

**Pirkei Avot: Introduction**  
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The placement

**1. Talmud, Bava Kamma 30a**

אמר רב יהודה: האי מאן דבעי למהוי חסידא, לקיים מילי דנזיקין. רבא אמר: מילי דאבות.  
Rav Yehudah says: One who wants to be pious should observe the matters of [the order of] *Nezikin* (damages).  
Rava said [he should observe] the matters of tractate *Avot*.

**2. Rabbeinu Yonah, Commentary to Pirkei Avot 1:1**

ומפני שאדם משיג אל מעלת החסידות בעשותו אחת מאלה הדברים שמוה בסדר נזיקין.  
And since a person ascends the steps of piousness by doing one of these matters, they placed [Avot] in the order of *Nezikin* (damages).

The name

**3. Mishlei 1:8**

שְׁמַע, בְּנִי, מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ, וְאַל־תִּטַּשׁ תּוֹרַת אִמְךָ.  
Hearken, my son, to the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the instruction of your mother.

**4. Mishnah Shabbat 7:2**

אַבּוֹת מְלָאכוֹת אַרְבָּעִים חֶסֶר אֶחָת...  
The “father” labors [prohibited on Shabbat] are forty minus one...

**5. Mishnah Tahorot 1:5**

הָאֵלֶּל שֶׁנִּטְמָא בְּאֵב הַטְּמֵאָה וְשֶׁנִּטְמָא בְּנֶלֶד הַטְּמֵאָה, מִצְטָרְפִין זֶה עִם זֶה לְטֵמְאָה כְּקֵל שֶׁבִשְׁנֵיהֶן.  
Food that contracted *tumah* from a “father of *tumah*” and one that contracted *tumah* from an “offspring of *tumah*” may be combined together to convey *tumah* according to the lighter grade of the two.

**6. Mishnah Bava Kamma 1:1**

אַרְבָּעָה אַבּוֹת נְזִיקִין...  
There are four “fathers” of damages...

The custom

**7. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 292:2**

אומרים צדקתך ואם חל בו יום שאלו היה חול לא היו אומרים בו במנחה נפילת אפים אין אומרים צדקתך: הגה ונהגו שלא לקבוע מדרש בין מנחה למעריב (טור זוהר תרומה ע' רע"ט) אבל אומרים פרקי אבות בקיץ ושיר המעלות בחורף וכל מקום לפי מנהגו.  
We say צדקתך. And if (Shabbat) falls at a time where, if it were a weekday, we would not say Tachanun at Minchah time, we do not say צדקתך. RAMA: *And our custom is not to establish a study session between the Afternoon Service and the Evening Service (Tur; Zohar Terumah 279), but we say Pirkei Avot in the summer, and שיר המעלות in the winter, each place according to its own custom.*

**8. Mishnah Berurah 292:6**

דמתו בו יוסף משה ודוד ולכן נהגו שלא לקבוע אז מדרש כי חכם שמת כל המדרשות בטלים.  
Yosef, Moshe, and David died on Shabbat afternoon. Therefore, we are accustomed to not schedule [Torah study], for when a sage dies, the houses of study cease [their regular study] (Moed Katan 22b).

**9. Irving Bunim, *Ethics from Sinai*, pp. xvi-xvii**

It is no accident or coincidence that originally the time before *Perek* seems to have been from Passover to Shavuoth. On Passover we celebrate going free from Egypt and its physical enslavement, to a destiny of G-dliness and Torah. Our people, however, were not ready to receive the Torah at once, and it was only weeks later, when they stood at Mount Sinai, that our people received the Torah - at Shavuoth time.

In the symbolic language of the Sages, on Passover we became “betrothed” to the Torah; on Shavuoth the spiritual “wedding” took place, as we made an eternal, irrevocable pact, a covenant, with the Almighty and His Torah. Now, in a time of betrothal, bride and groom get to know one another, in preparation for a lifetime together. Between Passover and Shavuoth, as we “count the days” by observing *s’firah*, waiting to receive the Torah anew from Sinai, it is good to prepare by studying *Avoth*, to gain some idea of the greatness, wonder and profundity of Torah, this unique spiritual “bride” that we are going to receive. Even a non-Jewish scholar has observed: “For a knowledge of the ideals of Rabbinical ethics and piety, no other easily accessible source is equal to *Avoth*.” (George Foot Moore, *Judaism*, Cambridge, 1927-30, II, p. 157.)

### The introductory mishnah

#### **10. Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1**

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשׁ לָהֶם חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שְׁנֵאמַר (ישעיה ס) וְעַמּוֹד כָּלֶם צְדִיקִים, לְעוֹלָם יִירָשׁוּ אֶרֶץ; נֶצֶר מִטְעֵי, מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי לְהַתְּפָאֵר.  
All [of the people of] Israel have a share in the World-to-Come, as it is stated: “And your people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of My planting, the work of My hands to be glorified” (Isaiah 60:21)...

#### **11. Rabbi Ovadiah miBartenura, Commentary to Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1**

אפילו אלו שנתחייבו מיתה בב"ד מפני רשעתן, יש להם חלק לעולם הבא. ועולם הבא האמור כאן הוא העולם הבא אחר תחיית המתים, שעתידיים לחיות ולעמוד בגופם ובנפשם חיים נצחיים...

Even those who were convicted for death by the Jewish court because of their wickedness, they have a share in the World to Come. And the World to Come spoken of here is the World to Come after the Resurrection of the Dead, who would be destined to live and to stand with their bodies and souls living eternally...

#### **12. Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1**

...ואלו שאין להם חלק לעולם הבא, האומר אין תחיית המתים מן התורה, ואין תורה מן השמים, ואפיקורס.  
And these are the people who have no share in the World-to-Come: One who says: There is no resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah, and one who says: The Torah did not originate from Heaven, and an *apikoros*.

#### **13. Isaiah 60:21**

וְעַמּוֹד כָּלֶם צְדִיקִים, לְעוֹלָם יִירָשׁוּ אֶרֶץ; נֶצֶר מִטְעֵי, מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי לְהַתְּפָאֵר.  
And your people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of My planting, the work of My hands to be glorified.

#### **14. Irving Bunim, *Ethics from Sinai*, p. 7**

The word used here for “My planting,” *matta'ai*, is quite interesting. It is derived from the root word *nata*, which denotes the planting of trees. When vegetables are planted, however, the verb used is *zara*; the noun, *z'ri'ah*. These different words reflect a fundamental difference in the respective ways that trees and vegetables grow. When you plant potatoes, for example, the mother potato must rot before the new crop comes up. Or, when you plant wheat, the mother wheat must decay before you can have the fresh wheat. Dissolution of the old must precede the advent of the new. But what happens in the case of the fruit tree? Fresh fruit is possible only when the tree is alive and healthy. When you cut away the roots, you destroy the possibility of offspring.

#### **15. Mishnah Uktzin 3:8**

יחור של תאנה שנפשה, ומערה בקלפה: רבי יהודה מטרה. וחכמים אומרים: אם יכול לחיות. תבואה שנעקרה ומערה אפלו בשרש קטן, טהורה.

If a branch of a fig tree was broken off, but it was still attached by its bark: Rabbi Yehudah says: [the fruit] is still not susceptible to *tumah* (impurity). But the Sages say: [it all depends] whether they could still live. Grain that had been uprooted, but is still attached to the soil even by the smallest of roots, is *tahor* (pure).

## The concluding mishnah

### **16. Mishnah Makkot 3:16**

רבי חנניא בן עקשיא אומר, רצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לזכות את ישראל, לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצוות, שנאמר (ישעיה מב) ה' חפץ למען צדקו; יגדיל תורה ויגדיר.

Rabbi Chananya ben Akashya says: The Holy One, Blessed be He, sought to confer merit upon the Jewish people; therefore, He increased for them Torah and mitzvot, as it is stated: "The Lord desires [this] for His righteousness' sake; He magnifies the Torah and strengthens it." (Isaiah 42:21).

### **17. Rashi, Makkot 23b**

לזכות את ישראל - כדי שיהו מקבלין שכר במה שמונעין עצמן מן העבירות לפיכך הרבה להן שלא היה צריך לצוות כמה מצוות וכמה אזירות על שקצים ונבלות שאין לך אדם שאינו קץ בהן אלא כדי שיקבלו שכר על שפורשין מהן.

- G-d ordained many things as mitzvot that we would naturally wish to do in any case, such as prohibitions against eating insects or carrion. We would, in all likelihood, abstain from eating these anyway, but as there are not mitzvot to forbid us, we receive reward for abstaining. (*Ethics from Sinai*, p. 11)

### **18. Irving Bunim, *Ethics from Sinai*, p. 14**

How appropriate and meaningful is the Hebrew word *l'zakkoth* (to make pure, meritorious), for it also means to cleanse.

### **19. Talmud, Avodah Zarah 5b**

אשריהם ישראל בזמן שעוסקין בתורה ובגמילות חסדים יצרם מסור בידם ואין הם מסורים ביד יצרם.

Happy are you Israel; when they engage in Torah study and in acts of kindness, their evil inclination is given over to them, and they are not given over to their evil inclination.

### **20. Talmud, Kiddushin 30b**

בראתי יצר הרע ובראתי לו תורה תבלין.

I created an evil inclination, and I created Torah as its antidote.

### **21. Pirkei Avot 1:1**

משה קבל תורה מסיני, ומסרה ליהושע, ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים, ונביאים מסרוה לזקני בני ישראל, הם אמרו שלשה דברים, הו מתונים בדין, והעמידו תלמידים הרבה, ונעשו סג לתורה.

Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in [the administration of] justice, raise up many students, and make a fence round the Torah.

### **22. Rabbi Ovadiah miBartenura, Commentary to Pirkei Avot 1:1**

"משה קבל תורה מסיני." אומר אנו, לפי שמסכת זו אינה מוסדת על פרוש מצוה ממצוות התורה כשאר מסכתות שבמשנה, אלא כלה מוסרים ומדות, ותקמי אמות העולם גם כן חברו ספרים כמו שבדו מלבם בדרך המוסר פיצד יתנהג האדם עם חברו, לפיכך התחיל התנא במסכת זו משה קבל תורה מסיני, לומר לה שהמדות והמוסרים שבזו המסכתא לא בדו אותם תקמי המשנה מלבם, אלא אף אלו נאמרו בסיני.

"Moshe received the Torah from Sinai": I say: Since this tractate is not founded on the exegesis of commandments from among the Torah's commandments, like the rest of the tractates which are in the Mishna, but is rather wholly morals and principles, and whereas the sages of the (other) nations of the world have also composed books according to the fabrication of their hearts, concerning moral paths, how a person should behave with his fellow; therefore, in this tractate the tanna began "Moshe received Torah from Sinai," to tell you that the principles and morals which are in this tractate were not fabricated by the hearts of the Mishna's sages; rather, they too were stated at Sinai.

### **23. Rabbi J. David Bleich, "Is There an Ethic Beyond Halakhah?"**

1. Does Judaism recognize a subjective morality? Is there room in Judaism for accommodation of the moral demands advanced by individual conscience? To that question the answer must be an emphatic no.

Indeed, the question is unequivocally answered in the negative by R. Ovadia Bartenura in the opening section of his commentary on Ethics of the Fathers...

2. However, precisely the same question can be reformulated in a second manner: Is there a natural morality which is discoverable by reason? The content of such a moral system might well be coextensive with the content of dogmatic ethics but might yet be endowed with independent validity. That such a concept exists is manifest in biblical verses such as "Shall the Judge of all the earth not do justice?" (Genesis 18:25). Nevertheless, an affirmative answer to this question does not dispose of the issue. The concept of natural morality must be distinguished from the concept of natural law.

#### 24. Rabbi Ovadiah miBartenura, Commentary to Pirkei Avot 1:1

"לאנשי כנסת הגדולה. מאה ועשרים זקנים היו. זרובבל שרֵיה רעֵליה מֵרְדְּכִי בִלְשָׁן, שֵׁהִיּוּ בִימֵי עֶזְרָא כְּשֶׁעָלוּ מִן הַגּוֹלָה בְּבֵית שְׁנֵי. וּמִכְלָלָם, חֲגִי זְכַרְיָה וּמִלְאָכִי וּנְחֵמְיָה בֶן חַכְלֵיָה וְחִבְרִיָּהֶם. וְנִקְרְאוּ כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוֹלָה לְפִי שֶׁהִחְזִירוּ הָעֶטְרָה לְלִשְׁנָה (יומא סט): שְׁמֹשֶׁה אָמַר (דברים י) הָאֵל לַהַגְּדוֹל הַגְּבוּר וְהַנּוֹרָא, בָּאוּ יִרְמְיָה וְדַנְיָאֵל וְלֹא אָמְרוּ גְבוּר וְנּוֹרָא, וְהֵם הִחְזִירוּם כְּבִתְחִלָּה, לְפִי שֶׁאָמְרוּ הֵן הֵן גְּבוּרוֹתַי הֵן הֵן נּוֹרְאוֹתַי, שֶׁאֵלְמֵלֵא כֵן הֵי אֵדָף אֲמָה כּוֹז יְכוּלָה לְהִתְקַיֵּם בְּפָנָי כְּמָה אֲמוֹת:

“to the men of the Great Assembly”: There were 120 elders, (including) Zerubavel, Seraiah, Re’elaiyah, Mordekhai, Bilshan, who in the days of Ezra were the ones who emigrated from the diaspora in (the period of) the second Temple. Included among them were Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi and Nechemiah ben Chachliah and their associates. They were called the Great Assembly since they restored the crown to its original splendor (Yoma 69b), for Moses said “The great, mighty and awesome G-d (Deut. 10:17).” Jeremiah and Daniel came but did not say, “Mighty and awesome (Jer. 32:18) (Dan. 9:4),” but they restored it as in the beginning, since they indeed stated both his might and his awesomeness. For were it not so, how could a nation such as this be able to endure in the presence of so many nations.

#### 25. Rabbi Ovadiah miBartenura, Commentary to Pirkei Avot 1:1

"הם אמרו שלשה דברים. הרבה דברים אמרו, אלא שלשה דברים הללו אמרו [הן] שיש בהם קיום התורה  
“they stated three things”: They stated many things; rather, they said these three things because they contain within them the preservation of the Torah.

#### 26. Rabbi Ovadiah miBartenura, Commentary to Pirkei Avot 1:1

"היו מתונים בדיון. שאם בא דין לפניך פעם ושתיים ושלש, לא תאמר דין זה כבר בא לפני ושניתי ושלשתי בו, אלא הווי מתונים, כלומר ממתנים קדם שתפסקו הדיון.

"Be deliberate in judgment": Where if a case comes before you one, two or three (times), do not say "This case already came before me, and (I ruled) a second and a third time." Rather, "Be discerning," which is to say deliberate before you decide the case.

#### 27. Rabbi Ovadiah miBartenura, Commentary to Pirkei Avot 1:1

"והעמידו תלמידים הרבה. לאפוקי מרבן גמליאל דאמר (ברכות כח). כל תלמיד שאין תוכו כבדו אל יפגס לבית המדרש, קא משמע לן ששלמדו תורה לכל אדם ואין צריך לבדק אחריו.

"raise up many students": (This is meant) to exclude (the words of) Rabban Gamliel, who said "Any student whose exterior is not like his interior shall not enter the Beit Midrash (Berakhot 28a)." We derive from this that we teach Torah to every person; there is no need to inquire after him.

#### 28. Rabbi Ovadiah miBartenura, Commentary to Pirkei Avot 1:1

"ועשו סניג לתורה. גדר שלא יבא לגע באסור תורה, כגון שניות לעריות, ושבבות לשבת. דכתיב (ויקרא יח) ושמרתם את משמרת, עשו משמרת למשמרת

"and make a fence for the Torah": A hedge, in order that he not come into contact with a Torah prohibition, such as second degree sexual relationships or rabbinic fences to protect the Shabbat as is written (Lev. 18:30), "You shall keep my guard;" [meaning,] 'Make a safeguard for my safeguard.'

## 29. Rabbeinu Yonah, Commentary to Pirkei Avot 1:1

והסייג הוא דבר גדול ומשובח לעשות סייג וגדר למצות לבל יוכל להכשל בהם הירא את דבר ה'. לכן המקיים את דברי חז"ל שהם סייגים למצות של תורה חיבב היראה ממי שעושה המצוה עצמה כי אין עשיית המצות הוכחה ליראה כמו השומר לסייגים שהוא נזהר מתחלה שלא יביא לידי פשיעה. אך העושה המצוה ואינו מקיים הסייג מראה לנו כי אם ייטיב בעיניו לעשות מצוה אל ירע בעיניו אם יפשע בה ולפרוץ פרץ לא חש מפני היראה ופורץ גדר ישכנו נחש.

And a fence is a great thing, and it is praiseworthy to make a fence for the commandments so that the one who fears the word of G-d not stumble in them. Hence one who observes the words of the sages, may their memory be blessed - which are the fences for the commandments of the Torah - has shown more love for [this] fear than one who does the commandment itself. As the doing of the commandments does not prove fear like the one who observes the fences, since he is careful from the start not to come to error. However, the one who does the commandment but does not observe the fence shows us that if it is good in his eyes to do the commandment, [yet] it is not bad in his eyes if he errs in it; and that he is not concerned about the fear that he will make a breach in it, and 'one who makes a breach will be bitten by a snake.'