

## Ethics of the Fathers (Collected by Alon Gildoni 5768 alongi@jafi.org)

Ethics of the Fathers, or as it is known in Hebrew, *Pirchei Avot*, is perhaps the most popular and widely read tractate of the Mishna. It was collected some two thousand years ago by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the author of the Mishna.

What is the Ethics of the Fathers?

If we were to collect the wisest statements from our sages concerning how to live our lives to the fullest and best, both in terms of our own fulfillment and in regards to our neighbors and our relationship to God, then this would be the book we would publish. Starting with the beginning of the Oral Tradition, (meaning from the time that Moses gave the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai) and extending to the period of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the statements quoted by the various sages in Pirchei Avot span perhaps a thousand years.

Included inside this book, are the wise and ethical statements upon which we can draw inspiration and concepts to improve the quality of our lives. Each great Rabbi from the various time periods is quoted as to what he considers to be the most important principle upon which we can utilize to live our lives in face of the various trial, troubles, temptations and turmoil that invade individual tranquility and endanger personal and family peace. Each is written simply and concisely, as was the style of the Mishna.

There are five original chapters, as compiled by Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, plus the sixth, which was added on several generations later by the authors of the Talmud. Following in chronological order, the Ethics of the Fathers make a continuum from Moses to the last of the great Rabbis of the Mishna, the period prior to the destruction of the Temple.

There is a very old and proper custom that between the seven weeks between Passover and Shavout a chapter is studied on each of the Shabbats. This corresponds to the concept that during the time that the Jewish People were taken out of Egypt until the time that they received the Torah at Mount Sinai, which was during these seven weeks, they occupied themselves in character refinement.

Others reinforce this custom and point to the tragedy that during this time the twelve thousand pairs of the students of Rabbi Akiva died mysteriously during this time. The reason given is that they did not behave with courtesy and honor toward each other. Therefore it is only fitting that we utilize this time to repair such ignoble character traits.

Others give the reason for learning Pirkei Avot on the Shabbat because it was on the Shabbat that Moses died. Therefore when we learn this book of the Mishna, the Oral Torah, we are giving life to the teachings and thoughts of Moses, as he passed them down to his students. Each statement in the Ethics of the Fathers is in accord with the teaching of Moses. Also, since the Shabbat is a time not only of rest, but of spiritual advancement, the study of Pirchei Avot is considered to best bolster that goal.

Many have the custom to continue the learning of the Ethics of the Fathers even past Shavout until the end of the summer. Since the days are long and need for our personal character improvement is a constant need, Pirchei Avot is a must.

There are more commentaries on this tractate than on any other tractate of the Talmud. From the classic commentators like Rashi and the Rambam, there are commentators who through out the ages have added their personal wisdom and insight. From the great Chassidic masters to the Mussar teachers, each added his commentary as to how we can utilize the teaching in Ethic of the Fathers to the best in our lives. Even today, new books are constantly being published with modern commentators who marvel at the depth of perception

shown by these Rabbis who, two and three thousand years ago, left their finest thoughts for us to discover on a long and peaceful Shabbat afternoon.

Don't restrict yourself only to one day of study, though. Once you get into the teaching of our greatest Rabbis, you will continue to study it throughout the week. And rightly that is exactly the way it was meant to be. The Ethics of the Fathers was meant for you to take it with you in your every day week day life. So get a new copy today and join the millions of Jews who throughout the generations have lived their lives with the Ethics of the Fathers, Pirchei Avot.

## Mishna: 'Pirkei Avot' Ethics of the Fathers

### Collection from the first two chapters (out of six)

#### משנה מסכת אבות פרק א

**1:1** Moses received the Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Joshua. Joshua gave it over to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it over to the Men of the Great Assembly. They [the Men of the Great Assembly] would always say these three things: Be cautious in judgement. Establish many pupils. And make a safety fence around the Torah.

משנה א  
[א] משה קבל תורה מסיני  
ומסרה ליהושע ויהושע לזקנים  
וזקנים לנביאים ונביאים  
מסרו לאנשי כנסת הגדולה הם  
אמרו שלשה דברים הוו מתונים  
בדין והעמידו תלמידים הרבה  
ועשו סייג לתורה:

**1:2** Shimon the Righteous was among the last surviving members of the Great assembly. He would say: The world stands on three things: Torah, Labor, and deeds of kindness.

משנה ב  
[ב] שמעון הצדיק היה משירי  
כנסת הגדולה הוא היה אומר  
על שלשה דברים העולם עומד  
על התורה ועל העבודה ועל  
גמילות חסדים:

**1:4.** Yossei the son of Yoezer of Tzreidah, and Yossei the son of Yochanan of Jerusalem, received the tradition from them. Yossei the son of Yoezer of Tzreidah would say: Let your home be a meeting place for the wise; dust yourself in the soil of their feet, and drink thirstily of their words.

משנה ד  
[ד] יוסי בן יועזר איש צרדה  
ויוסי בן יוחנן איש ירושלים  
קבלו מהם יוסי בן יועזר  
אומר יהי ביתך בית ועד  
לחכמים והוי מתאבק בעפר  
רגליהם והוי שותה בצמא את  
דבריהם:

**1:6.** Joshua the son of Perachia and Nitai the Arbelite received from them. Joshua the son of Perachia would say: Assume for yourself a master, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every man to the side of merit.

משנה ו  
[ו] יהושע בן פרחיה ונתאי  
הארבלי קבלו מהם יהושע בן  
פרחיה אומר עשה לך רב וקנה  
לך חבר והוי דן את כל האדם  
לכף זכות:

**1:7.** Nitai the Arbelite would say: Distance yourself from a bad neighbor, do not cleave to a wicked person, and do not abandon belief in retribution.

משנה ז  
[ז] נתאי הארבלי אומר הרחק  
משכן רע ואל תתחבר לרשע ואל  
תתיאש מן הפורענות:

**1:10.** Shmaayah and Avtalyon received from them. Shmaayah would say: Love work, loath mastery over others, and avoid intimacy with the government.

משנה י  
[י] שמעיה ואבטליון קבלו  
מהם שמעיה אומר אהוב את  
המלאכה ושנא את הרבנות ואל  
תתודע לרשות:

**1:12.** Hillel and Shammai received from them. Hillel would say: Be of the disciples of Aaron--a lover of peace, a pursuer of peace, one who loves the creatures and draws them close to Torah.

משנה יב  
[יב] הלל ושמאי קבלו מהם  
הלל אומר הוי מתלמידיו של  
אהרן אוהב שלום ורודף שלום  
אוהב את הבריות ומקרבן  
לתורה:

**1:13.** He would also say: One who advances his name, destroys his name. One who does not increase, diminishes. One who does not learn is deserving of death. And one who make personal use of the crown of Torah shall perish.

משנה יג  
הוא היה אומר נגד שמא אבד  
שמיה ודלא מוסיף יסיף ודלא  
יליף קטלא חייב ודישתמש  
בתגא חלף:

**1:14.** He would also say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?

משנה יד  
[יג] הוא היה אומר אם אין  
אני לי מי לי וכשאני לעצמי  
מה אני ואם לא עכשיו אימתי:

**1:15.** Shammai would say: Make your Torah study a permanent fixture of your life. Say little and do much. And receive every man with a pleasant countenance.

משנה טו  
[יד] שמאי אומר עשה תורתך  
קבע אמור מעט ועשה הרבה  
והוי מקבל את כל האדם בסבר  
פנים יפות:

**1:16.** Rabban Gamliel would say: Assume for yourself a master; stay away from doubt; and do not accustom yourself to tithe by estimation.

משנה טז  
[טו] רבן גמליאל אומר עשה  
לך רב והסתלק מן הספק ואל  
תרבה לעשר אומדות:

**1:17.** His son, Shimon, would say: All my life I have been raised among the wise, and I have found nothing better for the body than silence. The essential thing is not study, but deed. And one who speaks excessively brings on sin.

משנה יז  
[טז] שמעון בנו אומר כל ימי  
גדלתי בין החכמים ולא מצאתי  
לגוף טוב אלא שתיקה ולא  
המדרש הוא העיקר אלא המעשה  
וכל המרבה דברים מביא חטא:

**1:18.** Rabbi Shimon the son of Gamliel would say: By three things is the world sustained: law, truth and peace. As is stated (Zachariah 8:16), "Truth, and a judgement of peace, you should administer at your [city] gates."

משנה יח  
[יז] רבן שמעון בן גמליאל  
אומר על שלשה דברים העולם  
עומד על הדין ועל האמת ועל  
השלום שנאמר (זכריה ח) אמת  
ומשפט שלום שפטו בשעריכם:

**2:1.** Rabbi [Judah HaNassi]\* would say: Which is the right path for man to choose for himself? Whatever is harmonious for the one who does it, and harmonious for mankind.

### משנה מסכת אבות פרק ב

Be as careful with a minor mitzvah as with a major one, for you do not know the rewards of the mitzvot. Consider the cost of a mitzvah against its rewards, and the rewards of a transgression against its cost.

משנה א  
[א] רבי אומר איזוהי דרך  
ישרה שיבור לו האדם כל שהיא  
תפארת לעושה ותפארת לו מן  
האדם והוי זהיר במצוה קלה  
כבזמורה שאין אתה יודע מתן  
שכרן של מצות והוי מחשב  
הפסד מצוה כנגד שכרה ושכר  
עבירה כנגד הפסדה והסתכל  
בשלשה דברים ואי אתה בא  
לידי עבירה דע מה למעלה ממך  
עין רואה ואוזן שומעת וכל  
מעשיך בספר נכתבין:

Contemplate three things, and you will not come to the hands of transgression: Know what is above from you: a seeing eye, a listening ear, and all your deeds being inscribed in a book.

**2:2.** Rabban Gamliel the son of Rabbi Judah HaNassi would say: Beautiful is the study of Torah with the way of the world, for the toil of them both causes sin to be forgotten. Ultimately, all Torah study that is not accompanied with work is destined to cease and to cause sin. Those who work for the community should do so for the sake of Heaven; for then merit of their ancestors shall aid them, and their righteousness shall endure forever. And you, [says G-d,] I shall credit you with great reward as if you have achieved it.

משנה ב  
[ב] רבן גמליאל בנו של רבי יהודה הנשיא אומר יפה תלמוד תורה עם דרך ארץ שיגיעת שניהם משכחת עון וכל תורה שאין עמה מלאכה סופה בטלה וגוררת עון וכל העמלים עם הצבור יהיו עמלים עמהם לשם שמים שזכות אבותם מסייעתן וצדקתם עומדת לעד ואתם מעלה אני עליכם שכר הרבה כאילו עשיתם:

**2:3.** Be careful with the government, for they befriend a person only for their own needs. They appear to be friends when it is beneficial to them, but they do not stand by a person at the time of *his* distress.

משנה ג  
[ג] הוון זהירין ברשות שאין מקרבין לו לאדם אלא לצורך עצמן נראין כאוהבין בשעת הנאתן ואין עומדין לו לאדם בשעת דחקו:

**2:4.** He would also say: Make that His will should be your will, so that He should make your will to be as His will. Nullify your will before His will, so that He should nullify the will of others before your will.

משנה ד  
[ד] הוא היה אומר עשה רצונו כרצונך כדי שיעשה רצונך כרצונו בטל רצונך מפני רצונו כדי שיבטל רצון אחרים מפני רצונך. הלל אומר אל תפרוש מן הצבור ואל תאמן בעצמך עד יום מותך ואל תדין את חברך עד שתגיע למקומו ואל תאמר דבר שאי אפשר לשמוע שסופו להשמע ואל תאמר לכשאפנה אשנה שמא לא תפנה:

Hillel would say: Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not believe in yourself until the day you die. Do not judge your fellow until you have stood in his place. Do not say something that is not readily understood in the belief that it will ultimately be understood [or: Do not say something that ought not to be heard even in the strictest confidence, for ultimately it will be heard]. And do not say "When I free myself of my concerns, I will study," for perhaps you will never free yourself.

**2:5.** He would also say: A boor cannot be sin-fearing, an ignoramus cannot be pious, a bashful one cannot learn, a short-tempered person cannot teach, nor does anyone who does much business grow wise. In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.

משנה ה  
[ה] הוא היה אומר אין בור ירא חטא ולא עם הארץ חסיד ולא הביישן למד ולא הקפדן מלמד ולא כל המרבה בסחורה מחכים ובמקום שאין אנשים השתדל להיות איש:

**2:7.** He would also say: One who increases flesh, increases worms; one who increases possessions, increases worry; one who increases wives, increases witchcraft; one who increases maidservants, increases promiscuity; one who increases man-servants, increases thievery; one who increases Torah, increases life; one who increases study, increases wisdom; one who increases counsel, increases understanding; one who increases charity, increases peace. One who acquires a good name, acquired it for himself; one who acquires the words of Torah, has acquired life in the World to Come.

משנה ז  
[ז] הוא היה אומר מרבה בשר מרבה רמה מרבה נכסים מרבה דאגה מרבה נשים מרבה כשפים מרבה שפחות מרבה זמה מרבה עבדים מרבה גזל מרבה תורה מרבה חיים מרבה ישיבה מרבה חכמה מרבה עצה מרבה תבונה מרבה צדקה מרבה שלום קנה שם טוב קנה לעצמו קנה לו דברי תורה קנה לו חיי העולם הבא:

**2:9.** They would each say three things: Rabbi Eliezer would say: The honor of your fellow should be as precious to you as your own, and do not be easy to anger. Repent one day before your death.\*\* Warm yourself by the fire of the sages, but be beware lest you be burned by its embers; for their bite is the bite of a fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion, their hiss is the hiss a serpent, and all their words are like fiery coals.

[ט] הם אמרו שלשה דברים רבי אליעזר אומר יהי כבוד חברך חביב עליך כשלך ואל תהי נוח לכעוס ושוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך והוי מתחמם כנגד אורן של חכמים והוי זהיר בגזלתן שלא תכוה שנשיכתן נשיכת שועל ועקיצתן עקיצת עקרב ולחישתן לחישת שרף וכל דבריהם כגזלי אש:

**2:11.** Rabbi Joshua would say: An evil eye, the evil inclination, and the hatred of one's fellows, drive a person from the world.

משנה יא  
[י] רבי יהושע אומר עין הרע ויצר הרע ושנאת הבריות מוציאין את האדם מן העולם:

**2:12.** Rabbi Yossef would say: The property of your fellow should be as precious to you as your own. Perfect yourself for the study of Torah, for it is not an inheritance to you. And all your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven.

משנה יב  
[יא] רבי יוסי אומר יהי ממון חברך חביב עליך כשלך והתקן עצמך ללמוד תורה שאינה ירושה לך וכל מעשיך יהיו לשם שמים:

**2:13.** Rabbi Shimon would say: Be meticulous with the reading of the *Shema* and with prayer (Amidah). When you pray, do not make your prayers routine, but [an entreaty of] mercy and a supplication before the Almighty, as is stated "For He is benevolent and merciful, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, and relenting of the evil decree" (Joel 2:13). And do not be wicked in your own eyes.

משנה יג  
[יב] רבי שמעון אומר הוי זהיר בקריית שמע ובתפלה וכשאתה מתפלל אל תעש תפלתך קבע אלא רחמים ותחנונים לפני המקום ברוך הוא שנאמר (יואל ב') כי אל חנון ורחום הוא ארך אפים ורב חסד ונחם על הרעה ואל תהי רשע בפני עצמך:

**2:14.** Rabbi Elazar would say: Be diligent in the study of Torah. Know what to answer a heretic. And know before whom you toil, and who is your employer who will repay you the reward of your labors.

משנה יד  
[יג] רבי אלעזר אומר הוי שקוד ללמוד תורה ודע מה שתשיב לאפיקורוס ודע לפני מי אתה עמל ונאמן הוא בעל מלאכתך שישלם לך שכר פעולתך:

**2:15.** Rabbi Tarfon would say: The day is short, the work is much, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master is pressing.

משנה טו  
[יד] רבי טרפון אומר היום קצר והמלאכה מרובה והפועלים עצלים והשכר הרבה ובעל הבית דוחק:

**2:16.** He would also say: It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it. If you have learned much Torah, you will be greatly rewarded, and your employer is trustworthy to pay you the reward of your labors. And know, that the reward of the righteous is in the World to Come.

משנה טז  
[טו] הוא היה אומר לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין ליבטל ממנה אם למדת תורה הרבה נותנים לך שכר הרבה ונאמן הוא בעל מלאכתך שישלם לך שכר פעולתך ודע מתן שכרן של צדיקים לעתיד לבא:

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