

Alyth



Alyth Chavruta Project

Pirkei Avot: Chapter 2



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'Iron sharpens iron, so a person sharpens the wit of their friend.'

Proverbs 27:17



Introduction

Welcome to the third week of the Alyth Chavruta Project course on Pirkei Avot. This week, we approach the second chapter of Pirkei Avot, which you can find (in abbreviated form) on pages 706-710 of our siddur. In this booklet, we have selected three extracts on which to focus, with questions for you to consider, and supplementary materials that cast light on the words of the Mishnah or extend their meanings.

The text itself can be found here in both Hebrew only and Hebrew with translation. For those with some knowledge of Hebrew, we encourage you to attempt your own translation, but there is absolutely no expectation that you engage with the Hebrew. As usual, there is also no requirement to get to the end of the pack – we have provided more than you can get through in an hour of study, and we encourage you to focus on understanding a small amount rather than becoming confused by a greater amount.

Further resources and advice on how to get the most out of chavruta can be found in our [revised FAQs](#). We look forward to seeing you on Thursday to share our learning with each other.

As we will be studying during the Omer, we will include the blessing for counting the Omer at the beginning of each text pack, as well as the blessing for study as usual.

Blessing for Study

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצוותיו, וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה.

Blessed are You, our Living God, Sovereign of the universe, whose commandments make us holy, and who commands us to devote ourselves to the study of Torah.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheynu Melech ha-olam, asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu la-asok b'divrey Torah.

COUNTING THE OMER

The 49-day period from the second night of Pesach up to Shavuot is known as the Omer. Because of a longstanding dispute about when the Omer is supposed to begin, it became necessary to count the days out loud every night with a blessing. We have included the Hebrew and English formulae here so that you can count the Omer together with your partner when you meet. According to the Shulchan Aruch, it is possible to count the Omer at any time of day, though the blessing is only said between sunset and sunrise – if you count the Omer after this point then it is customary to do so without saying the blessing.

Blessed are You, our Living God,
Sovereign of the universe, whose
commandments make us holy and
who commands us to count the Omer.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ
הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו
וְצִוָּנוּ עַל סְפִירַת הָעֹמֶר:

Baruch attah Adonai eloheinu melech ha-olam, asher kidd'shanu b'mitsvotav v'tsivanu al s'firat ha-omer.

For Friday Evening/Shabbat

Today is day 13, making one week and
six days of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁבוּעַ
אֶחָד וְשִׁשָּׁה יָמִים לָעֹמֶר

For Saturday Evening/Sunday

Today is day 14, making two weeks of the
Omer.

הַיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי
שְׁבוּעוֹת לָעֹמֶר

For Sunday Evening/Monday

Today is day 15, making two weeks and
one day of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם שֶׁהֵם שְׁנֵי
שְׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד לָעֹמֶר



For Monday Evening/Tuesday

Today is day 16, making two weeks and two days of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם שְׁשֶׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם שָׁהֶם שְׁנֵי
שְׁבוּעוֹת וְשְׁנֵי יָמִים לְעֹמֶר

For Tuesday Evening/Wednesday

Today is day 17, making two weeks and three days of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם שִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר יוֹם שָׁהֶם שְׁנֵי
שְׁבוּעוֹת וְשִׁלְשָׁה יָמִים לְעֹמֶר

For Wednesday Evening/Thursday

Today is day 18, making two weeks and four days of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנֶה עָשָׂר יוֹם שָׁהֶם שְׁנֵי
שְׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים לְעֹמֶר

For Thursday Evening/Friday

Today is day 19, making two weeks and five days of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם תְּשַׁעָּה עָשָׂר יוֹם שָׁהֶם שְׁנֵי
שְׁבוּעוֹת וְחֲמִשָּׁה יָמִים לְעֹמֶר

Selections from Pirkei Avot, Chapter 2, the Hebrew text
(translation begins on page 5)

ג (רַבֵּן גַּמְלִיאֵל בְּנוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי יְהוּדָה הַנָּשִׂיא אוֹמֵר) הָיוּ זֵהִירִין בְּרִשּׁוֹת, שָׂאִין מִקָּרְבִּין
לוֹ לְאָדָם אֵלָּא לְצִרְף עֲצָמָן. נִרְאִין כְּאוֹהֲבִין בְּשַׁעַת הַנָּאֲתָן. וְאִין עוֹמְדִין לוֹ לְאָדָם
בְּשַׁעַת דְּחִקּוֹ:

טו רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר, יְהִי כְבוֹד חֲבֵרְךָ חָבִיב עֲלֶיךָ כְּשֶׁלֶךְ, וְאַל תְּהִי נוֹחַ לְכַעֲוֹס.
וְשׁוֹב יוֹם אֶחָד לִפְנֵי מִיתָתְךָ. וְהָיוּ מִתְחַמֵּם כְּנֶגֶד אוֹרֵן שֶׁל חֲכָמִים, וְהָיוּ זֵהִיר בְּגִחְלָתָן
שֶׁלֹּא תִכְוֶה, שְׁנֹשִׁיכָתָן נֹשִׁיכַת שׁוּעַל, וְעֻקֵּיצָתָן עֻקֵּיצַת עֲקָרָב, וְלִחִישָׁתָן לִחִישַׁת
שָׂרָף, וְכָל דְּבָרֵיהֶם כְּגִחְלֵי אֵשׁ:

כ רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן אוֹמֵר, הַיּוֹם קָצַר וְהַמָּלְאכָה מְרַבָּה, וְהַפּוֹעָלִים עֲצֵלִים, וְהַשָּׂכָר הִרְבָּה,
וּבַעַל הַבַּיִת דּוֹחֵק:

כא הוּא הֵיךְ אוֹמֵר, לֹא עֲלֶיךָ הַמָּלְאכָה לְגִמּוֹר, וְלֹא אֶתָּה בֶּן חוֹרִין לְבָטֹל מִמֶּנָּה. אִם
לְמִדַּת תּוֹרָה הִרְבָּה, נוֹתְנִים לָךְ שָׂכָר הִרְבָּה. וְנֶאֱמָן הוּא בַּעַל מְלֶאכֶתֶךָ שִׁישְׁלֵם לָךְ
שָׂכָר פְּעֻלָּתְךָ. וְדַע, מִתָּן שְׂכָרָן שֶׁל צְדִיקִים לְעֵתִיד לְבוֹא:

Note: the numbering of the paragraphs of Pirkei Avot differs immensely across the various editions of the text. Here, to avoid too much confusion, we follow the numbering applied in our siddur.



2:3

(רַבֵּן גַּמְלִיאֵל בֶּנוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי יְהוּדָה הַנָּשִׂיא אוֹמֵר) הָיוּ זֹהִירִין בְּרִשּׁוֹת, שָׂאִין מִקְרָבִין לוֹ לְאָדָם אֲלָא לְצָרָךְ עֲצָמָן. נִרְאִין כְּאוֹהֲבִין בְּשַׁעַת הַנָּאֲתָן. וְאִין עוֹמְדִין לוֹ לְאָדָם בְּשַׁעַת דְּחִקּוֹ:

[Rabban Gamliel¹ the son of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi² says,] 'Be careful with the ruling authority, for they only bring a person close for their own needs. Appearing as friends in their hour of benefit, they do not stand by a person in their hour of distress.'

Questions

- What is meant by 'the ruling authority' here?
- How does Rabban Gamliel's statement about the ruling authority fit with the command we find elsewhere in Jewish tradition that *dina malchuta dina* ('the law of the land is the law')?
- A different statement about government can be found in the following chapter of Pirkei Avot itself (see Pirkei Avot 3:2 in our supplementary texts on page 8). How do you think these two statements relate to each other? Are they contradictory, and if not, how can they be reconciled?

¹ Rabban Gamliel (III) was the son of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (see below), and is not to be confused with his more famous great-grandfather, Rabban Gamliel II (of Yavneh). Rabban Gamliel III was appointed leader of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel following the death of his father in the early third century CE.

² Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi (also known simply as 'Rabbi') was the leader of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel (the 'patriarch') at the end of the second and beginning of the third century CE. According to tradition, it was Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi who wrote down the Mishnah at the beginning of the third century.

רבי אליעזר אומר, יהי כבוד חברך חביב עליך כשלך, ואל תהי נוח לכעוס. ושוב יום אחד לפני מיתתו. והוי מתחמם כנגד אורן של חכמים, והוי זהיר בגחלתן שלא תפנה, שנשיכתן נשיכת שועל, ועקיצתן עקיצת עקרב, ולחישתן לחישת שרף, וכל דבריהם כגחלי אש:

Rabbi Eliezer³ says, 'May the honour of your fellow be as dear to you as your own; do not be quick to anger; repent a day before your death. May you be warmed before the fire of the wise, but be careful of their burning coals, that you are not scorched. For their bite is the bite of a fox, and their sting is the sting of a scorpion, and their hiss the hiss of a venomous serpent, and their words are like burning coals.

Questions

- How are we to understand the imperative not to be quick to anger? Consider the commentary of the Rambam (page 9) as well as the relation to Hillel and Shammai in Avot deRabbi Natan (pages 9-11).
- What does Rabbi Eliezer mean by saying that the words of the rabbis are like burning coals?

³ Rabbi Eliezer (ben Hyrcanos) was one of the preeminent rabbis of the late first and early second centuries CE. He is often found in the Mishnah in dispute with Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Eliezer is often courted by controversy, has a number of mystical traditions associated with him, and was once excommunicated by his fellow rabbis, only being reconciled with them on his deathbed.



2:20-21

כ רבי טרפון אומר, היום קצר והמלאכה מרבה, והפועלים עצלים, והשכר הרבה, ובעל הבית דוחק:

כא הוא היה אומר, לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, ולא אתה בן חורין לביטל ממנה. אם למדת תורה הרבה, נותנים לך שכר הרבה. ונאמן הוא בעל מלאכתך שישלם לך שכר פעלתך. ודע, מתן שכרן של צדיקים לעתיד לבוא:

20 Rabbi Tarfon⁴ says, 'The day is short, the work is great, and the workers are lazy, and the master of the house is insistent.'

21 He would say, 'It is not upon you to complete the work, but you are not free to abandon it. If you have learned much Torah, you will be given much reward, and faithful is your employer to pay you the wages of your labour. But know that the wages of the righteous are in the future to come.'⁵

Questions

- What is Rabbi Tarfon trying to tell us in 2:20?
- These paragraphs are included together as a meditation in the Reform Judaism funeral book (p. 3) – why do you think they are included? In what way are they relevant to the funeral service?
- How do you think the reference to the world to come relates back to the opening reading from Sanhedrin 10:1 that we studied in the first week?
- What does learning Torah have to do with rewards in the world to come?

⁴ Rabbi Tarfon was a rabbi in the Land of Israel in the first half of the first century CE. He is traditionally considered to be of priestly stock, and often ruled in favour of the priests.

⁵ Commentators tend to clarify this to mean 'the world to come'.

On the ruling authorities: Pirkei Avot 3:2

רַבִּי חֲנִינָא סֵגֵן הַכֹּהֲנִים אוֹמֵר, הָיִי מִתְפַּלֵּל בְּשִׁלוּמָהּ שֶׁל מְלָכוּת, שְׂאֵל־מֶלֶא מוֹרָאָה, אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ חַיִּים בְּלָעוּ.

Rabbi Chaninah,⁶ the deputy high priest, says, 'Pray for the peace of the government, for without fear of it, people would swallow their neighbours alive.'

On the ruling authorities: Bartenura, commentary to Pirkei Avot 2:3

הוּוּ זֹהִירִים בְּרִשּׁוֹת. אַתֶּם הַמִּתְעַסְקִים בְּצִרְכֵי צָבוֹר, אַף עַל פִּי שֶׁאַתֶּם צִרְכִּים לַהֲתוֹדַע לְרִשּׁוֹת כְּדִי לִפְקֹחַ עַל עַסְקֵי רַבִּים, הוּוּ זֹהִירִים וכו'.

'Be careful with the ruling authority' – you, who are concerned with the needs of the community; even though you need to be familiar with the ruling authorities in order to care for the concerns of many, 'be careful etc.'

⁶ Little is known of Rabbi Chaninah the deputy high priest (also called Chananyah depending on which version you are reading), except that he was active in the Land of Israel in the time of the Second Temple, as well as after its destruction in 70 CE.



On not being quick to anger: Rambam, commentary to Pirkei Avot 2:15

אל תהי נוח לכעוס. אל תכין עצמך לכעס ולרגזנות וכבר הפליגו לגנות הכעס והרגזנות והחזק שבדבריהם אמרם כל מי שכועס כאילו עובד עבודת כוכבים וסמכוהו לאמרו לא יהיה בך אל זר ולא תשתחוה לאל נכר. ר"ל ששני הדברים אחד:

'Do not be quick to anger' – Do not prepare yourself to anger or irritability. They have made sure to censure anger and irritability. And the strongest of their words are: 'Anyone who gets angry, it is as though they worship idols' (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 105b). And they adjoin it to Scripture's saying: 'You shall have no foreign god, and you shall not bow down to a alien god' (Psalm 81:10) – meaning to say that the two things are one.

On not being quick to anger: Avot deRabbi Natan A, 15:2

ואל תהי נוח לכעוס כיצד

מלמד שיהא עניו כהלל הזקן ואל יהי קפדן כשמאי הזקן

מה היה ענותנותו של הלל הזקן אמרו מעשה בשני בני אדם שעמדו והמרו זה את זה וזה את זה בד' מאות זוז אמרו כל שילך ויקניט את הלל יטול ארבע מאות זוז

'Do not be quick to anger' – how so?

It teaches that a person should be meek, like Hillel the Elder,⁷ and not impatient, like Shammai.⁸

What was the meekness of Hillel the Elder? They related an incident of two men who stood and wagered⁹ with each other four hundred *zuz*, saying, 'Anyone who goes and makes Hillel angry will take the four hundred *zuz*'

⁷ Hillel the Elder came to the Land of Israel from Babylonian in the first century CE. According to certain later traditions he was descended from the house of David. He is often cited in opposition to Shammai.

⁸ Shammai (the Elder) lived in the Land of Israel at the same time as Hillel (see above) and is usually only cited in opposition to Hillel (whose ideas and arguments tended to prevail).

⁹ The verbal root of this word also refers to 'apostacy' and changing one's religion.

הלך אחד מהם ואותו היום ע"ש היה עם חשיכה וקא חייף רישיה בא וטפח לו על הדלת אמר היכן הלל היכן הלל נתעטף ויצא לקראתו א"ל בני מה אתה צריך א"ל שאלה (זו) אני צריך לשאול א"ל אמור א"ל מפני מה עיניהם של תרמודים תרוטות א"ל מפני שדרין בין חול במדבר ובאות רוחות ומפזרות אותו על עיניהם לפיכך עיניהם תרוטות

One of them went that same day, Erev Shabbat, towards dust, and Hillel was washing his hair. He came, knocked on the door, [and] said, 'Where is Hillel? Where is Hillel?' Hillel wrapped himself [in his robe] and went out to greet him. He said to him, 'My child, what do you need?' He said to him, 'I have this question I need to ask.' He said to him, 'Speak.' He said to him, 'Why are the eyes of *Tarmudim* so narrow?' He replied, 'Because they live in sandy deserts, and the wind blows the sand over their eyes, therefore their eyes are narrow.'

הלך והמתין שעה אחת וחזר וטפח לו על הדלת אמר היכן הלל היכן הלל נתעטף ויצא א"ל בני מה אתה צריך א"ל הלכה אני צריך לשאול. א"ל אמור א"ל מפני מה רגליהם של אפרקיים רחבות א"ל מפני שהם יושבין עם בצעי המים ובכל יום ויום הם הולכים במים לפיכך רגליהם רחבות

He went and waited for a while, and returned and knocked on the door. He said, 'Where is Hillel? Where is Hillel?' Hillel wrapped himself [in his robe] and went out. He said to him, 'My child, what do you need?' He said to him, '[There is a] *halachah* I need to ask about.' He said to him, 'Speak.' He said to him, 'Why are feet of Africans flat?' He replied, 'Because they dwell in marshes and every day they walk in the water, therefore their feet are flat.'



הלך והמתין שעה אחת וחזר וטפח על הדלת אמר היכן הלל היכן הלל נתעטף ויצא א"ל מה אתה צריך לשאול א"ל הלכה אני צריך לשאול. א"ל אמור נתעטף וישב לפניו א"ל [מה אתה צריך א"ל כך נשיאים משיבים] אל ירבו כמותך בישראל (אמר לו ח"ו הוי זהיר ברוחך מה אתה צריך) א"ל מפני מה (ראשיהם של בבליים ארוכים א"ל בני הלכה גדולה שאלת לפי שאין שם חיות פקחות כשנולד הולד מגדלות *אותם על אברים של עבדים ושל שפחות לפיכך ראשיהם ארוכות אבל כאן שיש חיות פקחות כשנולד הולד מגדלות אותו בעריסה ומשפשות את ראשו לפיכך ראשיהם סגלגלי).

א"ל איבדת ממני ד' מאות זוז א"ל כדי הוא הלל שתאבד על ידו ד' מאות זוז [וד' מאות זוז] והלל אל יקפיד :

He went and waited a while, and returned and knocked on the door. He said, 'Where is Hillel? Where is Hillel?' Hillel wrapped himself [in his robe] and went out. He said to him, 'What do you need to ask?' He said to him, '[There is a] *halachah* I need to ask about.' He said to him, 'Speak.' He wrapped himself [in his robe] and sat before him. He said to him, 'What do you need?' He replied, 'This is how the princes respond? May there not be many like you in Israel!' He said to him, 'Heaven forbid! Be careful of your temper! What do you need?' He said to him, 'Why do are the heads of the Babylonians long?' He replied, 'My child, you have asked an important question. It is because they do not have skilled midwives there. When it is born, a baby is placed in the arms of male and female slaves, therefore their heads are long. Whereas, here, where there are skilled midwives, when a baby is born, it is placed in a cot, and they massage its head, therefore their heads are round.'

He said to him, 'Because of you, I have lost four hundred zuz!' He said to him, 'Hillel is worthy that you should lose four hundred zuz (and another four hundred zuz), and Hillel should not lose his temper.'

Note: There are a number of other stories about the patience of Hillel and the impatience of Shammai that follow this one in Avot deRabbi Natan, and can be read by clicking [here](#). There are also parallels to this story in Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 30b-31a, which you can read by clicking [here](#) (you may need to scroll down a bit to get to the relevant bit).

On repenting one day before death: Avot deRabbi Natan A, 15:4

שוב יום אחד לפני מיתתך

שאלו תלמידיו את רבי אליעזר וכי אדם יודע באיזה יום ימות שיעשה תשובה

אמר להם כל שכן שיעשה תשובה היום שמא ימות למחר ישוב למחר שמא ימות למחרתו ונמצא כל ימיו בתשובה.

‘Repent a day before your death’

Rabbi Eliezer’s students asked him, ‘But does a person know on what day they will die, so they can make *teshuvah*?’

He said to them, ‘All the more so, they should make *teshuvah* today, lest they die tomorrow, tomorrow lest they die the day after, and they will find that they make *teshuvah* all their days.’

On not being required to complete the work: Rabbi Tony Bayfield

A dictum appears in a number of places in the Talmud: *tafasta m’ruba lo tafasta* if you try to grasp too much you won’t get hold of anything. It continues: *tafasta mu’at tafasta* – if you grasp a little, you will be able to hold on to it. The trust of tradition is not so much to articulate a distant aspiration but to counsel against trying to bite off too much at one go; we should never lose sight of the ideal but move towards it in sensible, manageable steps. I suspect this is why a particular observation of the Viennese-born philosopher of science Karl Popper – another of those Jewish refugees from the Nazis who finally settled in Britain – so appeals to me. Popper, defender of the open society and democracy, urges us not to be obsessed with building the perfect school or hospital but to get on with building better schools and better hospitals.



A GUIDE TO THE TEXTS

The Mishnah is a Jewish legal code from approximately 200 CE, containing legal rulings and disputes of the sages which are written down there for the first time. It is the first part of what is called the 'Oral Law', which for traditional Jews is just as authoritative as the Written Law (the Tanach). The Mishnah is divided into six 'orders', and each order is divided into tractates. Pirkei Avot is included in *Seder Nezikin*, which deals with the laws of damages (tort law).

Avot deRabbi Natan is considered to be one of the 'minor tractates' of the Talmud, the first commentary and expansion of the Mishnah. It was likely completed at around the same time as the Babylonian Talmud, though it is difficult to date precisely. It is based on Pirkei Avot, and in some places offers a line-by-line commentary, though it is clear that the version of Pirkei Avot found in Avot deRabbi Natan is different in some places from the one we find in the Mishnah. The text can be found in two different recensions, which are labelled A and B (both of which are cited in this text pack).

Moshe ben Maimon (also known as **Moses Maimonides** or **the Rambam**) was a Jewish scholar and philosopher, was born in Cordoba, Spain in 1138 and died in Cairo, Egypt in 1204. As a young man he wrote an influential **commentary on the Mishnah**. In this text pack, the Rambam also refers to a work called **Eight Chapters**, an ethical introduction to Pirkei Avot.

One of the foremost commentaries on the Mishnah was written by the **Bartenura** (Ovadia ben Abraham of Bertinoro) in the fifteenth century in Italy. Since the Mishnah was first printed in the mid-sixteenth century, rarely has it appeared without his commentary.

Rabbi Tony Bayfield is Professor of Jewish Theology and Thought at Leo Baeck College, and was previously head of the Movement for Reform Judaism. His book ***Being Jewish Today*** was published in 2019.

HAPPY STUDYING!

If you have any further questions, please be in touch with Rabbi Elliott

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