

פרק ו
פרק קנין תורה

Chapter Six
Perek Kinyan Torah

Introduction and Commentary
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פֶּרֶק קִינָן תּוֹרָה
שְׁנוּ חֻכָּמִים בְּלִשׁוֹן הַמִּשְׁנָה.
בְּרוּךְ שֶׁבָּחַר בָּהֶם וּבְמִשְׁנָתָם.

THE CHAPTER CALLED KINYAN TORAH
("The Acquisition of Torah"),

which our sages taught in the language of the Mishnah.
Blessed be the One who chose them [as students] and who,
even now, looks with favor on their teachings.

The sixth chapter of Avot traditionally bears this heading. Since it is clearly not originally part of the Mishnah, this chapter is widely presumed to have been added to the five original chapters of Avot in order to provide material to study on the sixth of the Shabbatot that fall between Pesah and Shavuot, the time of year when the tractate is traditionally studied in its entirety.¹ And, indeed, this chapter appears elsewhere as well: as the seventeenth chapter of the post-talmudic midrashic work Tanna D'vei Eliyahu Zuta (where it is attributed not to Rabbi Meir but to Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanos), and also as the fifth chapter of Kallah Rabbati, an ancient work of no less obscure origins than the Tanna D'vei Eliyahu. The decision to include the chapter in this volume is thus fully justified by tradition: it may not, technically speaking, be part of the mishnaic Tractate Avot, but it is certainly part of Pirkei Avot as it has been studied and enjoyed by countless generations of Jews.

(Please note that although each individual paragraph of any chapter of the Mishnah is called a *mishnah*, the technical name for lessons from the sages of that time that were not included in the Mishnah proper is *baraita*, literally "an outside teaching." Since this sixth chapter of Pirkei Avot is specifically not part of the original Mishnah, I will speak of its lessons as *b'raitot*.)

1. The sixth chapter is not included, for example, in the Kaufmann codex, the oldest extant complete manuscript of the Mishnah. Also, at least one sage mentioned herein lived after the close of the Mishnah (Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, at 6:2). The earliest references to studying Avot on the Shabbatot between Pesah and Shavuot go back to the academies of ninth-century Iraq, among which some speak specifically of "Avot and Kinyan Torah" in this regard—that is, the mishnaic tractate called Avot and the added chapter called Kinyan Torah. For more details in this regard, see the comments of Aryeh Tuchman published in *Siddur Lev Shalem for Shabbat and Festivals* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2016), pp. 258–259.

רַבִּי מֵאִיר אָמַר:
 כָּל הָעוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה לְשִׁמָּה
 זוֹכֶה לְדִבְרִים הַרְבֵּה. וְלֹא עוֹד,
 אֲלֵא שֶׁכָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ בְּדִי הוּא לוֹ.
 נִקְרָא רַע אֲהוּב, אוֹהֵב אֶת הַמָּקוֹם,
 אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת, מְשַׁמֵּחַ אֶת
 הַמָּקוֹם, מְשַׁמֵּחַ אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת.
 וּמִלְבָּשֶׁתוֹ עֲנָוָה וִירְאָה;
 וּמִכְשָׁרְתוֹ לִהְיוֹת צַדִּיק וְחָסִיד, יֵשֶׁר
 וְנָאֵמָן; וּמִרְחֻקְתּוֹ מִן הַחֲטָא;
 וּמִקְרִבְתּוֹ לִידֵי זְכוּת.
 וְנִהְיִין מִמֶּנּוּ עֲצָה וְתוֹשִׁיָּה,
 בִּינָה וְגִבּוֹרָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
 לִיעֲצָה וְתוֹשִׁיָּה, אֲנִי בִינָה,
 לִי גִבּוֹרָה (משלי ח:יד).
 וְנוֹתַנָּת לוֹ מַלְכוּת וּמִמְשָׁלָה
 וְחֻקּוֹר דִּין.
 וּמִגְלִין לוֹ רֵזִי תּוֹרָה, וְנַעֲשֶׂה כְּמַעֲיָן
 הַמִּתְגַּבֵּר, וְכִנְהָר שְׁאִינוּ פּוֹסֵק.
 וְהוּא צָנוּעַ וְאַרְךְ רוּחַ,
 וּמוֹחֵל עַל עֲלָבוֹנוֹ.
 וּמַגְדִּילָתוֹ וּמְרוֹמְמָתוֹ
 עַל כָּל הַמַּעֲשִׂים.

6:1. Rabbi Meir liked to say:

Anyone who engages in [the study of]
 Torah for its own sake merits many things.
 Furthermore, the entire world is even said
 to exist for that individual's sake alone.
 [Such a one] is called a beloved friend,
 a lover of the Omnipresent, a lover
 of humanity, a bringer of joy to the
 Omnipresent, and a bringer of joy to
 humanity.

[The Torah] garbs such people in humility
 and reverence [for God]; qualifies them
 to be [called] righteous, pious, upright,
 and trustworthy; distances them from sin;
 and draws them close to [the reward for]
 meritorious behavior.

From such people, others receive counsel
 and wisdom, insight and encouragement,
 as it is said: "Counsel and wisdom
 are Mine; I am insight [itself], and
 encouragement too is Mine" (Proverbs 8:14).
 Furthermore, [the Torah] endows such
 people with [an aura of] sovereignty
 and governance, as well as the skill to
 investigate [effectively before coming to]
 judgment.

To such people are revealed the secrets
 of the Torah, so that they become [like] a
 powerfully flowing spring, like a river that
 never ceases [to flow].

Such a people become modest and
 patient, [even] forgiving of personal
 affront.

And [the Torah] makes such people great
 and raises them up above all other [divine]
 creations.

6:1. No idea is more basic to the rabbinic worldview than the notion that there is endless salutary value to the study of Torah—an idea expressed in countless ways throughout rabbinic literature in general, including Avot. Here, however, Rabbi Meir presents a midrash expanding on that basic idea and teaches that Torah study does not merely have the capacity to make the student wise or learned, but can actually transform that student into the Jewish version of the ideal individual, a human being blessed with the greatest of God's gifts and who personally embodies the most desirable of God's blessings.

But what exactly *are* those gifts and blessings? Most moderns, if offered the proverbial three wishes by a djinn of some sort, would probably ask for some combination of wealth, health, and personal happiness—yet none of these things appears on Rabbi Meir's list. Instead, Rabbi Meir conceives of the ideal person as someone who continually and creatively develops new insights from earlier ones (thus innovating authentically and responsibly), yet whose skill in interpreting the law and deriving new ethical and moral

insights from the ancient text leads not to arrogance, superciliousness, or self-referential haughtiness, but rather to humility, patience, and modesty. Such people, whose serious engagement with Torah has engendered the charisma of natural leadership, lead *not* to dominate others, but to bring greater justice into the world. Such people do not exploit their stature by punishing or humiliating those who either inadvertently or intentionally insult them, but instead treat such people with endless forbearing and forgiveness. They are considered beloved friends and cherished companions by all who seek their counsel and they are thus to be recognized also as lovers of God—saints who, because they bring joy to others, also bring joy to God. And that constitutes Rabbi Meir's image of the ideal human being, of the consummate individual who truly epitomizes the divine image in which we all are created. On the other hand, what Rabbi Meir would have made of those whose Torah learning leads to presumptuousness, pretentiousness, and pomposity is not at all hard to imagine.

אָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻעַ בֶּן לֵוִי:
בְּכָל יוֹם וַיּוֹם בֵּית קוֹל
יוֹצֵאת מֵהָר הָהָר

וּמִכְרֹזֹת וְאוֹמֶרֶת:

אֹי לָהֶם לְבָרִיּוֹת מַעֲלָבוֹנָה שֶׁל

תּוֹרָה—שָׁכַל מִי שֶׁאִינוֹ עוֹסֵק

בִּתּוֹרָה נִקְרָא נָזוּף, שְׁנֵאֲמַר:

נָזִים זֶהָב בְּאַף חֲזִיר, אִשָּׁה יָפָה

וְסִרְתָּ טָעַם (משלי יא:כב).

וְאוֹמֶר: וְהִלַּחַת מַעֲשֵׂה אֱלֹהִים הַמָּה,

וְהַמְּכַתֵּב מִכְתָּב אֱלֹהִים הוּא,

חֲרוֹת עַל־הַלַּחַת (שמות לב:טז).

אַל תִּקְרָא חֲרוֹת אֶלָּא חֲרוֹת,

שֶׁאִין לָךְ בֶּן חוֹרִין אֶלָּא מִי

שֶׁעוֹסֵק בִּתְלֻמּוֹד תּוֹרָה.

וְכָל מִי שֶׁעוֹסֵק בִּתּוֹרָה תָּדִיר

הָרִי זֶה מִתְעַלָּה, שְׁנֵאֲמַר:

וּמִמִּתְנָה נַחֲלִיאֵל

וּמִנַּחֲלִיאֵל בָּמוֹת (במדבר כא:ט).

6:2. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said:

Each and every day a heavenly voice goes forth from Mount Horeb and proclaims:

“Woe to those people who show contempt for the Torah”—

for whoever does not engage in [the study of] Torah is [rightly] called “censured” (*nazuf*), as it is said:

“As a ring of gold in a swine’s snout [the sound of which words in Hebrew suggests the word *nazuf*], so is a fair woman without discretion” (Proverbs 11:22).

Scripture also says: “The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tablets” (Exodus 32:16).

[In this verse,] do not read *harut* (“graven”) but rather *heirut* (“freedom”), for you will find no [truly] free individual other than one who is engaged in Torah study.

And all who regularly engage in [the study of] Torah [thus] exalt themselves, as it is said: “And from Matanah [literally ‘gift’] to Nahaliel [literally ‘inheritance’] and from Nahaliel to Bamot [literally ‘high places’]” (Numbers 21:19).

6:2. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, a sage who lived and taught in the Land of Israel in the third century CE, imagines a world in which Jews are constantly obligated to choose between two paths forward: one leading away from Torah, and thus to the kind of intellectual stagnation that in turn leads to spiritual desiccation; and the other, the path of spiritual integrity, leading to

wholeness in God. Of this latter path, Rabbi Yehoshua finds some subtle hints in a few obscure place-names mentioned in a verse that lists some of the waystations at which the Israelites camped on their way through the wilderness to the promised land. Where these places are exactly, nobody can say with certainty. But the progression from one place to the next suggested something much more

than simply an ancient itinerary to Rabbi Yehoshua, who found in their names something of the trajectory—the just and noble trajectory—that Jews should ideally take when negotiating their journey forward through life and having to decide at juncture after juncture which specific path to take.

Taking the name Matanah literally to mean “gift” and the name Nahaliel literally to denote a bequest from God, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi notes that one must begin one’s journey by accepting the Torah as a gift—that is, as something unearned that a beneficent donor has unilaterally bestowed. One can then move on to appreciate that Torah is not just a *gift*, but actually a *bequest* that Jewish individuals inherit by virtue of their membership in the House of Israel. For Rabbi Yehoshua, then, one begins by relating to the Torah personally and then—having embraced the notion that Torah is a gift from God not to humankind in general or even to the Jewish people *qua* nation, but one given to each individual Jewish soul personally and individually—moving on to consider one’s relationship to the Torah in the larger context of one’s sense of Jewishness. And then one moves on to the third step, Bamot, which

word literally means “high places.” There’s irony afoot here too: the “high places” mentioned in Scripture are elevated shrines at which the Israelites were forbidden to worship, but in this *baraita* that same word denotes the exalted heights of intellectual achievement to which all students of Torah naturally aspire. And so the journey—from Gift to Bequest to High Places—takes one from *understanding* study as a path toward self-improvement, to *appreciating* study as a means of integrating the self within the larger mission and destiny of the Jewish people, and finally to *accepting* Torah study as the path to true spiritual maturity. This, says Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, is the path of true freedom.

The alternate path, on the other hand, leads to disconnectedness from one’s people and from God. It is the path that leads to censure and rebuke. And it is the path that will be followed solely by people who lack any real devotion to the struggle toward redemption that is the hallmark of authentic, mindful Jewishness . . . and in whose mouths the words of Torah resemble nothing so closely as a golden ring in a swine’s snout.

הַלּוֹמֵד מִחֵבֶר פָּרָק אֶחָד—
 או הִלְכָּה אַחַת, או פְּסוּק אֶחָד,
 או דְּבוּר אֶחָד, או אֶפִּילוֹ אוֹת אַחַת—
 צָרִיךְ לִנְהוֹג בּוֹ כְּבוֹד,
 שֶׁכֵּן מִצִּינוּ בְּדוֹד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל,
 שֶׁלֹּא לָמַד מֵאַחִיתָפַל אֶלָּא שְׁנֵי
 דְּבָרִים בְּלִבָּהּ, וְקָרָאוּ רַבּוֹ אֱלוֹפוֹ
 וּמִידְעוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: וְאַתָּה אֲנוֹשׁ
 בְּעַרְפִּי, אֱלוֹפִי וּמִידְעִי (תְּחִלִּים נה:יד).
 וְהֵלֵךְ דְּבָרִים קָל וְחֹמֶר:
 וַיֵּמָּה דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל, שֶׁלֹּא לָמַד
 מֵאַחִיתָפַל אֶלָּא שְׁנֵי דְּבָרִים בְּלִבָּהּ,
 קָרָאוּ רַבּוֹ אֱלוֹפוֹ וּמִידְעוֹ,
 הַלּוֹמֵד מִחֵבֶר פָּרָק אֶחָד—
 או הִלְכָּה אַחַת, או פְּסוּק אֶחָד,
 או דְּבוּר אֶחָד, או אֶפִּילוֹ אוֹת אַחַת—
 עַל אַחַת בִּמְהָ וּכְמָה שֶׁצָּרִיךְ
 לִנְהוֹג בּוֹ כְּבוֹד.
 וְאֵין כְּבוֹד אֶלָּא תוֹרָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
 כְּבוֹד חֲכָמִים יִנְחָלוּ (מִשְׁלֵי ג:לה).
 וְתַמִּימִים יִנְחָלוּ טוֹב (מִשְׁלֵי כח:י).
 וְאֵין טוֹב אֶלָּא תוֹרָה, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר:
 כִּי לָקַח טוֹב נָתַתִּי לָכֶם, תּוֹרַתִּי
 אֶל־תַּעֲזוּבוּ (מִשְׁלֵי ד:ב).

6:3. One who learns a single chapter of
 Scripture from another person—
 or a single *halakhah*, or a single verse, or a
 single remark, or even a single letter—
 must act respectfully toward that person,
 for we learn as much by considering [the
 behavior of] David, king of Israel, who
 learned only two things from Ahitofel,
 yet who called him his teacher, his master,
 and his intimate friend, as it is said:
 “You are a man of my rank, my master,
 and my intimate friend” (Psalm 55:14).
 Now it surely stands to reason:
 if David, king of Israel, learned only two
 things from Ahitofel and yet called him
 his teacher, his master, and his intimate
 friend, surely one who learns a single
 chapter of Scripture from another
 person—or a single *halakhah*, or a single
 verse, or a single remark, or even a single
 letter—how much the more so must one
 act respectfully toward that person.
 And “respect” [in this context] denotes
 [the honor due] the Torah, as it is said:
 “The wise shall inherit respect” (Proverbs
 3:35) and “The guileless shall inherit
 goodness” (Proverbs 28:10).
 And the word “goodness” here refers
 [specifically] to the Torah, as it is said:
 “As I have given you a good doctrine,
 forsake not My Torah” (Proverbs 4:2).

6:3. And now, having established the eternal worth of Torah study as the medium in which Jews can forge a path forward toward an ongoing sense of God's enduring presence in their personal ambits, the third *baraita* in the chapter asks an obvious question: How exactly *can* someone acquire the knowledge needed to pursue a life of meaningful Torah study?

Moderns will no doubt expect the answer to have something to do with focused attention to the lectures of wise teachers, regular attendance at adult education classes, weekly presence in synagogue for the rabbi's sermon, and the study of sacred books. All that is no doubt important, but the author of our anonymous *baraita* knows too that people do not have unlimited time to devote to formal educational activities. And the author of this text also knows that it is possible to waste years searching for the "right" teacher, all the while feeling noble about refusing to settle for second best. Having top-notch, expert teachers is certainly desirable... but the *baraita* wishes to suggest another route forward, reminding us that learning need not be limited to classroom lessons that are taught by professional teachers—because, in the end, there is no one who has nothing to teach, no one from

whom it is impossible to learn *something*. As a result, the lifelong learner must never pass up the opportunity to learn anything at all from whatever teacher may be present in his or her life at any given moment. Moreover, one must show consummate respect for such an individual, even if the sum total of what one learns from that individual is quite small. Apparently, there is no such thing as learning so negligible that it need not stimulate a sense of gratitude in the learner.

Earlier on in Pirkei Avot (at 4:1), Ben Zoma asked for the definition of the truly wise individual, and opined that such a person is anyone who is ready—and able—to learn *something* from every other individual he or she encounters. Our *baraita* here simply builds on that idea, reminding us that we should not only jump at the opportunity to learn from every other living soul, but that we must show great respect to those souls—not *as though* they were our teachers, but because they in fact *are* our teachers. The entire world is a classroom and all the people in it, each and every one of them, a potential teacher... if only we open our hearts to the idea of learning from everyone, and open our ears to what even the least likely person we encounter might have to teach us.

כָּךְ הִיא דְרָכָהּ שֶׁל תּוֹרָה:
 פֶּת בַּמֶּלֶח תֹּאכֵל, וּמִים בַּמְשׁוּרָה
 תִּשְׁתֶּה, וְעַל הָאָרֶץ תִּישָׁן,
 וְחַי צֶעַר תַּחֲיָה—
 וּבַתּוֹרָה אַתָּה עֹמֵל.
 וְאִם אַתָּה עוֹשֶׂה כֵן,
 אֲשֶׁרִיף וְטוֹב לָךְ (תהלים קכח:ב).
 אֲשֶׁרִיף בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה,
 וְטוֹב לָךְ לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

6:4. In contemporary Western culture, the better a school is, the more opulent its setting is likely to be and the more gorgeous its appurtenances. State-of-the-art computer labs, cutting-edge gymnasiums, world-class libraries, expensively appointed seminar rooms, opulent faculty lounges, thickly carpeted dorm rooms, and well-stocked cafeterias bursting with healthy dining options—all of these are widely considered to be the trappings of fine institutions of higher learning.

Our *baraita*, on the other hand, has precisely the opposite idea: to be fully devoted to study, it claims, one needs to eliminate (or, at least, minimize) the physical pleasures that mostly distract us and rarely, if ever, enhance our ability to learn. Gorgeous campuses replete with creature comforts, therefore, count for nothing—because a life lived simply and without distraction is the key element that leads to success in learning. Where we sleep has no importance either, nor does what we eat or drink. Indeed, the simpler our bed and our food, the less likely it is that we

6:4. This is the way of the Torah [scholar]: eat bread [just] with salt, drink water in measured quantities, sleep on the ground, endure a life of hardship—

but toil in [the study of] Torah.

If you do so, “You shall 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.

will be drawn to them and hence away from our studies.

Moderns, at least those used to undertaking academic pursuits while surrounded in personal comfort, will find this *baraita* harsh and its lesson at best counter-intuitive. But the text has some simple truths behind it that should make its lesson both realistic and appealing. Whatever distracts us from learning detracts from our prospects of intellectual success. It is far easier to be distracted by luxury than by simplicity. What draws us away from our books cannot also be imagined to lead us toward those same books. In study, concentration is everything . . . and what diminishes the likelihood of concentration can never be imagined, therefore, to constitute a boon for the student. Only undistracted study can lead to success in learning. (Readers may wish to compare this *baraita* with two earlier *mishnayot* in Avot: 2:8, in which Hillel teaches about the relative unimportance of material goods and creature comfort, and 3:9, in which Rabbi Yaakov cautions about the dangers of distraction from study.)

אֶל תִּבְקֹשׁ גְדֻלָּה לְעַצְמְךָ
וְאֶל תִּתְחַמֵּד כְּבוֹד.
יֹתֵר מִלְמוּדֶךָ עֲשֵׂה
וְאֶל תִּתְאַוֶּה לְשִׁלְחָנָם שֶׁל מְלָכִים,
שֶׁשִׁלְחָנְךָ גָּדוֹל מִשִּׁלְחָנָם
וְכִתְרְךָ גָּדוֹל מִכִּתְרָם,
וְנֶאֱמַן הוּא בֶּעַל מְלֶאכֶתְךָ,
שִׁישְׁלֵם לְךָ שָׂכָר פְּעֻלָּתְךָ.

6:5. One after another, our *baraita* ticks off various things people seek out in life and derides them as empty and worthless. Personal greatness, in the form of fame and reputation, may be sought after by countless souls who yearn for the sense of self-validation that comes from the praise and respect of others—but it is worthless, the time spent in its pursuit pointlessly and irretrievably squandered. The honor one receives from worshipful admirers is meaningless blather that serves merely to help one feel justified in looking away from one's own faults and shortcomings. Learning is useless if it doesn't inspire principled moral behavior that is finer and more refined precisely *because* of one's devotion to one's studies.

Moreover, the goal is not for one's ethical behavior in life to meet a basic standard of "normal" decency expected by society, but to surpass it—and this should be the case

6:5. Do not seek out greatness for yourself and do not covet honor.

Let your deeds be greater than your learning and do not yearn for [a seat at] the table of monarchs, for your table is greater than their table and your crown is greater than their crown. Furthermore, your Employer can be trusted to pay you the compensation for your labor.

precisely *because* one's studies have led one to expect more of oneself than the barest minimum. The majesty of kings is just store-bought finery, their crowns merely bejeweled helmets. The rewards of Torah study, on the other hand, constitute the only true and lasting definition of wealth: the right to live one's life in the light of God's enduring presence and in the company of the righteous. Those wages, paid out (so to speak) by the Almighty to those who labor faithfully in God's sacred vineyard—that is the only kind of wealth that matters. These ideas sound simple enough to embrace . . . but can we actually set our fascination with life's creature comforts aside long enough truly to believe that Torah scholars are wealthier than kings and queens? That is the real question this *baraita* poses and leaves for us to ponder . . . and then, if we dare, to answer honestly.

גְּדוּלָּה תוֹרָה יוֹתֵר מִן הַפְּהָנָה
וּמִן הַמַּלְכוּת,

שֶׁהַמַּלְכוּת נִקְנִית בְּשָׁלֹשִׁים מַעֲלוֹת,
וְהַפְּהָנָה בְּעֶשְׂרִים וְאַרְבַּע,
וְהַתּוֹרָה נִקְנִית בְּאַרְבָּעִים
וּשְ�מוֹנֶה דְּבָרִים.

וְאֵלֶּה הֵן:

בְּתִלְמוּד, בְּשִׁמְיעַת הָאָז,

בְּעִרְיַת שְׂפָתַיִם,

בְּבִינַת הַלֵּב, בְּשִׁבְלוֹת הַלֵּב,

בְּאַיְמָה, בְּיִרְאָה, בְּעִנּוּת, בְּשִׁמְחָה,

בְּשִׁמוּשׁ חֲכָמִים, בְּדַבּוּק חֲבֵרִים,

בְּפִלְפּוּל הַתְּלַמִּידִים,

בְּיִשׁוּב, בְּמִקְרָא, בְּמִשְׁנָה,

בְּמַעֲוֵט שָׁנָה, בְּמַעֲוֵט שִׁיחָה,

בְּמַעֲוֵט תַּעֲנוּג, בְּמַעֲוֵט שְׂחֹק,

בְּמַעֲוֵט דֶּרֶךְ אֶרֶץ,

בְּאֶרֶךְ אַפִּים, בְּלֵב טוֹב,

בְּאַמוּנַת חֲכָמִים, וּבִקְבָּלַת הַיְסוּרִין,

הַמְּפִיר אֶת מְקוֹמוֹ, וְהַשְׂמִיחַ בְּחֻלְקוֹ,

וְהַעוֹשֶׂה סִיג לְדַבָּרֵי,

וְאֵינוֹ מַחְזִיק טוֹבָה לַעֲצָמוֹ,

אֲהוּב,

אוֹהֵב אֶת הַמָּקוֹם,

אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת,

אוֹהֵב אֶת הַצַּדִּיקוֹת,

אוֹהֵב אֶת הַתּוֹכָחוֹת,

אוֹהֵב אֶת הַמִּישָׁרִים,

6:6. The Torah is greater than priesthood
and royalty,

for royal bearing is acquired through
thirty qualities of character,
and priestly bearing through twenty-four,
but the Torah is acquired in forty-eight
[distinct] ways.

And these are they:

study, listening carefully with one's ears,
speaking clearly with one's lips,

heartfelt understanding,

heartfelt insight,

fear, reverence, humility, joy,

serving sages, bonding with colleagues,

argumentation with students,

reconciliation [of conflict],

[study of] Scripture,

[study of] Mishnah,

minimizing sleep,

minimizing conversation,

minimizing [physical] pleasure,

minimizing levity,

minimizing sexual activity,

patience, goodheartedness,

faith in sages,

acceptance of suffering,

knowing one's place,

being content with one's lot,

making a fence around one's words,

foregoing pride in oneself,

being beloved [by others],

loving the Omnipresent,

loving other people,

loving righteousness,

loving [principled] rebuke [by others],

loving decency,

מִתְרַחֵק מִן הַכְּבוֹד,
 וְלֹא מִגִּיס לְבוֹ בְּתַלְמוּדוֹ,
 וְאִינוֹ שֶׁמֶח בְּהוֹרָאָה,
 נוֹשֵׂא בְעַל עִם חֲבֵרוֹ,
 וּמִקְרִיעוֹ לְכַף זְכוּת,
 וּמַעֲמִידוֹ עַל הָאֲמֶת,
 וּמַעֲמִידוֹ עַל הַשְּׁלוֹם,
 וּמִתְיָשֵׁב בְּתַלְמוּדוֹ,
 שׂוֹאֵל וּמַשִּׁיב שׂוֹמֵעַ וּמוֹסִיף,
 הַלּוֹמֵד עַל מִנָּת לְלַמֵּד,
 וְהַלּוֹמֵד עַל מִנָּת לַעֲשׂוֹת,
 הַמַּחֲכִים אֶת רַבּוֹ,
 וְהַמְכִּינִן אֶת שְׂמוּעָתוֹ,
 וְהַאֲמִיר דְּבַר בְּשֵׁם אוֹמְרוֹ.
 הָא לְמִדָּת שְׁכָל הָאוֹמֵר דְּבַר בְּשֵׁם
 אוֹמְרוֹ מִבִּיא גְּאֻלָּה לְעוֹלָם, שְׁנֵאֲמַר:
 וְהָאֵמֵר אֶסְתֵּר לְמַלְךְ בְּשֵׁם מְרִדְכִי
 (אסתר ב:כב).

distancing oneself from honor,
 not being arrogant about one's learning,
 not taking pleasure in judgment,
 sharing another's burdens,
 giving another the benefit of the doubt,
 drawing another to truth,
 drawing another to peace,
 reconciling [inconsistencies] in one's
 learning,
 asking [questions] and responding [in
 such a way that one first] listens and [then]
 adds [to what one has heard],
 learning in order to teach,
 learning in order to do,
 adding to one's teacher's wisdom,
 citing others with precision,
 and saying things in the name of those
 who said them first.
 From this you may learn that anyone who
 says something in the name of the one
 who [first] said it brings redemption to the
 world, as it is said:
 "And Esther spoke to the king in the
 name of Mordechai" (Esther 2:22).

6:6. What are the characteristics of a great Torah scholar? It sounds like a simple enough question, but this *baraita* scruples actually to identify the specific qualities and skills one should cultivate in order to become the kind of insightful interpreter of the ancient text who not just *learns* Torah but who *actually lives* it. True Torah scholars do not merely reiterate what they have heard from their own teachers, after all. Instead, they cultivate a kind of learning that is personal and deeply idiosyncratic—while at the same time remaining fully faithful to the traditional

lessons received from their teachers. And how exactly does one join their ranks? That is the question to which this text addresses itself, offering a list of forty-eight specific qualities the would-be scholar should endeavor to nurture. The items on the list do not admit to easy characterization or organization, however.

One broad theme, which should hardly come as a surprise to students of Avot, is that Torah scholars must build their learning on a foundation of profound and deeply held moral principles. They must be humble,

decent, and kind human beings. They must shoulder their colleagues' burdens cheerfully and helpfully. They must generously extend the benefit of the doubt to others. They should listen before they speak. In a world of strife and discord, they should be peacemakers. When another steps forward to offer even stern counsel, they must be receptive to—and even grateful for—that correction, shrugging off the natural irritation people feel when their personal errors are pointed out to them by others. Above all, they should root their personal comportment outside the academy in the lessons they learn and teach inside its walls, thereby becoming not merely learned people but in fact the walking, talking—*living*—exemplars of their own lessons.

Another broad theme that underlies many of the qualities listed here is the expectation that would-be great scholars must allow their commitment to study to dominate their daily schedules, not allowing even attention to simple daily chores to intrude on their study time. The would-be great scholar will therefore always do what it takes to maximize time in the study hall . . . and will accept that ob-

ligation cheerfully. Indeed, the most basic of life's needs, the need for restful sleep, may itself be subjugated to the need to review one's lessons: there are, after all, only twenty-four hours in the day and time spent resting in bed is, by definition, time spent not studying. Nor should the pleasure of time whiled away with friends be allowed to encroach on time that could be spent bent over one's books. Indeed, when it comes to spending time in the pursuit of life's pleasures—those connected with satisfying physical activity, with lighthearted banter, or even with the pursuit of sexual satiety—our *baraita* dourly notes that such time is by definition *also* time spent away from one's books. In other words, the text is teaching that becoming a great scholar of Torah requires a huge commitment of time—time that could otherwise be spent on other things, many of which are entirely reasonable, wholly desirable, and fully moral ways to spend one's time! And so, sternly but fully reasonably, our *baraita* simply points out that would-be greats who ignore that reality are distancing themselves from their own goal. No more than that . . . but also no less.

גְּדוֹלָהּ תּוֹרָה, שֶׁהִיא נֹתֶנֶת חַיִּים
לַעֲשֵׂיהָ בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה וּבְעוֹלָם הַבָּא,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: בְּיַחֲיִים הֵם לְמַצְאֵיהֶם,
וּלְכָל־בָּשָׂרוֹ מְרַפָּא (משלי ד:כב).
וְאוֹמֵר: רַפְאוֹת תְּהִי לְשֶׁרֶף וְשִׁקּוֹי
לְעִצְמוֹתָיִךְ (משלי ג:ח).
וְאוֹמֵר: עֵץ־חַיִּים הִיא לְמַחְזִיקִים
בָּהּ, וְתוֹמְכֶיהָ מְאֹשֶׁר (משלי ג:יח).
וְאוֹמֵר: כִּי לֵוִית חֵן הֵם לְרֹאשָׁךְ,
וְעֲנָקִים לְגִרְגְּרֹתֶיךָ (משלי א:ט).
וְאוֹמֵר: תֵּתֵן לְרֹאשְׁךָ לֵוִית־חֵן,
עֲטֹרַת תְּפָאֶרֶת תִּתְמַגֵּנֶנְךָ (משלי ד:ט).
וְאוֹמֵר: כִּי־יִי יִרְבּוּ יָמֶיךָ,
וְיוֹסִיפוּ לָךְ שָׁנוֹת חַיִּים (משלי ט:יא).
וְאוֹמֵר: אַרְךְ יָמִים בְּיִמְיָנְךָ,
בְּשִׂמְאַלָּהּ עֶשֶׂר וּכְבוֹד (משלי ג:טו).
וְאוֹמֵר: כִּי אַרְךְ יָמִים וּשְׁנוֹת חַיִּים
וְשָׁלוֹם יוֹסִיפוּ לָךְ (משלי ג:ב).

6:7. Great is Torah, for it gives life to those who practice it, [both] in this world and in the world-to-come,

as it is said: "For they are life to those who find them, and healing to all their flesh" (Proverbs 4:22).

Scripture also says: "It shall be healing to your body and marrow to your bones" (Proverbs 3:8).

Scripture also says: "It is a tree of life to those who grasp it, and those who support it are content" (Proverbs 3:18).

Scripture also says: "For they shall be an ornament of grace for your head, and a necklace around your neck" (Proverbs 1:9).

Scripture also says: "It shall give an ornament of grace to your head, a crown of glory shall it deliver to you" (Proverbs 4:9).

Scripture also says: "For through Me your days shall be increased, and the years of your life shall be increased" (Proverbs 9:11).

Scripture also says: "Length of days is in its right hand, and in its left hand are wealth and honor" (Proverbs 3:16).

Scripture also says: "For length of days and years of life and peace shall they add to you" (Proverbs 3:2).

6:7. At first blush, this *baraita* appears to be nothing more than a list of verses from the Book of Proverbs presented as prooftexts to buttress the assertion that the Torah's greatness lies not solely in its capacity to enhance life in *this* world, but also in its ability to grant life in the world-to-come to those who cling to its values. And, indeed, each of the verses

cited manages somehow to suggest that the Torah is not merely a repository of sacred information, but also a source of vitality and vigor strong enough to transcend the boundary between this world and the next.

But contemplating these verses from Proverbs hardly teaches us anything new: the verses only work as pegs on which to hang

familiar lessons, and are not actually the generative sources of new lessons or insights. Rather than evaluating the worth of this kind of rabbinic exegesis, then, readers would do better to focus on the *baraita*'s opening assertion that the key to being *truly* alive in the world—as opposed to being *merely* alive in the banal sense that animals or even plants are alive—lies in embracing the Torah through the inculcation of its values, obedience to its laws, fealty to its foundational ideas, and acceptance of its stories as the defining narrative of Jewishness itself. And that notion, that there are different degrees of being alive in this world, is well worth contemplating.

Generally speaking, moderns use the word

“alive” to describe the state of being animate, of not being dead. But our *baraita* takes the idea of “alive” one step further and posits that it is possible to be fully *animate*, yet at the same time not fully *alive* in the ultimate sense of the word. And it is the Torah that offers the key to how a human being might transcend “mere” existence and become alive in that fullest possible sense. That is the kind of living that the ancient prophet no doubt had in mind when, channelling the divine spirit, he proclaimed in God’s name *dirshuni vilyu* (“know Me and [in so doing] become alive,” Amos 5:4). But whether moderns can truly learn to live in that exalted way is hardly a question that can be answered by perusing ancient books.

רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן מֵנַסְיָא
אוֹמֵר מְשׁוֹם רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן
בֶּן יוֹחָאִי:

הַנּוֹי, וְהַפֶּת, וְהַעֶשֶׂר, וְהַכְּבוֹד,
וְהַחֲכָמָה, וְהַשִּׁיבָה, וְהַבְּנִים,
נָאָה לְצַדִּיקִים וְנָאָה לְעוֹלָם,
שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: עֲטֹרַת תְּפָאֶרֶת שִׁיבָה,
בְּדֶרֶךְ צְדָקָה תִּמְצָא (משלי טו:לא).
וְאוֹמֵר: עֲטֹרַת חֲכָמִים עֶשְׂרֵם
(משלי יד:בד).

וְאוֹמֵר: עֲטֹרַת זִקְנִים בְּנֵי בָנִים,
וְתִפְאֶרֶת בָּנִים אֲבוֹתָם (משלי יז:א).
וְאוֹמֵר: תִּפְאֶרֶת בַּחוּרִים כָּחֶם,
וְהִדָּר זִקְנִים שִׁיבָה (משלי כ:כט).
וְאוֹמֵר: וְחִפְרָה הַלְבֵנָה וּבֹשֶׁה
הַחֲמָה, כִּי־מֶלֶךְ יִהְיֶה צְבָאוֹת בָּהֶר
צִיּוֹן וּבִירוּשָׁלַיִם, וְנִגְדָּה זִקְנָיו
כְּבוֹד (ישעיהו כד:כג).

רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן מֵנַסְיָא
אוֹמֵר: אֱלֹ שֶׁבַע מִדּוֹת,
שֶׁמֶנּוּ חֲכָמִים לְצַדִּיקִים,
כֻּלָּם נִתְקִימוּ בְּרַבִּי וּבְבָנָיו.

6:8. Rabbi Shimon ben Menasia liked to say in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai:

Corneliness, strength, wealth, honor, wisdom, the hoary head, and children are pleasing to the righteous and pleasing to the world, as it is said: "The hoary head is a crown of glory; it shall be found in the way of righteousness" (Proverbs 16:31).

Scripture also says: "The crown [of wisdom] is the wealth of the wise" (Proverbs 14:24). Scripture also says: "Children's children are the crown of the elderly, but parents are the glory of their children" (Proverbs 17:6).

Scripture also says: "The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendor of the elderly is the hoary head" (Proverbs 20:29).

Scripture also says: "Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed, when Adonai of the heavenly hosts shall reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem; the glory [of God] shall be before the elderly" (Isaiah 24:23).

Rabbi Shimon ben Menasia liked to say: The seven qualities that the sages attributed to the righteous were all to be found in Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi] and his sons.

6:8. What are life's greatest rewards? Given the general tenor of Avot, we would expect a reference to wisdom, Torah learning, or virtue, but instead our *baraita* opens up unexpectedly with a reference to physical comeliness. And that is not the only surprise on our

list: after beauty, the *baraita* mentions physical strength, and then goes on to mention wealth and the experience of being honored by others. Moderns will no doubt consider all of these things desirable, perhaps imagining them as well-earned rewards for righteous

living—as is the very last item on the list, the great blessing of children able to carry one's legacy into the future. But one of the items is something we are dramatically less likely to consider a positive boon: *seivah*, old age, which is *also* listed as among the most desirable of life's blessings.

We all hope to grow old, by which sentiment we mean that we hope not to die young. Obviously, we moderns with access to first-world medical care would set the bar considerably higher in terms of the actual ages we hope to attain than would have the sages of antiquity. But the *baraita* does not seem to be saying that attaining old age is a blessing merely because one has not died prematurely. Instead, it suggests that old age *itself* is a blessing . . . not only because attaining a venerable age is preferable to suffering an early death, but also, in some sense, because old age *itself* is preferable to youth.

According to Avot, old age is wisdom. Old age is experience. Old age is insight into the ways of the world, which one cannot have while navigating the turmoil of youth or negotiating the traumata of middle age. Old age is, if one has devoted one's life to the study of Torah, the time finally to put all the pieces of the puzzle in place and thus to understand deeply and profoundly what life truly is all about. To grow old, therefore, is not a blessing simply because it means one has not died young. It is a desirable commodity in its own right: it is the season of life most suffused with wisdom and insight, the crowning achievement of a life earlier—but ideally no longer—rife with struggle, anxiety, and toil. In other words, longevity is a blessing not only because of what old age isn't. It is a blessing too because of what it is: the crowning achievement of a virtuous life lived in harmony with the Torah's eternal values.

אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹסִי בֶן קִסְמָא:
 פֶּעַם אַחַת הָיִיתִי מְהַלֵּךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ
 וּפָגַע בִּי אָדָם אֶחָד, וְנָתַן לִי שָׁלוֹם
 וְהִחֲזַרְתִּי לוֹ שָׁלוֹם. אָמַר לִי:
 רַבִּי, מֵאִיזָה מְקוֹם אַתָּה?
 אָמַרְתִּי לוֹ: מֵעִיר גְּדוֹלָה שֶׁל חֲכָמִים
 וְשֶׁל סוֹפְרִים אָנִי. אָמַר לִי: רַבִּי,
 רְצוֹנְךָ שֶׁתִּדּוֹר עִמָּנוּ בְּמִקְוֵמָנוּ?
 וְאֲנִי אֶתֶּן לָךְ אֶלֶף אֶלֶפִים דִּינָרִי
 זָהָב וְאַבְנִים טוֹבוֹת וּמִרְגָּלִיּוֹת.
 אָמַרְתִּי לוֹ: בְּנִי, אִם אַתָּה נוֹתֵן
 לִי כָּל כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב וְאַבְנִים טוֹבוֹת
 וּמִרְגָּלִיּוֹת שֶׁבָּעוֹלָם,
 אֵינִי דֹר אֶלָּא בְּמִקְוֵם תּוֹרָה—
 לִפִּי שֶׁבִשְׁעַת פְּטִירְתּוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם אֵין
 מְלוֹיִן לוֹ לְאָדָם לֹא כֶסֶף וְלֹא זָהָב
 וְלֹא אַבְנִים טוֹבוֹת וּמִרְגָּלִיּוֹת,
 אֶלָּא תּוֹרָה וּמַעֲשִׂים טוֹבִים בְּלִבָּהּ,
 שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: בְּהִתְהַלֵּכְךָ תִּנְחָה אֶתָּה,
 בְּשִׁכְבְּךָ תִּשְׁמֹר עָלֶיךָ,
 וְהִקִּיצוֹת הִיא תִּשְׁיַחֲךָ (משלי ו:כב).
 בְּהִתְהַלֵּכְךָ תִּנְחָה אֶתָּה—בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה.
 בְּשִׁכְבְּךָ תִּשְׁמֹר עָלֶיךָ—בְּקִבְּךָ.
 וְהִקִּיצוֹת הִיא תִּשְׁיַחֲךָ—לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא.
 וְכֵן כְּתוּב בְּסֵפֶר תְּהִלִּים עַל יְדֵי דָוִד
 מֶלֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל: טוֹב לִי תוֹרַת פִּיךָ
 מֵאֶלְפֵי זָהָב וְכֶסֶף (תהלים קיט:עב).
 וְאוֹמַר: לִי הַכֶּסֶף וְלִי הַזָּהָב,
 נָאִם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת (חגי ב:ח).

6:9. Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma said:

Once, when I was walking down the road, a man met me and greeted me and I returned the greeting.

He said to me, "Rabbi, from what place do you come?"

I said to him, "I am from a great city of sages and scholars."

He said to me, "Rabbi, would you agree to dwell with us in our place? [If you would,] I will give you a million dinars of gold, and precious stones and pearls."

I said to him, "My son, if you were to give me all the silver and gold and precious stones and pearls in the whole world, I would not dwell anywhere but in a place of Torah—for when we die, it is not silver or gold or precious stones or pearls that accompanies us, but Torah and good deeds alone, as it is said: 'When you walk about, it shall lead you; when you lie down, it shall guard you; when you awaken, it shall speak to you' (Proverbs 6:22).

When you walk about, it shall lead you—[this refers to] in this world. When you sleep, it shall guard you—[this refers to] in the grave. When you awaken, it shall speak to you—[this refers to] the world-to-come. And thus it is written in the Book of Psalms, by David, king of Israel: 'The Torah of Your mouth is more valuable to me than thousands of gold and silver [coins]' (Psalm 119:72).

Scripture also says: 'Silver is Mine and gold is Mine, says Adonai of the heavenly hosts' (Haggai 2:8)."

6:9. And now, of all things, a story. The Mishnah has very few stories, and most are hardly more than vignettes conjured up for the sake of illustrating some specific point.² But here, almost entirely out of the blue, we are presented with a story—the only one in all of Pirkei Avot. (Perhaps Avot 2:7, where we read about Hillel coming across a human skull floating in a river, could be taken as a second example of a story. But it's surely not much of one!)

Of Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma we know not too much. He was a second-century sage, probably a resident of Tiberias, who believed that the Jews of Roman Palestine should submit peacefully to Roman rule. Yet Rabbi Yosei also believed in the imminence of messianic redemption, and the Talmud records that he actually offered his disciples a specific sign they could watch out for and thus know in advance when the messianic age was almost upon them (B. Sanhedrin 98a).

The story itself is straightforward enough, but moderns will find it hard to understand Rabbi Yosei's decision to turn down a fortune to travel to a distant city and teach Torah in that place because he simply could not bring himself to live someplace other than in an already functioning *m'kom torah*, a place of ongoing Torah study. It feels like a surprising approach. Isn't that what rabbis do, after all—travel to distant places where the Torah is unfamiliar to (or at least unembraced by) the Jewish inhabitants and, by setting a personal example and by teaching invitingly and

preaching forcefully, encourage and inspire observance of the commandments? Why, then, was Rabbi Yosei so unwilling to go, and particularly with such a very attractive salary offer? Was he a young man as our story begins, perhaps inexperienced and unsure if he could perform adequately totally on his own? Or might he have been elderly and in a state of physical decline, therefore feeling the need to be around people who shared his worldview and his spiritual orientation, rather than serving as a leader of strangers in a strange place?

In the end, we cannot know why Rabbi Yosei responded as he did. We will thus do better to ask not about Rabbi Yosei at all, but rather about the extent to which finding and settling in a *m'kom torah* is crucial to our own sense of well-being. How important is it for us to live in close proximity to a thriving Jewish community, one with which we can affiliate and in which we can take active roles? How crucial is it for us to have a rabbi nearby from whom we can learn Torah and solicit answers to the philosophical, halakhic, and spiritual problems that plague us? How critical is it for us to live in a place where there are rich opportunities for Jewish growth and serious learning? These may be painful, stress-inducing questions for many of us even to ask aloud, let alone to answer honestly. But that is the whole point of Rabbi Yosei ben Kisma's story: not just to tell us about something that once happened (if indeed it did ever happen), but to challenge us to find ourselves in the story and, through its contemplation, to learn something about the way we ourselves choose to live . . . and particularly with respect to the company we choose to keep and the places we choose to live.

2. For more about how those brief vignettes can serve as gateways into some of the Mishnah's most profound lessons, see my book, *The Boy on the Door on the Ox: An Unusual Spiritual Journey Through the Strangest Jewish Texts* (New York: Aviv Press, 2008).

חֲמִשָּׁה קִנְיָנִים קָנָה הַקָּדוֹשׁ
 בְּרוּךְ הוּא בְּעוֹלָמוֹ, וְאֵלוֹ הֵן:
 תּוֹרָה, קִנְיִן אֶחָד;
 שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ, קִנְיִן אֶחָד;
 אַבְרָהָם, קִנְיִן אֶחָד;
 יִשְׂרָאֵל, קִנְיִן אֶחָד;
 בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, קִנְיִן אֶחָד.
 תּוֹרָה קִנְיִן אֶחָד, מִנֵּין?
 דְּכַתִּיב: יְהוָה קִנְיִן רִאשִׁית דְּרַפּוֹ,
 קֹדֶם מִפְּעֻלּוֹ מֵאֶז (משלי ח:כב).
 שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ קִנְיִן אֶחָד, מִנֵּין?
 שְׁנֵאמַר: כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה, הַשָּׁמַיִם
 כִּסְאִי וְהָאָרֶץ הֶדֶם רַגְלִי, אֵיזָה
 בֵּית אֲשֶׁר תִּבְנוּ לִי וְאֵיזָה מְקוֹם
 מִנוּחֹתִי (ישעיהו סו:א).
 וְאוֹמַר: מִהֲדַרְבוֹ מַעֲשֵׂיָהּ, יְהוָה,
 כֻּלָּם בְּחִכְמָה עָשִׂיתָ, מְלֶאכֶה הָאָרֶץ
 קִנְיָנָךְ (תהלים קד:כד).
 אַבְרָהָם קִנְיִן אֶחָד, מִנֵּין? דְּכַתִּיב:
 וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ וַיֹּאמֶר, בְּרוּךְ אַבְרָם לְאֵל
 עֲלִיוֹן, קָנָה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ (בראשית יד:יט).

6:10. The blessed Holy One [personally] acquired five created things in this world, and these are they:

the Torah is one such acquisition; heaven and earth are [together considered] another such acquisition; Abraham is another such acquisition; Israel is another such acquisition; and the Temple is another such acquisition.

From where [do we learn] that the Torah is one such acquisition?

[From the verse in which] it is written: "Adonai acquired me first of all, on the path [of creation] even before the [most] ancient [of God's] works" (Proverbs 8:22). From where [do we learn] that heaven and earth [too] are acquisitions [in this category]?

[From the verse in which] it is said: "Thus says Adonai, 'The heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. What kind of house would you build for Me? What kind of place [would you fashion as] My resting place?'" (Isaiah 66:1).

Scripture also says: "Adonai, how manifold are Your works! You created them all with wisdom; the earth is full of Your [created] acquisitions" (Psalm 104:24).

From where [do we learn] that Abraham was [another such] acquisition [of God's in the world]?

[From the verse in which] it is written: "And he blessed him, saying, 'Blessed be Abram to God Most High, Acquirer of heaven and earth'" (Genesis 14:19).

יִשְׂרָאֵל קָנִין אֶחָד, מִכֵּין?
 דְּכַתִּיב: עַד־יַעֲבֹר עִמָּךְ, יְהוָה,
 עַד־יַעֲבֹר עִם־זוֹ קִנְיָתָ (שְׁמוֹת טו:טז).
 וְאוֹמֵר: לְקַדְּשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־בְּאַרְץ הַמָּה,
 וְאֵדִירִי כָּל־חִפְצֵי־כֶם (תְּהִלִּים טו:ג).
 בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ קָנִין אֶחָד, מִכֵּין?
 שְׁנֵאמַר: מִקְדָּשׁ אֲדֹנִי כּוֹנֵן יָדֶיךָ
 (שְׁמוֹת טו:יז). וְאוֹמֵר: וַיְבִיֵּאם אֶל־
 גְּבוּל קִדְשׁוֹ, הַר־זֶה קִנְיָתָהּ יְמִינוֹ
 (תְּהִלִּים עח:גד).

From where [do we learn] that Israel was [another such] acquisition?
 [From the verse in which] it is written:
 "Until Your people passes over, Adonai, until the people You acquired passes over" (Exodus 15:16).
 Scripture also says: "As for the holy people that live on earth, they are the noble ones in whom is My whole delight" (Psalm 16:3).
 From where [do we learn] that the Temple was [another such] acquisition?
 [From the verse in which] it is said: "The Temple, Adonai, which Your hands established" (Exodus 15:17).
 Scripture also says: "And God brought them to the territory of [God's] sanctuary, [even to] this mountain that God's right hand acquired" (Psalm 78:54).

6:10. What we believe about God is often inconsistent, at times even illogical. We may say that God is everywhere, because divine omnipresence *feels* like a basic tenet of monotheism. But we also speak about God being more intensely present in some specific places—at the Western Wall, for example, or even in the sanctuaries of our own synagogues—even though such a comment seems to imply that God, if fully present in *some* places, must therefore also be absent (or at least less than fully present) in *other* places. And our beliefs about divine omniscience are similar: we often say that God knows all, but we also embrace the concept of free will... which seems to require that God *not* know whether we will obey some specific law or keep some particular commandment in ad-

vance of our own decision to act. When it comes to theological dogma, we appear to be more than capable of living peacefully with a bit of paradox.

And now we find ourselves facing yet another theological paradox: the idea of divine ownership of specific things. We say that the world and all that is in it belongs to God (as proclaimed in Psalm 24). The prophet Haggai proclaimed that even the gold and silver that we hold so dear actually belong to God and are held merely in temporary stewardship by those who "own" them according to the laws of human society (2:8). And so, just as we embrace other inconsistent ideas about God, we learn from this *baraita* that, even though the world and all that it contains belong to God, we can also maintain the belief

that God can somehow also possess certain *specific* things—even if that notion appears to require that there be certain other things that God does *not* possess.

And the *baraita* not only asserts that God can possess certain things, but actually goes so far as to enumerate five of them. One is a book. One is the universe, here called “heaven and earth.” One is a man. One is a nation. And one is a building. What it means in the ultimate sense for God to “own” anything is hard to say. But, at least in this context, it feels likely that the term will be best understood to denote a level of intimate connectedness with the thing possessed so that two spheres of otherwise disparate existential reality merge slightly—thus making two discrete things not merely owner and owned, but in fact partners who are so intensely *involved* in each other’s existence that the relationship itself alters both parties to it.

To contemplate the things on the *baraita*’s list—the Torah, the universe, our father Abraham, the people Israel, and the holy Temple—is therefore to focus on those elements outside of God that, if they were to

stop existing, would in some way impinge upon divine reality. What that could possibly mean in the ultimate sense is probably something no mere mortal could ever grasp. But the notion that there are things—specific, nameable things—that are so intimately related to God’s perceptible existence in the created world that God would be differently perceived without them—that is an idea for moderns to ponder thoughtfully and carefully. We might also do well to ask ourselves what *we* would put on such a list, if challenged to create one that reflects our own ideas about God and the world. God’s existence is surely not predicated on the existence of this or that *thing* in the panoply of divine accessories and accoutrements. But to ask ourselves which of our *beliefs* about God could be materially altered without the change making it impossible for us to continue to understand divine reality in the style to which we have become accustomed over the years of our lives—that really is a very interesting question for any individual of faith to ponder.

כָּל מֵה שֶׁבָּרָא הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא
 בְּעוֹלָמוֹ לֹא בָּרָא אֱלֹא לְכָבוֹדוֹ,
 שְׁנֵאֲמַר: כָּל הַנִּקְרָא בְּשִׁמִּי,
 וְלִכְבוֹדִי בְּרֵאתִיו יִצְרָתִיו
 אֶף-עֲשִׂיתִיו (ישעיהו מ"ד).
 וְאוֹמֵר: יְהוָה יִמְלֹךְ
 לְעֹלָם וָעֶד (שמות ט"ו:יח).

6:11. As noted, it is widely believed that this sixth chapter was added to the original five of the mishnaic tractate because of the need for a final chapter to correspond to the last of the six Shabbatot that stretch out between Pesah and Shavuot, the traditional time of year for the study of Pirkei Avot. And so, lest Jews everywhere be annually tempted just before Shavuot (the festival celebrating the revelation at Sinai) to entertain the notion that the bestowal of the Torah on Israel was meant somehow to grant superior status to the Jewish people over other, Torah-less nations, this sixth chapter concludes with a sobering reminder that *all* that God has created in the world—including not only the House of Israel and its holy Torah, but all other peoples as well—was created solely for the glory of God.

6:11. Everything that the blessed Holy One created in this world was created solely for the glory of God, as it is said: "I have created, made, and fashioned for My own glory all that is called by My name" (Isaiah 43:7). And Scripture also says: "Adonai shall reign for ever and ever" (Exodus 15:18).

Can we modern readers get down from our lofty pedestals long enough to embrace that sublime truth fully and without reservation? Can we learn to live in the world in a way that reflects our belief that the God of Israel *is* the God of the nations... and that failing to embrace that principle is tantamount to denying that God created the world? More to the point, can we learn to serve the Creator by embracing the intrinsic worth that inheres in all of God's creatures and acting accordingly? Can faith make people proud but not haughty, strong but not arrogant, empowered but not condescending? These are the penetrating—and more than slightly unsettling—questions with which Pirkei Avot concludes!

Mishnah Recited After Studying Pirkei Avot

*After studying Pirkei Avot, it is customary to recite the following
ancient lesson from Tractate Makkot:*

רבי חנניא בן עקשיא אומר:
רצה הקדוש ברוך הוא לזכות את ישראל,
לפיכך הרבה להם תורה ומצוות,
שנאמר: יהוה חפץ למען צדקו יגדיל תורה ויאדיר (ישעיהו מב:בא).
— משנה מכות ג:טז

Rabbi Hanania ben Akashia liked to say:
Wanting to grant merit to Israel,
the blessed Holy One gave them the Torah and its many commandments,
as it is said: “Adonai, eager to act for the sake of divine righteousness,
makes the Torah great and mighty” (Isaiah 42:21).

—MISHNAH MAKKOT 3:16

THE COUNTERPART to the lesson from Tractate Sanhedrin traditionally recited before studying Pirkei Avot, this lesson from Tractate Makkot is traditionally recited upon concluding one’s study of Avot (or any part of it). According to Rabbi Simḥah of Vitry, whose thoughts on the opening *mishnah* were cited above (pages xxxvii–xxxviii), this concluding lesson was chosen simply to provide a rousing finish to a study session devoted to Avot—presumably one both less depressing than the teaching of Ben Hei Hei that concludes the tractate as it appears in the *Mishnah* proper, and less theocentric than the lesson that concludes the sixth chapter of Avot in its expanded, six-chapter version. (For a discussion of the status of the sixth chapter of Avot, see the discussion on pages xiii and 284 above.) That may be as good a reason as any for including this teaching, but moderns might choose to focus instead on the fact that tradition chooses to end any encounter with Pirkei

Avot with, of all things, an ancient lesson about the notion of *z'khut* (here translated as "merit").

Z'khut has many nuances, but is most regularly used to designate the kind of merit that accrues to an individual as a kind of legacy from worthy ancestors whose dedication to the service of God and the study of God's Torah was profound enough to outlive them. Rabbi Hanania's lesson itself ignores the heritable aspect of *z'khut*, however, and focuses on the two avenues along which we may travel in pursuing the kind of personal merit that has the potential to transform an individual from a mere cog in the wheel of human endeavor into a player in the great redemptive drama that is history, and particularly Jewish history, itself. These twin avenues, the study of Torah and the service of God through the observance of the commandments, are available to all. Neither is reserved for the rich or the mighty, nor is either attainable solely by the brightest scholars or their most devoted students. And thus we conclude the study of Pirkei Avot prompted to internalize two profound ideas: that the *z'khut* to participate personally in the ever-unfolding history of the Jewish people is available to all of the House of Israel who commit themselves to the worshipful service of God and the study of the Torah . . . and that this *z'khut* is itself a gift from God.

By reflecting on this idea after studying Avot, we remind ourselves that this noble thought must be tempered with the caution that intellectual engagement and ritual observance are only meaningful in the context of the soul that yearns purposefully and palpably for moral perfection. Surely, this is what the ancient master Rava meant when he declared (in a lesson I discussed in my preface to this volume, on page xii above) that the way for anyone to attain true piety is simply to embrace the lessons of Pirkei Avot. And *that*, surely, is exactly the right lesson for anyone to hear just before closing the book in hand and going out into the world to live as a person among people—and as a Jew among Jews—in a world in which studying Torah is routinely disparaged as intellectual obscurantism, ritual observance is regularly downplayed as behavioral quirkiness, and the lifelong quest to maintain and promote strong moral standards is too often dismissed as indicative of illiberality, intransigency, or intolerance. Avot knows better! And so will those who study it carefully and take its lessons to heart.

—MSC

Afterword to Pirkei Avot

TAMAR ELAD-APPELBAUM

Our feet stand at the threshold of the future. The hour is near when our ancient dream is to be interpreted. What will its content be? The Hebrew nation has obtained a ticket back into its land to do the work that awaits it there. What, then, will be the content of the social and national life of Zion restored in our days, the life that will be made here?

—Berl Katznelson, "Toward the Coming Days"

על סף העתיד עומדות רגלינו. שעת
הפתרון לחלום הקדומים מתקרבת.
מה יהיה תוכנו? העם העברי השיג
את כרטיס־הכניסה לשוב לארצו
ולעשות את העבודה המחכה
לו. מה איפוא יהיה תוכן החיים
הלאומי־החברתי של שיבת ציון
בימינו, תוכן החיים אשר יעשו פה?
—ברל כצנלסון, "לקראת הימים הבאים"

THUS DID BERL KATZNELSON begin his speech at the assembly of workers in Rehovot in 1918. It was in the period after the Balfour Declaration, when the leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine were busy creating a framework for a national life, that Katznelson tried to direct their gaze toward the essential question they were facing: How would the nation be constituted? His question echoes from a time long ago, from the sages of Tractate Avot, to the pioneers of modern Israel—and then all the way to us. Indeed, many Jews living in the modern State of Israel (and around the world) continue to devote thought to that very question, as they seek the upright path that a people returning to Zion should choose, if they are to create strands of connection between the past and the future in a way that will reflect Jewish life and thought *and* be both respectful of the past and appropriate for our own era. This commentary to Tractate Avot has attempted to describe the program for educating the individual Jew, as proposed by the Jewish sages of antiquity and dispatched by them to us, across the ocean of time that separates us. Its starting point is an outline of the scope of life itself and an invitation to the individual to explore life, equipped with the inspiration of Torah. Its continuation

1. Originally published in 1914 in *Likrat HaYamim HaBairim* and reprinted in Berl Katznelson, *K'tavim* (Tel Aviv: Hotzaat Miflegat Poalei Eretz-Yisrael, 5708 [1947/1948]), p. 246.

is in the building of faith and the construction of the character of the person of faith. Its further continuation lies in the ability of individuals to realize their efforts on behalf of the collective, and in constructing the image of the Jewish pioneer. Following that comes the building of the stature of a Jewish teacher, who tells his or her students about the encounter between spirit and action, thus awakening in them the will also to become learners, and teachers among the people as well. The tractate ends by charging each and every Jew to recognize his or her mission, and to go and do his or her own part in building the world. Avot should perhaps be read as a kind of succinct ethical will, a spiritual portrait complete in five chapters, that gathers together a group of ancient teachers, whose teachings are then passed on to generations of Jews who will carry it in their pockets at all times.

What shall be done? How shall we do it? What will we, all of us, do with the legacy bequeathed to us by our ancestors? The right to answer these questions is in the hands of all individuals of our generation, both in Eretz Yisrael and also all around the world, who will decide whether this time is the end of the day or just its beginning . . . and will choose whether to give nothing or to give everything.

I want to express my thanks for the guests who have stopped in and visited us at such an early hour . . . for the hour is indeed early. We are still at the beginning of the day, and it may be that people who come after us will look at this picture and think for a moment: here is the beginning . . . and they may not know that for us this was not the beginning but everything.

—Natan Alterman, *Kineret, Kineret*³

והנני מודה גם לאורחים שנודמנו
ובאו אלינו בשעה כל כך מוקדמת
... כי השעה מוקדמת. עוד אנחנו
בראשיתו של יום, ויתכן כי אנשים
אשר יבואו אחרינו יביטו בתמונה
הזאת ויהרהרו לרגע: הנה ההתחלה
... ולא ידעו אולי כי בשבילנו לא
היתה זו התחלה כי אם הכל.
— נתן אלתרמן, כנרת, כנרת²

2. Natan Alterman, *Kineret Kineret* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad and the Teiatron Hakamari, 1962), pp. 132–133.

3. The English translation of the passage was prepared by Martin S. Cohen for publication in this volume.