



Volume 4. Issue 41

Introduction to Avot

This week we commenced *Masechet Avot* consisting of a collection of aphorisms that provide *Am Yisrael* with an overarching moral or *mussar* framework. Uniquely, there is no section of the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Rambam* or any other major halachic work that deals with the practical ramifications of our *Masechet*. Indeed, in his commentary on the very first *Mishnah* of *Avot*, *Bartenura* notes that this *Masechet* is structured unlike any other in terms of its non-linkage to explicit *mitzvot*. He also points out that *Avot* consists of moral guidelines similar to those advanced by non-Jewish “wise men”¹ in their ethical works.

According to *Bartenura*, it is with sensitivity towards this potentially undermining context that the *Tanna* of our *Mishnah* very deliberately commences the *Masechet* with “*Moshe* received the *Torah* from *Sinai*”, highlighting that these aphorisms were not developed through intuitive reasoning but rather “these too were said at *Sinai*”. In other words, the very ideas encapsulated within the body of *Masechet Avot* were no less communicated at *Har Sinai* than any other revelation of *Matan Torah*.

Drawing on the *pasuk* in *Mishlei* (6:23): “For the commandment is a lamp and *Torah* is light and reproofs of *mussar* are the way of life”, the *Maharal* provides three explanations of the word *Torah*. The word *Torah* can be understood as 1) the teaching of the *Mitzvot*; 2) the teaching of the *ta’amei* (reasons) of the *Torah*; and 3) the teaching of “the ‘path’ that leads one to *Olam Haba*” (*Netiv HaTorah* 1)

In a continuation of this theme in his introduction to *Derech HaChaim*, the *Maharal* defines this critical “path” to *Olam Haba* as the journey paved by the various lessons of *mussar* from *Masechet Avot*. In other words, the ethical constructs of our *Masechet* are absolutely central to the most basic definition and fulfillment of *Torah*.

In a much earlier explanation by *Chazal* of our quoted *pasuk* in *Mishlei*, the *Midrash* in *Bereisheit Rabbah* (9) states as follows:

‘For the commandment is a lamp and *Torah* is light and reproofs of *mussar* are the way of life (*Mishlei* 6:23)’ - go out and see which path leads a person to *Olam Haba*, I say [it is] the path of *ייסורי* (“suffering”)

What connection could the *midrash* possibly be referring to in its comparison of a blueprint of ethical standards (תוכחות (מוסר) to the experience of suffering (ייסורי)? Perhaps we can better understand this *Midrash*² in light of a separate,

but related *Maharal* commentary, wherein he establishes that the linguistic root and very concept of *מוסר* is inexorably linked to the notion of *ייסורי*.

Specifically, and in a powerful assessment of the nature of man, the *Maharal* explains that man’s natural tendency is not to comply with the highest of ethical standards, because the “suffering” endured through ethical compliance is incompatible with our base inclinations. That hypothesis would of course lead us to the logical conclusion that a true *Torah* framework commands not only compliance with *taryag mitzvot*, but also requires willingness to self-negate extremely human tendencies that are often at direct odds with fulfillment of *middot tovo*.

In similar recognition of the challenges posed by *Torah*’s implicit ethical standards, the *Gra*, comments on another guiding *pasuk* of *Mishlei* (4:13): “Take fast hold of *mussar*, let her not go, keep her, for she is your life.” Here the *Gra* explains that man’s existence is predicated upon the exercise of self-discipline to overcome innate human shortcomings. We overcome these shortcomings, according to the *Gra* through ethical behaviour. In doing so, we certainly need much encouragement and strength because principled conduct of the highest order is not intuitive and consequently may not be taken for granted.

It is presumably no coincidence that the *Ramban*³, commenting on the *mitzvah* of “*kedoshim tihyu*”, notes the genesis of that *mitzvah* lies in the reality that strict halachic compliance could have otherwise theoretically been achievable despite one behaving like a “scoundrel”. It is similarly not for nothing that the *Rambam* notes that “even though they (the performance of the *Mishnayot Avot*) would seem to be clear and simple . . . [but] they are not simple for all men” (*Hakdamot L’Peirush HaMishnah, Avot*).

The sensitivity of *Chazal* to human limitation is perhaps an appropriate starting point for an understanding of the message of *Avot*. In other words, a life lived in concert with the principles of *Masechet Avot* necessitates the confrontation of many innate challenges. If confronted successfully as the *Torah* demands, such a life is a mission of the highest order, ensuring not only true fulfillment of both the definition and essence of *Torah*, but the attainment of *Chazal*’s highest praise (*Bava Kama* 30):

Rav Yehuda said, one who wishes to be devout...
Rava says he should fulfill the words of *Masechet Avot*

Avi Gilboa

¹ See *Rav Kook* (ג) אורח הקודש who differentiates between normative secular and *Torah* ethics.

² See also *Brachot* 5a

³ *Ramban al Hatorah: Vayikra* 19

Revision Questions

עבודה זרה ה': י"ב

- What are the three methods of *kashering keilim* purchased from a *goi* and when do they apply? (ה': י"ב)
- How does one *kasher* a skewer? (ה': י"ב)
- How does one *kasher* a knife? (ה': י"ב)

אבות א': א' – י"ג

- Describe the *mesorah* chain from *Moshe* to the *Anshei Knesset Ha'Gedolah*? (א': א')
- What three things did the *Anshei Knesset Ha'Gedolah* teach? (א': א')
- *Shimon Ha'Tzaddik* taught that the world stands on which three things? (א': ב')
- According to *Antignos Ish Soco*, which is the proper method to serve *Hashem*? (Include both points.) (א': ג')
- What three statements did *Yosi ben Yo'ezer* make with respect to dealings with *Chachamim*? (א': ד')
- What three things did *Yosi ben Yochanan* teach? (א': ה')
- What three things did *Yehoshua ben Perachya* teach regarding important relationships? (א': ו')
- What did *Nitai Ha'Arbeli* teach and how does it relate to the previous question? (א': ז')
- What did *Yehuda ben Tabai* teach regarding court cases and the debating parties? (א': ח')
- What did *Shimon ben Shetach* teach regarding interrogating witnesses? (א': ט')
- What three things did *Shema'ya* teach regarding work? (א': י')
- What did *Avtalyon* teach regarding speech? (א': י"א)
- According to *Hillel* what four traits characterise a "student of *Aharon*"? (א': י"ב)
- What is different about the thirteenth *Mishnah*? (א': י"ג)
- What did *Hillel* say regarding one who: (א': י"ג)
 - Pursues honour?
 - Stops learning?
 - Does not learn?
 - Makes personal use of "keter Torah"?

Local Shiurim

Sunday -Thursday
Between mincha & ma'ariv
Mizrachi Shul

Friday & Shabbat
10 minutes before mincha
Mizrachi Shul

Audio Shiurim on-line!

- 613.org/mishnah.html
- www.shemayisrael.com/mishna/



Next Week's Mishnayot...

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	שבת קודש
2 nd March כ"ז אדר א'	3 rd March כ"ח אדר א'	4 th March כ"ט אדר א'	5 th March ל' אדר א'	6 th March א' אדר א'	7 th March ב' אדר א' ראש חודש	8 th March א' אדר ב' ראש חודש
Avot 1:14-15	Avot 1:16-17	Avot 1:18 - 2:1	Avot 2:2-3	Avot 2:4-5	Avot 2:6-7	Avot 2:8-9

