

רַבִּי יַעֲקֹב אָמַר:
הַמְהִילָךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וְשׁוֹנָה,
וּמִפְסִיק מִמְשָׁנָתוֹ וְאוֹמֵר,
מָה נָּאָה אֵילָן זֶה!
מָה נָּאָה גֵּיר זֶה!
מֵעֵלִין עָלָיו כָּאֵלוֹ מִתְחַיֵּב בְּנִפְשׁוֹ.

3:9. Rabbi Yaakov liked to say:
Those who, while walking along and
reviewing their lessons,
break off their study to exclaim,
"What a fine tree! What a fine furrow!"
should be considered in the same category
as those found guilty of capital offenses.

רַבִּי דּוֹסְתַאי בַּר יַנָּאי, מִשּׁוּם רַבִּי
מֵאִיר, אָמַר:
כָּל הַשּׁוֹכֵחַ דְּבַר אֶחָד מִמְשָׁנָתוֹ,
מֵעֵלָה עָלָיו הַכֶּתֹּב כָּאֵלוֹ מִתְחַיֵּב
בְּנִפְשׁוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: רַק הִשְׁמַר לָךְ
וְשִׁמְרֵם נִפְשֵׁךְ מֵאֵד, כֹּה־תִשְׁכַּח אֶת־
הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ (דברים ד:ט).
יָכוֹל, אֶפְיָלוֹ תִקְפֶּה עָלָיו מְשָׁנָתוֹ?
תִּלְמוֹד לֹא־מֵר: וּפְנִי־סוּרֵי מִלְכָּכָה
כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ (דברים ד:ט).
הָאֵינוֹ מִתְחַיֵּב בְּנִפְשׁוֹ
עַד שִׁישֵׁב וַיִּסְרִם מִלְּבּוֹ.

3:10. Rabbi Dostai bar Yannai liked to say
in the name of Rabbi Meir:
All those who forget [even] a single

word of their learning are considered
by Scripture in the same category as
those found guilty of capital offenses,
as it is said: "Take care and exert all due
diligence, lest you forget the things that
your eyes have seen . . ."
Perhaps this applies [even] to those whose
studies overwhelm them?
Thus does Scripture continue: "... lest
your lessons be eliminated from your heart
all the days of your life" (Deuteronomy 4:9).
Thus we learn that one should not be
considered in the same category as those
found guilty of capital offenses unless
one sits down expressly to eliminate them
from one's heart.



GORDON TUCKER

3:9-10. In these two *mishnayot*, we have teachings that will no doubt strike modern readers as rhetorically extreme, if not an absurd appeal to forces of magic. Can interrupting study of Torah actually endanger one's life? Can forgetting what one has studied really expose one to danger?

Consistent with these teachings are various legends (of which the most famous is about the death of King David), according to which studying Torah serves to keep the Angel of Death at bay, but distraction from that study—even if accidental—can bring on the fatal encounter with mortality. (See, for example, the talmudic stories at B. Shabbat 30a-b and Bava Metzia 86a.) Are those simply children's stories, intended to underscore the importance of Torah, but not intended to be taken literally?

It is worth recalling two other texts here, one biblical and the other midrashic. The

first of these relates God's first command to human beings, in the Garden of Eden. Eating from the Tree of Knowledge was forbidden, "for on the day on which you eat from it you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17)—in other words, consuming its fruit would bring about death. The Torah's own narrative makes it clear that the humans who ate from the tree did not die on that day. But they did become mortal—or at least they became *aware of their mortality*—on that day. The second tale (found in Leviticus Rabbah 18:3) relates that when the Israelites accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai, God turned to the Angel of Death and said, "You no longer have dominion over this people." This certainly did not mean to imply that none of the people at Mount Sinai would ever die; they were the very people who were condemned to die in the desert before reaching their promised destination! This divine statement can therefore only mean to convey that having accepted the Torah, the Israelites now had an indestructible source of meaning for their lives and the lives of their children. Their *survival as a people* would no longer be a function of the fortunes of a tribal group, but would henceforth depend on their keeping alive the enduring set of truths received at Sinai.

And it is in line with the lessons of these two texts, no doubt, that we should understand the mortal threats in these two *mishnayot*. To allow ourselves to be distracted from what Torah teaches us about the meaning of human life and survival—and certainly to forget what we have learned from the Torah about this—is to put the very *meaning* of one's life in jeopardy. Doing so certainly will not automatically endanger an individual's ability to survive. But it will do something

of much greater cosmic importance: namely, undermine the foundation that gives value to that survival.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:9. Imagine a person **walking along** without carrying any belongings, someone who is busy with the essential task of life: seeking to infuse meaning into the walk and into life itself. The person chooses a path and, wandering along, is **reviewing . . . lessons** and pondering various insights arising from them. And then something happens that interrupts everything. As the Baal Shem Tov explains, it is as if such a person had allowed a preoccupation with the lesson to interfere with appreciating God's grandeur and glory in nature, and instead had self-referentially exclaimed, "**What a fine tree!**"—that is, seeing oneself as a magnificent, strong tree.⁹

This is a profound insight, particularly within this chapter of Avot that deals with the interstices between despair and meaning. Even in the context of Torah study, dangers lie in wait along the way . . . and the most unfortunate of all is when a person lifts up one's eyes and sees one's own reflection in everything: in nature, in books, in the world. Such a person has no fields or orchards, no property at all—save one single field or tree, and that is the ideal metaphor for the prison of the narcissistic approach, when one allows that one single tree or field to serve as one's entire vista—and thus effectively hides the world from one's view. This person, whose mind is presumably filled with rabbinic law and lore, loses a handle on the real world; the

9. See the Baal Shem Tov's *Keter Shem Tov HaShalem* §235 (ed. Jacob Immanuel Shochet [1972; repr. Brooklyn: Kehot, 2004], p. 132). The author is referencing Deuteronomy 20:19, which compares a human being to "a tree of the field."

entirety of such a person's universe is the student of Torah that he or she has become. And so it is with a nation, too: the glowing coals of Torah can undermine the faith of an entire people and divert us from our path. Take note, says Rabbi Yaakov, not to spoil what God has created—for if you cause damage to the trees, out of such blindness or short-sightedness, there will be no one to set it right after you.

3:10. Rabbi Dostai in the name of Rabbi Meir outlines the next step into the depth of human narcissism that sprouts from feelings of despair and futility, both of which can distance those they affect from the shared language of their own people, as well as effect a growing attenuation of the connection to their own heritage. When Rabbi Dostai speaks of **those who forget [even] a single word of their learning**, he is not talking about someone who forgets a detail once learned, but rather about a person who decides that the learning itself isn't important after all, and abandons it forever. It seems that the learner in the previous *mishnah* believed in the importance of what was previously learned but simply felt satisfied that he or she had learned enough; but the situation described here is more dire—for the learner has lost faith in what has been learned and is on the verge of forgetting the lessons altogether. In this context we can better understand why our *mishnah* quotes the verse **"Take care and exert all due diligence, lest you forget the things that your eyes have seen."** A person should know that in the course of studying it is not at all unusual to be tempted, by one's own baser impulses, to forget about the honor of the Torah and to instead focus on one's own achievements. We must resist the temptation to say "I have learned enough" and to abandon further

study—essentially making oneself into an idol or a graven image, an unchanging being that does not continue to grow. Those who stop learning are likely to forget what they have already learned, and they risk succumbing to negativity and sadness over having lost the source of their youthful vigor.

What does our *mishnah* mean by **those whose studies overwhelm them**? Vocalizing the verb in this sentence as *t'keifah* (rather than *takfah*) would yield the meaning of "those whose studies are hostile to them"—that is to say: even if from the outside a person's learning appears to still be present, still providing proper direction for life, one who removes one's studies from one's heart becomes "liable for one's soul"—the soul, but not one's life. One's *life* goes on and appears, to an outside observer, unchanged. But the soul has already wandered far afield into foreign territory and is now sinking into stagnation and despair over life's pointlessness. **"All the days of your life"** is a phrase carefully chosen to denote a *life* that stretches on, with each day bringing the extended suffering of a body whose soul has disappeared.

(As noted in the commentary to 3:5 above, the phrase *mithayev b'nafsho* can be understood in two different ways, since the Hebrew word *nefesh* can be understood either as "life" or as "soul." The translation presented on page 132 opts for the former sense of *nefesh*, thus rendering the phrase as "those found guilty of capital offenses." But this commentary takes *nefesh* in the sense of "soul"—thus understanding the *mishnah* to say that such people become "liable for their soul." It thus issues a warning not about a mortal danger that awaits those who forget something they've learned, but rather about the transparent spiritual dangers that they incur by doing so.)

ג:יא

רַבִּי חֲנִינָא בֶן דּוֹסָא אוֹמֵר:
כָּל שִׁירָאֵת חֶטְאוֹ
קוֹדֶמֶת לְחֻמָּתוֹ—
חֻמָּתוֹ מִתְקַיֶּמֶת.
וְכָל שֶׁחֻמָּתוֹ קוֹדֶמֶת לִירָאֵת חֶטְאוֹ—
אֵין חֻמָּתוֹ מִתְקַיֶּמֶת.

3:11. Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa liked to say:
All those whose fear of sin takes priority
over their wisdom—
their wisdom will endure.
But all those whose wisdom takes priority
over their fear of sin—
their wisdom will not endure.



GORDON TUCKER

3:11. Moses Maimonides' interpretation of this *mishnah* is so true to both the text and to life, and so pedagogically sound, that it is worth encapsulating here. We must start, however, with the word *yirah*, which is translated here as "fear" but more generally connotes standing in awe or reverence of something's or someone's power. The familiar expression *yirat heit* thus references an instinctive respect for the power of sin, not merely the fear of the untoward consequences that sin threatens to bring in its wake. Unlike many other forms of *yirah*, however, the reverence for sin's pull on us must be acquired. And it must be acquired from one's culture and home environment so totally that, when one is confronted with the desire to transgress, it becomes a natural reflex to steer clear of wrongdoing. With

that understanding of *yirat heit*, Maimonides points out that if we begin to study ethical precepts (which is what he takes *hokhmah*, "wisdom," in this text to be referring to) once we have already acquired the reflex of *yirat heit*, then what we are learning cognitively will correlate with what we have already become wired to do. Our learning of ethical precepts will thus endure. But if we have not acquired a sufficient level of *yirat heit* when we begin to study ethics, then whatever we learn will be foreign and even counterintuitive to our embedded instincts, and we will ultimately reject the wisdom—the ethical principles—that we are learning, so totally that it will not endure.

This teaching, so understood, underscores that the transmission of knowledge and the acquisition of wisdom is not simply a matter of a master conveying ideas to a student or an apprentice. The latter must be sufficiently receptive to what is being taught, in order for the teacher's message not to run so counter to entrenched instincts that, like a transplanted but mismatched organ, it is inevitably rejected. What a strong argument for a partnership between home and school!

It is perhaps coincidental, but still worth noting, that in the standard prayer for each approaching new month, we ask for *yirat heit* prior to asking for a love of Torah. Torah can only be loved by someone whose reflexive actions are already attuned to the message that the Torah seeks to convey.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:11. Hanina ben Dosa now moves the discussion from the specifics of the path—including what happens on it, and the knowledge learned

along the way—to a more general discussion about the relationship between the individual and wisdom. He raises the question of whether wisdom can, *ab initio*, imbue a person's life with meaning, or whether it is incapable of doing so. Wisdom, Hanina tells us, does not endure in every situation, such that it can necessarily be counted on to be a source of meaning and fill one's life with substance. Indeed, wisdom

without reverence, or without actualization, will *not* endure. This is why Hanina speaks of **those whose fear of sin takes priority over their wisdom**: one needs to develop a functional moral consciousness *before* attaining wisdom, or the wisdom will have no meaning and will be nothing more than a mere collection of bits of knowledge.

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ג:יב

הוא הִיָּה אוֹמֵר:
כָּל שֶׁמַּעֲשִׂיו מְרִבִּין מִחֲכָמָתוֹ—
חֲכָמָתוֹ מִתְקַיֶּמֶת.
וְכָל שֶׁחֲכָמָתוֹ מְרִבָּה מִמַּעֲשָׂיו—
אֵין חֲכָמָתוֹ מִתְקַיֶּמֶת.

3:12. He [also] used to say:
All those whose [good] deeds exceed
their wisdom—
their wisdom will endure.
But all those whose wisdom exceeds their
[good] deeds—
their wisdom will not endure.



GORDON TUCKER

3:12. This is one of many rabbinic passages that emphasize the pragmatic nature of Torah. Another *mishnah* below (3:22) gives a similar message, and various other rabbinic sayings also make the same point—for example, the *mishnah* above that insists that “learning is not the essential thing but rather doing” (1:17), as well as the talmudic dictum that “study is great when it leads to action” (B. Megillah 27a, Kiddushin 40b, and Bava Kama 17a). The need to emphasize this point arose, no doubt, from the very idea that we have seen to be one of the signature elements of Rabbinic Judaism: the notion that study of Torah is the medium of revelation and of experiencing God. This idea successfully saw the Jewish people through the transition from sovereignty and from a land- and Temple-based culture to what it has been for the last two thousand years: a culture

that could survive wide dispersion because it was now text-based (and thus mobile and receptive to diversity). However, this same shift of theological emphasis to textual study has always run the risk of limiting Judaism to an intellectual “ivory tower” religion that could, perhaps even that *should*, thrive apart from the world’s practicalities—a risk that has been borne out repeatedly, throughout history.

The oft-recurring phrase *torah lishmah* (which appears below, in Avot 6:1) is usually translated as “[the study of] Torah for its own sake” and is thus widely understood—even by devoted practitioners of Judaism—as promoting the notion that there is value in study undertaken for its own sake, simply for the virtue of study. But it is surely more accurately translated as “Torah for its intended purpose”—that is to say, Torah that is studied for the purpose of infusing our lives and our daily deeds with godliness and goodness. It is for that reason that Torah was created and received, and this *mishnah* reminds us that, absent a lifetime of deeds that bring Torah to its fulfillment, the very study of Torah becomes vacuous and cannot endure.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:12. But after attaining some degree of wisdom, a person needs a field of action in which to work toward actualizing his or her inner stances, and this is why Hanina goes on to discuss **those whose [good] deeds exceed their wisdom**. Without a complementary interest in the pursuit of good deeds, knowledge simply accumulates within and eventually begins to decay. Wisdom does not, per se, grant a person life; it

does so only insofar as it can fill one with a profound recognition that life *can* have value, and that wisdom can help bring value and meaning to life. And this idea resonates with the words of Kohelet, who declared that "the making of many books is without limit, and much study leads to the wearying of the flesh" (12:12). Those people who are sensitive to human existence, who feel in the depths of their being the waves of futility and despair that erode the courage of individuals and the staying power of cultures, need to know that books and information will never be sufficient. Indeed, their effect is sometimes just the opposite and in any event never satisfies the emptiness that gnaws at the human soul.

Gently and slowly, Hanina ben Dosa brings us closer to the line that demarcates despair from meaning. In his eyes wisdom, as deep and wide as it can ever be, has no intrinsic value for a person's life if the individual does not use that wisdom as the basis for action, such as forging a moral stance or a pioneering achievement. With this insight, the third chapter of Avot reaches its apex and makes clear to its readers that there is nothing else—not food, sleep, possessions, work, or even wisdom—that on its own fills a person's life with meaning, with a sense of complete value. The sages do not denigrate such things, but rather find in each some real, if elusive, power able to grant human beings a reason to live.

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הוא הִיָּה אוֹמֵר:
כָּל שְׂרוּיֵה הַבְּרִיּוֹת נוֹחָה הַיָּמֶנֶה,
רוּחַ הַמָּקוֹם נוֹחָה הַיָּמֶנֶה.
וְכָל שְׂאִין רוּחַ הַבְּרִיּוֹת נוֹחָה הַיָּמֶנֶה,
אֵין רוּחַ הַמָּקוֹם נוֹחָה הַיָּמֶנֶה.

3:13. He [also] used to say:
When the popular spirit is pleased
with somebody,
the divine spirit is [also] pleased with
that person.
But when the popular spirit is displeased
with somebody,
the divine spirit is [also] displeased
with that person.



GORDON TUCKER

3:13. This is the first really explicit anthropomorphism in Avot, insofar as feelings are, for the first time in the tractate, here attributed to God. The image of God “*shepping nachas*” from human beings drives home the message that Judaism is ultimately about refining our relationship with the world and its inhabitants. Just as Judaism is not a purely intellectual tradition, it is also not a purely devotional one. One cannot bring pleasure to God, as it were, without promoting peaceful relations among God’s creations. And this also means that the familiar dichotomy between “commandments governing the relationship of humans to God” and “commandments governing the relationships of humans to other humans” must be seen as a convenient and heuristic construct that bespeaks no real substantive distinction.

3:13. The phrase translated here as **the popular spirit** is *ruah ha-b'riyot* (literally “the spirit of [God’s human] creatures”) and it refers to the human spirit, that elusive element that grants purpose to an individual’s life. Hanina ben Dosa thus redirects the discussion and tells us: the main thing you need to know about your life is that you are not the one who will determine whether it has meaning; that will be determined by the people around you, as an outgrowth of the connection between your own life and theirs. It is not your solo search for meaning that will fill your life with value, but rather the effort to direct yourself toward other people and their lives—only that will fill your life with value. A person’s life is a journey that unfolds in connected vessels. One cannot redeem oneself from emptiness. It is only one’s fellow human being who can effect this redemption, and who can serve as a witness affirming that an individual exists and leads a life that has value . . . that the world could not be without that person.

And there is nobody better to teach us that lesson than Hanina ben Dosa, the Galilean rabbi and colleague of Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. So many of his sayings direct our gaze toward relationships with others. The Talmud tells us that Hanina ben Dosa was a man known for his unique ability to pray on behalf of the sick, and thus bring about their healing (B. Berakhot 34b), a man who took greater pains to ensure that other people had food than he did for himself (ibid.), a man who devoted his wonder-working powers to helping others (B. Taanit 25a)—he was, in short, a person who not only filled every aspect of his own life with meaning but gave the entire world a reason to

exist. And so it is not surprising that the sages tell us: "Every day a heavenly voice is heard, declaring: 'The whole world draws its sustenance because [of the merit] of My son Hanina, and a *kav* of carobs suffices for My son Hanina from one Shabbat eve to the next" (B. Taanit 24b). The Talmud tells us that when Hanina was once bitten by a snake, it was not Hanina who died, but the snake! The text (at B. Berakhot 33a) reads as follows:

In a certain place there was once an *arvad* [some sort of snake or lizard] that used to injure people. They came and told Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa. He said to them: "Show me its hole." They showed

him its hole and he put his heel over the hole, whereupon the *arvad* came out and bit him, and *it* died. He [Hanina] put it on his shoulder and brought it to the study hall and said: "See, my children, it is not the *arvad* that kills; it is sin that kills!" On that occasion they said: "Woe to the person who encounters an *arvad*, but woe to the *arvad* that encounters Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa!"

Death has no dominion over such a man, whose life fills the world with encounter, connection and kindness. He is what exists. He is the cause. He is the meaning. The human spirit is pleased by the existence of this rare individual.

ג:יד

רַבִּי דוֹסָא בֶּן הִרְכָּנֹס אָמַר:
שְׁנֵה שֶׁל שְׁחֲרִית,
וַיֵּין שֶׁל צֹהָרִים,
וְשִׁיחַת הַיְלָדִים,
וְיִשְׁיבַת בֵּיתִי כְּנִסְיוֹת שֶׁל
עַמִּי הָאֲרָץ—
מוֹצִיאִין אֶת הָאָדָם מִן הָעוֹלָם.

3:14. Rabbi Dosa ben Hyrkanos liked to say:
Morning sleep,
midday wine,
the babbling of youths,
and frequenting the meeting-places of the unlettered—
all these remove a person from the world.



GORDON TUCKER

3:14. The various behaviors enumerated here by Dosa ben Hyrkanos all limit one's exposure to the study and discussion of Torah. The consequence about which we are here warned, however, is not an impoverished devotional or intellectual life, but rather ultimate isolation from the fellowship of human beings, which is what gives life its true meaning. This is exactly the meaning of the expression *motzi'in et ha-adam min ha-olam*, as we have already seen in 2:16. Here, we find a kind of irony in the teaching. Certainly, three of the four things about which Dosa ben Hyrkanos cautions us—drinking during the workday, chatting with children, and whiling away one's time in the haunts of the unlettered²—would seem to *promote* our involve-

ment in the human community. (Morning slumber, if it is the result of late-night revelry with the masses, may also fit this pattern.) And yet, we are taught here that the only real blueprints to creating meaningful and enduring community are the teachings of Torah that these apparently social behaviors keep us from. Neglecting Torah study for the sake of bonding with others cannot work, we are told; it will create a false, superficial bond. The only way to keep oneself in the world is through the diligent apprenticeship of Torah—which will require patience and delayed gratification, to be sure, but which will also guide us to the kinds of human relationships that constitute a “world” worthy of its name.

This is the second appearance in Avot of the term *amei ha-aretz*, translated here as “the unlettered” (cf. 2:6 above, where the same term is translated as “ignoramus”). The phrase has undergone a noticeable change from its earlier biblical usage, when it meant something like the “governing assembly” or “town council” and was clearly a term of authority and respect (see, for example, Genesis 23:7 and Leviticus 20:4). In rabbinic times, it apparently was taken somewhat more literally as “people of the land”—that is, those who worked the land, thus a sneering reference to *hoi polloi*, to the vulgar masses unschooled in the intricacies of Torah-based scholarship. What can only be called a prejudice and thus a distrust (which was no doubt entirely mutual) developed between

2. The Hebrew *batei k'neisyot* (singular, *beit k'nesset*) literally means “house of assembly.” Often it refers specifically to a synagogue (i.e., place of prayer), but the term here seems to refer more generally to a “gathering place” (and not specifically a synagogue).

the rabbinic leadership and the *amei ha-aretz*; the latter were assumed not to be concerned with certain ritual laws (especially concerning tithes and purity restrictions), and they were therefore treated with disdainful hostility when the sacred was at stake. Mostly, they were considered by the rabbis to be ignorant of, perhaps even antagonistic to, the Torah itself, an assumption that may have been quite unwarranted. At other times, they were considered to be more generally ignorant. In any event, the term survives to this day as a very pejorative moniker for someone who is completely unversed in Torah, Jewish practices, and Jewish concepts. It is decidedly not recommended as part of a polite and tolerant vocabulary!



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:14. Rabbi Dosa ben Hyrkanos immediately follows the teaching of Hanina ben Dosa in the previous *mishnah*, with this teaching from a different perspective: that the human spirit can also lead one astray, from that which is pure and uplifting to that which is impure, with the power to contaminate the soul. Do not seek the recognition of others by force or by chitchat or by idleness, Rabbi Dosa says, for these can **remove a person from the world**—that is to say, they can impede one from being a needed, beneficial presence in the world. Devote yourself to bettering other people's lives, the rabbi admonishes us, and do so both publicly and privately. Dedicate yourself to the work of connections, of truly seeing others who approach you from any corner of life: hearing their voices, praying on their behalf, and giving fully of yourself. Doing these things will fill your life with cause and meaning. Doing them will fill your life with Life.

רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר הַמּוֹדְעֵי אוֹמְרִי:
הַמַּחְלִיל אֶת הַקִּדְּשִׁים,
וְהַמְבַּזֵּה אֶת הַמוֹעֲדוֹת,
וְהַמְלַבֵּין פְּנֵי חֲבֵרוֹ בְּרִבּוֹת,
וְהַמְפָּר בְּרִיתוֹ שֶׁל אֲבִרָהֶם אֲבִינוּ,
וְהַמְגַלֵּה פְּנִים בַּתּוֹרָה שְׁלֹא בַּהֲלָכָה,
אֶף עַל פִּי שֵׁישׁ בִּידוֹ תּוֹרָה וּמַעֲשִׂים
טוֹבִים, אֵין לוֹ חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

3:15. Rabbi Elazar of Modin liked to say:
These have no portion in the world-to-come,
even if they have both Torah and good deeds [to their names]:
those who profane sacrificial meat,
those who scorn the festivals,
those who cause others to blanch in public,
those who annul the covenant of our father Abraham,
and those who interpret facets of the Torah contrary to the *halakhah*.



GORDON TUCKER

3:15. Rabbi Elazar of Modin. Elazar of Modin was one of the premier expounders of Scripture in the generation following the destruction of the Temple. So respected was he by his colleagues that when something cried out for a clever interpretation, the sages would often say, "We sure could use that fellow from Modin."

3:15. These have no portion in the world-to-come. This *mishnah* is a kind of companion to the one found in Sanhedrin 10:1, which also lists several categories of people who, though of the people Israel, have forfeited their promised share in the world-to-come. There is no overlap between the two lists, and in fact, they seem to have very different purposes. The *mishnah* in Sanhedrin apparently defines what normative Jewish beliefs are taken to be. Those that deviate from those beliefs (for example, that resurrection in the messianic era is promised by the Torah), even though they might be defensible on some readings of the tradition, are declared to be heterodox—and thus, in what was no doubt a rhetorically exaggerated assertion, those who hold them are said to be deserving of the ultimate punishment. Our present *mishnah* seems to be making a very different point, however, though it does so by means of the same overinflated sanction of forfeiting one's portion in the world-to-come. Elazar of Modin teaches us that even mastery of Torah and living a generally good life are still insufficient to countervail some fundamental infractions. Violating certain sancta, displaying gross insensitivity to human feelings, and interpreting or quoting Torah in a way that exposes it in an unflattering way will nullify all the merit one may have accrued, even over the course of a lifetime of fealty to the commandments. The items listed in this *mishnah* do not constitute matters of doctrinal interpretation (as do those in Tractate Sanhedrin), but rather issues of respect for the tradition and for the human heart.

3:15. Those who cause others to blanch in public. The Hebrew *malbin* literally means

"to turn white," and causing the blood to drain from another's face is an oft-used expression for causing someone public humiliation. Elsewhere, the sin of public shaming is compared in a clever way to homicide, since the expression for that is "shedding of blood"—and the assumption is that shame causes a person's face to turn white precisely because blood has been made to flow out of the face (see the Talmud's discussion at B. Bava Metzia 58b). The comparison to homicide is apt as well because unlike theft of property, where restitution can be made for the crime, there is no real way to undo the harm done by public embarrassment, just as it is impossible to undo killing. It is noteworthy that English also preserves this idea of the connection between humiliation and murder, in the idiom "character assassination." Also noteworthy, and sadly true, is the text's assumption that one can be a student of Torah and a faithful observer of the commandments, yet still fail this prime test of sensitivity to the humiliation of others. (In this regard, see the following comment.)

3:15. And those who interpret facets of the Torah contrary to the *halakhah*. This phrase is difficult to translate both accurately and elegantly; the last two words (*she-lo kha-halakhah*) appear only a handful of times in rabbinic literature. Literally, the phrase speaks of one "who exposes an aspect of the Torah that is contrary to the *halakhah*," and the expression clearly is intended to convey a sense of brazenness and disrespect for tradition. Torah, like any other text in human language, can be interpreted tendentiously, or taken out of context and thus portrayed unfairly in a negative light. Noteworthy again

is the supposition that this fatal infraction can sometimes be found in a person who is immersed in Torah and is even strictly observant of the *mitzvot*. An analogy: we all recognize, and learn to excuse and even perhaps embrace, the shortcomings and flaws of those we love and are devoted to. But we must still beware of wantonly disclosing those flaws to others who do not share that love. The same is true of Torah, inasmuch as overly literal and/or contextless quotation of Scripture (or dicta of the rabbinic masters, for that matter) can sometimes have an injurious impact on the view outsiders have of Judaism. Elazar, whose lifespan was marked, after all, by dangerous relations between Judea and the Roman Empire as well as by the ascendancy of Christianity, warns us in dire terms of the harm to the reputation of Judaism and to Jews that can be done even by "insiders."

To informally paraphrase Rabban Gamliel's assessment of Rabbi Elazar, "We really need this fellow from Modin" (cf. the talmudic material at B. Shabbat 55b, Hullin 92a, and elsewhere). And, indeed, we still need these two teachings—and others of his as well—to this day.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:15. But who exactly is included in the category of the "human spirit" mentioned above (at 3:13)? A Jew cannot fill up this world with meaning, cannot possibly do anything to bring the world-to-come closer, cannot work to make this world into a better place, if one remains satisfied just with Torah and good deeds. Those are obviously important pursuits, but they are not enough. Rabbi Elazar of Modin lists five

categories of people who **have no portion in the world-to-come**, and these five fields symbolize the paths that sustain Jewish covenantal society. To **profane sacrificial meat** symbolizes detachment from the circle of life. To **scorn the festivals** symbolizes detachment from the annual cycle of worship. To **cause others to blanch in public** symbolizes detachment from shared communal ethical standards. To **annul the covenant of our father Abraham** (that is, circumcision) symbolizes detachment from uniqueness present in the (Jewish male) body. To **interpret facets of the Torah contrary to the halakhah** symbolizes detachment from the language of Torah, from the values embedded in the language of revelation. A person cannot imbue one's life with meaningful content without adopting these five covenantal strands, which bind together all members of the Jewish people. Indeed, for Rabbi Elazar, the "popular spirit" (*b'riyot*) spoken of by Avot (see 3:13) extends primarily to those who are members of the same covenantal community (*b'rit*)—that is, the Jewish nation. If the sum total of one's Jewishness is expressed only in personal Torah study and in general acts of kindness to others, it will not be enough. A person cannot act in every realm, but must instead focus on the envi-

ronment specific to one's own connections and relationships, that form the core of the world in which one lives . . . and it is in that environment that a person needs to act.

Rabbi Elazar's position may appear distant from our world and even foreign to it. We should, however, listen to his words—especially in our own era, when many dream of breaking down all barriers to the global village. To such people, Rabbi Elazar sends out his thoughts and says: Real human connectedness can be most fully actualized only in the context of community. It can never find its fullest expression in the world at large, more generally. It needs a language, a home, a people, a land, a society, a framework. Do not destroy the framework in the name of humanity, for even humanity needs a framework in which to realize itself. A universal life of meaning will flourish for the human community only if it trains all its children, in all of their own native tongues and cultures, to live in such a manner that their fellow creatures will be pleased with them. Then each culture will be able to truly see the faces of others, each people will see in others the faces of its brothers and sisters, until the entire world finds meaning in its existence.

רַבִּי יִשְׁמָעֵאל אוֹמֵר:
הָיִי קָל לְרֹאשׁ וְנוֹחַ לַתַּשְׁחֻרָּת,
וְהָיִי מְקַבֵּל אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם בְּשִׂמְחָה.

3:16. Rabbi Yishmael liked to say:
Be pliable with a leader and
understanding with a novice,
and receive all people joyfully.



GORDON TUCKER

3:16. The last phrase of this *mishnah* echoes what Shammai is cited earlier as having said: "receive all people cheerfully" (1:15). Whereas Shammai's dictum can be read as counseling a way of interacting with people that will conform to the dignified conventions of proper society, this teaching seems to ask us to mold our feelings and character so as to be genuinely happy in the company of others. It is thus a more far-reaching, and thus more challenging, lesson to live up to.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:16. Rabbi Yishmael broadens the scope of what is included in "creatures" (*b'riyot*) to include all of humankind. The *K'nesset Yisrael* commentary to this *mishnah* by Rabbi Israel Goldmann notes that the unusual word *tish-horet*, here translated as "novice," is related to the word *shahor*, "black." It thus refers here not merely to someone with no experience (that is, a "novice"), but someone for whom the world has gone dark: an unfortunate person full of anger and burdened with awful travails. Rabbi Yishmael commands us to be under-

standing with such a person: we should bring comfort and respite to those whose faces have grown dark because of troubles and sorrows, and who have been brought very low in their own esteem. You must leave your soul open toward such people, who may turn to you from any corner of the community, and you must receive them with joy. Maimonides evinces a similar understanding, in his commentary to this *mishnah*: "You must greet each person—small or great, free or enslaved, any member of the human race—with joy and gladness."

To this, Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac de Uçeda (sixteenth century) in his *Midrash Shemuel* adds the penetrating suggestion that Rabbi Yishmael's words are to be taken as dealing also with the question of how a person might react when approached by someone else, who is asking for aid: "Not only when it will benefit you, but even when it will pain you—you must be understanding with [the one who is asking for help]. The word *tish-horet* resonates with *shehorot*, describing the raven-black locks of the male lover in the Song of Songs (5:11), their blackness a subtle reference to the suffering Israel must endure. And the sages thus also admonish us that even if we are suffering ourselves, when we are approached [and asked for help] we must greet the person not gruffly but with joy."

The final line of the *mishnah*, **receive all people joyfully**, relates to the fact that those who suffer and are in need of help or support often turn to others who are also in pain. One might feel justified in not helping in such a situation, citing one's own psychological, spiritual, or physical suffering. Rabbi Yishmael teaches that even when we are weighed down by our own misery, it is possible that we will not find meaning in life unless we are able to help sustain the life of others.

רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אָמַר:
שְׁחוֹק וְקִלּוֹת רֹאשׁ מְרַגְלִין לְעֶרְוָה.
מִסֶּרֶת סִיג לַתּוֹרָה,
מַעֲשָׂרוֹת סִיג לְעֹשֶׂה,
נְדָרִים סִיג לַפְּרִישׁוֹת,
סִיג לַחֲכָמָה שְׁתִּיקָה.

3:17. Rabbi Akiva liked to say:

Levity and lightheartedness promote
lewd behavior.

Tradition is a fence around the Torah,
tithes are a fence around wealth,
vows are a fence around self-control,
and a fence around wisdom is silence.



GORDON TUCKER

3:17. Rabbi Akiva, no doubt the most famous of all the second-century sages, here presents us with a teaching in two parts. The first part speaks of ways in which certain activities or tendencies inexorably lead to others, and the second part advises us, conversely, of ways of protecting ourselves from encroachment on things to be valued and safeguarded. Levity, when pursued to the point of losing all sight of the consequences of impulsive deeds, can and does lead to lewdness, as well as to other undignified and destructive acts. Things that should be safeguarded include Torah, wealth, self-control, and wisdom itself. Tradition provides fences that safeguard Torah (see commentary to 1:1 above). The practice of tithing not only preserves wealth, but also the right attitude toward wealth. (The rabbis elsewhere punned on the assonance

between *aseir* ["to tithe"] and *osher* ["wealth"], which are written with the same consonants, asserting that wealth is a reward for making such gifts; see the talmudic discussion at B. Taanit 9a.) Self-control is facilitated, where it might otherwise be lacking, by (literally) forswearing overindulgences. And, in a reprise of both Shammai (1:15) and Shimon ben Gamliel (1:17), avoiding gratuitous speech and keeping one's counsel are deemed to be protections for wisdom.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:17. And now Rabbi Yishmael's colleague, Rabbi Akiva, ponders the concept of spirit. Just what is the nature of the *ruah* that animates human creatures, *b'riyot*? (See 3:13 above, where the term *ruah ha-b'riyot* appears, translated there as "popular spirit.") It is that exalted expanse in which people truly encounter each other: not in **levity and lightheartedness**, nor in **lewd behavior**. Joy, not pointless hedonism, even if undertaken in the company of others—perhaps especially if undertaken with others—will not save a person from despair; instead, it will only deepen that sense of futility that corrupts and sullies the soul. Not in those activities and not from their midst can the spirit rise to fill the individual and one's fellow human being with satisfaction—that is, satisfaction that is derived from their keeping company with others, from their collective days upon this earth, from their very existence of living in each other's space. It is precisely the human ability to live with self-restraint and self-limitation, reining oneself in, that is often responsible for preserving the elevated realm of the spirit. And, indeed, **tradition is a fence around the Torah**, ensuring its efficacy

by faithfully enveloping its precepts in the very values that it seeks to inculcate. Likewise, **tithes are a fence around wealth**, enveloping property and the generosity that attends charitable giving; and **vows are a fence around self-control**, enveloping those who take them in a sense of obligation. Finally, teaches Rabbi Akiva, a

fence around wisdom is silence, especially the kind of silence that is enveloped with careful observation and listening. All of these forms of restraint direct the individual toward creativity within self-limitation and humility—a creativity that reveals new dimensions of gentleness in the world, the dimensions of the spirit.

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ג'יח

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר:
חָבִיב אָדָם, שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם;
חֶבֶה יִתְרָה נֹדַעַת לוֹ שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה
אֶת־הָאָדָם (בראשית ט:ו).

חָבִיבִין יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ בָנִים
לְמָקוֹם; חֶבֶה יִתְרָה נֹדַעַת לָהֶם
שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ בָנִים לְמָקוֹם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
בָּנִים אַתֶּם לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם (דברים יד:א).
חָבִיבִין יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁנִּתְּנָן לָהֶם כָּלִי
חֲמֻדָּה; חֶבֶה יִתְרָה נֹדַעַת לָהֶם
שֶׁנִּתְּנָן לָהֶם כָּלִי חֲמֻדָּה שֶׁבּוֹ נִבְרָא
הָעוֹלָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
כִּי לִקְחָ טוֹב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם,
תּוֹרָתִי אֶל־תַּעֲזֹבוּ (משלי ד:ב).

3:18. He [also] used to say:
Beloved are human beings, in that they
were created in the image [of God];
but even more beloved, in that it was made
known to them that they had been created
in the image [of God],
as it is said: "For in the divine image did
God create humankind" (Genesis 9:6).
Beloved is Israel, in that they are called the
children of the Omnipresent;
but even more beloved, in that it was made
known to them that they are called the
children of the Omnipresent,
as it is said: "You are the children of
Adonai your God" (Deuteronomy 14:1).
Beloved is Israel, to whom was given a
beloved tool; but even more beloved, in

that it was made known to them that they
were given the beloved tool with which
the world was created, as it is said:
"As I have given you a good doctrine,
forsake not My Torah" (Proverbs 4:2).



GORDON TUCKER

3:18. Beloved are human beings, in that
they were created in the image [of God];
but even more beloved, in that it was made
known to them that they had been created
in the image [of God]. Rabbi Akiva begins
this *mishnah* with a simple statement of the
exceptionalism of human beings, which is
somewhat complicated by an opaque fol-
low-up. Only humans are said to have been
created in the divine image, and thus God
must have been moved to fashion a strong
bond between the human and the divine
realms. This is evidence that human beings
are particularly beloved. What the second
phrase means, however, is somewhat am-
biguous. It may refer to the aftermath of the
flood, when Noah was actually told (in the
verse cited in this *mishnah*) that humans were
created in the divine image—something
that Adam and Eve had not been told. Thus
the act of grace in the generation of Adam
(namely, creation in the divine image) is in
fact augmented in the generation of Noah
by the conveyance of this critical fact about
human nature to the humans themselves. Or
the point may be that since the Torah states
that we are created in the divine image, all
who can read and study Torah should know
this fact. In any event, the knowledge of this
essential aspect of ourselves is something
we are meant to live up to, and thus to be
accountable to.

3:18. Beloved is Israel. In addition to the exceptional nature of human beings, Akiva also asserts the exceptional nature of Israel within the human race. They are referred to as God's children, and they were given the special and precious gift of the Torah.

In Akiva's days, when Israel was persecuted at the hands of Rome, one can understand the insistence on proclaiming the superiority of victim over victimizer. But what are we to do with this teaching today? It is perhaps helpful to note that other nations are not described as *not* being God's children. In fact, Isaiah 19:24–25 refers to Egypt and Assyria as potentially the equals of Israel in God's eyes, both of them God's nations and handiworks. Thus, it is possible to take Akiva's words to mean something that Akiva would probably never have said, given his own historical circumstance: that we have an obligation to acknowledge and assume the responsibilities of being God's children and the receivers of God's Torah, but that other nations may have similar and parallel obligations.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:18. Rabbi Akiva continues his lesson, now moving on to deal at greater length with the idea of human beings (*b'riyot*). He will propose a unique combination of the two positions discussed previously: the particularism of Rabbi Elazar of Modin and the universalism of Rabbi Yishmael. Rabbi Akiva begins by remarking: **Beloved are human beings, in that they were created in the image [of God].** This is how the Torah opens, with the account of the creation of humanity in the divine image. He then turns to the mission of the Jewish people, **children of the**

Omnipresent, noting that it is Israel's mission—together with the divine image and the gift of the Torah—that creates the context for the enduring presence of Israel in history. The reference to Israel as children of the omnipresent God is not something to be passed by lightly: it implies the obligation of Israel to exist among the nations in exile, to learn from its neighbors, and eventually to return to its own land in order to realize great steps forward in economics, in medicine, in education, in defense, in law. The words of Rabbi Akiva seem to be echoed in the writings of the twentieth-century Jewish thinker Leon Roth, who wrote: "The content of Judaism would thus seem to be universal, yet its bearers are a particular people, the Jews; and so far as Judaism may be said to have a history, it is the story of the balance (often an uneasy one) between the universality of the doctrine and the particularity of its transmitters."¹⁰

It is not easy to exist in this medial position, between particularism and universalism, but that is the place that the Jewish people occupy. It is their mission to bring to the world the message that human beings, created in the divine image, are beloved. There has been no period as challenging for the Jewish people in Eretz Yisrael as this one, as we labor to build an edifice of spiritual stature and morality in our national home and wherever we are. May we succeed in establishing Zion as an inspiration to strengthen the divine image that exists in every person, in the spirit of Isaiah (2:3): "For instruction (*torah*) shall come forth from Zion, and the word of Adonai from Jerusalem."

10. Leon Roth, *Judaism: A Portrait* (New York: Schocken, 1960), p. 15. I am grateful to Professor Menachem Kellner, Chairman of the Department of Philosophy and Jewish Thought at Shalem College in Jerusalem, for bringing this passage to my attention.

ג'יט

הַכֹּל צָפוּי וְהָרְשׁוּת נְתוּנָה,
וּבְטוֹב הָעוֹלָם נִדּוֹן,
וְהַכֹּל לְפִי רֵב הַמַּעֲשֵׂה.

3:19. Everything is foreseen,
yet free will is given.
The world is judged with goodness,
yet all depends on the preponderance
of [one's] deeds.



GORDON TUCKER

3:19. Everything is foreseen, yet free will is given. Oddly, this *mishnah* does not begin with the words "He liked to say," and thus it is possible to conclude that these words are not being ascribed to Akiva. However, the next *mishnah* does begin with those words, and there they can only refer to Akiva. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the words dropped out here, but that the sequence of teachings from Akiva is unbroken.

Ovadia of Bertinoro, in his commentary to this *mishnah*, stated that this should be read as the simple statement that everything we do is seen (as later taught by Yehudah Ha-Nasi; see 2:1 above), even in places we think are secret—but we have the power to choose how to act. There is nothing paradoxical about this.

Most, however, have read this *mishnah* as the statement of an antinomy, a fundamental contradiction. All is foreseen (that is, seen in advance), and yet we still have the power to choose. Much ink has been spilled in the course of centuries-long theological discussion about the status of this paradox, and whether it has any resolution. Some (even

such canonical figures as Maimonides' older contemporary, Abraham ibn Daud) have questioned God's ultimate power to know everything in advance, and others (and not only "outsiders" such as Spinoza) have questioned whether the freedom we instinctively feel might not be illusory. Each of those approaches, of course, raises problems for what have been seen as cornerstones of the tradition and of moral theory, namely divine omniscience and human moral agency. And thus many have taken a third alternative: assuming that this text is indeed calling an apparent contradiction to our attention, it is probably best to understand it as counseling acceptance of both assertions while deferring any possible resolution of the paradox for another time. Only in that way will a responsible moral life coexist comfortably with traditional beliefs about the Divine.

All of these possible understandings still stand before the contemporary reader and believer.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:19. After having addressed these issues, Rabbi Akiva goes back to the beginning. **Everything is foreseen**, he says, but what exactly is it that he thinks is foreseen? At the beginning of this chapter, Akavia ben Mahalalel taught that the first thing you have to know about life is that you will die. But death, which is the fate of every human being, has the power to awaken one's consciousness to sense its own uniqueness in the world. Moreover, **free will is given**, so that you can create from your life whatever will grant it meaning. And Rabbi Akiva observes also that **the world is judged with goodness**, with

kindness—since each individual can choose to create a life suffused with meaning, this allows us to trust in life, to trust that we will be judged generously. And since it is human actions that are decisive, **all depends on the preponderance of [one's] deeds**—the world of actions, not the world of feelings or the world of thoughts, but the place that people make within themselves for the lives of others.

How profound the Hebrew language is! The words for “deed” (*ma-as*) and “hear” (*sh'ma*) are anagrams, suggesting a meaningful rela-

tionship between the two ideas: only true, deep listening finds its way into deeds that leave a substantive impression upon the world. (Note: This *mishnah* uses the word מעשה/*ma-aseh* for “deed,” but there also exists a variant form of the word, מעש/*ma-as*. The Hebrew verbal root for “hear” is שמע. In unvocalized Hebrew, the letters *sin* and *shin* look alike, even though they are pronounced differently; the “anagram” proposed here relies on the near-identity of these two letters.)



GORDON TUCKER

הוא הִיָּה אוֹמֵר:
הַכֵּל נָתוּן בְּעֶרְבוּן,
וּמִצְוָה פְּרוּסָה עַל כָּל הַחַיִּים.
הַחֲנוּת פְּתוּחָה, וְהַחֲנוּנִי מְקִיף,
וְהַפְּנִיקָס פְּתוּחָה, וְהַיָּד כּוֹתֶבֶת,
וְכָל הַרוּצָה לְלוּוֹת יָבֵא וְיִלָּוֶה,
וְהַנֶּבְאִים מְחַזְּרִים תְּדִיר בְּכָל יוֹם,
וְנִפְרָעִין מִן הָאָדָם מִדַּעְתּוֹ וְשֵׁלָא
מִדַּעְתּוֹ, וַיֵּשׁ לָהֶם עַל מֶה שִׁיִּסְמְכוּ,
וְהַדִּין דִּין אֲמָתָה,
וְהַכֵּל מְתָקֵן לְסַעֲוָדָה.

3:20. He [also] used to say:

Everything is given on pledge
and [thus] the net of obligation is cast over
all the living.

The shop is open and the shopkeeper
extends credit,
but the ledger is [ever] open and the hand
[ever] writes [its daily entries].

And [thus] any who wish to borrow may
come to do so,
but collection agents [also] go around
regularly every day

and exact payment from people
whether they wish to pay up or not,
and they have [sound information] on
which to rely.

[In the end, though,] the law is just and
so everything is [justly] prepared for the
banquet.

3:20. A single thought stretches through the extended statement that is the final contribution of Rabbi Akiva to Avot and, as might well be expected from one who lived in such turbulent times, it is not a cheerful one. But there is nevertheless a deep and timeless truth in it. Everything that life brings us—and life itself needs to be thought of this way—is a grant that must be redeemed (in this case, by our deeds). Thus the net of the dunning creditor is always a short distance above our heads. Importantly, this teaching is concerned not with suffering that is undeserved; that is a separate subject (dealt with, for example, in the biblical book of Job, and many rabbinic texts, such as the talmudic source at B. Berakhot 7a). We are here concerned with *grace* that is unearned, and we are told that nearly everything we enjoy in this world has some aspect of that status. We do not get many of the things we so enjoy in this world *because* we are worthy of them; instead, we are challenged to *make* ourselves worthy of them. That is the meaning of “acquiring on credit.” The store is always open, but there is an infallible recording system that, should we fail to redeem our gifts with our deeds, cannot be challenged. In an age in which people routinely live on credit beyond what is responsible, this *mishnah* can function as a chilling lesson—one that can bring sobriety to all facets of our lives.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:20. Rabbi Akiva concludes with a parable drawn from everyday life. Regarding the lesson that *everything is given on pledge* and [thus]

the net of obligation is cast over all the living, Rabbi Shimon ben Tzemaḥ Duran (1361–1444) wrote in his *Magen Avot*: “This refers to death and suffering, from which it is impossible for a person to escape, as it is written, ‘Where can I escape from Your spirit? Where can I flee from Your presence?’ (Psalm 139:7), and it is also written, ‘Like fish caught in a dangerous net, so can no person know one’s time’ (Kohelet 9:12).”¹¹ Each person is placed into the net of existence, and there is no escape from it at all. What shall such a person do? Choose! **The shop is open.** Come in! Be there, take up residence in life, and make of it what only you can on behalf of others. **Everything is [justly] prepared for the**

banquet, which is a symbol for human life. A human being has two aspects: one is the animal which finds prey or food and consumes it all while preserving its own life in the daily struggle for survival in the worldwide jungle; the other is the human, who seeks to find companions with whom to share food, and thus states that there is no value at all to life without helping others. Everything is ready and waiting for a person to come and dine. One may choose to eat and drink alone, or one may choose to live with others and to see goodness all the days of one’s life in the House of Adonai, which is the realm of all human beings that God has dreamt into being for all of God’s creations.

11. *Magen Avot*, ed. Joseph Wachs (Brooklyn, NY: Light Publishing, 5706 [1945/1946]), p. 53a, s.v. *u-m’tzudah p’rusah al kol ha-ḥayim*.

רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן עֲזַרְיָה אָמַר:
 אִם אֵין תּוֹרָה אֵין דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ,
 אִם אֵין דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ אֵין תּוֹרָה.
 אִם אֵין חֲכָמָה אֵין יִרְאָה,
 אִם אֵין יִרְאָה אֵין חֲכָמָה.
 אִם אֵין בִּינָה אֵין דַּעַת,
 אִם אֵין דַּעַת אֵין בִּינָה.
 אִם אֵין קֶמַח אֵין תּוֹרָה,
 אִם אֵין תּוֹרָה אֵין קֶמַח.

3:21. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah liked to say:

In the absence of Torah there can be no decency, [yet] in the absence of decency neither can there be any Torah.

In the absence of wisdom there can be no [true] reverence, [yet] in the absence of reverence neither can there be any [real] wisdom.

In the absence of knowledge there can be no insight, [yet] in the absence of insight neither can there be any [real] knowledge.

In the absence of [adequate] sustenance there can be no Torah, [yet] in the absence of Torah neither can there be [adequate] sustenance.



GORDON TUCKER

3:21. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. We are here introduced to yet another of the great sages of the second century CE, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. His is the last appearance in Avot of the five who, according to the Passover Haggadah, assembled in B'nei B'rak all those

centuries ago to discuss the exodus from Egypt all night long. (The others are Rabbis Eliezer, Yehoshua, Akiva, and Tarfon—all of whom we have already encountered in Avot.) The legend most often associated with him (found in the Talmud at B. Berakhot 27b–28a) is that he was, as a young man, chosen by his colleagues to succeed the much more senior Rabban Gamliel, when the latter was impeached by his peers for high-handed and humiliating behavior toward other sages, especially Rabbi Yehoshua. When Gamliel proved to be chastened by this punishment he was reinstated, whereupon Elazar ben Azariah retained a minor co-chairmanship of the college of sages.

Elazar ben Azariah presents us here with what look like four equivalences, each with this form: "In the absence of X there can be no Y, [yet] in the absence of Y neither can there be any X." Taking the place of the variables X and Y are, respectively: (1) Torah and *derekh eretz* (translated here as "decency"), (2) wisdom and reverence, (3) knowledge and insight, and (4) sustenance (*kemah*, literally "flour") and Torah. It is certainly possible to understand this teaching as asserting simple equivalences—so, for example, Torah and decent conduct are, in essence, identical and inseparable such that a person cannot be said to exemplify Torah unless that individual is also seen and known to exemplify becoming conduct; and, conversely, that the ultimate in decent conduct cannot be achieved without the teachings of Torah. And the other three pairs would follow the same pattern: wisdom and reverence in the presence of creation and the Creator are mutual prerequisites; so too are knowledge and the kind of meaningful insight born of intelligent speculation;

as are, finally, material prosperity and the advancement of Torah. Read this way, the equivalences are exactly that, and they could have been given in either sequence (that is, the order of X and Y could just as well have been switched in each statement).

But there is another, and more sophisticated, exegesis that is possible here. According to this line of interpretation, Elazar ben Azariah can be imagined as giving us a deliberate sequence that is not asserting an equivalence between two values or goods, but rather teaching that while X is necessary for Y, the achievement of Y brings one to a newer, richer level of X—such that X_1 leads to Y, whereupon Y then leads us to X_2 . Let's see how this works in each of the four cases.

3:21. In the absence of Torah there can be no decency, [yet] in the absence of decency neither can there be any Torah. Without the basic rules of Torah, one will certainly be unable to achieve *derekh eretz*—that is, decent conduct that enables one to make one's way in human society. But the achievement of *derekh eretz* then, in turn, brings one beyond the basic rules of Torah to a fuller realization of the personal transformation that Torah is meant to effect in its adherents. (And this understanding of Elazar's first dyad fits nicely with the legend of his life and career cited above. Even the great Rabban Gamliel, who had an undisputed mastery of Torah on its basic level, needed to learn the lessons of *derekh eretz* in order to ascend to the higher level of Torah that made him acceptable again to his peers, and transformed his patriarchate into something more than a mere family inheritance to be passed blithely along from generation to generation.)

3:21. In the absence of wisdom there can be no [true] reverence, [yet] in the absence of reverence neither can there be any [real] wisdom. We have here an alternative formulation of what Hanina ben Dosa taught above (see commentary to 3:11): that while some wisdom (*hokhmah*) is surely required in order for one to acquire true reverence (*yirah*) for the powers inherent in the world and in us (including, especially, the power of sin), having acquired such reverence makes the wisdom we accumulate that much richer and more likely to endure.

3:21. In the absence of knowledge there can be no insight, [yet] in the absence of insight neither can there be any [real] knowledge. Knowledge is an indispensable foundation for a deeper, insightful understanding of this world of ours. But again, once we are attuned to that kind of insight, the particulars of knowledge now have a greater coherence and significance, and that more coherent reservoir of knowledge can even "spiral" us into higher levels of understanding. We might even think of this as what Elazar and his colleagues were striving to attain on that marathon night of discussion in B'nei B'rak!

3:21. In the absence of [adequate] sustenance there can be no Torah, [yet] in the absence of Torah neither can there be [adequate] sustenance. Finally, *kemah*—literally "flour," but here symbolizing ample material sustenance—is the *sine qua non* for Torah study. On the individual level, a person cannot learn without being physically sustained. And on the communal level this is also true: institutions of Torah learning cannot exist without the material support that comes from those

who produce and amass the *kemah* needed to sustain the institutions and to pay their employees. But there is now an additional truth—and a crucial one—that emerges from this alternate reading of this *mishnah*. The Torah that is learned thanks to the requisite *kemah* should enable us to see the reality of *kemah* in a truer light. It is its necessary coupling with Torah, and all for which Torah stands, that gives *kemah* its ultimate value. Material prosperity cannot be apprehended in a narcissistic, self-aggrandizing way once one has internalized the truths embodied in Torah. The school of Torah study that is supported by money should have something critical to say about the value of money itself, and its proper role in individual lives and in human society.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:21. That meal of life, with which the previous *mishnah* concluded, is prepared for a person who chooses it. Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah now comes now and delineates the raw materials that are needed for that meal. The first of them is Torah, but with the caveat that **in the absence of Torah there can be no decency; likewise, in the absence of decency neither can there be any Torah.** And so we find ourselves at the meeting-point of the Torah of Israel with the wisdom of the world. At the specific point at which the two encounter each other, they create a tangible trace of divine glory in the world. This idea was also expressed by the first Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uziel (1880–1953), as follows:

Our sanctity is not complete when we withdraw from human life and its mani-

festations, its pleasures and enjoyments, but rather when we are nourished by all the new phenomena of the world that continually appear, all the wondrous discoveries, and all the knowledge in science and philosophy that sprout up and multiply in our world. . . . The external nourishment that we take in and are nourished by enriches our national storehouses and the treasure of our souls, but does not change the essence of our being, which is one of sanctity and uplift that remains floating upon the water. . . . The sum of our national destiny is to live and work, to build and be built, to improve our world and our lives, to be ourselves uplifted and lift up others to the highest summit of human perfection and success . . .¹²

So too with wisdom and reverence, knowledge and insight, sustenance and Torah. The essential point is that building a world of meaning can only take place in a context of the dialecticism of the human experience. Similarly, the *mishnah's* assertion that **in the absence of wisdom there can be no [true] reverence** means that wisdom is of no use at all to a person unless it is accompanied by some modesty and humility, and there can never be reverence or humility without a foundation of wisdom layered over the distinctive upright stature of the individual. And so too with respect to knowledge and insight: **in the absence of knowledge there can be no insight**, which

12. From the chapter entitled "Nationalism, the Purpose of the State, and Nationalism in Relation to Universalism" (Hebrew), in his *Hegyonai Uziel* (5713 [1952/1953]; repr. Jerusalem: HaVaad L'hotzaat Kitvei Harav, 5769 [2008/2009]), p. 120.

itself cannot exist without deep roots in the intelligent rumination people bring to their estimation of the world in which they live. And last but not least: **in the absence of [adequate] sustenance there can be no Torah.** There is no material life without the life of the spirit, and the reverse is true as well. These two are always

in need of each other and function as complementary upper and lower worlds. And the ongoing movement between the two infuses meaning into a person's existence and energizes one's life, leading it from futility to insight into the hidden core of things.

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ג:כב

הוא הִיָּה אוֹמֵר:
כָּל שֶׁחֲכָמְתוֹ מְרַבָּה מִמַּעֲשָׂיו,
לִמָּה הוּא דוֹמָה?
לְאֵילָן שֶׁעֲנָפָיו מְרַבִּין וְשָׂרְשָׁיו
מְעֻטִּין—וְהָרוּחַ בָּאָה וְעוֹקְרָתוֹ
וְהוֹפְכָתוֹ עַל פָּנָיו, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
וְהִיָּה כְּעֶרְעֵר בְּעֶרְבָה וְלֹא יִרְאֶה
כִּי־יָבֹוא טוֹב, וְשָׁכֵן חֲרָרִים בַּמִּדְבָּר,
אֶרֶץ מְלָחָה וְלֹא תִשָּׁב (ירמיהו יז:ו).
אֲבָל כָּל שֶׁמַּעֲשָׂיו מְרַבִּין מִחֲכָמְתוֹ,
לִמָּה הוּא דוֹמָה? לְאֵילָן שֶׁעֲנָפָיו
מְעֻטִּין וְשָׂרְשָׁיו מְרַבִּין—שֶׁאֵפִילוֹ
כָּל הָרוּחֹת שֶׁבְּעוֹלָם בָּאוֹת
וְנוֹשְׁבוֹת בּוֹ, אֵין מְזִיזוֹת אוֹתוֹ
מִמְּקוֹמוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְהִיָּה כְּעֵץ שְׁתוּל
עַל־מִים, וְעַל־יִבְל יִשְׁלַח שָׂרְשָׁיו,
וְלֹא יִרְאֶה כִּי־יָבֹא חֹם, וְהִיָּה עֹלֶהוּ
רַעְנָן, וּבִשְׁנַת בָּצָרֹת לֹא יִדָּאג,
וְלֹא יִמִּישׁ מַעֲשׂוֹת פִּרִּי (ירמיהו יז:ח).

3:22. He [also] used to say:
What is one like when one's wisdom is
greater than one's [good] deeds?
[Such a person is] like a tree whose foliage
is abundant but whose roots are few—
[when] the wind comes and uproots it,
[the wind] overturns it entirely,
as it is said: "Such a person shall be like a
lonely tree in an uninhabited desert that
shall not see the coming of good,
and shall grow in an arid, uninhabited
wilderness of salt flats" (Jeremiah 17:6).

But what is one like when one's [good]
deeds are greater than one's wisdom?
[Such a person is] like a tree whose foliage
may be scanty but whose roots are many—
[even if] all the world's winds come and
blow [their hardest], they will not [ever]
move it from its spot, as it is said:
"Such a person shall be like a tree planted
by the waters, that spreads its roots by a
stream; it does not worry about excessive
heat, for its leaves are fresh. Nor does it
find even a year of drought worrisome,
for it will not [even under such dire
circumstances] desist from bearing fruit"
(Jeremiah 17:8).



GORDON TUCKER

3:22. See the commentary on 3:12 above,
Hanina ben Dosa's teaching on the rela-
tionship between wisdom and deeds. The
imagery here, however, makes the point in an
even more striking manner. The metaphor
of the trees with weak or strong root systems
is taken from the Book of Jeremiah: "He
who trusts in Adonai . . . shall be like a tree
planted by waters, sending forth its roots by
a stream" (17:7-8). But we might have ex-
pected that a rabbinic voice would associate
wisdom (presumably the wisdom of Torah)
with that which roots us, and our actions in
the world as the foliage (or perhaps as the
fruit) that grows out of those roots. In that
expected (but hypothetical) version of this
teaching, an excess of wisdom over action
should cause no anxiety because acts moti-
vated by a love of Torah will eventually come
to fruition, even if as yet not fully evident.
But the metaphor is applied here in reverse!

The healthy, enduring tree with a strong root system that over-supports its foliage is presented as the analogue of the person who has a rich foundation of good action, even though that individual's wisdom may not yet have fully developed. One has the sense of an assurance that the wisdom will come in time.

So, is it that action grows out of wisdom? That would suggest that study needs to be primary. Or does true wisdom grow out of righteous action learned and applied, which would imply that practice is primary? Although the former lesson might have been expected here, the latter is what is taught. Practice is the root system, and wisdom is the foliage! Once again, the reader is referred back to the commentary on 3:12 above, particularly the paragraph about the true meaning of *torah lishmah*.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:22. Sustenance and Torah are not only mutually dependent upon each other for their very existence, as Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says above, but in fact they complement each other, forming a singular completeness that symbolizes the movement inherent in life itself. The spirit alone will not redeem humankind. Indeed, spirit itself has no meaning at all if it does not seek its expression and actualization in real deeds. Rabbi Elazar compares the human being to a tree: a tree is grounded in the earth, into which it sends its roots and from whose depths it draws its life-energy in order to flourish . . . and the same is true also for the human being. And it is not the roots close to the surface that are most necessary for the flourishing of the tree's branches, but rather the tree's deepest

roots, the ones totally hidden from the eye.

And so we are brought back to the dust, the putrid drop, and the place of worms and maggots with which Akavia ben Mahalalel began our chapter. Throughout one's entire lifetime, one can see—everywhere in the world—the place that will become one's grave . . . or at least the mists hovering over the grave, which awaits. There is always the risk that life can feel devoid of reason and content. In such a state, it is easy to feel the terror of futility. But if one wishes, one can see this web of earth (and the existential truths it holds) spread out at one's feet as an ornate tapestry leading to a forest thick with thoughts, and home to the ruminative energy of people striving to ascend ever higher.

All who bring a dream to fruition in the world, all who fertilize their land with deeds of kindness, all who enrich the world's soil by attentiveness to others—the roots of such people's actions, both the visible ones and the hidden ones, will grant to both those specific individuals and to the world itself a permanent presence in the forest of which we speak. That is precisely what happens **when one's wisdom is greater than one's [good] deeds**, and no ghostly spirit can then succeed in contaminating the rootless soul with despair. The living waters of life itself will flow at the feet of such people, shade will sprout up on top, all their leaves will be fresh, and thus shall such people find fruit nestled in branches that constitute the very fruit of the Tree of Life. Suddenly the world will become a meadow, a resting-spot for the soul that does not despair of bearing fruit in the world. A tree that bears fruit, or one that does not. Vast foliage, or not. Meaning, or emptiness. We always have both options, so that we may always choose between them.

רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר חֲסִמָּא אָמַר:
קִנִּין וּפְתִיחֵי גִדָּה הֵן הֵן גּוּפֵי הַלְכוֹת,
תְּקוּפוֹת וְגַמְטְרִיאוֹת
פְּרַפְרָאוֹת לַחֲכָמָה.

3:23. Rabbi Eliezer Ḥisma liked to say:
[The laws relating to] bird-sacrifices
and menstrual cycles are essential
matters of *halakhah*,
[whereas] astronomy and mathematics
are ancillary to [real] wisdom.



GORDON TUCKER

3:23. Although it is not immediately apparent on the surface, this *mishnah* is dealing with the different roles that mathematical calculations play in the study of Torah and *halakhah*. The Hebrew *kinin* literally means “nests,” but refers here to the pairs of birds that the Torah requires certain people to offer as sacrifices on different occasions (including, for example, a woman recovering from childbirth, or a poor person who has recovered from the skin ailment known as *tzara'at*). The complication is that while one of the birds in each pair must be a burnt offering (*olah*) and the other is to be a purification offering (*hattat*, often translated as “sin offering”), the rules for how each of these two kinds of offerings are brought are incompatible. What then happens if one of the sacrificial birds escapes, or if it is forgotten which bird was designated for which offering? Without going into even rudimentary detail here, we can simply note that rectifying this kind of misstep can demand some complex mathematical and logical reasoning

(as set forth in the mishnaic tractate called *Kinin*). And a similar situation pertains for the woman who has forgotten when her last cycle began, and who thus cannot say whether the bleeding she is experiencing is true menstrual bleeding or out-of-cycle bleeding, which has different (and ritually more serious) implications. How can she get back to certain knowledge about her body? Again, it turns out that some complicated logic and mathematics are required (which is discussed in detail in the mishnaic tractate *Arakhin*). These are examples of mathematical calculations that are essential for the very application of *halakhah*.

On the other hand, astronomical calculations that determine when the seasons begin, which are mathematically substantive in and of themselves, are called “ancillary”³ because they are not the ultimate determinants of the canonical calendar—which is, or was, the exclusive province of the Patriarch. As the Mishnah elsewhere relates, the Patriarch might decide to ignore the scientific calculation, and an individual appealing to those calculations would have no recourse in the face of the Patriarch’s binding decision. (See *Rosh Hashanah* 2:8–9, for the specific case involving Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabban Gamliel.) The same attribution of marginality would apply to *g'matriya*, the midrashic technique that derives meaning from the numerical equivalents of words.⁴ Such techniques are

3. The Hebrew *parpra'ot*, translated here as “ancillary,” literally means “side dishes” or “hors d'œuvres.”

4. Classical Hebrew uses the letters of the alphabet as numerals so that, at least theoretically, every word composed of letters also has a numerical value. For example, *alef* has a numerical equivalent of one, *bet* is two, and so forth. The concept of learning lessons from such numbers is called *g'matriya*.

useful for homiletic purposes, but are not essential for the study of *halakhah* and its real-life applications.

The point of this *mishnah* is far from clear, and in fact it does not appear in all recensions of the Mishnah. (It was, for example, not present in the version of the Mishnah that Maimonides used as the basis for his commentary.) But note that the previous *mishnah* (3:22) lauded practice over study; this final *mishnah* in the chapter may be inviting us to distinguish between primary and ancillary modes of study, by determining which have truly practical consequences and which are to be considered more as the pursuit of pure knowledge.



TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

3:23. The third chapter of Avot concludes with a lesson from Rabbi Elazar Hisma: **[The laws relating to] bird-sacrifices and menstrual cycles are essential matters of *halakhah*.** If you want to be a fruit-bearing tree, the rabbi teaches, the first thing to do is to go to the essential matters in the world. Delve into them and look at their details. Don't write off even the smallest detail, the finest point, the most overtly physical aspect of the whole . . . because that is where you will find the tiny seeds of the fruit, which will give rise to life, growing from the depths of the earth. And this is true too of people—not in broad patterns, but in the fine-grained detail: in the laws surrounding an individual's modest sacrifice of a bird (the least expensive of all animal offerings, specifically designated for those who could not afford more), and in the rules that govern the impurity that attends menstruation (which itself symbolizes the power of

fertility in reality). It is precisely there, in these details, that the essence of Jewish thought and life is to be found.

And thus ends the third chapter of Avot, rooted in the world as it exists: ever seeking out humanity and the power of creativity, embodying the pioneering spirit and its drive to realize action in the world (which can be thought of as the movement of a seed, hoping to bring its fruit forth into the world) . . . and hoping that people will take it upon themselves to act in this way.

This chapter's voice is in dialogue with that of Kohelet. The two talk with one another, looking deeply into each other's eyes and speaking their human words honestly. These are the words of thinkers who look at death and see two paths leading into the world: the path of futility and despair, and the path of meaning and fruitfulness. And so we are challenged to choose between the two, arousing an inner desire to live a rich, meaningful life—notwithstanding the futility inherent in all human endeavor—a life that can go far beyond futility to affirm the inestimable value of existence itself. In the words of Scripture:

A mere breath, proclaims Kohelet—everything is as insubstantial as a single breath. Moreover, Kohelet was a sage and he continued teaching the people and listening to parables and maxims. Kohelet sought the ideal way of expressing himself, seeking to speak only the truth. Indeed, the words of sages are like goads studded with nails, capable of leading others forward. They were all given by one Shepherd. And furthermore: there is no end to the making of books. Too much study only

wearies the flesh. In the end, this is what it all amounts to: fear God and keep the commandments; this is all, concerning humanity. Every hidden thing, whether good or bad, will eventually be brought to judgment. (Kohelet 12:8–14)

All those who are truly human cannot but sense in the world the possibility of random pointlessness stealing up toward them and trying to seize their good intentions to live a meaningful, purposeful life . . . but those sensitive to that possibility will not despair at all and will find the courage to construct a life that leads forward, on the path to the Tree of Life and to fruitfulness, creativity, and productivity in the world.

And so I wish to conclude this chapter by citing the words of the great poet Rachel Bluwstein Sela, known to all Israelis simply as Rachel, in her poem "*Kan Al P'nei HaAdamah*" ("Here on the Face of the Earth"):¹³

כָּאֵן עַל פְּנֵי הָאָדָמָה
לִמְ. ב.

כָּאֵן עַל פְּנֵי אָדָמָה—לֹא בְּעֵבִים, מַעַל—
עַל פְּנֵי אָדָמָה הַקְּרוֹבָה, הָאֵם;
לְהַעֲצִב בְּעַצְבָּהּ וְלִגְלֵל בְּגִילָה הַדֹּל
הַיּוֹדֵעַ כֹּל כֶּן לְנַחֵם.

לֹא עֶרְפָּלִי מִחֶר—הַיּוֹם הַמוֹמֵשׁ בַּיָּד,
הַיּוֹם הַמוֹצֵק, הַחֵם, הָאֵיתָן:
לְרוֹת אֶת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה, הַקָּצֵר, הָאֶחָד,
עַל פְּנֵי אָדָמָתָנוּ כָּאֵן.

בְּטָרֵם אֶתָּא הַלֵּיל—בּוֹאוּ, בּוֹאוּ הַכֹּל!
מֵאֲמֵץ מֵאֶחָד, עֵקֶשׁנִי וְעַר
שֶׁל אֶלֶף זְרוּעוֹת. הָאֲמָנָם יִבְצֹר לְגַל
אֶת הָאֶבֶן מִפִּי הַבְּאֵר?

Here on the Face of the Earth

for M.B.

Here on the face of the earth—not in the
clouds, in air—

On the face of the familiar earth, the mother;
Both in her sorrow and her impoverished joy
to share,

That knows to comfort as no other.

Not foggy tomorrow but fully real today to
take,

Today—solid, warm, dear:

This unique, brief day's thirst to slake,

On the face of our earth in this place, here.

Before night should come—come all and one!

In one unified, stubborn, and fully conscious
try

Of a thousand arms. Can it truly, possibly be
done,

Stone cover from well's mouth to pry?

13. The poem was originally published in the poet's collection *Safiah: Shirim* (Tel Aviv: Davar, 5687 [1926/1927]), p. 39. This English translation of the poem was prepared by Martin S. Cohen for publication in this volume.