

Jewish Ethics

The Life-Elevating Wisdom of Pirkei Avot

In loving memory of Yehuda ben Ita Esther A"H

4:1

Learning from a Thief

The tzadik Rabbi Meshulam Zusya of Anipoli, of blessed memory, learned a number of methods of serving G-d from a thief: a) He works quietly without others knowing. b) He is ready to place himself in danger. c) The smallest detail is of great importance to him. d) He labors with great toil. e) Alacrity. f) He is confident and optimistic. g) If he did not succeed the first time, he tries again and again.

(Hayom Yom, 3 Iyar)

Witnesses

You are my attesters (*eidai*), says G-d.

(Isaiah 43:10)

Up/Down

...In Heaven above and upon earth below.

(Deuteronomy 4:39)

Feeling Stuck?

Do not look behind you and do not stand on any of the plain; run to the mountain, lest you be swept away.

(Genesis 19:17)

Protect Your Head

He took from the stones of the place and placed them about his head.

(Genesis 28:11)

4:2***More Than Good Deeds***

Mitzvah = Tzavta (bond, connection)

4:3***People of the Pom***

Even the 'empty ones' are filled with mitzvot like a pomegranate [is filled with seeds].

(Talmud, Chagigah 27a)

Instant Transformation

There are those who acquire the World to Come in numerous years, and there are those who acquire the World to Come in an instant.

(Talmud, Avodah Zarah 54b)

Final Rose

If a man says to a woman, "I betroth you on the condition that I am completely righteous—the betrothal has validity, even if he is known to be a wicked person, since he may have repented in that moment.

(Talmud, Kiddushin 49b)

4:4***Healthy Extremism***

The straight path: This [involves discovering] the midpoint temperament of each and every trait that man possesses. This refers to the trait which is equidistant from either of the extremes, without being close to either of them...

One who shuns pride and turns to the other extreme and carries himself lowly is called pious. This is the quality of piety.

(Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 1:4-5)

4:5***Don't Touch the Crown!***

An orchard owner encountered Rabbi Tarfon, who was eating the remnants of his dates at the end of the season. The owner wrapped Rabbi Tarfon in a

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sack, and carried him off to dump him in the river. Rabbi Tarfon wailed, "Woe to Tarfon who has been killed by that man." When the orchard owner heard this he dropped the sack and ran away.

Rabbi Abahu said in the name of Rabbi Chananiah ben Gamliel that for his entire life, Rabbi Tarfon was pained by this occurrence, saying, "Woe to me for using the Crown of Torah."

(Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 5:1-4)

4:6

Forgetting

What was Rabbi's reason for saying that the law follows Rabbi Yosay? He replied: Say nothing, my son, say nothing—you have never seen Rabbi Yosay. Had you seen him, [you would know] that he always had good ground for his views [lit., "his reason was with him"].

(Talmud, Gittin 67a)

4:8

Shared Responsibility

When a case was brought before Rav Huna he would assemble ten sages from the yeshivah to rule with him, saying, "So that I will receive only a small splinter from the beam."

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 7b)

Good Partner

Any judge that rules according to the truth becomes a partner with G-d.

(Talmud, Shabbat 10a)

4:9

Aha!

In the Future, when the Heavenly realms will be apparent to all, those who studied about them during the Exile will have the pleasure of saying, "Aha! Now I understand..."

(Tzemach Tzedek, cited in Otzar Pitgamei Chabad, vol. 1, p. 414)

4:10***Honest Assessment***

Just as it is important to recognize one's own shortcomings, it is no less crucial to recognize one's own advantages and strengths.

(Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch)

In Your Place

Do not judge your fellow until you are in his place.

(Pirkei Avot 2:4)

4:12***Honor***

Rabbi Akiva had 12,000 pairs of students... and all of them died in one period of time because they did not treat each other with honor.

(Talmud, Yevamot 62b)

4:13***Ignorance is Sin***

Bilaam said to the angel of G-d, "I have sinned, for I did not know that you were standing opposite me on the road."

(Numbers 22:34)

4:15***Chasing Peace***

Seek out peace and pursue it.

(Psalms 34:15)

4:16***Long Life***

Honor your father and mother, that your days be lengthened, and that good befall you.

(Deuteronomy 5:16)

Send away the mother bird and then you may take the young for yourself, that good may befall you and that your days be lengthened.

(Deuteronomy 22:7)

Delayed Gratification

Rabbi Yaakov is of the opinion that there is no reward for mitzvot in this world.

(Talmud, Kiddushin 39b)

4:18

Timing

Everything has its season, and there is a time for everything under the sun.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1)

4:19

Timing

Let there be no hope for slanderers, and let all wickedness perish in an instant. May all your enemies quickly be cut down, and may you soon in our day uproot, crush, cast down and humble the dominion of arrogance.

(Amidah Liturgy, V'lamalshinim Blessing)

4:20

Look Within

Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate. He ate the inside and discarded the peel.

(Talmud, Chagigah 15a)

4:22

Resurrection

If G-d can bring life to those who have never lived, He can certainly bring life to those who have lived before.

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 91a)



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