

Pirkei Avot Community Learning Study Resource

Chapter 4

Questions to Consider

Mishna 1. What are lessons you have learned recently from people who are not your formal teachers? Who are these people? “Who is Rich” Think of five things that happened today which you are grateful for. (It can be as seemingly small as waking up.) How do you express honor? To whom do you tend to give respect and why? How is God honored when you honor others?

Mishna 2. What feelings do you experience when you do something good? Do these feelings make want to do more good deeds? How do you think the son of Azzai understands developing habits? What are small, good things we do each day? Where else can we squeeze in small, good deeds?

Mishna 4. What does Rabbi Levitas mean when he refers to worms? How can thinking such an morbid thoughts impact how we see ourselves? How might we restate this mishna in more positive terms? How can we understand this mishna in the context of wanting to live a productive life full of achievements?

Mishna 5. Why do you think the person in the mishna thought they could get away with it? Who are we really responsible to when no one is looking? What can we learn about honesty from this mishna? What are healthy ways of dealing with challenges (emotional, religious, etc.) to avoid melting down or desecrating God? What can we learn from this mishna about how we should conduct ourselves in private and public spaces?

Mishna 6. What have you taught others? What do you teach others? In what situations are you a “teacher?” What do you learn from your friends and their passions or hobbies? Pick a mishna from Pirkei Avot that you especially loved and share it.

Mishna 7. Rabbi Tzadok and Hillel both warn about the dangers of exploiting the Torah. What are exploitations of truth in the world that you seek to fix? What does it mean to “separate yourself from the community?” How do you balance being a member of a community (e.g. this class, your synagogue) and needing personal space and time? What does it mean to be a “lawyer” vs. a “judge?” How are their roles and jobs different? Why is each necessary? What does it mean to turn the Torah into a “spade to dig with” or a “crown?” Why is that not the right relation to Torah? Can you think of times when people used the Torah that way? What would that look like?

Mishna 8. What are your personal ways of giving honor to the Torah?

Mishna 9–10. What is dangerous about being too quick to judgment? Why is Rabbi Ishmael warning us about being judgmental? Why is he worried about hate, stealing, and lying? What can we learn about the value of communication and making space for others’ opinions?

Mishna 11. Do you think Rabbi Yonatan is literally talking about being rich or poor? If yes, why? If not, what else can he mean? Kids don't have much control over money, so how can we translate this teaching into our own lives? When are you "rich?" When are you "poor?"
Mishna 12. What can we learn about organization and structure in our lives from Rabbi Meir?

Mishna 13. How do repentance and good deeds protect people from punishment? What does he mean by "angels?" What inside of us helps us become better people or makes self-improvement more difficult?

Mishna 14. Do you find this mishna challenging in a world where power can be placed in the hands of groups with corrupt values? How can we determine whether a group is dedicated for "the sake of Heaven?" What are causes which require large groups to take up properly?

Mishna 15. What is the right way for teachers and students to have relationships? Can you think of especially precious relationships you've had with your teachers? What did they look like? What were their main characteristics?

Mishna 16. Why do you think a misunderstanding in Torah study is such a big deal? What can it lead to?

Mishna 17. What do these three crowns represent in Judaism? Do you think a crown for a good name is difficult to achieve? Why is it the most special?

Mishna 18. If we aren't actually able to exile ourselves to a place of Torah, what are other ways to practice this teaching when we study? Do you think you have to isolate yourself to successfully learn Torah? How does this jive with the teaching above, to, "not separate yourself from the community?"

Mishna 19. Even if we can't understand the inner workings of the secret, mysterious ways of the universe, how can we respond to injustice? How do you respond when it does?

Mishna 20. What values motivate this teaching? Think of the feelings you experience when you are greeted warmly. Do you think this is a mishna that can have a big effect on people?
Activity: Have students promise to greet each other the following morning. See how that goes. What are lions and foxes symbolic of? Why wouldn't someone want to be a head of just anything?

Mishna 21–22. How do you think the processes being described can be quantified?

Mishna 23. According to the illustrations, how can one respond in these instances? What do we learn about giving space to people in this lesson? When do you think is the appropriate time to confront people in these instances?

Mishna 24. What can we learn from this mishna about the impact that our feelings can have on the world?

Mishna 25. What do you think we can learn from our sages from their inclusion of Elisha son of Avuyah in this text? Why do you think he was drawn this way? Some more insights on Elisha ben Avuyah: He is also known as “Acher” (the Other Guy) and is the most famous heretic in all of rabbinic Judaism. He is famous for leaving the community of rabbis after a mystical experience in Paradise (see Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hagigah 15b), becoming involved in Greek culture (Palestinian Talmud, Tractate Megillah 1:9), and not being able to theologially process tragedy (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Hullin 142a).

Mishna 26. What does it mean to be a new vessel or an old vessel? What does it mean to have new or old wine? Which is better?

Mishna 27. Discuss dan l’kaf zechut (judge others favorably) and compare the teachings of mishna 26 with 27. How do the two mishnayot work together? What does it mean to be dan l’kaf zechut? Is this a natural tendency for you? How do we normally relate to people we encounter for the first time, or we don’t know? How can we actively try to give people the benefit of the doubt?

Mishna 28. What does the mishna mean by “drive a person from this world?” What do you think happens to a person and their relationship with others when they act on these feelings in a negative way?

Mishna 29. What can we learn about the journey of the soul from the first part of this mishna and the illustration? Although the last page of this mishna is written in a harsh, depressing tone, can we understand it as a warning to not take the life we have been given for granted?