote: How does this quote make you feel connected to the Jewish people?

Chain of Torah: What kind of story is this chain of tradition providing? What relationship between God, Moses, and the Sages does it propose? What are unique qualities of each group or individual? Do you see yourself in this chain?

“Be deliberate in judgment”: Why is it important to take one’s time in such a situation?

“Raise many students”: How does education relate to the genealogical framework presented by Pirkei Avot? What is this message trying to ensure? What is special about the teacher-student relationship?

“Make a fence”: What are we protecting the Torah from? How else do we protect what is important to us? Explain the difference between Torah mi-Sinai (the Five Books of Moses, the Hebrew Bible) and Torah she-b’al peh (“Oral Torah,” the teachings passed down by the Rabbis. For many years this was passed down verbally, from teacher to student).

Mishna 2. How do you see these pillars play out in your life or the world at large? How would you define each one? How do they relate to each other?

Mishna 3. What are other relationships in our lives that we give attention to from a place of love and not reward? Have students brainstorm examples of each model of relationship.

Mishna 4. What are goals we should have for creating a home?

Commentary

RAMBAM on 1:2: He is saying that with wisdom, and that is the Torah; and with enhancement of [good] traits, and that is acts of lovingkindness; and with the fulfillment of commandments, and that is the sacrifices [referred to in the mishnah as service] - there will be a continuous refinement of the world and ordering of its existence in the most complete way.

Bartenura on 1:4 - "May your house be a meeting place for the sages": When the sages wish to gather together or to meet, let your house be ready for this purpose, so that they will become accustomed to saying "Let us gather at so and so's house." For it is not possible that you will not learn some bit of wisdom from them. They stated allegorically, "To what can this be compared? To one who entered a perfumer's shop; though he did not purchase anything, in any case he soaked up a good scent and brought it out with him. "

Sefaria English Commentary: ...At this time period in history fixed study halls such existed in later times, especially in Babylonia during the late Talmudic period, did not yet exist. Learning the Oral Torah was performed (recited and not read) in small “disciple circles”, usually centered around a charismatic leader who would be the teacher. When the leader passed away the center of learning often moved to wherever the new leader was located. Yose ben Yoezer is encouraging people to make their homes open to the Sages, to turn them into places of learning, so that these disciple circles can exist there. When he says “drink in their words with thirst” he is comparing the Torah to water, a common comparison in rabbinic literature. Just as water can eventually wear down rock, Torah learning eventually can seep into the hardened minds of human beings, even those who have never before learned.