

Pirkei Avot Community Learning Study Resource

Chapter 1: Mishnayot 13-18

Questions to Consider

Mishna 13. What would be the positive reading of this mishna?

Mishna 14. This mishna is very well known. Why do you think this is? What are the conclusions we can draw from it regarding our responsibility to ourselves and others? How do we balance the attention we give to our own needs and attention we give to others? Are these rhetorical questions or do they have answers?

Mishna 15. Discuss the personality differences between Hillel and Shammai. Hillel was known to be the more lenient and patient sage, while Shammai was known to be strict and serious. Compare the advice in mishna 14 and 15, and discuss what else we can learn about their personalities aside from how they are stereotyped. How is structured routine so beneficial? If something is not a “regular part of your life,” what happens to it?

Mishna 16. What qualities do you look for in a teacher? How is doubt harmful and when can it be helpful? Explain that the third teaching refers to the commandment of Ma'aser (donating a tenth of your crops to the poor). Discuss the importance of paying attention to details when we are fulfilling a positive deed.

Mishna 17. How can we balance the lessons that silence and action are both important? Activity: What deeds does he have in mind? Why is this more important than learning?

Mishna 18. Compare mishna 18 with mishna 2. How are they similar? Does one speak more to you than the other? Do you think that these are the best choices of words to describe how the world endures? What things would you choose? What would happen to us if we exclude one of these - justice, truth or peace - from our lives, our society our world? Do justice, truth and peace ever contradict?

Commentary

"make your torah fixed" - such number of chapters every day, such number of halachot per day (Sefer Chareidim)

English Explanation of Pirkei Avot 1:16:2, Sefaria, Joshua Kulp

“Avoid doubt” means that if a person should be confronted by a doubtful halachic case, for instance he doesn’t know whether something is pure or impure, he should not decide for himself, but rather he should ask a higher authority, a rabbi whose knowledge is greater. For if the person says that something is impure and it was really pure, he will cause a financial loss to the owner. And if he says it was pure and it was really impure, he will cause someone to transgress. Note how this statement connects to the previous one. In order to avoid doubt a person must have a teacher. Before one eats his produce he must give two tithes. The first tithe goes to the Levite and the second tithe must either be consumed in Jerusalem (during 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th years of a Sabbatical cycle) or be given to the poor (during the 3rd and 6th years). Rabban Gamaliel teaches that one should not tithe by estimate, but rather should make sure that his tithes are precise. This also connects with the previous statement, that one should avoid doubt. If one tithes by estimate, his food is considered “doubtfully tithed produce”, which is forbidden. This final statement is also understood by commentators as meaning that a person should not make any halachic decisions by guesswork. Rather he should carefully check his sources to make sure that his decision is not only reasonable, but correct.