

PIRKEI AVOT

WITH COMMENTARY BY
RABBI ADIN EVEN-ISRAEL

STEINSALTZ

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The Steinsaltz Mishna
Pirkei Avot

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TRACTATE AVOT

(Ethics of Our Fathers)

*This book is tenderly dedicated to the
loving memory of my mother*

Beverley Maron

whose teachings continue to light
my way through life's tapestry

To our cherished children,
Maya, Rachel, and Ari,
who embody the enduring wisdom
and loving-kindness she instilled in our hearts.

And to our brave soldiers,
whose valor is safeguarding our sacred legacy,
who will lead Am Yisrael to victory





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INTRODUCTION TO *TRACTATE AVOT*

Tractate *Avot* is a compendium of sayings of wisdom and ethics stated by the “Fathers [*Avot*] of the World,”¹ the Torah Sages from the beginning of the Second Temple era through the period of the last Sages of the Mishna. As a book of ethics, the tractate serves as a guide, directing people in how they may reach human perfection in all areas of life, both in the private life of each and every person and in matters regarding society as a whole. Among the topics it addresses are the relationship between Torah and life and between study and action.

This tractate is substantively different from the rest of the tractates in the Mishna. All the others address matters of halakha, of fixed and defined laws delineating the standards that obligate every Jewish person: what he is commanded to do and what he is prohibited from doing, halakhot of marriage and acquisition, protocols of criminal and civil jurisprudence, the Temple service, and the halakhot of spiritual purity and impurity. By contrast, this tractate discusses general principles [*avot*] of conduct that, by their very nature, do not determine defined halakha. Rather, the tractate addresses approaches and attitudes, values, matters of wisdom, and arousal of the soul.

The tractate’s content influences the manner in which it was edited. As opposed to other tractates, which cite tannaitic disputes and in which the details of the halakhot are organized according to defined topics and parameters, in tractate *Avot* there is no such order. This is due in part to the general nature of the directives therein, which include sayings of wisdom and ethics. It is also because each Sage who articulates his words of wisdom does not relate to the sayings of others, but rather, views matters from a completely novel perspective and formulates them in a unique manner, both in terms of content and in terms of form and expression.²

1. See Eduyyot 1:4.

2. At the same time, it is possible to very clearly discern the order and editorial policy of

“The Mishna of the Pious [*Ḥasidut*]”

A unique characteristic of tractate *Avot* is that it contains no defined laws or halakhic rulings. It does not address the basic halakhic obligations of each and every Jew, but rather the area characterized by the Sages as piety [*ḥasidut*], or what is beyond the letter of the law. This tractate does not say how one must fulfill the Torah laws in practice, but rather prescribes the direction and the effort required to transcend the obligatory to the realm of the appropriate, the desirable, and beyond. “The Mishna of the Pious,” however we characterize it, is not a halakhic guide for every person, but it is primarily directed toward those who are capable of and seek to go beyond halakhic obligations to fulfill matters that are not typical of the standard person, but are on a more exalted level, *ḥasidut*, as it is stated in the Talmud, that “One who seeks to become pious... should observe the matters of tractate *Avot*.”³

Similarly, although from a different perspective, the Rambam explained the positioning of this tractate in the order of *Nezikin*, adjacent to tractate *Sanhedrin*. In his opinion, after tractate *Sanhedrin* teaches regarding the significance and the standing of the judges of Israel, tractate *Avot* constructs the appropriate ethical template and ways of conduct for those who issue rulings in Israel.

Tractate *Avot* and the Book of Proverbs

The Oral Torah in general and the Mishna in particular constitute a continuation of the Written Torah. Despite the differences in language, style, and other features, the continuity is implicit in the Oral Torah. Virtually every tractate in the Mishna contains a different formulation of one of the halakhot written in the Torah and greater detail about it.

Tractate *Avot*, too, is based on the Bible, and in certain respects is a continuation of it. But it continues not only the Torah itself;⁴ it is to a large degree comparable to and a continuation of the book of Proverbs.⁵

the tractate. It consists of several parts, each with its own nature and structure regarding chronology, content, and form. In each of these parts, there is a discussion of a certain topic, such as wisdom, ethics, Torah, mitzvot, or etiquette, from different perspectives that complement one another. Together these parts constitute a single tractate.

3. Bava Kamma 30a.

4. It is especially conspicuous in the book of Deuteronomy, in which Moses, in his orations, serves as a teacher and guide, not only as a lawgiver and an arbiter of halakha and justice.

5. It is apparently no coincidence that just as the book of Proverbs consists primarily of a father's words of wisdom and ethics to his son, as in the verse: “Hear, my son, the admonition of your father” (Proverbs 1:8), so the Sages called this tractate “*Avot*,” meaning fathers.

The primary conspicuous similarity is that just as the book of Proverbs contains guidance in instructive, pedagogical, and, to a large degree, even obligatory terms, even though this guidance is not formulated in legal terms, so too, the statements in tractate *Avot* are all sayings of counsel and guidance for ethical conduct and perfection of one's attributes.

The similarity between tractate *Avot* and the book of Proverbs is also manifest in the absence of one central topic. The book of Proverbs includes hundreds of statements of wisdom, ethics, and counsel in all areas, statements that in general act to form a specific character, although each verse in the book of Proverbs fundamentally constitutes a matter of wisdom in and of itself. Similarly, the *mishnayot* of tractate *Avot* are an unsystematic collection of counsel, guidance, and instruction in various areas that together create a template for the ideal character of man.

In addition, although the great majority of the book of Proverbs is ethical and practical guidance, it contains, primarily in its final chapters, matters that are not goal oriented but rather are matters of wisdom that expand horizons and provide knowledge of the world. Similarly, tractate *Avot* contains *mishnayot* and chapters that consist of matters of wisdom, summaries of matters that are found in the world, and explanations of how different matters in the world relate to one another. Interestingly, these portions of tractate *Avot*, too, are primarily located in the final chapter of the tractate.

Reciting Tractate *Avot*

There is an ancient custom among the Jewish people, dating back to the geonic period, to communally recite one chapter of tractate *Avot* on each of the *Shabbatot* between Passover and *Shavuot*, after the afternoon prayer, in honor of Moses, who died around that time. Likewise, it is said that reciting these chapters serves as preparation for the giving of the Torah on the festival of *Shavuot*.⁶ In order to have it correspond to the number of the six *Shabbatot* between those holidays, the sixth chapter, "Acquisition of the Torah," was added. It is not strictly part of the Mishna, but is a *baraita* that contains a collection of statements in praise of the Torah and of those who engage in its study. Tractate *Avot*, thereby, entered into the prayer books throughout the Jewish Diaspora, and has been the object of many and varied commentaries.

6. The custom of Ashkenazic communities is to continue reciting the chapters of tractate *Avot* during the summer months until the Shabbat preceding Rosh HaShana.

Tractate *Avot* contains six chapters:

The first chapter, “Moses received,” is primarily arranged chronologically, from the giving of the Torah until after the destruction of the Second Temple. The chapter begins with the chain of transmission of the Torah from Moses through the members of the Great Assembly at the beginning of the Second Temple era. From there, the chapter cites the statements of those who perpetuated the tradition: “pairs” of *tanna'im* from the Second Temple period; through those who filled the position of *Nasi*, from Beit Hillel through Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, the father of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, redactor of the Mishna.

The second chapter, “Rabbi says,” begins with the statements of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and his son, who were the last of the Beit Hillel dynasty during the period of the Mishna. Then the chapter returns to a discussion of Hillel and the chain of transmission of Hillel’s students, i.e., Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai and his disciples.

The third chapter, “Akavya ben Mahalalel,” is less defined in terms of chronology or content. It cites statements of the Sages who lived at the end of the Second Temple era and at the beginning of the functioning of Yavne as a center for Torah study. The three primary topics addressed in it are: engaging in Torah study both communally and individually, the relationship between wisdom on the one hand and action and fear of God on the other hand, and appropriate social ties.

The fourth chapter, “Ben Zoma,” begins by citing statements of Sages who resided in Yavne but were not part of the court; the following generation, that of the students of Rabbi Akiva after the bar Kokheva revolt; and occasionally, later *tanna'im*. It concludes with words of reproach by Rabbi Elazar HaKappar, in the transitional generation between the *tanna'im* and the *amora'im*.

The fifth chapter, “With ten statements,” is based primarily on unattributed statements and is constructed in descending numerical order beginning with ten. The chapter begins with matters of Creation and of providence over the Jewish people, and later places emphasis on the conduct of groups of people, both as individuals within the group, and as part of a large group. The chapter concludes by returning to the special matter of Torah study and cleaving to it.

The sixth chapter, “The Sages taught,” is not from the Mishna per se, but is a *baraita*, apparently a very ancient one. The *baraita* is called “Acquisition of the Torah,” referring to Torah study. The chapter, which contains statements that are somewhat more midrashic and detailed, addresses just the topic of the Torah – its virtue, its significance, and the methods to acquire it.

Chapter 1

Mishna 1

This mishna serves as an introduction to the entire tractate, and underscores the complex relationship between tradition and innovation. On the one hand, the entire Torah was transmitted through tradition, and on the other hand, sages in every generation discover and introduce matters of Torah in accordance with their own approach.

מֹשֶׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, **Moses** our teacher **received** everything that can be categorized as **Torah^N** from the mouth of God at **Sinai^N**, when he was atop the mountain for forty days and forty nights (Exodus 24:18) and received the Torah in its entirety there (Deuteronomy 4:14).

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Moses received Torah – מֹשֶׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה: The chain of tradition is cited specifically at the beginning of tractate *Avot* in order to teach that even though the statements in tractate *Avot* are usually cited without biblical support texts, they should not be underestimated, because their source is the tradition of the fathers [*avot*] (Meiri). Others say that the emphasis on these matters at the beginning of this tractate, whose primary focus is on the desired mode of conduct, comes to teach that Torah has no existence without proper conduct, and there is no proper conduct without Torah (*Tiferet Yisrael*, based on mishna 3:17; see *Melekheth Shlomo*). Some write that the point of the mishna is to emphasize that this tractate is unlike other books of wisdom and ethics, but addresses

more exalted matters, which originated with the receiving of the Torah (Bartenura).

The line drawn between these two elements, the tradition from Sinai on the one hand and the personal statements of the Sages according to their topics and their time on the other hand, is the secret of the Torah in general. It has special significance specifically as an introduction to a tractate that discusses matters of ethics and perfection of the soul.

From Sinai – מִסִּינַי: The reference to Sinai is not to the place where Moses received the Torah, but to the One from whom he received it, i.e., the Holy One blessed be He, who revealed Himself at Sinai (Bartenura). This form of expression is a form of

וּמִסֵּרָהּ לְיִהוֹשֻׁעַ,

And this Torah that Moses received, he transmitted it to Joshua, his primary disciple, who was chosen as his replacement and successor (see Numbers 27:18). Joshua was first to receive the Oral Torah in the chain of transmission.

וְיִהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים,

And Joshua transmitted the Torah that he received to the Elders, the leaders of Israel in his generation, who outlived him and continued his legacy (Joshua 24:1).

וְזִקְנִים לְנָבִיאִים, וְנָבִיאִים מִסְרוּהָ
לְאֲנָשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָה.

And the Elders transmitted it to the prophets,^N who lived during the era of the Judges and thereafter, and the later prophets transmitted it to the members of the Great Assembly,^{NB} who were their colleagues and disciples at the beginning of the Second Temple era.

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respect vis-à-vis the Holy One blessed be He, who is not mentioned by His name, but with an appellation, just as one says “the Omnipresent,” or “Heaven,” and the like (see *Midrash Shmuel*). Some write that this wording emphasizes that Moses received the Torah while he was on Mount Sinai, at a level that no person other than he was privileged to reach (Rabbi Moshe Alsheikh).



Jabel Musa, one possible location of Mount Sinai

And the Elders to the prophets – לְנָבִיאִים: The reference is to the Elders who stood at the head of the congregation “who continued living after Joshua” (Joshua 24:31). The commentaries disagree as to whether the reference is to the entire period of the Judges as well (Rashbatz, Meiri), or whether the Judges are not included among these Elders, but are included among the prophets (see *Mahzor Vitri*, Vilna Gaon). Likewise, some hold that the period of the prophets begins in the days of Samuel the prophet, continues through the First Temple era, through Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who was exiled to Babylon, and concludes with the final prophets, who ascended in



The Ten Commandments as seen in a scroll from Qumran, first century BCE

הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים: הָיוּ
מִתּוֹנִים בְּדִין, וְהֵעֲמִידוּ תַלְמִידֵי
הַרְבֵּה, וַעֲשׂוּ סִיג לַתּוֹרָה.

They, the members of the Great Assembly, stated three matters:^N Be deliberate in judgment,^N as the judges must precisely analyze every case that comes before them, even if it appears to them that the matter is clear and resolved. And establish many stu-

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the return to Zion: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (see *Avot deRabbi Natan*, where the latter prophets are considered a group in and of themselves).

The prophets are mentioned here as part of the chain of transmission of the Torah. Although they hear the word of God, they are unable to innovate anything novel with respect to matters of Torah on the basis of their power of prophecy (Yaavetz).

And the prophets transmitted it to the members of the Great Assembly – וּנְבִיאִים מְסֻרוּהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי – בְּנִקְסַת הַגְּדוּלָה: Transmission appears explicitly twice in the mishna: “He transmitted it to Joshua...and the prophets transmitted it to the members of the Great Assembly.” The first transmission marks the transition from the exalted status of Moses’s prophecy at Sinai to the Sages of Israel with the giving of the Written Torah, and with it the tradition of the Oral Torah through the end of the First Temple era. The second explicit instance of transmission is at the beginning of the Second Temple era, from the prophets to the members of the Great Assembly, marking the transition from transmission of the Torah to the select leaders of the generation at the beginning of this period to the dissemination and teaching of the Torah to the multitudes by its end. Likewise, this marks the transition from the period during which the Torah was primarily Torah from Heaven, to a period where the Oral Torah was continually

expanding and developing into a work crafted by the human intellect (*Beit Shaul*, Nathanson).

Three matters – שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים: The tally of “three matters” appears several times in the *mishnayot* of tractate *Avot* and in the words of the Sages in general. Three suggests completeness, like a triangle, which is the simplest shape that forms a structure. Scholars have written in this regard that in an abstract sense three reflects the dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis.

Be deliberate in judgment [*badin*] – הָיוּ מִתּוֹנִים בְּדִין: Most commentaries explain that the reference is to issuing halakhic rulings, especially in monetary cases, which are typically referred to as *din* or *dinim*. Some explain that *din* in this context is a reference to an approach to study based on logic and reason through which one arrives at conclusions based on Torah verses, an approach that gradually developed during the Second Temple era. This approach is reflected in the talmudic phrases “from logical inference [*min hadin*]” and “could this not be derived through logical inference [*vehalo din hu*]?” According to this, the mishna means that the members of the Great Assembly warned that although it is necessary and fitting to study and expand matters of Torah, one must do so very cautiously, as failure to exercise caution can lead to erroneous conclusions.

BACKGROUND

The Great Assembly – בְּנִקְסַת הַגְּדוּלָה: The Great Assembly is the leadership group that functioned in Judah in the first part of the Second Temple era, from the days of Ezra the scribe at the time of the return to Zion, until the Greek conquest by Alexander the Great. Its character and identity are not perfectly clear, but it was apparently a council that convened from time to time and addressed matters on the

communal and religious agenda. Since the names of the members of the Great Assembly were not preserved, some posited that the identities of the participants varied from session to session. Several ordinances are attributed to the Great Assembly, among them the institution of blessings, prayers, *kiddush*, and *havdala* (*Berakhot* 33a).

dents^N in order to create a broad foundation of Torah study and Torah instruction. **And establish a fence [seyag] for the Torah^N** These are ordinances and decrees enacted in order to distance individuals and society from transgressing mitzvot of the Torah.

Mishna 2

The Mishna continues recording the transmission of the Torah to a last member of the Great Assembly.

שִׁמְעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הָיָה מִשְׁיָרֵי בְּנֵי
הַגְּדוּלָּה.

Shimon HaTzaddik^P was among the remnants of the Great Assembly,^N one of the last of its Sages, and he continued the transmission of the Torah.

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And establish many students – וְהַעֲמִידוּ תַלְמִידִים – הַרְבֵּה: Some write that this matter, too, relates to the realm of teaching the Torah, as by means of increasing the number of students, the wisdom of the teachers is also increased and sharpened, as it is said: “From my students more than all of them” (*Mahzor Vitri*, Meiri). Although this is true in every generation, it was especially so during the era of the members of the Great Assembly, whose primary role was establishing the stratum of Sages and their disciples.

Some note that in this regard, there is a moral determination regarding an issue that existed throughout the generations, especially between Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai, and was again manifest in the Yavne period (see *Berakhot* 28b): the question of how best to allocate teaching resources. Is it by forming an exclusive unit of extremely talented people or by teaching a large number of people with the understanding that greater quantity would produce greater quality (Rashbatz, Meiri, Rabbeinu Yona)?

And establish a fence for the Torah – וַעֲשׂוּ סֵיג – לְתוֹרָה: In addition to establishing ordered systems and instituting doctrines and principles for the Torah, the members of the Great Assembly also constructed a template of “fences for the Torah” (Meiri). In other words, they prohibited matters that were permitted per se, because of concern that people would err and violate Torah prohibitions due to habit or forgetfulness. This is because the difference between prohibited and permitted is sometimes very small. A large portion of the halakha that developed over the generations, especially during the Second Temple era, involves the creation of these fences. On the one hand, one is obligated to observe these fences, but on the other hand, one must remember that they are a rabbinic addition and not an intrinsic part of the mitzva.

Some explained that “and establish a fence for the Torah” is a continuation of “establish many students.” Teaching the Oral Torah to many students itself preserved the Torah within certain frameworks and established a “fence” around it (*Notzer Hessed*).

הוא היה אומר: He would regularly say a fundamental principle that he would repeat:

על שלשה דברים העולם עומד, על התורה, ועל העבודה, ועל גמילות חסדים. On the basis of three matters^N the world exists; there are three foundational spiritual pillars upon which the world rests that enable it to exist: on the basis of the

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Among the remnants of the Great Assembly – משני כנסת הגדולה: This means that he was one of the last survivors, and in his days few of those Sages remained (*Mahzor Vitri*, Meiri). In any case, the emphasis here is that he was considered one of the members of the Great Assembly. Through him, the live chain of tradition of the deliberations and activity of that institution continued (see Rashbatz).

On the basis of three matters – על שלשה דברים: There are many explanations of the meaning and the identity of these pillars of the world, which are parallel to three “lines” of God’s revelation, which are the mystical concepts of Kindness – acts of kindness; Might – Temple service; and Glory – Torah. This is an

expression of the relationship between man and God. The Torah is the rational-intellectual component; the Temple service is the experiential-emotional component; and, in contrast to those two, which constitute a direct approach between man and God, performing acts of kindness is a manifestation of God’s relationship with man, through one’s relationship with other people.

Similarly, some explain that these three pillars correspond, respectively, to the power of study, faith, and virtues (Rambam). Others write that it corresponds to the three manners in which the soul expresses itself: speech, while engaging in Torah study; thought, in prayer service; and action, through acts of kindness (*Hesed LeAvraham*).

PERSONALITIES

Shimon HaTzaddik – שמעון הצדיק: Shimon HaTzaddik was one of the last survivors of the members of the Great Assembly. His place in the chain of tradition is significant, as he is the first of the Second Temple Sages whose name is known. Moreover, it is known that he was a High Priest, and as such he was also the most significant personage in the autonomous Jewish community in the Land of Israel at that time. He lived in the fourth century BCE and successfully oversaw a smooth transition between the period of Persian rule over the Land and the Greek conquest. It is related in the Talmud that for that purpose, he met with Alexander the Great, apparently during the latter’s journey from the north toward Egypt (*Yoma* 69a).

Tradition holds that Shimon HaTzaddik served as High Priest for forty years. He was conspicuous in his extreme sanctity, which is also reflected in his title, “HaTzaddik,” meaning, “the righteous.” It is said that until the end of his life, protocols concerning sanctity and the Temple were conducted in the appropriate manner, and that after his death there was deterioration in these areas (*Yoma* 39a). A brief

description of his character and his accomplishments is found in the Book of ben Sira, and ben Sira might have been his contemporary. The Book of ben Sira also includes words of personal praise of Shimon HaTzaddik, which were incorporated in lyrical form in the Yom Kippur prayers, in the liturgical poem: “How Splendid Was the Appearance of the High Priest.” It is related that after his death, there was a crisis



Crypt of Shimon HaTzaddik in Jerusalem, with his statement in the mishna inscribed next to it

Torah,^N i.e., studying it, knowing it, and engaging in it; **on the basis of worship of God through the Temple service;**^N **and on the basis of acts of kindness,**^N performing good deeds to benefit another person.

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concerning the succession to the High Priesthood (see *Menaḥot* 13:10 and 109b).

On the basis of the Torah – על התורה: This is the first instance in the words of the Sages regarding the special place of Torah study as one of the pillars of the world. This mishna emphasizes Torah study as an independent value, in other words, not merely as a means to acquire knowledge of the mitzvot and their practical fulfillment, but a complete, absolute, and central world that exists in and of itself. This position of the Torah is one of the unique aspects of the Jewish world. The obligation to study Torah and the requirement to occupy oneself with it are an independent objective, a unique form of worship of God, and in its essence an act of ritual worship.

On the basis of the service [*haavoda*] – ועל העבודה: The plain understanding of the term *avoda* is Temple service, which is the unique aspect of worship of God emphasized in the Torah, the aspect of ritual worship and the connection and the drawing near of the person and the entire people to the Creator, and the entire world along with them. There is a reason that the prescribed offerings include all

the strata of Creation: inanimate, vegetation, and living, which are all sacrificed and ascend heavenward. At the same time, prayer, which is characterized as “service of the heart [*avoda shebalev*]” serves, in certain respects, as a replacement for Temple service, because it is primarily a form of worship: direct worship of the Holy One blessed be He, which establishes the relationship between man and God (see Rabbeinu Yona and Rashbatz). Some write that service is a reference to fulfillment of all the practical mitzvot between man and God (*Tiferet Yisrael*, and so it is explained in Hasidic literature).

On the basis of acts of kindness – ועל גמילות חסדים: In contrast to the mitzva of charity, “acts of kindness” include many matters that do not fall into defined halakhic categories (see *Pe’ea* 1:7). It includes all aid extended to people, monetarily or physically, as the Sages said: Acts of kindness are greater than charity, as they can be fulfilled with all people, not just the poor, with both the living and the dead, and with both money and the body (see *Tosefta, Pe’ea* 4:19). Included in “acts of kindness” are fostering peace between people, respecting others, organizing a wedding for a needy bride, accompanying the dead and arranging burial, consoling mourners, and more (Rashi).



Worshippers fill the Western Wall plaza, Yom Kippur eve, 2010



Sacrificing the daily offering

Mishna 3

Following Shimon HaTzaddik, who addressed matters upon which the world stands, his successor, Antigonus of Sokho, addresses the inner essence of each individual's worship of God.

אַנְטִיגֹנוֹס אִישׁ סוֹכוֹ קִבֵּל מִשְׁמֵעוֹן הַצְּדִיק. **Antigonus of the city of Sokho^P in Judah received Torah from Shimon HaTzaddik.**

PERSONALITIES

Antigonus of Sokho – אַנְטִיגֹנוֹס אִישׁ סוֹכוֹ: Little is known about the life and personality of this Sage, who was a contemporary of the successors of Alexander the Great, in the first part of the third century BCE. It appears that he was a resident of the city of Sokho, in the lowlands of Judah (see Joshua 15:5). However, it is reasonable to posit that as a teacher of the multitudes and the head of the Sages, he also resided in Jerusalem.

The source of the name is the Greek Antigonus, a very common Greek name in those days, suggesting that Greek influence already existed at that time. It is possible that Antigonus was named after Antigonus I Monophthalmus, a prominent general of Alexander the Great and, for a certain period, his primary successor, much in the way that Jews called their sons Alexander in honor of that king.

In *Avot deRabbi Natan*, it is related that two of the disciples of Antigonus, Tzadok and Baitos, did not

properly understand his statement as it was expressed in the mishna. They learned from it that a person does not receive reward for his good deeds at all. As a result, those disciples denied the existence of the World to Come, as well as denying the immortality of the soul and denying the Oral Torah in general. They established the sects of the Sadducees [*Tzedokim*] and the Boethusians [*Baitusim*], who strayed from the confines of tradition and for generations were enemies of the traditional Judaism of the Pharisees, the purveyors of the Oral Torah (see *Makkot* 1:6; *Menahot* 10:3; *Yadayim* 4:6–8, and elsewhere). According to what is related there, these sects' denial of the immortality of the soul caused them to live lives of luxury and hedonism. This divergence that resulted from the teacher's lack of clarity stands as the backdrop to several of the Sages' statements in this tractate that address the need to be cautious in choosing students and to convey material clearly.



The Ela Valley as seen from the top of Tel Sokho, commonly identified as Sokho

הוא היה אומר: אל
תהיו בעבדים המִשְׁמְשִׁין
את הָרֵב עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל
פְּרָס, אֲלֵא הוּוּ בְעֵבָדִים
הַמִּשְׁמְשִׁין אֶת הָרֵב שְׁלֵא
עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס.

He would regularly say: **Do not be**, when fulfilling mitzvot and worshipping God, **like servants^N who serve the master in order to receive a portion^N** in order to receive their portion of food, i.e., to receive reward for mitzvot, as that is not the ideal mode of service. **Rather, be like servants^N who serve the master not in order to receive a portion.^N**

ויהי מורא שמים עליכם.

He added: Although you are not worshipping God in order to receive compensation, do not forget that you are servants of God, **and let the fear of Heaven be upon you.^N**

NOTES

Do not be like servants – אֵל תְּהִי בְעֵבָדִים: This statement provides guidance of great significance regarding the entire matter of observance of the mitzvot. In the Torah, the fact that there is reward for good deeds is mentioned many times; therefore, Antigonus saw the need to underscore that service of God should not be performed in order to receive that reward, but in order to perform the mitzvot for their own sake. Any intent to receive reward detracts from the virtue of the service, although it does not uproot it completely. That is, one should strive to arrive at a situation where his service will not be dependent upon receiving an external reward.

Portion [peras] – פְּרָס: Some explain that *peras* is a customary meal, a perpetual payment (Meiri and others). Others emphasize that it is a gift and is not characterized as the receiving of a payment (Rashi, Rambam, Bartenura). There are also those who explain it in homiletic fashion, as *peras* can mean “half,” referring to thinking only of the reward in this world, which is half of what a person has (Rabbeinu Yosef H̄ayyim).

Rather, be like servants – אֲלֵא הוּוּ בְעֵבָדִים: The reason Antigonus repeated his statement in two ways, one negative and one positive, was in order to emphasize that performing matters in the manner of “not in order to receive a portion” is not merely refraining from the negative, but it is a virtue in and of itself (Maharal of Prague). Moreover, there is another underlying emphasis. Although service of God that is not in order to receive a portion is primarily service motivated by love, nevertheless, “be like servants

who serve the master.” A person must consider himself like a servant, who does not work according to his own free will, but is subservient to his Master and worships Him with complete and fixed service.

Not in order to receive a portion – שְׁלֵא עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס: In ancient variant readings there is a more extreme formulation: “In order not to receive a portion.” Some write that this version is referring to prominent people, while the version that appears in the mishna is directed to common people (*Notzer H̄esed*). Conversely, it is referring to those of little faith, who, if they do not receive the portion, are likely to regret performance of mitzvot altogether (*Rashbatz*). In any case, this does not mean that there is no reward for mitzvot; rather, one must not perform them in order to be rewarded, but due to love (*Mahzor Vitri*), and with complete identification with the purpose of the service (*Yaavetz*).

And let the fear of Heaven be upon you – וְיִהְיֶה מוֹרָא שָׁמַיִם עֲלֵיכֶם: This statement completes what was stated previously. A person who does not anticipate reward is ostensibly one who performs matters according to his will alone, from love. However, love alone is insufficient, as at times it waxes and at other times it wanes. This is why Antigonus adds that even if the most exalted action is one motivated by love, nevertheless, let the fear of Heaven be upon you (Rambam). Some write that the word Heaven in the expression “fear of Heaven upon you” comes to emphasize that the reference is not to fear of punishment, which is fundamentally parallel to receipt of reward, but to fear motivated by a sense of exaltedness (*Yaavetz*).