פרק ד

Chapter Four

בֶּן זוֹמָא אוֹמֵר:
אֵיזֶהוּ חָכָם? הַלּוֹמֵד מִכָּל אָדָם,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: מִכָּל־מְלַמְּדַי הִשְׂכַּלְתִּי
(תהלים קיט:צט).
אֵיזֶהוּ גִבּוֹר? הַכּוֹבֵשׁ אֶת יִצְרוֹ,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: טוֹב אֶרֶךְ אַפַּיִם מִגִּבּוֹר,
וּמֹשֵׁל בְּרוּחוֹ מִלֹּכֵד עִיר (משלי טז:לב).
אֵיזֶהוּ עָשִׁיר? הַשָּׂמֵחַ בְּחֶלְקוֹ,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: יְגִיעַ כַּפֶּיךָ כִּי תֹאכֵל,
אַשְׁרֶיךָ וְטוֹב לָךְ (תהלים קכח:ב).
אַשְׁרֶיךָ בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה,
וְטוֹב לָךְ לָעוֹלָם הַבָּא.
אֵיזֶהוּ מְכֻבָּד? הַמְכַבֵּד אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: כִּי־מְכַבְּדַי אֲכַבֵּד וּבֹזַי יֵקָלּוּ
(שמואל א, ב:ל).

4:1. Ben Zoma liked to say:
Who is wise? One who learns from all people, as it is said: "I have learned from all my teachers" (Psalm 119:99).
Who is mighty? One who overcomes one's [baser] inclinations, as it is said: "One slow to anger is better off than a hero, as is one who rules over one's own spirit [better off] than one who conquers a city" (Proverbs 16:32).
Who is wealthy? One who is content with one's lot, as it is said: "When you eat [that which comes to you through] the labor of your hands, you will be content and it shall be well with you" (Psalm 128:2).
"You will be content" [denotes happiness] in this world, while "and it shall be well with you" [denotes happiness] in the world-to-come.
Who is honored? One who honors other people, as it is said: "Those who honor Me shall I honor, but those who scorn Me shall be spurned" (1 Samuel 2:30).

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4:1. Ben Zoma. We have encountered quite a number of sages whom rabbinic tradition associates with each other. There were the *zugot*, the "pairs"; the scions of the patriarchal line (Rabban Gamliel, Rabban Shimon, and Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi); and then there were the five sages who, we are told, spent the entire night in B'nei B'rak discussing matters pertaining to the exodus. In this chapter, we shall complete yet another group of sages bound to one another by tradition: the four who, the Talmud tells us in Tractate Ḥagigah, "entered the *pardes*."

What was the *pardes*? That is never made entirely clear.[1] But from the immediate story itself (as told in both the Babylonian Talmud and the Talmud of the Land of Israel), as well as from some of its surrounding legends, we can make at least some general inferences. The four who entered the *pardes* were:

1. The Hebrew word (itself a Persian loanword) literally means an orchard. It was later on that *PaRDeS* was also taken as an acronym to denote four different approaches to biblical exegesis: *peshat* (the contextual meaning), *remez* (the allegoric or symbolic meaning), *derash* (the midrashic meaning), and *sod* (the secret or esoteric/mystical meaning). That is not what it denotes in the talmudic text referenced here.

(1) Rabbi Akiva, whom we have already encountered in chapter 3; (2) Shimon ben Zoma, the sage quoted in this *mishnah*; (3) Shimon ben Azzai, who will be quoted in the following *mishnah*; and (4) Elisha ben Avuyah, whom we will encounter later in this chapter at 4:25. Here is what the Talmud (in B. Ḥagigah 14b) tells us were the results of their having ventured into the *pardes*: Ben Zoma saw what he saw there and was stricken (presumably in his mind). Ben Azzai saw what he saw and lost his life. Elisha ben Avuyah (who is called *Aḥeir*, "Other," meaning something like "he who must not be mentioned") "cut down the [young] saplings" (which may mean something like uprooting the principles of the faith, or corrupting the youth with heterodox ideas, or both). Only Rabbi Akiva exited the *pardes* in peace.

It seems, from these serious but mysterious consequences, that the *pardes* symbolized a confrontation with esoteric doctrines brought on by the basic life questions raised in times of oppression and inexplicable suffering (such was the case in the Land of Israel in the second century CE). Perhaps they were gnostic or other dualistic doctrines with which these sages (and perhaps others like them) engaged. Abraham Joshua Heschel maintained that the *pardes* was a generic way of referring to the struggle to explain suffering, particularly of innocents.[2] The message that we then get from the stories of the *pardes* is a stark and sobering one: wrestling with the riddles of human tragedies can sap away the very will to live. Or it can drive you mad. Or it can drive you to a complete loss of faith. And finally, there is at best a 25% chance of your life continuing more or less on its previous trajectory.

It is all the more remarkable that we have such life-giving wisdom, such as what we are about to encounter, from sages who struggled, with such dismal results, with these theological riddles.

Ben Zoma will take us through four different definitions of what are conventionally considered to be human achievements worth striving for. They are: wisdom, power, wealth, and honor. The first three are precisely the ones that the prophet Jeremiah spoke of: "Let not the wise glory in their wisdom, let not the powerful glory in their power, let not the wealthy glory in their wealth" (9:22). Jeremiah has told us that the conventional understandings of these achievements do not denote qualities that are worthy of any glory or recognition. (We would say today that they are primarily inherited, either through biology or bequest. In addition, they often have the unfortunate effect of focusing our attention on fleeting worldly achievements, as opposed to the more timeless goal of "knowing God," in Jeremiah's own words.) But Ben Zoma gives alternative definitions that are, in many ways, the opposite of the conventional ones—and in so doing, he tells us what kind of wisdom, power, and wealth we *can* take pride in and get true recognition for. The fourth quality, being honored, is simply the one that summarizes his overturning of Jeremiah's triad (see comment to "who is honored" below).

4:1. Who is wise? This is probably better rendered as "Who is a truly wise person?"

2. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations*, ed. and trans. Gordon Tucker (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 125 (and see the editor's comments on p. 105 and p. 118, n. 32).

We have various definitions of what wisdom is in the ancient tradition. One, of course, is the wisdom of Solomon, who was said to have mastered most of the secrets of the natural world, and who—as the famous story in 1 Kings 3 tells us—had an ingenious instinct for justice and how to bring it about. And the Talmud itself has various definitions of what a wise person is; predictably, it has to do with an ability to answer complicated questions in some of the more abstruse areas of Jewish law.[3] But Ben Zoma's definition is quite different: in his opinion, the wise person is the one who is ready and willing to learn from every other person. This is quite similar to the story told in Plato's *Apology* (20e–23b) of how the Delphic oracle pronounced Socrates to be the wisest person, whereupon Socrates indicated that the oracle must be correct because he alone in his day knew how much more he had to learn. Commenting on this *mishnah*, the sixteenth-century commentary on Pirkei Avot *Midrash Shemuel*, by the sage Rabbi Samuel ben Isaac de Uçeda, makes a very astute and telling point: throughout rabbinic literature, sages are often referred to as *talmidei ḥakhamim*, which literally means "students of the wise." The highest compliment you can give to someone in Jewish religious and intellectual circles, even today, is thus to call that person a *talmid ḥakham*—where *ḥakham* is not an adjective describing the person as a student who has become wise, but rather a noun denoting that the person is still a student of those who have wisdom to impart. This is exactly the point of Ben Zoma's teaching and insight. As soon as we consider ourselves to be wise, there is a real and present danger that learning may stop. But that would be to fool ourselves, and to deprive ourselves of the even greater wisdom that continued living and learning can bring.

A noteworthy point about Ben Zoma's prooftext from Psalm 119:99 is that he cites the verse as corroboration of the idea that one should be open to learning from everyone. But he reads the verse to say, "I have gained insight from all those who have taught me." As such, the verse is more or less a tautology, rather than a prooftext: if someone has actually taught you, then of course you have gained insight from them. But that is not the same as saying that every person should be seen as a potential teacher. In its biblical setting the verse is not a tautology at all, but means something quite different from the use to which Ben Zoma puts it. The context in Psalm 119 makes it clear that *mikol m'lamdai hiskalti* is a triumphal boast that "I have gained more insight than any of my teachers," and the reason for this is that the psalmist has something that those teachers do not have: a devotion to Torah. It is hardly surprising that Ben Zoma uses the verse in a way that significantly departs from its contextual meaning; this is a regular feature of rabbinic interpretation. It is striking, though, that the departure from the contextual meaning is so stark that it effectively converts a prideful boast ("I am smarter than all my teachers") into the humble statement of a person willing to learn from all.

4:1. Who is mighty? The might in which we can justifiably take pride is the ability to overcome the instinctive drives that are part of our constitutions. This is the kind of strength that cannot simply be inherited in one's

3. See, for example, B. Kiddushin 49b, Shabbat 114a, and Ḥullin 44b.

genes, but requires acts of discernment and of will. The eleventh-century Spanish sage Baḥya ibn Pakuda, the author of the spiritual and ethical treatise *Ḥovot HaLevavot*, used a parable to describe the cultivation of this kind of inner strength of character. It was said that a certain righteous person encountered soldiers coming home victorious from a military expedition, laden with booty of all sorts. He said to them: "You have returned from the lesser battle with many spoils, but prepare yourselves now for the greater battle." When they asked what the greater battle was, he responded by saying: "It is the battle with your immoral instincts" (Fifth Gate, chapter 5). This parable, as well as Ben Zoma's teaching that it illustrates, speak to the truism that the struggles we have against some of the destructive forces within ourselves are often the fiercest battles that we have to fight in our lives, so that a true measure of strength has been achieved and revealed when we emerge from them victorious. Wrestling with various sorts of addictions and temptations is one example of such a struggle, and conquering those addictions and temptations does indeed call forth, from those who witness the triumph, justifiable admiration and respect.

Avot D'Rabbi Natan has a particularly nice variant on the very same theme: "Who is a mighty person? One who can turn an enemy into a friend" (Version A, chapter 23).

4:1. Who is wealthy? Ben Zoma's teaching here is that it is neither what you have inherited nor how much you have that makes you rich, but rather your ability to feel contentment in what you have. The prooftext from Psalm 128 promises contentment and satisfaction to those who are self-sufficient, who are able to provide for life's necessities with their own hands. But while that self-sufficiency is, in and of itself, an important component of security, the real focus here seems to be on avoiding the tendency to compare what one has to what others have. *Schadenfreude* (deriving pleasure from the misfortunes of others) is rarely *Freude* (true joy); there is, in the end, a very disappointing measure of happiness in surpassing others. Rather, it is the sense of fulfillment that comes from appreciating what one has that is the basis for true happiness. A wide range of contemporary studies of human happiness confirm this truth.[4] Ben Zoma could just as well have quoted Kohelet 5:11, which says: "The laborer's sleep is sweet, whether he has much or little to eat; but the rich person's abundance does not allow him to sleep." The converse perhaps makes it even clearer: poverty is far more about neediness than actual need. The quantitatively poor person will generally be needy. But it is all too common for people who have large quantities of material goods to feel the incessant need for more. They are thus not wealthy in any but the most literal (and crass) sense of the term.

4:1. Who is honored? As noted above, this fourth question seems to step outside of the framework that was set by Jeremiah, who reflected on the attributes of wisdom, power,

4. See, for example, Richard A. Easterlin, "Explaining Happiness," in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 100, no. 19 (September 2003), pp. 11176–11183; Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons From a New Science* (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 43–48; and Tal Ben Shahar, *The Pursuit of Perfect: How to Stop Chasing Perfection and Start Living a Richer, Happier Life* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009).

and wealth. Why would Ben Zoma add a fourth category, honor?

Both the answer to the question and the prooftext give us our explanation. The answer is that the person truly respected is the one who willingly accords respect to God's creatures. (The Hebrew *b'riyot* can sometimes refer to all creation, human and not, but here clearly refers specifically to human beings.) The prooftext from 1 Samuel is part of a larger passage in which God condemns the line of the priest Eli, because of the deeply offensive behavior of his sons and the failure of his own half-hearted attempts to rein them in. God's spokesperson condemns the behavior of Eli's sons and then says, "Those who honor Me shall I honor, but those who scorn Me shall be spurned." What did the sons of Eli do to dishonor God? We are told that they were avaricious and gluttonous, taking from the people who came to sacrifice much more than what they were entitled to take. Moreover, they threatened with violence anyone who protested their overreaching and they indulged their sexual urges with the women who came to do service in the Tabernacle. And, as if that weren't bad enough, they then refused to listen to their father's attempts to chide them. It thus emerges that the sons of Eli behaved heinously in their blatant disregard for proper boundaries regarding all three of the areas discussed by Jeremiah (wealth, power, and wisdom): they were not content with the priests' legitimate emoluments; they used their power recklessly, because they were unwilling to control their own base urges; they refused to learn from their father. Because of those three traits, then, they ended up inflicting the worst kind of dishonor on their fellow Israelites. In other words, this fourth clause is, as Ben Zoma conceived of it, a true summation of the previous three. And his lesson is trenchant: fail at achieving the true forms of wisdom, power, and wealth, and you will inevitably inflict dishonor on other human beings. And note the most significant thing here: the prophet who spoke to Eli said that Eli's sons were dishonoring God as well. Dishonoring God's creatures effectively dishonors God. And so says Ben Zoma, by using this as his prooftext: if you do not achieve the "countercultural" definitions of wisdom, power, and wealth, then you will inevitably trample the rights and dignity of others. You will thereby be dishonoring God, and you will be altogether dishonorable.

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מורה־זלדה דיברה כה בשקט, עד שאם רצינו לשמוע לא די היה שנשתתק אלא היה הכרח לרכון לפנים אל שולחנותינו. היינו יושבים אפוא רכונים לפנים בלי הרף, מן הבוקר עד הצהריים, כי חששנו לאבד מילה: כל מה שדיברה מורה־זלדה היה מושך לב וקצת לא צפוי. כאילו למדנו אצלה שפה חדשה, לא רחוקה מאוד מן העברית ואף־על־פי־כן שונה וצובטת־לב: להרים היא קראה לפעמים הררים. לכוכבים—כוכבי שמים. התהום היתה תהום רבה והעצים נקראו אילנות, אף כי לרוב היו נקראים אצלה כל אחד ואחד בשמו. אם ביטאת בביתה רעיון שמצא חן בעיניה, היתה מורה־זלדה מצביעה עליך ואומרת חרש: תסתכלו נא כולכם, הנה יש באן ילד שטוף־אור.

—עמוס עוז, מתוך "סיפור על אהבה וחושך"[1]

Teacher Zelda talked so softly that if we wanted to hear what she was saying, we not only had to stop talking, we had to lean forward on our desks. Consequently we spent the whole morning leaning forward, because we did not want to miss a word. Everything that Teacher Zelda said was enchanting and rather unexpected. It was as if we were learning another language from her, not very different from Hebrew and yet distinctive and touching. She would call stars "stars of heaven," the abyss was "the mighty abyss," and she spoke of "turbid rivers" and "nocturnal deserts." If you said something in class that she liked, Teacher Zelda would point to you and say softly: "Look, all of you, there's a child who's flooded with light."

—from Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*[2]

1. Amos Oz, *Sippur al Ahavah V'ḥoshekh* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2002), p. 327.

2. Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (Orlando: Harcourt, 2004), pp. 284–285.

Student and Teacher: The Instructor

Each chapter of Avot deepens the entryway to the grand sanctuaries of life itself. The fourth chapter begins by discussing how people can best negotiate their life-journey in the world in which they have agreed to live, to put their faith, and to forge a path for themselves and for others. But then this chapter moves on and focuses on one particular figure, that of the learner—and the chapter will describe the many characteristics and traits of the student, who is indeed at the very core of what it means to be a member of the Jewish people. This figure is portrayed with amazing refinement, as if it were a butterfly whose wings display so many shades of color as if to suggest the infinite power of the student to learn, and then eventually also to teach—so that fresh new generations of butterflies will spring forth and take part in the larger undertaking, the ongoing quest of each and every human being to strive to live life as meaningfully as possible. This chapter impresses on us that the cycle of a person's life must include the personal obligation to take responsibility for one's own education, so as to be able to provide a basis of education for the following generations. And so the reader is invited to enter the sphere of that idealized student.

4:1. Ben Zoma begins by asking: **Who is wise?** His answer is, simply: **One who learns from all people**. Before anything else, he says, each individual is encouraged to develop a sense of him or herself in the world as a student, a learner. The psychological stance necessary to think of oneself in that way is hardly natural in a human culture such as our own, which encourages people to present themselves as already knowledgeable, rather than as still learning. In Ben Zoma's words, though, we hear a recommendation to pursue precisely the

opposite path: people should create space within themselves to pay attention to the world, and to internalize possibilities for learning from whatever circumstances they find themselves in. Ben Zoma further teaches that people ought to feel that they have something to learn from all others whom they encounter. In this way, everyone can become our teacher, with every conversation pointing to infinite strands of divine wisdom embedded in human speech and so, in every conversation we are part of, we can feel ourselves taking hold of yet another strand. These strands of wisdom might be imagined as the strings attached to a large number of kites flying overhead, each capable of harnessing the great power of the wind—which not only keeps them aloft, but also transfers some of its strength to those who hold on tightly enough to those strings.

This position taken by Ben Zoma is a spiritual and ethical stance that was not self-evident in his time, and is surely less so in our own day. The assumption that every Jew can be both a teacher and a learner says something profound about the Jewish educational enterprise, which is reflected in a famous debate among the ancient rabbis (recorded in Sifra, Kedoshim 4:12). Rabbi Akiva privileged the Torah's injunction to "love your fellow as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) as the foundational principle of the entire Torah; and it should be noted that "your fellow" in the verse has a particularistic sense, referring specifically to Jews. His colleague Ben Azzai saw the foundation of the Torah embodied in the verse "This is the record of Adam's descendants" (Genesis 5:1), which shifts the emphasis from the narrow sphere of the Jewish community to the broader, universal sphere of the entire human family. This chapter of Avot, devoted to exploring the persona of the student, chooses to highlight the approach of Ben Azzai, a study-companion and colleague of Ben Zoma. His lesson is that the Jewish individual's classroom is the entire world, and that we must therefore see, in each and every person we encounter in the world, a potential teacher. (And in this regard, also see Ben Azzai's teachings in 4:2–3 below.)

This is the essence of Ben Zoma's lesson; and by opening the chapter with it, Avot suggests that we consider it as a kind of prayer—a request of each person continually to be a student in the world, prepared to learn from all. And so the *mishnah* continues with a set of related ideas, also pertaining to the idea of personal growth: **might** is best measured by a person's ability to exercise self-control; **wealth** is best measured by a person's ability to be satisfied; and **honor** is best measured by a person's ability to look directly at another generously and with understanding. All of these are traits that a person is called upon to develop, and the gateway to building the character of the learner consists of directing one's gaze into each realm in the one big classroom called life.

ד:ב

בֶּן עַזַּאי אוֹמֵר:
הֱוֵי רָץ לְמִצְוָה קַלָּה כְּבַחֲמוּרָה,
וּבוֹרֵחַ מִן הָעֲבֵרָה,
שֶׁמִּצְוָה גּוֹרֶרֶת מִצְוָה
וַעֲבֵרָה גּוֹרֶרֶת עֲבֵרָה,
שֶׁשְּׂכַר מִצְוָה מִצְוָה
וּשְׂכַר עֲבֵרָה עֲבֵרָה.

4:2. Ben Azzai liked to say:
Run to [perform] a [seemingly] trivial commandment as [vigorously as you would] to a [seemingly] consequential one, and flee from transgression, for one [fulfilled] commandment brings another [in its wake] just as one transgression brings another [in *its* wake].
The reward for [fulfilling] a commandment is [the desire to fulfill] another commandment, whereas the "reward" for transgression is [the brazenness to commit yet] another transgression.

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4:2. Run to [perform] a [seemingly] trivial commandment as [vigorously as you would] to a [seemingly] consequential one. See 2:1 above for a discussion of the terms "[seemingly] trivial commandment" and "[seemingly] consequential commandment." Ben Azzai, like Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi would do nearly a century later, seems to be challenging the tendency to rank the *mitzvot*—a natural tendency for most of us. Who, for example, would not instinctively consider the performative *mitzvah* of eating matzah on the first night of Passover to be more important than that of eating in a *sukkah* on the first night of Sukkot? And as for prohibitive *mitzvot*, who would not instinctively think that avoiding forbidden foods is weightier than avoiding the intermingling of wool and linen in one's garments? The "official" position is that such rankings are entirely speculative, and that obligations are obligations—and they are all equally important. Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi's dictum in 2:1 is in line with this official caution, inasmuch as he urges us to be as scrupulous with those commandments that we deem to be trivial as we are with those we think more consequential.

But Ben Azzai may be saying something different, and the clue may be in his use of the word *ratz*, "run." The Hebrew verb, and the running that it denotes, is often used in both biblical and rabbinic literature to convey a sense of eagerness and joy in the performance of some task.[5] Thus, for example, Abraham is depicted as "running" to greet his unexpected guests, and again as running to prepare a meal for them (Genesis 18:2, 7). The sun itself is depicted as joyously "running" to fulfill its astronomical role (Psalm 19:6). In keeping with this observation, one can read Ben Azzai's teaching not as a repudiation of the tendency to rank *mitzvot* according to weightiness. (After all, he himself is presuming the distinction by telling people not to allow it to distract them from the pursuit of the "trivial" commandments.) Rather, he exhorts us to be as joyful in the fulfillment of the "trivial" ones as we are in the case of

5. Yochanan Muffs has written about this connection between speed and joy at greater length in his *The Personhood of God* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), chapters 15 and 16.

the "consequential" ones. (Note also that the image of running must also mean that he is talking exclusively about performative *mitzvot*.) He would urge us, for example, to put on *t'fillin* each morning with the same enthusiasm and anticipation with which we approach the annual Passover seder, which is the highlight of the Jewish year for most families. It's a tall order, perhaps. But rising to the challenge can keep even the most regular and simply done religious rituals from becoming routine.

4:2. For one [fulfilled] commandment brings another [in its wake], just as one transgression brings another [in *its* wake]. This is generally a sound psychological observation. It is more challenging to do something for the first time than to repeat the action over and over. Whether they are comfort-sacrificing acts of ritual observance or acts of kindness to others, or inhibition-breaking acts of transgression—once they are done for the first time, the actions are much easier to repeat. The natural reaction, depending on whether it is a positive performance or a negative violation, is either "Yes, I can do that comfortably" or "See, I can do that and get away with it!" Yet again (see comments to 1:1 and 1:6 above), we see Avot's concern with the power of habituation both in education and in character formation.

4:2. The reward for [fulfilling] a commandment is [the desire to fulfill] another commandment, whereas the "reward" for transgression is [the brazenness to commit yet] another transgression. There would seem to be two different ways in which to interpret Ben Azzai's words here. If this clause is connected to the previous one ("one [fulfilled] commandment brings another . . ."), it would then mean that the reward for performing a *mitzvah* is the next *mitzvah* that comes in its wake, while the wages of transgression are the sins that follow once one commits an initial transgression. Alternatively, it can be understood to mean that the reward that comes to us from a *mitzvah* is that *mitzvah* itself, and the wages of transgression inhere in the sinful act itself. But the two readings are really equivalent, as it is the virtuous act (or the sinful act) in both cases that constitutes the deed's most important recompense. Here, Ben Azzai's teaching seems to diverge most from Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi's teaching in 2:1. There, we were advised to attend equally to the "trivial" and the "consequential" *mitzvot* because one cannot know what the rewards for the *mitzvot* are. But here, we are told that we look in the wrong place for a *mitzvah*'s reward if we look to an external source, precisely because the reward is intrinsic to the act itself. "Virtue is its own reward" (and by symmetry the same must be said with regard to sin, that it constitutes its own punishment) was an aphorism already current in the Greco-Roman world by this time, and we have already encountered this sentiment in 1:3 above, in the teaching of Antigonos of Sokho.

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4:2. Ben Azzai's words broaden the dimensions of the classroom. **Run to [perform] a [seemingly] trivial commandment,** he teaches. The *mitzvot* constitute a variety of different gateways into human experience, available for learners

to pass through and thereby grow. Therefore, enter each gateway that opens for you. And yet, Ben Azzai further counsels that we are to **flee from transgression**, because sin pushes a person away from those open gateways toward those that are locked. Commandment and transgression are thus two guides to the spiritual and moral topography of life, enabling the learner to identify the openings through which one may profitably pass, on the one hand, and the walls that will constitute dead ends, on the other. Choose an opening, any opening at all, teaches Ben Azzai, and avoid the walls as best you can—indeed, flee from them. Life consists of the dynamic alternation of pursuit and flight, as the student of Torah moves back and forth in the world in an ongoing effort to approach what is essential for learning and to move away from whatever might inhibit the ability to discern and understand. This motion is necessitated by the fundamental human inability to know the full consequences of every action, and it grows also from our humility in recognizing that we can never learn everything there is to learn. Every moment in life is thus to be taken as a kind of ephemeral understanding of some specific thing that must lead to further, unfolding comprehension in subsequent moments in order for moral progress to be sustained.

ד:ג

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר:
אַל תְּהִי בָז לְכָל אָדָם
וְאַל תְּהִי מַפְלִיג לְכָל דָּבָר—
שֶׁאֵין לְךָ אָדָם שֶׁאֵין לוֹ שָׁעָה,
וְאֵין לְךָ דָּבָר שֶׁאֵין לוֹ מָקוֹם.

4:3. He [also] used to say:
Do not scorn anyone at all and do not disparage [even inanimate] things—
for there are no individuals who do not have their day, nor any things that do not have their place.

GORDON TUCKER

4:3. Do not scorn anyone at all and do not disparage [even inanimate] things—for there are no individuals who do not have their day, nor any things that do not have their place. This *mishnah*, too, can be understood in several different ways:

It may be imparting the very practical advice that no one and no thing should be summarily dismissed as unworthy of our attention and respect, because that person, or that object or idea, may someday assume great importance—at which point we will *want* to be associated with him or her or it. A ready example of this kind of observation is in the relationship of Joseph and his brothers in the Book of Genesis. Joseph was seen as beneath contempt and literally disposable by his brothers early in the biblical story, but he eventually rose to such prominence that their very lives depended on him and on his goodwill toward them.

And so this teaching may also be intended as encouragement to those who feel themselves, or those whom they love or their values and principles, to be "losers" doomed never to achieve any success or notice. Ben Azzai is teaching that current reality is never inevitably destiny, because every person and every thing can eventually have its own moment—or more than just a moment—in the sun. On this reading, all people or things deserve some recognition but some simply have not received it *yet*.

But our *mishnah* may also have a dark, foreboding meaning, to wit: that we are not to consider the rise—or the resurgence—of any one, any thing, or any idea to be so far beyond possible that it need not be considered or precautions taken against it. On this reading, even people who deserve to be ignored or ideas eminently worthy of being discarded may yet come to the fore and gain adherents. This third interpretation reminds us of Yeats's great poem, "The Second Coming," and the ominous image of the "rough beast, its hour come round at last" as it prepares for its own rebirth. How often in our own times have we imagined that certain types of villains and some dark ideologies of the past were forever done away with, only to see them rise again in altered forms!

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4:3. Ben Azzai continues, teaching: **Do not scorn anyone at all and do not disparage [even inanimate] things.** By this he means that we should never elevate ourselves in relation to others, nor should we remain disengaged from any event, even if it does not concern us personally. Arrogance can be disastrous for a student: since the world is a classroom and everything in it

ד:ד

רַבִּי לְוִיטָס אִישׁ יַבְנֶה אוֹמֵר:
מְאֹד מְאֹד הֱוֵי שְׁפַל רוּחַ,
שֶׁתִּקְוַת אֱנוֹשׁ רִמָּה.

4:4. Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh liked to say:
Be very, very humble of spirit,
for the [ultimate] hope of
humankind is the worm.

GORDON TUCKER

4:4. Be very, very humble of spirit. The repetition of the word *me'od* ("very") by Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh is surely intended to be essential in his teaching. There is something about humility that is apparently considered by this teacher (about whom we know very little) to be a truly indispensable trait. And indeed, most modern readers will agree that an inability to keep the ego in check can lead to antisocial behavior. In fact, the one attribute of Moses on which the Torah explicitly comments is his meekness (Numbers 12:3). And Maimonides, who followed Aristotle in prescribing the middle path for all human dispositions, made humility the one exception to that rule. With respect to the humility–egocentrism spectrum, Maimonides counseled going toward the extreme of utter humility. And he used Avot 4:4 as his prooftext. (See his Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Dei·ot 2:3.)

4:4. For the [ultimate] hope of humankind is the worm. This (literally) earthy aphorism gives the reason for seeking to be humble. This teaching focuses on the end of every human life and is, in effect, the converse of a different rabbinic teaching about the ultimate hope and worth of every human being, which is more upbeat (and therefore more frequently quoted). In Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5, we read that human beings were created singly, rather than as an entire species, in order to remind us that everyone has the same origin and thus that no one's lineage is greater than anyone else's. Rabbi Levitas reminds us that the destiny of every human being—at least as it concerns one's physical self—is also equal, in terms of where it ultimately leads: to the grave. (This is similar to Akavia ben Mahalalel's teaching in 3:1 above.) And thus there is no point at all in inflating one's ego.

Of note here is the usage of the word *tikvah*, a word that often means "hope" (as it does in modern Hebrew). In Joshua 2:18, it is used—in what is likely a more original meaning—to mean a length of a line or cord. And that is the meaning it seems to have in the blessing attributed to either Rabbi Ami or Rabbi Ḥanina in the Talmud: *v'tikvat'kha l'dor dorim*, "may your line extend for generations" (B. Berakhot 17a). Thus, the translation here of *tikvat enosh* as a mortal's "[ultimate] hope" could reasonably be revised to read "the trajectory [that is, the line] of every mortal's life."

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4:4. These words of Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh, **Be very, very humble of spirit**, are pure. He wishes learners to deepen their consciousness, not only by learning from all living things, but in fact by making space within themselves for the humility needed to constantly step aside, so

as to focus on other creatures rather than on oneself. What is the import of **very, very** in his lesson, repeating the Hebrew word *me'od*? It seems that this is related to the well-known verse "You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5)—where the word "might" is the same *me'od* that can also mean "very." In this regard we can look to Abraham ibn Ezra, who explains in his comment to that verse that the Torah's instruction to love God with all of one's *me'od* ("might") simply means "as much as you possibly can, with every manifestation of your soul and your life"—that is, with complete love in your heart. That is what Rabbi Levitas also means to teach: we must teach our souls to be as humble as possible, because only a person fully imbued with all-encompassing love for every creature and all of creation can truly merit being called a student, one who learns from all. Only such an individual will truly understand that **the [ultimate] hope of humankind is the worm** (that is, the grave). How fitting that Rabbi Levitas leaves us only this sentence, and we know of no other statements of his. In that taciturnity lies true humility! One sole sentence, carrying out in a mere eight words a message of eternity.

ד:ה

רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן בֶּן בְּרוֹקָא אוֹמֵר:
כָּל הַמְחַלֵּל שֵׁם שָׁמַיִם בַּסֵּתֶר,
נִפְרָעִין מִמֶּנּוּ בַּגָּלוּי.
אֶחָד שׁוֹגֵג וְאֶחָד מֵזִיד
בְּחִלּוּל הַשֵּׁם.

4:5. Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Beroka liked to say:
All those who profane the name of
Heaven in private will be punished in
public.
When it comes to the profanation of the
divine name,
the same applies both to those who
act inadvertently and to those who act
intentionally.

GORDON TUCKER

4:5. All those who profane the name of Heaven in private will be punished in public. Desecration of God's name, *ḥillul hashem*, is arguably the very epicenter of religious betrayal because it vitiates the force of God's presence among human beings by diminishing or eradicating the perception of God's holiness, thus contributing to the elimination of any sense of the transcendent from human life. The term has long been applied (and is still applied) to actions that tend to bring God, God's law, and God's people into disrepute. What Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Beroka is teaching here immediately reminds us of the scene in 2 Samuel in which the prophet Nathan confronts King David after the latter's adulterous affair with Bat-Sheva and his "murder by proxy" of her husband, Uriah. Nathan tells David that God's retribution would be evident to all: "You acted in secret," Nathan says in God's name, "but I will make this happen in the sight of all Israel and in broad daylight" (12:12). In this *mishnah*, Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Beroka seems to be principally restating and generalizing the lesson inherent in the scriptural story, but important questions still remain. Why did Nathan say what he did? Why did justice require that David's crimes be requited in public? And, most pertinent of all: Is it justifiable to generalize from the case of the King of Israel to the actions of any person at all?

Yet David's case may indeed be paradigmatic of all cases of *ḥillul hashem* in the following sense. David's intent was certainly to commit his original crime of lust in secrecy, as kings have many resources for keeping things secret. And he surely did not intend for Bat-Sheva to become pregnant. But when she did, and with her husband away at the front lines of war, the liaison was already in danger of becoming public. David then endeavored to eliminate this problem secretly by bringing Uriah back home, but was frustrated by Uriah's public refusal to return to his home and to his wife—out of principled solidarity with his comrades still at the front. Finally, unable to keep everything secret, David was driven to the worst evil of all: murdering Uriah, the one person other than Bat-Sheva who would have been able to reveal everything to the public. The story is a classic tale of the cover-up becoming worse than the crime (which is surely one of the instantiations of Ben Azzai's teaching in 4:2 that transgressions inevitably bring on others in their wake). And this may indeed be the real lesson here. In a sense, any crime at all committed in secret is an act of *ḥillul hashem*,

since it suggests that the violator is more concerned with human perception than with God's perception. And that very misplaced concern can lead to cover-ups that, because of their escalating urgency, rarely escape becoming public. The leaking-out of the crime into the public domain then is already the essence of the retribution, since it was precisely that which was the sinner's greatest fear to begin with.

4:5. When it comes to the profanation of the divine name, the same applies both to those who act inadvertently and to those who act intentionally. Scores of commentators over the centuries have been troubled by this clause, which seems unjustly to equate inadvertent and deliberate sins. But the real intent may be much simpler. The *mishnah* likely is not speaking so much—or even at all—about the severity of punishment, but rather about the effects that profanation of the divine name has on others, who will not be able to make the distinction between a sinner's deliberate and inadvertent acts. Given the very serious nature of *ḥillul hashem* (as described above), it behooves us all to be especially careful in our behavior, so as to avoid even an inadvertent act that is improper—since the consequences of such an act, in terms of the disrepute brought to God and religion, are so destructive and difficult to rectify.

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4:5. Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Beroka goes a step further in the pursuit of humility. He teaches that **all those who profane the name of Heaven in private**—those who abandon the work of humility, when they are in shady areas hidden from human eyes (that is, in the hidden pockets of life, in the lonely space between encounters with others)—are bound to become so puffed up in their own eyes that opportunities to learn from others, which might otherwise have been available to them, are all spoiled. The section of this chapter focused on students ends with the advice always to cultivate a sincere, inner humility, one deeply enough rooted in the psyche to keep the gateway to learning wide open, even in the transparent areas hidden from all others.

ד:ו

רַבִּי יִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנוֹ אוֹמֵר:
הַלּוֹמֵד עַל מְנָת לְלַמֵּד,
מַסְפִּיקִין בְּיָדוֹ לִלְמוֹד וּלְלַמֵּד;
וְהַלּוֹמֵד עַל מְנָת לַעֲשׂוֹת,
מַסְפִּיקִין בְּיָדוֹ לִלְמוֹד וּלְלַמֵּד
לִשְׁמוֹר וְלַעֲשׂוֹת.

4:6. His son, Rabbi Yishmael, liked to say:
One who learns in order to teach
will be given the chance to learn [more]
and [also] to teach, but one who learns in
order to put that learning into practice
will be given the chance [not only] to
learn and to teach, [but also] to observe
[commandments] and to put into practice
[that which has been learned].

GORDON TUCKER

4:6. One who learns in order to teach will be given the chance to learn [more] and [also] to teach. Rabbi Yishmael, the son of Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Beroka, articulates here a principle whose better-known formulation is found in the Talmud: "Torah acquired in order to teach it is the essence of *torat ḥesed*, a Torah of kindness" (B. Sukkah 49b). Torah is no different in this respect from any other valuable asset. Acquire it for the sake of your own satisfaction and gratification, and it is a selfish asset. But acquire it with the intent to share it with others, and the very same asset (whether money, practical skills, worldly wisdom, or Torah) now becomes an instrument of *ḥesed*, of kindness. And it thus follows that the intent to teach the Torah that one has learned becomes a self-fulfilling purpose.

As we have seen, and will continue to see throughout Avot, a special value is attached to Torah that is not acquired alone but rather with a study partner or group of partners. (In this regard, see especially 1:6 above.) Torah acquired with others is richer and more examined than Torah acquired on one's own. But studying with others is not the only way of deepening one's experience of Torah: we are told here that Torah learned with the intent of teaching it to others will also be learned more deeply. This is because although one may be able to deceive oneself into believing that a subject is well understood, it is not so easy to deceive another who is dependent on you for understanding. Anyone who has ever taught any subject at all will testify readily that the very best way to learn something deeply is to prepare to teach it to others. And this, then, is the true meaning of this teaching: if one intends to teach Torah, then one has an even greater capacity to learn it well oneself.

4:6. But one who learns in order to put that learning into practice . . . We are here reminded, as we are in so many different places and in so many different ways, that Torah study is intended not as an intellectual exercise but rather as a guide to practice that will lead to a better, kinder, more refined and gracious life. It is not even enough to intend to teach the Torah that one learns (as set forth in the first half of this *mishnah*); one must intend to practice it in one's life as well. Only then does it fulfill all of the purposes for which we were given the Torah in the first place.

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4:6. The first part of this chapter of Avot focused on the student: underscoring the importance of learners, portraying the learning environment, and suggesting ways to refine the soul so as to make it most receptive to internalize the lessons that need to be learned. And here we end this part of the chapter, with the words of Rabbi Yishmael (in this *mishnah*) and Rabbi Tzadok (in the following *mishnah*), both of whom ask the same questions: For what purpose does a person study? What can—*should*—one do with what one learns? Their answers complement each other, one sage suggesting how to comport oneself and the other warning about what not to do.

The positive admonition is given by Rabbi Yishmael, who teaches that **one who learns in order to put that learning into practice** will be afforded the opportunity to go the full distance, from study to teaching to practice. The person who realizes all those goals, the student who seeks to actualize his or her learning in practice, sits atop the summit of this first part of the chapter.

ד:ז

רַבִּי צָדוֹק אוֹמֵר:
אַל תַּעֲשֵׂם עֲטָרָה לְהִתְגַּדֵּל בָּהֶם
וְלֹא קַרְדֹּם לַחְפּוֹר בָּהֶם.
וְכָךְ הָיָה הִלֵּל אוֹמֵר:
וּדְאִשְׁתַּמַּשׁ בְּתָגָא חֲלַף.
הָא לָמַדְתָּ,
כָּל הַנֶּהֱנֶה מִדִּבְרֵי תוֹרָה
נוֹטֵל חַיָּיו מִן הָעוֹלָם.

4:7. Rabbi Tzadok liked to say:
Do not make them [namely, words of Torah] into a crown with which to seek self-aggrandizement or [use them as] a shovel with which to dig.
And so did Hillel like to say:
One who abuses the crown [of Torah] will perish.
From this we learn that all who derive benefit from words of Torah will end up paying with their lives [for having done so].

GORDON TUCKER

4:7. Do not make them . . . into a crown with which to seek self-aggrandizement or . . . a shovel with which to dig. A basic axiom of biblical Judaism was that things that belonged to the Temple (what the rabbis later called *hekdeish*, from a root meaning "sacred") could not under any circumstances be used for private purposes. Doing so was a misappropriation, a sacrilege called *me'ilah* (a word that in modern Hebrew denotes a breach of trust). Consistent with the paradigm shift that is pervasive in Avot, teachings of Torah have now assumed the status formerly held by property in the ancient Temple. Though abstract rather than concrete, they are now the loci of holiness and thus they too can be deemed subject to misappropriation. To use knowledge of Torah in order to gain in prestige ("a crown with which to seek self-aggrandizement")—or, worse, to produce personal gain ("a shovel with which to dig")—are now to be considered acts of *me'ilah* as well, a new species of sacrilege. Interestingly, not only is this phrase more or less a rephrasing in Hebrew of Hillel's warning in Aramaic recorded in 1:13 above, but the Mishnah here takes the unusual step of quoting itself by reproducing here the final line of Hillel's dictum in 1:13.

This ideal, that the study and teaching of Torah should be unsullied by any considerations of gain, could be realized in a setting in which the work of Torah scholarship was primarily undertaken by people who earned their livings by working at various occupations and trades. When it became increasingly necessary to ensure, for the sake of Torah itself, that there would be full-time professional teachers, the problem arose of how to reconcile the vision of this *mishnah* with the practical necessity of having such professionals. This occurred not very long after the time of Avot, for the classic mode of solving this problem is already articulated in the Talmud of the Land of Israel: the full-time teacher of Torah is compensated not for the teaching itself, but rather for the opportunity-cost of being such a teacher—that is, for the lost earnings that one could have achieved in another profession had one not devoted one's time instead to teaching Torah (Y. Nedarim 4:3, 38c).

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4:7. In contrast, Rabbi Tzadok outlines the negative side: **Do not make them into a crown with which to seek self-aggrandizement or [use them as] a shovel with which to dig**—that is, one must not learn Torah for the sake of building up one's status or for personal benefit. That is not what the life of the student is meant to be. Hillel's lesson—**one who abuses the crown [of Torah] will perish**—epitomizes the essence of the ideal orientation of a learner. Imbued with the limitless learning potential of the Torah, students are guided to direct their gaze not inward, at themselves, but outward, toward the world.

ד:ח

רַבִּי יוֹסֵי אוֹמֵר:
כָּל הַמְכַבֵּד אֶת הַתּוֹרָה,
גּוּפוֹ מְכֻבָּד עַל הַבְּרִיּוֹת;
וְכָל הַמְחַלֵּל אֶת הַתּוֹרָה,
גּוּפוֹ מְחֻלָּל עַל הַבְּרִיּוֹת.

4:8. Rabbi Yosei liked to say:
All those who show honor to the Torah
will be personally honored
by other people,
but all those who treat the Torah profanely
will be personally disrespected
by other people.

GORDON TUCKER

4:8. This is an extremely simple corollary to what has previously been established in Avot, regarding honorable behavior (see especially 4:1 and 4:5 above). What could it mean to honor Torah? It must mean to live one's life in such a way that evidently brings Torah to its intended purposes. Living one's life in that way will bring about *kiddush hashem*—that is, the sanctification of God's name by putting God's teachings in a good light. But it will also call forth the admiration and respect of one's fellow human beings. And the converse would follow in the same direct way: there is no greater *dis*honor to the Torah than the spectacle of those who are ostensibly committed to Torah but who live lives that are egregiously dissonant with Torah's intended purposes. That, this *mishnah* teaches, is a true act of *ḥillul hashem*.

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4:8. We now come to the heart of the chapter. Among those human beings who would be students and teachers, there walks in the world one special teacher and instructor for human beings: Torah. The Book of Proverbs imagined Torah as an actual woman in the world (see below), and so shall we. What do we know of her? That she is fresh, even at her great age, and that she is the inspiration for all vibrant learning. Speaking her own language, she is the one who reveals to humankind the wide vistas of knowledge available, and so she directs human beings to work at preserving their knowledge and understanding, rooting them in actual life. She is truly ageless, and at the same time she both embodies tradition and is also a wellspring for Jewish rejuvenation. She moves the eternal secret from the body to the spirit and whispers to the human soul that, if it would only engage her in conversation, it would never wither—the body that houses it being made fresh and strong by its association with her, by virtue of its housing the spirit.

And so it is that **all those who show honor to the Torah will be personally honored by other people.** All who open the gate to let the Teacher called Torah enter their lives are thus summoned to dwell in the eternal pantheon of scholars and students, and will forever be honored by being mentioned in others' conversations about Torah. But Rabbi Yosei also teaches that **all those who treat the Torah profanely will be personally disrespected by other people.** He is thus saying that those who do not take pains to protect the Torah—or, worse, who personally defame the Torah and its values—will eventually themselves find dishonor, as their entire journeys through life will in the end amount to

nothing at all. This teaching is very much in line with the following midrash, which uses as its starting-point a verse from the Book of Proverbs. The context in Proverbs makes clear that Wisdom (*ḥokhmah*) is speaking here; the rabbis understood Wisdom to refer to the Torah. The midrash is brought in the name of Rabbi Oshaya at the beginning of Genesis Rabbah (1:1):

> "Then I [Wisdom] was as His nursling (*amon*); and I was daily all delight" (Proverbs 8:30). The Hebrew word *amon* [suggests that the Torah is a kind of] craftsman (*uman*), as if the Torah were to declare: "I was the craftsman's tool of the blessed Holy One." In the human world, when a king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill but with the expertise of an architect (*uman*, translated above as "craftsman"). The architect, moreover, does not build it on his own, but rather employs blueprints and diagrams to know how to construct the chambers and the doorways. In the same way, God consulted the Torah [as a blueprint] and created the world. The Torah states: "In the beginning (*reishit*) God created" (Genesis 1:1), and the word *reishit* refers to the Torah, as in the verse: "Adonai made me [again, Wisdom] at the beginning (*reishit*) of His way" (Proverbs 8:22).

The Torah is the instructor and the inspiration for the creation of the world at large, according to this midrash. And it acts in the same way for the creation of each person's individual world. The Torah is thus a generous, ancient teacher: whispering text, looking carefully at each student, recounting his or her history, asking existential questions of the student's soul, and accompanying the student along every step throughout his or her life. One's relationship with Torah mirrors one's relationship with humanity itself as well as with oneself, and anyone who disparages the honor due the Torah is effectively undermining the foundations of existence, and will consequently be lost to the world.

ד:ט

רַבִּי יִשְׁמָעֵאל בְּנוֹ אוֹמֵר:
הַחוֹשֵׂךְ עַצְמוֹ מִן הַדִּין,
פּוֹרֵק מִמֶּנּוּ אֵיבָה וְגָזֵל וּשְׁבוּעַת שָׁוְא,
וְהַגַּס לִבּוֹ בְּהוֹרָאָה,
שׁוֹטֶה רָשָׁע וְגַס רוּחַ.

4:9. His son, Rabbi Yishmael, liked to say: One who avoids litigation [thereby] frees oneself from enmity, theft, and false oaths, whereas one who treats judgment in a coarse way is a fool, a wicked person, and a vulgarian.

GORDON TUCKER

4:9. Rabbinic Judaism lived with a tension regarding human courts and their power to render judgment under the law. On the one hand, there was the ideal—traceable back to Moses and the judicial system the Torah twice describes him as setting up (see Exodus 18 and Deuteronomy 1)—of a law-based society in which justice could and would be executed by conscientious human judges. But at the same time there was the specter of the uncertainty that is inescapable in human judgment. That endemic uncertainty meant that the verdicts of human courts might be issued in error, which could then cause harm—physical, social, and financial—to people, resulting in possibly irrevocable injustice. The tension is exquisitely expressed in a difference of opinion recorded in the Talmud (at B. Sanhedrin 6b). There, one sage teaches us that compromise between two litigants (what we would call "settling out of court") is abhorrent, because it almost by definition leads to a resolution *not* founded on strict justice. But another sage counters that mediation of this sort is actually preferable to a solution imposed by judges seeking the truth of the matter, since the real point of the justice system is not to uncover the truth but to lead to the peaceful resolution of conflict. And, somewhat paradoxically, there is no real compromise possible between these two positions themselves. The preamble to the American Constitution states that that document aims to "establish justice" and to "insure domestic tranquility." But are these goals not potentially at odds with each other? And which is the higher goal: the attempt to uncover and serve objective truth, or the effort to achieve a livable peace?

Rabbi Yishmael ben Yosei, the author of this *mishnah*, apparently takes the side of caution, worrying more about the potential for human error—and the resultant harm thus caused to the lives of real people—than achieving the goal of absolute justice. Finding a way to avoid imposing judgment will spare a would-be judge other things: (1) the hatred and enmity of the litigant victimized by possible error, (2) the guilt that results from having imposed a financial loss on the losing party in error—an outcome that the victim of the error will experience as theft, and (3) the possibility of having overseen and rewarded a false oath on the part of the victorious party. (Of course, if the parties do not agree to settle, there may be no alternative to coming to the best decision possible.) And it hardly needs saying—although Yishmael states it explicitly here—that the hasty presumption that one *is* qualified to render such judgments is a sign of foolishness and hubris.

And yet, another text in the Talmud (also

at B. Sanhedrin 6b) admonishes the judge to go ahead, despite the uncertainties inherent in the judicial process, and to trust in God when conscientiously pursuing strict justice. A text in the Talmud of the Land of Israel (Y. Taanit 4:2, 68a) likewise suggests that carrying out strict justice will inevitably result in peace. Notwithstanding these more optimistic texts, there is naturally a tension and duality between justice and peace, which is in most cases inevitable, and can be resolved only by intentionally choosing one over the other.

TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

4:9. From the first part of this chapter, focused on the student, we now move to the second part of the chapter, which is focused specifically on the student ripening into a teacher. The greatness of Israel's Torah rests in its accessibility, in the fact that all have the potential to enter her gates as students while she, the Torah itself, hopes for them to leave later on as teachers. Indeed, all can delve deeply into the Torah—and also into themselves—and can keep at their studies until they ripen into mature teachers, taking their inspiration from the Torah and raising up students of their own.

This idea is expressed quite nicely by several of the verses that speak of the command to teach Torah to one's children, which appears in the liturgical recitation of the Shema. (And I am indebted to my teacher, Rabbi Michael Graetz, from whom I learned the following insights.) In the first paragraph of the Shema, we read: "Teach them [that is, words of Torah] again and again to your children" (Deuteronomy 6:7). The verb used here, *v'shinantam*, literally denotes repetition, implying that teaching at first must be accomplished through rote instruction, such that students absorb the material as it is presented over and over again, through repetition. But in the second paragraph of the Shema, we read: "Teach them to your children, by speaking of them" (Deuteronomy 11:19). The verb used here, *v'limadtem*, is the more common word for teaching. The shift from *v'shinantam* to *v'limadtem* suggests that it is only after a person has learned on one's own, from what he or she has received—only then is one truly able to teach one's children, guiding them to speak in their own voices from within the Torah, each in his or her own unique manner. That is the essence of the Torah's purpose: to prepare an individual to be first a student and then a teacher. And this insight is reflected in the very structure of this chapter of Avot: it is divided into a first part, about becoming a student, and a second part, about becoming a teacher. At the center is the Torah, a well of living waters that was given to human beings to enable them to quench their own thirst and then to slake the thirst of others.

This *mishnah* can be interpreted in several different ways, depending on how the verb *porek* (literally "to unload" or "to cast off") is understood. The translation in this volume understands this to be a positive unburdening, a "freeing" experienced by those who are able to resolve their disputes out of court: **one who avoids litigation [thereby] frees oneself from enmity, theft, and false oaths**. But it is also possible to understand that **Rabbi Yishmael** is here coming to teach something entirely different. First and foremost, a teacher must be willing to plunge into the very depths of human experience, and be prepared to adjudicate disputes between people. Those who have

studied Torah and yet are not prepared to use their Torah learning to adjudicate contentious court cases, making a fair determination between right and wrong, are themselves guilty of casting off (*porek*) responsibility—but doing so effectively burdens the world with the frustration of dissatisfied litigants, who may (because justice was not served) themselves then turn to **enmity** (between the litigants themselves, as well as animosity toward the justice system itself); **theft** (since the wrongdoing has not been righted); **and false oaths** (entailing the desecration of God's name). And by noting that **one who treats judgment in a coarse way is a fool, a wicked person, and a vulgarian**, Rabbi Yishmael might mean to imply the inverse: those who judge deliberately, fairly, and thoughtfully are to be respected and admired.

In a sense, a courtroom is a classroom, one firmly entrenched in the realities of the world. There we encounter rifts, pain, and wrongdoing . . . both the suffering souls of those who have unintentionally erred, as well as the wicked who are actively pursuing evil in the world. There, mercy and discernment are siblings who seek to forge a path toward worthiness and justice along the very muddy trail of life itself. Indeed, one who would be a judge but who treats the concept of judgment itself coarsely—without sensitivity, with a haste that tramples underfoot the delicate realities of the human experience—makes the court not into a classroom but into a firing range, endangering the Torah itself. Such a judge has learned nothing of the Torah at all, neither how to listen nor how to hear; not how to learn, and certainly not how to teach. And if one thing is certain in that room, it is the fact that such a judge is **a fool, a wicked person, and a vulgarian**: a fool, because such people have distanced themselves from the careful, patient discernment of their office; a wicked person, because they have distanced themselves from the divine gaze seeking to speak through them to the world, thus denying the reality of God's presence on earth; and a vulgarian, because instead of sallying forth into the world with their sails billowing with the spirit of Torah, they have callously allowed the wind to escape altogether. (Note that the Hebrew word *ruah* means both "spirit" and "wind.") In order to be a judge, Rabbi Yishmael teaches, one needs to do these two things: first, to carry the world's sorrow and corruption upon one's own shoulders and to pave the way forward for those who are downtrodden; and second, to deal with corruption vigorously—with strength tempered by humility, with a noble heart and with moderation—in order to find the frayed edges in the spirit of those who stand before the court and, by judging them fairly and justly, to heal *something*.

ד:י

הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר:
אַל תְּהִי דָן יְחִידִי,
שֶׁאֵין דָּן יְחִידִי אֶלָּא אֶחָד.
וְאַל תֹּאמַר קַבְּלוּ דַעְתִּי,
שֶׁהֵן רַשָּׁאִין וְלֹא אַתָּה.

4:10. He [also] used to say:
Do not [agree to] be the sole judge [of a case], for only the One [God] can be a sole judge.
Do not say [to the other judges] "Accept my opinion," for they are permitted [to do so on their own], but you may not [press them to do so].

GORDON TUCKER

4:10. The teaching in this *mishnah* can be seen as a direct continuation of the thoughts given in the previous one. Although there is no guaranteed antidote to the human propensity for error, one of the best correctives is to be in the habit of consulting with others—and this is why judicial decisions are generally to be made not by single judges but by panels of at least three. And although the Talmud in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that certain authorized experts may adjudicate cases on their own (B. Sanhedrin 4b–5a), this *mishnah* strongly discourages that practice, in frankly theological terms. To imagine that one can arrive at objective truth on one's own is to arrogate to oneself what is, in the end, a divine prerogative.

Later in this chapter (4:18) the Book of Proverbs will be quoted, to remind us not to rely only on our own intellectual ability. As noted in the commentary to 1:6 above, this is the basis for the pervasive rabbinic ideal of learning as proceeding through mutual engagement and dialectic (similar to the Socratic method called *elenchus*—that is, the practice of using refutations in order to sharpen arguments). And it leads directly to Yishmael ben Yosei's second admonition here: that the point of being in dialogue with others is not to press your point on them insistently, but rather to listen to alternative points of view that may challenge your own.

Although the content of this *mishnah* and the previous one is articulated in the language of the judicial setting, the emphasis on humility and on a suspicion of feelings of certainty is every bit as cogent and constructive when taken as more general advice about life's informal judgments.

TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

4:10. Rabbi Yishmael continues by teaching that the second thing teachers (including judges) need is company and partnership. Teachers cannot teach alone. Indeed, they must search the wide sea of knowledge and the broad wisdom that emerges from it, and they need friends and colleagues to teach alongside them. **Do not [agree to] be the sole judge [of a case], for only the One [God] can be a sole judge**, counsels Rabbi Yishmael. The greatest teacher there is in the world is the oneness that encompasses all being—that is, God. Prepare yourself, therefore, to seek God's nearness in all the teachers around you, and along with them forge a path that meets the challenges of humankind in your generation. Jewish tradition distances itself from the image of the lone, lionized teacher and instead embraces the image of Abraham (still called Abram, at that

point in the biblical narrative) setting out for the promised land—not as a solitary traveller, but in the company of "his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the wealth that they had amassed, and the persons they had acquired in Haran; and *they* set out for the land of Canaan" (Genesis 12:5).

ד:יא

רַבִּי יוֹנָתָן אוֹמֵר:
כָּל הַמְקַיְּמִים אֶת הַתּוֹרָה מֵעֹנִי,
סוֹפוֹ לְקַיְּמָהּ מֵעֹשֶׁר;
וְכָל הַמְבַטֵּל אֶת הַתּוֹרָה מֵעֹשֶׁר,
סוֹפוֹ לְבַטְּלָהּ מֵעֹנִי.

4:11. Rabbi Yonatan liked to say:
All those who observe [the laws of] the
Torah in [a state of] poverty
will eventually end up observing
[its laws] in [a state of] wealth,
but those who ignore [the laws of] the
Torah while in [a state of] wealth
will eventually end up ignoring them
in [a state of] poverty.

GORDON TUCKER

4:11. The structure of this *mishnah* is a bit misleading. That Rabbi Yonatan has praise for the poor person who observes the Torah's teachings while condemning the wealthy person who ignores them suggests that Jewish learning and living are most likely to be neglected by the poor, presumably because they will be too busy trying to make a living and will not have time for Torah. In a talmudic text (B. Yoma 35b), however, we find a somewhat different take on the relationship between financial security and faithfulness to the Torah, as we read there about two complementary role models. On the one hand we are told about Hillel, whose poverty and desperate need to earn a living could have kept him from spending time on Torah, but did not. And on the other hand we are told about Eliezer ben Ḥarsom, whose vast wealth and the need to manage it could also have kept him from Torah, but did not. Clearly, excuses for not fulfilling the mandates of Torah could be found at all points of the economic spectrum. That being the case, one who is wealthy and yet fulfills the Torah should also be deserving of praise, and one who is impoverished and neglects it should likewise draw criticism.

But this *mishnah* is focused on the ironic form of the "measure for measure" system of reward and punishment so familiar from the Bible and rabbinic literature. And so Rabbi Yonatan does not mention the wealthy individual who fulfills the Torah, for promising such a person greater wealth would not be ironic. And the same would hold true for punishing an impoverished person who neglects the Torah with more profound poverty. Yet, despite this *mishnah*'s rhetorical effect, the fact is that both scarcity and prosperity can be—and often are—used as reasons to set Torah aside in favor of what are seen as the practicalities of life. But the truest determinant of a life devoted to Torah is not economic status at all, but rather the degree of commitment one has to the value of that life and its values.

TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

4:11. Rabbi Yonatan, a student of Rabbi Yishmael, adds a new thought: a third thing teachers are called to do is reflect, in how they live their lives, the value-language that they speak. To be a teacher in this world is a mission. Those who would be teachers must commit to building a life that places at its center spiritual inspiration . . . a life based on morality, justice,

and *tzedakah*. Their lifestyles, expectations, and language—in teaching and in life—must reflect the Torah's values, and will thus pave the way for many others to follow. Moreover, teachers cannot separate words of Torah from a life of Torah; their lives must reflect, always, the contours of the proper life, as outlined in their lessons and their teachings. They should teach the building of a covenantal society founded on a sense of personal willingness to make do with what one needs, conducting life as best one can, and focusing one's attention not on acquiring wealth but rather on investing time and effort in the construction of a moral community and society. These points are especially important in our own time, as those who would become teachers must constantly re-evaluate their lives and choose their path forward thoughtfully and deliberately.

But it is not only study of Torah that we must consider; it is observance of the commandments as well. And so Rabbi Yonatan assures us that **All those who observe [the laws of] the Torah in [a state of] poverty will eventually end up observing [its laws] in [a state of] wealth.** He means this not necessarily in a materialistic way, but in the sense that such people will one day look around and see a world of kindness, built from their own personal efforts in concert with those of their students and colleagues. These are the long-lasting riches of those who are happy with their lot, referenced at the beginning of this chapter (4:1). And the inverse is also true: **those who ignore [the laws of] the Torah while in [a state of] wealth**—teachers who have made their Torah into an enterprise designed to generate endless income, and whose personal realm is flush with valuable and lavish material possessions—will eventually come to neglect the Torah. Its voice will be muted and the discourse and language of learning will eventually be silenced altogether—and so, metaphorically speaking, they **will eventually end up . . . in [a state of] poverty.**

רַבִּי מֵאִיר אוֹמֵר:
הֱוֵי מְמַעֵט בְּעֵסֶק וַעֲסֹק בַּתּוֹרָה,
וֱהֱוֵי שְׁפַל רוּחַ בִּפְנֵי כָל אָדָם.
וְאִם בִּטַּלְתָּ מִן הַתּוֹרָה,
יֵשׁ לוֹ בְּטֵלִים הַרְבֵּה כְּנֶגְדֶּךָ;
וְאִם עָמַלְתָּ בַתּוֹרָה,
יֵשׁ לוֹ שָׂכָר הַרְבֵּה לִתֶּן לָךְ.

4:12. Rabbi Meir liked to say:
Minimize time on business matters and [instead use that time to] engage in Torah [study], and be humble of spirit before all people.
If you are lax in [the study of] Torah, [God] has many idlers to consider just like yourself; but if you toil diligently in [the study of] Torah, [God] has a great reward to grant you.

GORDON TUCKER

4:12. Rabbi Meir. It is a bit odd that Rabbi Meir, the author of this *mishnah*, makes his very first appearance in Avot only here, well more than halfway through the tractate, because it could reasonably be argued that Rabbi Meir was one of the most important sages of the entire mishnaic period. A second-century student of Rabbi Akiva (and also of Elisha ben Avuyah, to be encountered below), he is considered to have been the conduit of his master's teachings, which formed the core of the Mishnah as redacted by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi. So strong was this presumption, in fact, that the Talmud lays down the principle that whenever we encounter a *mishnah* that is stated anonymously, we can be sure that we are reading the words and opinions of Rabbi Meir (B. Sanhedrin 86a). Many legends seek to embellish what is known of his life, but given his caution here of not overvaluing the world of business and commerce, it is perhaps relevant to note the tradition that he was a scribe (that is, a writer of sacred scrolls) by trade, and that scribes were known to earn a very minimal, basic living.

4:12. Minimize time on business matters and [instead use that time to] engage in Torah [study], and be humble of spirit before all people. This *mishnah* necessarily reminds us of Hillel's teaching in 2:6 above, which stated that not everyone who is involved in commerce will "necessarily become wise." But, just as above, this too is not an exhortation to embrace asceticism and abandon society and its commercial enterprises. Rather, Rabbi Meir means to remind us that although business can be a healthy and useful means to acquire the funds necessary to devote oneself to the study and practice of Torah, and to deeds of charity, one can also put too much emphasis on achieving success in the world of commerce. When business becomes an end to itself, its very raison d'être has been betrayed. This is clearly of a piece with what Rabbi Yonatan said in 4:11 above, about the dangers of neglecting Torah from a position of wealth and prosperity.

Presenting a humble mien is itself a restatement of the teaching of Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh about humility (see 4:4 above), in which the very same Hebrew term, *sh'fal ruaḥ*, is employed.

TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

4:12. Rabbi Meir, who was another of Rabbi Yishmael's students and the most important disciple of Rabbi Akiva, adds another dimension to the discussion: commitment. **Minimize time on business matters,** he teaches, because to **engage in Torah** and to be a teacher of Torah is not the sort of occupation that one might replace with another after a few years; it is a destiny and a unique way of life, a vow to be kept because dedication to a life of Torah is a commitment that cannot be simply cast off, but needs to be upheld, and fulfilled each and every day. And so one must be **humble of spirit before all people,** taking care neither to drive others to distraction in one's chosen role as teacher, nor to permit one's commitment in that regard to distance oneself from other people. "**All people**" is meant to remind us that there are indeed other responsibilities, other callings, that can await an individual, which are also precious in God's world; and the teacher should treat everyone with respect and consideration, no matter what one chooses as one's life path.

And this as well: Teachers who are **lax in [the study of] Torah,** who violate their spoken and unspoken vows to their own students by betraying the responsibility inherent in the teacher–student relationship, open the door to many additional violations (namely, those committed by the students who they will inevitably lead astray); while teachers who **toil diligently in [the study of] Torah,** keeping at their labors assiduously, will have the good fortune to see the fruits of their labors in the successes of their students, and in those students' own commitment to choose lives of Torah for themselves as well.

ד:יג

רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן יַעֲקֹב אוֹמֵר:
הָעוֹשֶׂה מִצְוָה אַחַת,
קוֹנֶה לוֹ פָּרַקְלִיט אֶחָד;
וְהָעוֹבֵר עֲבֵרָה אַחַת,
קוֹנֶה לוֹ קַטֵּגוֹר אֶחָד.
תְּשׁוּבָה וּמַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים
כִּתְרִיס בִּפְנֵי הַפֻּרְעָנוּת.

4:13. Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov liked to say:
One who performs a single *mitzvah* acquires a defender [in God's heavenly court], but one who commits a single transgression acquires a prosecutor [in that same courtroom].
[In the end,] repentance and good deeds are [the only real] protection against retribution.

GORDON TUCKER

4:13. **A defender . . . a prosecutor . . .** It is natural to think of the arena of advocacy and accusation referenced here as that of the posthumous judgment that awaits us all in the heavenly tribunal (as per 3:1 above and 6:9 below). But that is not the only possible reading; the *mishnah* can also be understood to refer to what we call today the "court of public opinion." On what does one's reputation most depend? What can advocate on behalf of a person in the minds of others, and what might indict an individual? The answer given here is that how a person acts in the world is the primary determinant of how he or she will be judged.

The theme of the previous *mishnayot* is here continued in a distinctive way by Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov, another of Rabbi Akiva's students. We have seen several formulations of the idea that a life of Torah-based piety holds primacy over the material prosperity that worldly affairs can bring. Now we are taught that the very best advocate that one can have for oneself is acquired with the currency of *mitzvot*, and that the most potent accuser one can face is the one who is activated and empowered by our misdeeds. We are invited to think of a person who wants to hire an advocate to argue on his or her behalf, and who imagines (as is all too common in our place and time) that such an effective advocate can be bought using the currency of the business world, just as other commodities are routinely purchased. Although such "acquisitions" may perhaps work in human court systems, they will work neither in the ultimate court of judgment on high nor in the informal court of public opinion below. In those arenas, not only does one require a record of pious acts, but it is also the case that one's misdeeds will, in effect, pay the salary of the state prosecutor!

It is noteworthy that the words used here for "advocate" and "accuser" (or "defender" and "prosecutor," as in the present translation) are not Hebrew words at all, but rather loanwords from the Greek. The word *p'raklit* is a Hebrew reworking of the Greek *parakletos*, while *kateigor* is a reworking of the Greek *kategoros*. The fact that Greek words are used here reflects the fact that in Jewish jurisprudence there were no professional advocates or accusers. Judges sworn to the law were to examine a person's deeds, and not the rhetorical flourishes in which they could be

dressed up. But the terms still have a useful metaphorical function—especially when imagining the proceedings in a heavenly "courtroom."

TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

4:13. Teachers offer, by the lives they live and the examples they set, a certain pace—a certain rhythm—to the society in which they live. And so Rabbi Eliezer ben Yaakov points out the fact that a teacher's way of life is always recognizable in every aspect of life, whether one is performing **a single *mitzvah*** or committing **a single transgression**. In that way, teachers may influence—that is, instruct—those in their ambit to move forward, one day at a time, one step at a time, each step following the next. Each step undertaken bears its own reward and deserves one's full attention. No step is self-evident. The teaching of the Torah is that every moment, every step, counts . . . one after another. It is a *torah*/teaching that shows no disdain at all for the smallest features of life, for life's most transitory moments. It does not skip over anything or hurry along. Instead, the Torah professes belief in the importance of every single moment of a person's life. And it is for that reason that **repentance and good deeds are [the only real] protection against retribution**: because those individuals who examine each and every one of their moments and actions, giving each one its due consideration, will shield themselves from retribution. The Hebrew word for "retribution" is *puranut*, which suggests unrestrained wildness in conduct. For example, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (in his commentary to Genesis 41:1) points out that the name "Pharaoh" seems to be related to the same root as *puranut* (namely, *pei-resh-ayin*), suggesting his unfettered behavior. In contrast, Jacob describes the proper way for one to live as consisting of self-restraint and deliberation: "As for me," he says, "I will travel slowly" (Genesis 33:14).

ד:יד

רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן הַסַּנְדְּלָר אוֹמֵר:
כָּל כְּנֻסִּיָּה שֶׁהִיא לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם,
סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם;
וְשֶׁאֵינָהּ לְשֵׁם שָׁמַיִם,
אֵין סוֹפָהּ לְהִתְקַיֵּם.

4:14. Rabbi Yoḥanan HaSandlar liked to say:
Every gathering [convened] for the sake of Heaven
will endure in the end,
but one not [convened] for the sake of Heaven
will not endure in the end.

GORDON TUCKER

4:14. **Gathering.** The word *k'neisiyah* is somewhat uncommon in Rabbinic Hebrew and is very general in nature. It could apply to almost any gathering, from a local coterie to an entire governmental structure. In the generation of Rabbi Akiva's students, there was no doubt a great need for a Jewish *consolatio* in the face of local informants, corrupt and cruel government officials, and the Roman Empire itself. The Jewish community no doubt needed assurance that no matter how powerful and successful a potentially hostile group or institution might be, it could not endure if it crossed God's purposes in the world. And just such an assurance is provided here, as it was provided countless times throughout the history of Jewish literature—from the prophets through the Book of Daniel, and into the centuries of discrimination and oppression under the medieval Church.

TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

4:14. Rabbi Yoḥanan HaSandlar teaches that **every gathering [convened] for the sake of Heaven will endure in the end**—that is, in order to ensure survival, any gathering of people undertaken must be informed, in one way or another, by a sense of striving for something beyond themselves. The teacher's task is to prepare people's hearts to be aware that simply gathering together will not suffice if such assembly is not also informed by a deep commitment to the service of God, if it does not seek to aim to reach toward the Divine. And it is precisely this sentiment that Jacob expresses (in the continuation of the verse cited above, at the end of the commentary to Avot 4:13), remarking that his pace will not be set by his brother or, for that matter, anyone else: he will travel "at the pace of the work that is before me" (Genesis 33:14).

ד:טו

רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן שַׁמּוּעַ אוֹמֵר:
יְהִי כְבוֹד תַּלְמִידְךָ חָבִיב עָלֶיךָ כְּשֶׁלָּךְ,
וּכְבוֹד חֲבֵרְךָ כְּמוֹרָא רַבְּךָ,
וּמוֹרָא רַבְּךָ כְּמוֹרָא שָׁמָיִם.

4:15. Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua liked to say:
Let the honor you show your student be as precious to you as your own [honor],
let the honor you show your colleague be [as intense] as the reverence [you have] for your teacher,
and let the reverence [you have] for your teacher be [the same] as the reverence [you have] for Heaven.

GORDON TUCKER

4:15. All of these—the honor due to one's student, one's own personal honor, the honor due to one's colleague, the reverence due to one's teacher, and the reverence due to Heaven—are equated in this teaching. The text of the *mishnah* that was before Maimonides, as well as other manuscripts, reads slightly differently from the text presented here, with the words *ki-kh'vod ḥaveirkha* in place of *k'shelakh*; thus, "Let your student's honor be as precious to you as your colleague's honor." But either version of the *mishnah* reads like an inversion of a statement of Rabbi Ḥanina preserved in the Talmud: "I have learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues even more than from my teachers, but from my students most of all" (B. Taanit 7a). In other words, students should never be disrespected because—as Rabbi Ḥanina testifies—their (initial) instances of confusion and their probing questions are often the straightest paths to increased wisdom. And it is for this specific reason that it is so important to safeguard the honor of one's students with the same energy one brings to being zealous about the dignity of one's peers. And again, in keeping with Ḥanina's testimony, the honor of one's peer must have the same gravity as the reverence for one's master. (A ubiquitous trope in rabbinic literature is the analogy between teachers and parents; just as the Torah commands reverence for parents [Leviticus 19:3], so is it interpreted to be commanding reverence for teachers as well.[6])

What is added here—and it is very much in the spirit of Avot, which begins with the ultimate teacher (namely, Moses) receiving instruction from on high—is that the reverence for a teacher of Torah is itself analogous to the reverence one should feel in the presence of God. Analogous to, but of course not identical to. The prefix used in the Hebrew (*k'*), which conveys approximation, makes that clear.

TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

4:15. A teacher has to have a history, a sense of rootedness in the past. A teacher has to be part of a chain, part of an ongoing succession of teacher and learner and teacher. Every teacher must have his or her own teacher, and must be willing to continue transmitting the ancient tradition that has been passed on by that teacher. A teacher must also have a living

6. In this regard, see the exegesis of Deuteronomy 6:13, attributed to Rabbi Akiva, preserved in B. Pesaḥim 22b and B. Bava Kama 41b.

colleague, with whom to debate freely. And a teacher needs students who will pass all of this on to subsequent generations of teachers and students.

This idea of a dynamic gathering—an ongoing intergenerational colloquy of students who are teachers and teachers who are students—is further developed by Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua, who adds depth to the core concepts in play: student, colleague, and teacher. **Let the honor you show your student be as precious to you as your own [honor]**, he teaches, emphasizing that first of all comes the student. Teachers' eyes look toward their students and even beyond, to future generations whom they themselves will not know; teachers think and deliberate on behalf of those who are yet to come, teaching for *their* sake, and taking the lessons inspired by the Torah and actualizing them in real life, also for their sake. After that, guided by the exhortation to be mindful regarding **the honor you show your colleague**, a teacher's gaze comes to rest on one's present-day colleagues, those with whom one sharpens one's own learning. Ideally, colleagues share a vision of reality (together with its challenges), and jointly direct their inner resources to articulate its precise needs and then pave a shared path toward its betterment. And last but not least are the teachers' own teachers, about whom Rabbi Elazar teaches: **Let the reverence [you have] for your teacher be [the same] as the reverence [you have] for Heaven**. It is *this* group, representing the past, who passes on to a younger generation what had been transmitted to *them*, together with *their* own new insights; it is *they* who lay their hands upon their disciples and charge them with bearing their teachers' legacy into the world and making it part of their own legacy as well. That symbolic act of laying on of hands, teacher to student, bears the ancient secret of those who direct their lives to carry forward the legacy of their forebears, adding to it and renewing it even as they transmit it. Doing so will inevitably cause one to be suffused with a sense of reverence for Heaven. Indeed, all teachers personally embody the best qualities of student, colleague, and teacher, thus stepping outside of time and into history—to embrace a mission that exists both within the flow of historical moments but also outside of past and future time as we know it.