

Pirkei Avot Community Learning Study Resource

Chapter 1: Mishnayot 9-12

Questions to Consider

Mishna 9. Why does Judaism value questions so much, and what do questions bring us closer to? Where are questions especially important in Judaism?

How does this mishna offer guidance that counter balances the previous one? (as in other examples from this chapter's diarchs)

Mishna 10. What is it about work that we should love? How can power be harmful? For what kind of relation to the government is Shmaya advocating? Why do you think he is concerned?

Mishna 11. What do we learn about the power of speech from this mishna? What can we learn about the importance of checking with primary sources? Have students think of times their choice of words has been harmful or helpful. Role-play different ways interactive scenarios can go, with keywords changed in each scenario.

Mishna 12. How can we live this lesson in practice? Discuss how change and positive influence starts with an individual working on bettering oneself. An outside example can be the Chofetz Chayim (1839–1933), the author of *Sh'mirat Ha-Lashon*, a book on making our speech more loving and less damaging. He thought the world was too big, so he would start with his community, but then realized that starting with himself would be the most effective.

What is the difference between loving peace and pursuing peace? Do they always go together? How can you be a person who brings peace to the world? Why do you think these traits are associated with Aaron the High Priest? How does bringing people close to Torah show that you love them? Has this happened in your life?

Commentary

Shemaiah used to say: love work: In many places we see that the rabbis considered work to be important to proper moral behavior. This is learned from Exodus 20:9, “six days shall you work... and on the seventh day you shall rest.” Just as on the seventh day it is a commandment not to work, so too on the first six days it is a commandment to work. Even the wealthy should work, for idleness may lead a person into depression and perhaps even into licentiousness. *English Explanation of Pirkei Avot 1:10:2 from Sefaria, Josh Kulp*

“Despise Positions of Power”: Seats of authority are precarious, for jealousy abounds and one may be forced to react in a spiritually inappropriate manner in order to protect one’s power. *Rambam*

Interrogate the witnesses extensively; The S’fas Emes views this as an allegory for the great trial of life. We must consider our actions carefully, sitting on any course of action before proceeding. The evil and good inclinations are the witnesses, each testifying for the purpose of its vested interest. We must thoroughly and intensively interrogate each of these “witnesses” in order the path of truth.