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

**Proverbs 27:17**



## Introduction

Welcome to the fourth week of the Alyth Chavruta Project course on Pirkei Avot. This week, we approach the fourth chapter of Pirkei Avot, which you can find (in abbreviated form) on pages 715-719 of the RJ prayer book. When studying the text to decide what would go into this week's booklet, we realised that the content of Pirkei Avot 4:1 could fill an entire Omer's worth of study in itself. Therefore, we have decided to focus just on that Mishnah, and to delve more deeply than usual into the parallel texts, related texts and commentaries. The questions on this Mishnah have been divided into sections – one at the beginning that deals with the text as a whole, and then sections on each of the sections.

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

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

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 יְהוָה 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 27, making three weeks and six days of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם שְׁבַעַה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שָׁהֵם  
שְׁלֹשָׁה שְׁבוּעוֹת וְשֵׁשׁ יָמִים לְעֹמֶר

### *For Saturday Evening/Sunday*

Today is day 28, making four weeks of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם שְׁמוֹנָה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שָׁהֵם  
אַרְבָּעָה שְׁבוּעוֹת לְעֹמֶר

### *For Sunday Evening/Monday*

Today is day 29, making four weeks and one day of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם תְּשַׁעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים יוֹם שָׁהֵם  
אַרְבָּעָה שְׁבוּעוֹת וְיוֹם אֶחָד לְעֹמֶר



*For Monday Evening/Tuesday*

Today is day 30, making four weeks and two days of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם שָׁהָם אַרְבָּעָה  
שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁנַיִם יָמִים לְעֹמֶר

*For Tuesday Evening/Wednesday*

Today is day 31, making four weeks and three days of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם אֶחָד וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם שָׁהָם  
אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וּשְׁלֹשָׁה יָמִים לְעֹמֶר

*For Wednesday Evening/Thursday*

Today is day 32, making four weeks and four days of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם שְׁנַיִם וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם שָׁהָם  
אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וְאַרְבָּעָה יָמִים לְעֹמֶר

*For Thursday Evening/Friday*

Today is day 33, making four weeks and five days of the Omer.

הַיּוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה וּשְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם שָׁהָם  
אַרְבָּעָה שָׁבוּעוֹת וַחֲמֵשָׁה יָמִים לְעֹמֶר

Selections from Pirkei Avot, Chapter 4, the Hebrew text  
(translation begins on page 5)

א בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר (תהלים קיט), מכל מלמד  
השכלתי כי עדותיך שיתיה לי.

איזהו גבור, הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר (משלי טז), טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומשל  
ברוחו מלכד עיר.

איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו, שנאמר (תהלים קכח), יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך  
וטוב לך. אשריך, בעולם הזה. וטוב לך, לעולם הבא.

איזהו מכבד, המכבד את הבריות, שנאמר (שמואל א ב), כי מכבדי אכבד ובזי  
יקלו:



## 4:1

בֶּן זוּמָא אוֹמֵר, אֵיזְהוּ חָכֵם, הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תהלים קיט), מִכָּל מְלַמְדֵי  
הַשְּׂפִלְתִּי.

Ben Zoma<sup>1</sup> says, ‘Who is wise? The one who learns from every person, as it is written, “I have gained understanding from all my teachers” (Psalm 119:99).’

אֵיזְהוּ גִבּוֹר, הַכּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת יָצְרוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (משלי טז), טוֹב אַךְ אִפְּיִם מִגִּבּוֹר וּמִשָּׁל  
בְּרוּחוֹ מִלְכָּד עֵיר.

[Ben Zoma continues,] ‘Who is mighty? The one who subdues their inclination, as it is written, “It is better to be slow to anger than mighty, and to rule one’s spirit than to conquer a city” (Proverbs 16:32).’

אֵיזְהוּ עֹשֵׂר הַשְּׂמֵחַ בְּחֻלְקוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תהלים קכח), יִגִּיעַ כְּפִיךָ כִּי תֹאכַל אֲשֶׁרִיךְ  
וְטוֹב לְךָ. אֲשֶׁרִיךְ, בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה. וְטוֹב לְךָ, לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

[Ben Zoma continues,] ‘Who is rich? The one who is happy with their portion, as it is written, “When you eat the labour of your hands, you shall be happy and it will be good for you” (Psalm 128:2). “You shall be happy” – in this world; “it will be good for you” – in the world to come.’<sup>2</sup>

אֵיזְהוּ מְכַבֵּד, הַמְכַבֵּד אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שמואל א ב), כִּי מְכַבְּדֵי אֶכְבֵּד וּבֹזֵי  
יִקְלֵוּ:

[Ben Zoma concludes,] ‘Who is honoured? The one who honours humanity, as it is written, “For those who honour Me I will honour, but those who despise Me shall be esteemed lightly” (1 Samuel 2:30).’

<sup>1</sup> Little is known of (Shimon) ben Zoma, except that he was a rabbi in the Land of Israel at the beginning of the second century CE. He was also one of the rabbis who entered Pardes with Rabbi Akiva.

<sup>2</sup> This last sentence is not present in all versions of Pirkei Avot.

### Questions

- What is this text trying to teach us, and how does it do so?
- Have a look at the parallel versions (on pages 7-8) – what is different between the versions, and how does that affect our understanding?

### On who is wise

- Looking at the text from Pirkei Avot, Babylonian Talmud Tamid and Sifrei Devarim, what are the three different understandings of wisdom? Which resonates most for you? (You can read a sermon on this topic by Rabbi Josh by clicking [here](#).)

### On who is mighty

- What does the text mean by ‘the one who subdues their inclination’?
- Look at the text on the *Yetzer HaRa* (on page 10). How does this text understand human nature?

### On who is rich

- Does Ben Zoma really think that we should not want to improve our condition? If not, what can this idea of richness mean?
- Look at the text from Bamidbar Rabbah (on page 11). How does this tradition use the text from Pirkei Avot? How does it affect our reading?

### On who is honourable

- Look at the supplementary texts from Pirkei Avot 4:8 and the parallel version of that text in Avot deRabbi Natan 27:1 (on page 12). How do these two texts relate to 4:1? What do they add to the concept of honour?



## SUPPLEMENTARY TEXTS

### A Parallel Text: Avot deRabbi Natan A, 23:1

בן זומא אומר איזהו חכם הלומד מכל אדם שנא' מכל מלמדי השכלתי איזו עלוב שבעלובים זה שהוא עלוב כמשה רבינו שנאמר והאיש משה עניו מאד. איזו עשיר שבעשירים זה ששמח בחלקו שנאמר יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך.

איזו גבור שבגבורים זהו שכובש את יצרו שנאמר טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומושל ברוחו מלוכד עיר.

וכל הכובש את יצרו מעלין עליו כאילו כבש עיר מלאה גבורים שנאמר עיר גבורים עלה חכם

ואין גבורים אלא גבורי תורה שנא' גבורי כח עושי דברו. וי"א מלאכי השרת שנאמר (שם) ברכו ה' מלאכיו [גבורי כח וגו'] ויש אומרים מי שעושה שונא אוהבו:

Ben Zoma says, 'Who is wise? The one who learns from every person, as it is written, "I have gained understanding from all my teachers" (Psalm 119:99).

'Who is the humblest of them all? The one who is as humble as Moshe Rabeinu, as it is written, "The man Moshe was very humble" (Numbers 12:33).

'Who is the richest of them all? The one who is happy with their portion, as it is written, "When you eat the labour of your hands, you shall be happy and it will be good for you" (Psalm 128:2).

'Who is mightiest of them all? The one who subdues their inclination, as it is written, "It is better to be slow to anger than mighty, and to rule one's spirit than to conquer a city" (Proverbs 16:32).'

'And anyone who subdues their inclination it is as though they defeated a city full of warriors, as it is written, "A wise man ascends to a city of warriors" (Proverbs 21:22).



## Alyth Chavruta Project

'The only mighty ones are warriors of Torah, as it is written, "Warriors of strength do as God says" (Psalm 103:20). And there are those who say [these are the] ministering angels, as it is written, "Bless the Eternal, God's messengers" (Psalm 103:20). And there are those who say, the one who turns their enemy into their friend.'

### A Parallel Text: Babylonian Talmud, Tamid 32a

אמר להם אידין מתקרי חכים

אמרו ליה איזהו חכם הרואה את הנולד

אמר להם אידין מתקרי גבור

אמרו לו איזהו גבור הכובש את יצרו

אמר להן אידין מתקרי עשיר

אמרו ליה איזהו עשיר השמח בחלקו

[Alexander]<sup>3</sup> said to them, 'Who is to be called wise?'

They said to him, 'Who is wise? The one who sees the consequences.'<sup>4</sup>

He said to them, 'Who is to be called mighty?'

They said to him, 'Who is mighty? The one who subdues their inclination.'

He said to them, 'Who is to be called rich?'

They said to him, 'Who is rich? The one who is happy with their portion.'

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<sup>3</sup> This section is part of a long debate between Alexander and 'The Elders of the South'. We do not know who the latter are, but we know that the Alexander referred to is supposedly Alexander the Great, king of the ancient Greek kingdom of Macedon (356-323 BCE).

<sup>4</sup> The Hebrew *nolad* translates literally as 'that which is born'.



## Another answer on who is wise: Sifre Devarim, 13

### חכמים ונבונים

זה ששאל אריוס את ר' יוסי: אמר לו איזהו חכם? אמר לו המקיים תלמודו.

אתה אומר תלמוד, או אינו אלא נבון?

א"ל: הרי כבר נאמר נבונים.

מה בין נבונים לחכמים? חכמים דומים לשולחני עשיר, שמביאים לראות רואה, כשאינן מביאים יושב ותוהה. נבון דומה לשולחני תגר, כשאינן מביאים לו לראות - מביא משלו ורואה:

'Wise and understanding' (Deuteronomy 1:13)<sup>5</sup>

As Arios<sup>6</sup> asked Rabbi Yosei, 'Who is wise?' He said to him, 'The one who establishes their learning.'

[He responded,] 'You say learning, or is it only understanding?'

He said to him, 'Behold, it already says "understanding".'

What is the difference between understanding people and wise people? Wise people are to be compared with a rich money changer. When they bring [coins] he examines them; when they do not bring [coins] he sits and is idle. An understanding person is to be compared with a travelling money changer. When they do not bring [coins] to him to examine, he examines his own.

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<sup>5</sup> The full verse reads: 'Pick from each of your tribes people wise and understanding and experienced, and I will appoint them as your heads.'

<sup>6</sup> We do not know anything about Arios, except that he is a non-Jew asking the same question as Alexander in Babylonian Talmud Tamid (above). There is a possibility that these are two versions of a particular oral tradition, despite the fact that they give different answers to the question.

**On learning from every person: Bartenura on Pirkei Avot 4:1**

הלומד מכל אדם. ואף על פי שהוא קטן ממנו. שכיון שאינו חס על כבודו ולומד מן הקטנים, נכרים הדברים שחכמתו הוא לשם שמים ולא להתיהר ולהתפאר בה:

‘The one who learns from every person.’ Even if they are lesser than them. As they are not concerned with their honour, and learn from those who are lesser than them, it shows that their knowledge is for the sake of heaven, and not for them to boast about and revel in.

**On the evil inclination (*Yetzer (Ha)Ra*): Bereshit Rabbah 9:7**

רבי נחמן בר שמואל בר נחמן בשם רב שמואל בר נחמן אמר הנה טוב מאד זה יצר טוב והנה טוב מאד זה יצר רע,

וכי יצר הרע טוב מאד, אתמהא, אלא שאלולי יצר הרע לא בנה אדם בית ולא נשא אשה, ולא הוליד ולא נשא ונתן, וכן שלמה אומר (קהלת ד) כי היא קנאת איש מרעהו.

Rabbi Nachman bar Shmuel bar Nachman<sup>7</sup> said in the name of Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman,<sup>8</sup> “Behold, it was good” (Genesis 1:25) refers to the *Yetzer Tov*, “And behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31) refers to the *Yetzer Ra*.’

Can then the *Yetzer HaRa* really be “very good”? That would be extraordinary!

But for the *Yetzer HaRa*, no one would build a house, take a wife, or have children or do business; and thus said Solomon, ‘I noted that all labour and excelling in work come from men’s envy of each other’ (Ecclesiastes 4:4).

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<sup>7</sup> It is not clear who Rabbi Nachman bar Shmuel bar Nachman was, and we do not find him in other sources. Given the repetition of his patronymic (Shmuel bar Nachman, as below), this name may be attributable to a scribal error.

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman lived in Tiberias in the Land of Israel in the late third century CE.



## On who is rich: Bamidbar Rabbah 22:9

ד"א לב חכם לימינו זה משה ולב כסיל לשמאלו אלו בני ראובן ובני גד שעשו את העיקר טפל ואת הטפל עיקר שחיבבו את ממונם יותר מן הנפשות שהן אומרים למשה גדרות צאן נבנה למקננו פה וערים לטפנו

אמר להם משה אינה כלום אלא עשו את העיקר עיקר תחלה בנו לכם ערים לטפכם ואח"כ וגדרות לצאנכם

אמר להם הקב"ה אתם חיבבתם את מקניכם יותר מן הנפשות חייכם אין בו ברכה עליהם נאמר נחלה מבוהלת בראשונה ואחריה לא תבורך וכה"א אל תיגע להעשיר מבינתך חדל ואיזה הוא עשיר השמח בחלקו שנאמר יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך:

Another explanation:<sup>9</sup> 'A wise one's understanding is at their right hand' – this is Moses; 'A fool's understanding is at their left' these are the children of Reuben and the children of Gad, who made the essential thing of secondary importance, and the thing of secondary importance essential, for they cherished their property more than human life, saying to Moses, 'Here we will build sheepfolds for our flocks, and towns for our children' (Numbers 32:16).

Moses said to them, 'That is not right! Do the essential thing first. Build cities for your children and afterwards sheepfolds for your flocks.'

The Holy Blessed One said to them, 'You have cherished your cattle more than human life. By your life, there shall be no blessing for you in it.' Of them Scripture says, 'An estate gained hastily from the beginning, its end will not be blessed' (Proverbs 20:21). And likewise it says, 'Do not strain to become rich, cease from your understanding' (Proverbs 23:4). And who is rich? The one who is happy with their portion, as it is written, 'When you eat the labour of your hands, you shall be happy and it will be good for you' (Psalm 128:2).

<sup>9</sup> 'Another explanation (*Devar Acher*)' is a standard midrashic way of introducing an alternative interpretation of a given biblical verse. In this case, the verse is Ecclesiastes 10:2. The verse with which the midrash is primarily concerned, however, is Numbers 32:1, in which it is stated that the children of Reuben and the children of Gad have a great number of cattle. These two tribes therefore decide to remain to the East of the River Jordan rather than joining the rest of the Israelites in the Promised Land.

**On honour: Pirkei Avot 4:8**

רבי יוסי אומר, כל המכבד את התורה, גופו מכבד על הבריות. וכל המחלל את התורה, גופו מחלל על הבריות:

Rabbi Yosei<sup>10</sup> says, 'Anyone who honours the Torah, they are themselves honoured by humanity. And anyone who dishonours the Torah, they themselves are dishonoured by humanity.'

**On honour: Avot deRabbi Natan A, 27:1**

רבי יוסי אומר כל המכבד את התורה גופו מכובד על הבריות שנא' כי מכבדי אכבד ובוזי יקלו

Rabbi Yosei says, 'Anyone who honours the Torah, they are themselves honoured by humanity, as it is written, "For those who honour Me I will honour, but those who despise Me shall be esteemed lightly" (1 Samuel 2:30).'

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<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Yosei (ben Chalafta) is quoted extensively in the Mishnah. One of the later students of Rabbi Akiva, he lived in the Land of Israel and taught in the city of Sephoris in the first half of the second century CE.



## A GUIDE TO THE TEXTS

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**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).

The **Babylonian Talmud** (also known simply as The Talmud or *Bavli*) is a commentary on the Mishnah from Babylonia, containing the discussions of rabbis from the period just after the Mishnah was finished (around 200 CE), until it was finally redacted in approximately 700 CE. The tractate extracted in this pack is 'Tamid', which deals with the daily offerings in the Temple in Jerusalem.

**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).

A number of midrashim have been included in this booklet. **Sifrei Devarim** is a midrash on the book of Deuteronomy, covering legal, narrative and homiletic material, and is thought to have been completed in the late third century CE. **Bamidbar Rabbah** is a homiletic midrash on the book of Numbers. It is difficult to date precisely, but it is likely to have been finished around the same time as the Babylonian Talmud. **Bereshit Rabbah** is a midrash on the book of Genesis, completed around the first half of the fifth century CE (roughly the same time as the Jerusalem Talmud).