

Pirkei Avot Community Learning Study Resource

Chapter 3

Questions to Consider

Mishna 1. In what way, according to Akavia, should we try to live our lives? How do you respond to such an indelicate story of what it means to be a human being? Do you like it? How does it make you feel? How would you tell a story about where you're coming from and where you're going? What lessons would your version of such a story teach?

Mishna 2. According to this teaching, what purpose does our government serve? Can you write your own personal prayers for the government? Intertext: Compare this teaching to the "Prayer for the Government" found in many siddurim. What differences and similarities do you find? What do they say about our contemporary relation to the government?

Mishna 3–4. Why do you think that, according to Rabbi Chanina, it is so important to share words of Torah? Do you think the sources he brings are extreme (either good or bad)? What do you think he meant by "words of Torah"? What do "words of Torah" mean to you? Is it just what you hear in synagogue or learn in school?

Mishna 5. What do you think about sages providing practical life advice, as in this teaching? What does it mean that Judaism's concern is not just "Jewish" stuff? Or: do you think there is something deeper to it? Consider sharing a chassidic approach to this mishna, which understands surrendering your heart to God as talking to God.

Mishna 6. How can "carrying" Torah eliminate worldly cares? What sort of feelings does learning and observing Torah bring you? Do you see a conflict between learning and observing?

Mishna 7. Does it surprise you that the Divine would rest upon different-sized groups studying Torah? Why do you think it was important to Rabbi Chalafta to prove this? Compare this with mishna 3–4.

Mishna 8. What does it mean to give God what is God's? How do we practically do this? What is obviously "of God's" to you? What is less obvious?

Mishna 9. What can we learn from the way this illustration was made (specifically the book being thrown)? Today, we see trees as holy and important, but what happens when we think that nature is not connected to Torah?

Mishna 10. How can we guard our soul and our knowledge? What are the ways you make sure to remember things that are important?

Mishna 11–12. Does the emphasis on our feelings, actions, and intentions over wisdom surprise you?

Mishna 13. How we are all created b'tzelem elohim (in the image of God). When we are able to realize this truth how do we start treating people differently?

Mishna 14. Try re-writing this mishna in the positive. What do you think it means when the mishna says that all these things will drive a person from this world?

Mishna 15. What do you think causes people to behave this way? Have you ever started an argument just for its own sake? Why?

Mishna 16. Who are leaders in your life? Does it surprise you that Rabbi Yishmael makes a point to not only listen to leaders, but also to be 'pleasant' to those who are young? Ultimately, he says we need to be welcoming to all people. Why do you think he didn't just share the last part of his teaching? What is so important about him pointing out different types of people?

Mishna 17. How is the fence of tradition different from the protective fence we read about in the first chapter at the end of the first mishna? How can giving charity protect the money we earn?

Mishna 18. How can you understand this mishna as a metaphor for the two distinct periods of his life?

Mishna 19. What is your understanding of free will?

Mishna 20. What is going on in this allegorical description? Break down each of the characters/components.

Mishna 21. How do each of these relationships work?

Mishna 22. What does it mean to have more wisdom than good deeds, or vice versa? Which do you think is more important? How do they reinforce the other?

Mishna 23. What type of study is Rabbi Eleazar emphasizing we engage in first? Why do you think astronomical calculations and gematria are categorized as enhancements to wisdom?