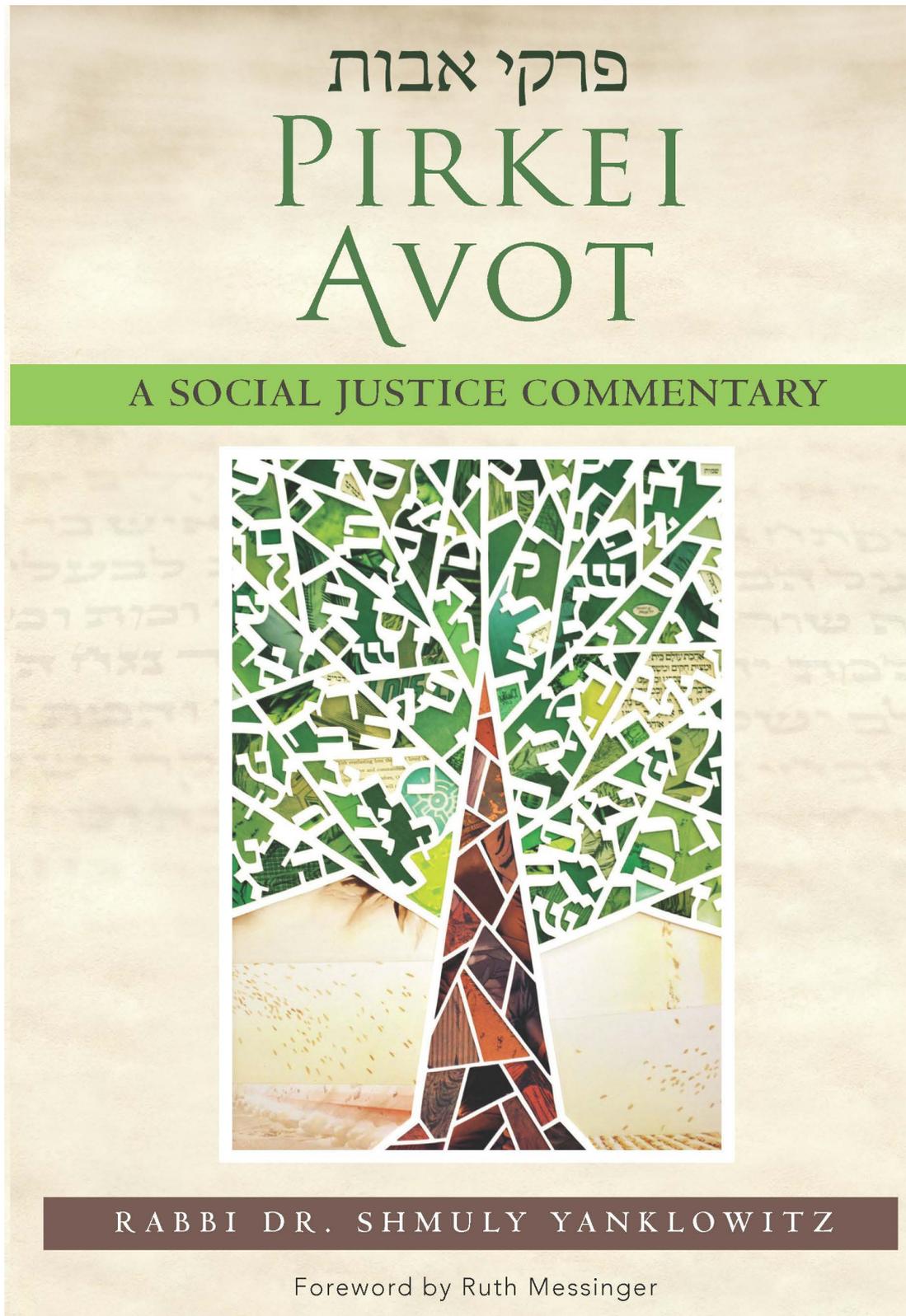


Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary

Discussion Guide



By Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz
Discussion Guide by Rabbi Jesse Paikin
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Discussion Guide to Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz's *Pirkei Avot*: A Social Justice Commentary

by Rabbi Jesse Paikin

This discussion guide takes on something of a dual nature: it is useful both as a guide to reading Rabbi Yanklowitz's commentary, as well as a guide to the primary text of *Pirkei Avot* itself. Because Rabbi Yanklowitz's commentary draws heavily on Talmudic primary sources, classical medieval commentaries, and modern thought, this guide also encourages thoughtful consideration of those sources, as well as Rabbi Yanklowitz's use of them.

Note that given the extensive nature of *Pirkei Avot*, this guide does not include discussion questions for every single mishnah. Given the frequent thematic overlap, related *mishnayot* are often grouped together to encourage considering their shared philosophical and practical relationship.

May this guide inspire you to live by the words of Torah in all places of your daily lives, as Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev teaches in his commentary to *Pirkei Avot* 2:2.

CHAPTER ONE

1:1

In commenting on the chain of tradition at the beginning of *Pirkei Avot*, and on the Maharal's argument that "people must strengthen three components of the human intellect: *chochmah* (wisdom), *binah* (understanding), and *daat* (discernment)," Rabbi Yanklowitz suggests that every generation of Jews is "responsible to render safe passage to the tradition" and to "transmit the teachings in such a way that they are stronger than when they were received."

- a) What are the connections between strengthening human intellect, and strengthening Torah?
- b) What does the idea of "safe passage" mean to you? What responsibilities might it entail?

Rabbi Yanklowitz identifies two tendencies that endanger the life of Torah: (1) the tendency to distort the tradition so radically that it loses its initial meaning, and (2) the tendency to freeze the tradition, and neuter its relevance to contemporaries.

- c) Liberal and progressive Jews are likely more sensitive to the second danger. In what ways might we open ourselves to recognize the first?
- d) Have you had any personal encounters where you felt that the meaning of Torah was radically distorted?
- e) How might you balance "preservation through safe passage", with Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook's idea of "expanding the place of Torah"?

Rabbi Yanklowitz raises a number of questions at the end of this mishnah:

- f) What teaching from the Torah has humbled you? Why?
- g) How do you learn with integrity, self-awareness, rigor, and passion?
- h) How do you engage others in learning Torah, spiritual growth, and performing mitzvot?
- i) How do you preserve your core values while elevating them?

1:3

Rabbi Yanklowitz suggests that the presence of Antigonus in this mishnah functions as a reminder that we should neither embrace nor reject *all* truths of the non-Jewish culture in which we live. We must be open to universal truths, but we also must maintain a connection with Torah scholarship and a sense of awe toward God.

- a) How do you differentiate between the various values of the non-Jewish culture in which you live? Which principles guide your decisions on whether or not you will accept one of these values for yourself?
- b) How does the concept of awe at the end of this mishnah relate to the concept of servitude presented at the beginning?
- c) What inspires a sense of awe in you? What place does that sense of awe have in your Jewish life?

- d) What helps you move beyond “the zealous arrogance of certainty” and toward the “productive humility of doubt”? How might *awe*, as suggested by Rabbi Yanklowitz, help with this endeavour?

1:4 and 1:5

Rabbi Yanklowitz argues that “The home can be an even more powerful site of learning than the synagogue or yeshivah.”

- a) What learning took place in your home when you were a child? How would you characterize it?
- b) What learning takes place in your home now? What kind of learning do you aspire to?
- c) How do you, in your home, navigate the tension between Yosei ben Yoezer’s vision of a home as a sanctuary and refuge from the negative forces of the world; and Yosei ben Yochanan’s vision of a home as an open and welcoming place that is not fearful of the challenges posed by secular culture?
- d) What challenges might result from a kind of hospitality that blurs the boundaries between private and public; between family and community?

1:6 and 1:7

Commenting on *Pirkei Avot* 1:5, Rabbi Yanklowitz notes that our concept of friendship has been radically altered through the explosion of social media.

- a) How does the mishnah’s juxtaposing of the concepts of “friend”, “teacher”, “the chain of tradition”, and “fair-judgement” change your understanding of the potential meaning of friendship?
- b) What responsibilities are incumbent upon friends toward one another according to this mishnah? How does the mishnah’s definition of friendship differ from your current understanding, and from the understanding of the wider society?
- c) How might this mishnah and its commentaries provide an antidote to the current challenges to human relationships Rabbi Yanklowitz identifies?
- d) How can you apply Rabbi Kook’s ideas on “group learning” to contemporary political or religious discourses? What are the associated challenges and benefits of this kind of group learning?
- e) Rabbi Yanklowitz teaches that the idea of judging *kol haadam* means not only “everybody,” but also “the whole person.” Since we can never fully know someone else, we must never reject a person in his or her entity. Might this be “naïve” in some cases, as suggested in *Pirkei Avot* 1:7? Are there any cases in which someone’s actions or beliefs might be beyond the pale, in which he or she should be judged in his or her entity?
- f) How do we live up to this high ideal?
- g) Is it possible to be close to or “associate with” people whose behaviour we condemn? How do we work with those with whom we disagree?
- h) How do you respond to criticism yourself? Is it easy for you to see it as an invitation to grow? According to these *mishnayot*, why do we need others?

1:10

Rabbi Yanklowitz comments on the fact that the rabbis of the mishnah advocated for social change primarily by pushing first and foremost for inner change.

- a) How does this push back on the idea of *Tikkun Olam* as you have learned it?
- b) What does this idea demand of you socially and spiritually?
- c) Does the concept of leadership presented in this mishnah reflect your own vision of leadership and your evaluation of good leadership? Why or why not?

1:11

Rabbi Yanklowitz raises a concern about scholarly commentaries on the Torah that might “alter the divinely created system and desecrate the Name of Heaven.”

- a) What does the term of a “divinely created system” mean for you? What might “desecrate” such a system?
- b) What challenges to traditional Torah study are posed by academic approaches to the field? Where might you draw lines as to what is informative for you? How do you balance spiritual purity against academic integrity?
- c) Thinking back to *Pirkei Avot* 1:3: How do you preserve “the centrality of Judaism” in your study of Judaism? What is “the centrality of Judaism” for you?
- d) What does this mishnah teach about the connection between wisdom and speech?

1:14 and 1:15

Rabbi Yanklowitz cites commentaries about spiritual self-reflection and mindfulness as possible guidance in discerning the moral responsibility demanded by living a Jewish life.

- a) What sources of strength, inspiration, and guidance have you found for yourself?
- b) How do these commentaries influence your understanding of *Pirkei Avot* 1:14?

The commentary to verse 1:15 notes that we must balance our life between inner reflection and outer action, and that a life only of contemplation makes it difficult to direct attention to the realities of the world and people we encounter.

- c) How do you understand this mishnah in relationship to the previous one?
- d) What prompts you to learn and act spiritually? What prompts you to be active in the world? Do/should these overlap in any way?
- e) How do the Six Remembrances relate to the focus of this mishnah?
- f) What are your own touchstones that provide awareness of where you have been and where you need to go, both individually and communally?

1:17

According to Rabbi Yanklowitz, this mishnah speaks to us about the inherent value of silence, mindfulness, humility, and service.

- a) What is your relationship to silence? Is it a comfortable or uncomfortable state for you, and why? With what different kinds of silence are you acquainted?

- b) Which kind of silence has been the most impactful for you? Which is the most connected to prayer?
- c) Thinking back to *Pirkei Avot* 1:11: What is the connection between speech, silence, and wisdom?

1:18

Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, in his commentary on this mishnah, writes that “truth is not always identical to justice, and it is often incompatible with peace.”

- a) According to this mishnah, the world rests on these three concepts. What do you make of Rabbi Greenberg’s comment in light of this mishnah?
- b) How do you reconcile all three of these ideas in your beliefs and daily conduct? What do you do if and when you cannot reconcile them?
- c) How do you prioritize truth, justice, and peace? What informs your thought process?

CHAPTER TWO

2:1

Rabbi Yanklowitz tries to understand what role (if any) the idea of divine reward and punishment might play in contemporary life. He suggests that one understanding might be that although human lives are small “when compared to the infinities of the Divine,” we ultimately matter to God, and that “we are not so insignificant that our deeds are meaningless.”

- a) How do you understand reward and punishment? Has this understanding changed throughout your life? In what way?
- b) Do you find Rabbi Yanklowitz’s interpretation tenable from a progressive religious perspective?
- c) When have you wrestled with this question: “What is the good life?”

2:2

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev notes in his comment on *Pirkei Avot 2:2* that Torah can be learned in all places of our daily lives, and not only in the *beit hamidrash*.

- a) Have you ever learned Torah in unexpected places? Where has that been, and what was meaningful about that experience?
- b) Is it harder or easier for you to learn Torah in informal learning spaces? What mindset does that require from you?
- c) How do you define “Torah learning” for yourself?
- d) What might this mishnah demand of you in regard to studying Torah?

2:4 and 2:5

How do you respond to the questions Rabbi Yanklowitz poses in his commentary to these *mishnayot*:

- a) What are you most concerned about in the world?
- b) What should be most important in our lives?
- c) How do you awaken yourself to awe and humility in the face of infinity?
- d) How does the idea of judgment presented in these *mishnayot* relate to the idea presented in 1:6 and 1:7?
- e) How might this mishnah inform your answers to these questions?

2:6

Rabbi Yanklowitz notes that in the context of this mishnah, the Hebrew *ish* (literally: person) might also be translated as “leader.”

- a) How do you understand the implications of this translation? What obligations does this translation present to you and your community?
- b) How can public leadership— particularly in a milieu saturated by virtue signalling—be consistent with the idea of leadership presented in this mishnah?
- c) How might the idea of being “ethically and spiritually sensitive,” presented toward the end of Rabbi Yanklowitz’s commentary, inform a Jewish idea of leadership?

2:8

Viktor Frankel teaches that “what is fundamental to our core humanity is the ability to embrace the brief moment between a stimulus and a response.” This teaching finds an analogue in *musar* in the idea of the *n’kudah b’chirah*—the moment of choice—to which we need to attune ourselves.

- a) In his commentary on this mishnah, Rabbi Yanklowitz combines teachings on decision-making, morality, and wisdom. How do you understand the relationship between these concepts?
- b) Do you have a moment-to-moment awareness of how you make your choices? What influence does Jewish thought or practice bear on how you choose to speak and act?
- c) What do you make of the distinction Rabbi Kook makes between divine and natural morality?
- d) What wisdom have you drawn from outside the Jewish canon?

2:12 and 2:13

These *mishnayot* focus on the *derech hayashar* – the “proper path to which a person should cling.” Rabbi Yanklowitz cites the famous story of the *tanur shel achnai* to exemplify how a person should understand the role of Torah in this endeavour.

- a) In discerning this path, when have you trusted “the heavens” more than earthly wisdom? When the opposite?
- b) How do you understand the Talmud’s distinction between a “sage” and a “prophet” in relation to this work?
- c) What does Parker Palmer’s idea of a “well-tempered heart” add to this crucial work?

2:15

Among other ideas, this mishnah discusses the role of anger in interpersonal relationships.

- a) How do you typically deal with anger? Do you see it in as stark terms as does this mishnah?
- b) In which cases is anger justifiable for you?
- c) What role has anger played in causing you to forget or neglect something?

2:16 and 2:17

These *mishnayot* concisely articulate one of the key themes present throughout *Pirkei Avot*—the question of how to achieve a balanced life between an orientation of awe and reverence toward God, and the commitment to the love of and the betterment of humanity. As Rabbi Yanklowitz notes, these *mishnayot* also pose direct challenges and prompt us to confront significant questions:

- a) What influences you most negatively?
- b) To where do you direct your prayers?
- c) How do you balance serving and loving God against loving humanity?

2:19

Continuing the theme of power dynamics and relationships between God and humanity, this mishnah teaches us how to answer an *apikoros*—a “heretic.” Rabbi Yanklowitz’s commentary suggests that the study of “heretical” ideas might actually be a Jewish imperative.

- a) Are there ideas “too heretical” for you that you have no interest in studying? If so, how would you reconcile your decision with the commentary to this mishnah?
- b) Do you believe that there is a “spark of [God’s] light” in *everything*? What ideas or practices are beyond the pale for you?
- c) How do you determine what is “inside” and what is “outside” your areas of interest?

CHAPTER THREE

3:1

Chapter Three of this commentary introduces the two primary schools of *musar* thought and their relationship to this mishnah.

- a) When confronting self-deprecating thoughts or doubts, to where do you turn for support?
- b) Is there a Jewish theology or philosophy that nurtures your sense of self-awareness? What is it that gives you that sense?
- c) Do you feel drawn to one of the schools of *musar* thought as they are presented here? Why or why not?
- d) How do you understand the idea of returning to “our fundamentally good selves, our inner divine spark,” when contrasted with the imagery of this mishnah?

3:2

Rabbi Yanklowitz argues that when praying for the welfare of secular governments, “we should try to focus away from petty partisanship and toward a unifying redemption.”

- a) What is the ultimate purpose of praying for “a unifying redemption” for you? What does redemption look like for you?
- b) Can you imagine any circumstances under which political partisanship might be an appropriate means?
- c) In what ways is this theology of a religious relationship with the State nurturing? In what ways is it challenging?
- d) Do you feel as though this mishnah and its commentary adequately address today’s political climate in the United States?

3:3–4, 7

In this commentary, a question is raised: “What does it mean to engage in Torah study?” Rabbi Yanklowitz, quoting Rabbi Hirsch, provides an answer: anything “shaped in accordance with Torah’s teachings,” or— as he himself puts it— “when discussed compassionately and for the sake of raising up others,” counts as Torah study.

- a) What does this argument hinge on for you—that is, do *all* compassionate conversations about perfecting the world count as “Torah,” or are there certain characteristics that must define what counts as “Torah” for you?

3:8

This mishnah introduces a concept perhaps radical when held up against most Western capital-based economies: our acquired property is never ours to begin with, it belongs to God.

- a) To what degree—if any—do you have a sense of your own belongings not really being yours? To what extent is your sense informed by your theology?
- b) What might/should the practical implications of this theology be? Rabbi Yanklowitz suggests that, as a result of this idea, “any everyday activity ... can be suffused with holiness.” To what extent do you believe this to be true? That is, where do you encounter

holiness in your daily life, and what demands do these encounters place upon you? What are the challenges and benefits of such a worldview/theology?

3:10

This mishnah and the commentaries focus on the notion of forgetting in general, and on the implications of forgetting one's learning specifically. Rabbi Yanklowitz argues: "it is tragic to forget, but it can also be a virtue."

- a) What do you wish to remember?
- b) What do you wish to forget?
- c) What is essential to your idea of communal memory?
- d) What weight do the instructions of this mishnah place on your sense of Jewish memory and Jewish identity?

3:11-12 and 22

Rabbi Yanklowitz discusses core principles of Torah wisdom and ethical behavior as they appear in these *mishnayot*. He also observes the ways different Jewish communities prioritize learning and action.

- a) How does your Torah wisdom find constructive purposes: How does your learning lead to action?
- b) What counts as *maasim tovim* (good deeds) for you? Have you experienced how "a focus on external service can come at the expense of more reflective practices," or the opposite? What are the implications of each of these conflicts?
- c) As with much of *Pirkei Avot*, the goal here seems to achieve an appropriate balance—how might you work to reach that goal?

3:15

This mishnah continues discussing a central theme throughout *Pirkei Avot*—the relationship between Torah study and *maasim tovim*.

- a) Why do you think Torah study and *maasim tovim* are continually paired? How do they relate to each other in this mishnah?
- b) What does it mean, as Rabbi Yanklowitz asks, to desecrate Judaism? Does your own answer differ from that of this mishnah?
- c) What is the difference between "religion" and "Torah" for Rav Kook? What is the difference for you?

3:17

- a) Why is wisdom included in the list of fences; and why is silence considered to be a fence?
- b) How is silence similar to tithes and tradition?
- c) How might Rabbi Yanklowitz's description of the need for fences be applicable to a contemporary progressive Jewish setting?
- d) Can you conceive of settings where Torah wisdom would not need the protection of fences? What would that look like?

3:19

This mishnah discusses the concepts of judgment, compassion, and *maasim tovim*.

- a) Which idea resonates more for you: “God-as-judge,” or “God-as-protector”? Why does one speak more to you, and how might you attune yourself to the merits of the other?
- b) How is it possible to balance justice with mercy? How does Jewish thought reconcile these two ideas, both of which are necessary for the continuation of our existence?
- c) How do you balance your own tendencies toward either judging or acting compassionately? How do you know when one mode is more needed than the other?

3:20

With this mishnah, we return to the theme of our responsibility to repay God (see also mishnah 3:8). Rabbi Yanklowitz teaches: “We are only afforded so much time on this earth. How we expand our spiritual capital is one of the most important parts of life. All we can hope for is that, by exertion of will and cultivation of character, we are prudent and judicious with our limited resources.”

- a) Rabbi Yanklowitz reads this Mishnah as a model for social change. How else might you understand it?
- b) How does the financial metaphor work in the discussion of this mishnah?
- c) Are you used to doing an “accounting” of your time on earth? Does this idea compel you to act?

3:23

The final mishnah of this section discusses some concepts related to other *mishnayot* and our measurement of time.

- a) How does Rabbi Yanklowitz’s reading of this perplexing text add relevance and clarity for you? Or why does it not? What questions are you left with?
- b) How does the flow of Jewish time impact your life? Is it felt more through holiday observance, or through a sense of historical awareness? How do each tug at you in different ways?
- c) Do you feel a greater sense of historical progress or historical decline? Do you tend to find yourself longing for the past, or hoping for the future?
- d) What is the impact of your bodily functions upon your Jewish spirituality?

CHAPTER FOUR

4:1

According to Rabbi Yanklowitz, this mishnah provides the grounding for a philosophy of religious pluralism. He argues that it creates space for multiple interpretations of God, and for the acceptance of the validity of other people's commitments to the gods of their own religions.

- a) How do you understand the idea of pluralism in this mishnah and the accompanying biblical passages and commentaries? Would it be possible to understand this mishnah as an argument in favor of Jewish *particularism*? Why or why not?
- b) How do you understand the relationship between relativism and particularism?
- c) Based on your own experiences, which interpretation of religious pluralism do you find more inspiring: a relativistic one, where all ideas are equally valid; or an absolutist one that affirms particularistic standards?
- d) How can Jewish communities actualize Rabbi Yitz Greenberg's description of Jewish pluralism as "an absolutism that has come to recognize its limitations"?
- e) Rabbi Yanklowitz writes about the tension between "the easy temptation of blind absolutism" and "relativism where there is no single entity called truth." Which of these poles pulls you more? What do you see on the other side? How do you take up Rabbi Yanklowitz's challenge to become a conscientious person who does not slide into either of these traps?

4:2

This mishnah and the commentaries related to it teach about the performance of mitzvot and religious creativity in Torah study. Rabbi Yanklowitz cautions that "when we allow our moral muscles to atrophy out of unwillingness to perform a minor mitzvah, they will become too weak to perform major mitzvot, too ... Religious ritual is like exercise; at its best, it is the practice that strengthens our souls."

- a) Which mitzvot are the hardest for you to flex your muscles on?
- b) How do you distinguish between minor and major mitzvot?
- c) Do you agree with Rabbi Yanklowitz's comment on this mishnah, or can you imagine that there are mitzvot that do not train your moral muscles?

4:3

This mishnah discusses the meaning of human existence. Writing about the place of human autonomy, Rabbi Yanklowitz cites a teaching of Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari-zal) that "there isn't a creature that exists on this earth whose purpose is meaningless," and argues for the centrality of empathy as a counterbalance to autonomy.

- a) How do you discover the meaning and purpose of existence? What makes this endeavor difficult for you?
- b) Does Rabbi Yanklowitz's existential prescription—to see yourself in connection to divine compassion, and to extend your empathy to all—work for you?
- c) How do you balance autonomy with "the singular *I*"? How do you know when either a greater focus on the self, or a greater focus on the other is needed? What guidance does the mishnah provide for this decision?

4:8

Discussing the relationship between honoring Torah and honoring people, Rabbi Yanklowitz cites teachings from the Jerusalem Talmud and Benjamin Franklin to emphasize the need to pay attention to our choice of words.

- a) How does the imagery of sight and blindness in the Jerusalem Talmud exemplify this mishnah's central idea?
- b) How might a more judicious choice of our words, such as "I imagine," bring honor to Torah?

4:9 and 10

These *mishnayot* revolve around our juridical and moral judgement of others. Rabbi Yanklowitz encourages us to refrain from indiscriminate judgment, while sharing helpful rebuke.

- a) How do you discern when passing judgment is needed or helpful in life?
- b) Where do you understand the place of Rabbi Heschel's "outrage" to be? How do these words impact you in today's context—a time when so many people seem to be expressing unmitigated political outrage?
- c) How does the rabbinic idea of *sh'tikah b'hodaah*—the silence of agreement—add to the mishnah's argument about refraining from judging others?

In commenting on 4:10, Rabbi Yanklowitz cites a teaching of Maimonides about how our ethical behaviour sanctifies God.

- d) What does it feel like to experience the opposite of what Maimonides describes here? What might this tell us about the Rambam's awareness of how human beings can treat each other?
- e) How does this behaviour relate to the idea of *halachta bidrachav*—the imitation of God?

4:12

Continuing the discussion of the relationship between Torah and other activities, this mishnah speaks about the place of business.

- a) The word used to describe business activities—*eisek*—is the same word used to describe engaging in Torah. What does this say about the rabbis' understanding of the relationship between business and Torah study?
- b) How might the idea of labor rights emerge from this teaching? How might it be at the center of an approach to protecting the rights of workers?

4:14

This mishnah gives space to the idea of communities dedicating themselves to God, and the lasting impact of their work.

- a) Who gets to decide whether or not something is for the sake of heaven (God)?
- b) In an age of intellectual silos and hyper-partisanship, how might one begin to mediate this idea expressed in this mishnah? Think back to the idea of pluralism advocated in 4:1.
- c) What is the difference between generating "light" and generating "heat"?

- d) What is your answer to Rabbi Yanklowitz’s question: “We have so much to accomplish in our lifetimes. Where do we muster the will to actualize our tasks?”
- e) How does his view of “social agitation and constructive disruption” relate to the concept of communities dedicating themselves for the sake of heaven/God?
- f) What might be the significance of the fact that this mishnah is attributed to a shoemaker?

4:19

Discussing theodicy—the problem of the existence of evil—Rabbi Yanklowitz cites commentaries on the *yetzer hara* and teachings on the human capacity to change.

- a) How do you understand the Baal Shem Tov’s teaching that a hero is one who turns his *yetzer hara* into a service of God?
- b) What does it look like to take an evil inclination and transform it into something supremely good?
- c) When are you aware of your own negative inclinations? Do you feel strongly about learning from them or destroying them? Why or why not?

4:22

Rabbi Yanklowitz connects the importance of human repentance with the idea that God repents, and with the responsibilities that this theology imparts upon us.

- a) Has your understanding of God changed over time? How does the change in your understanding relate to the question of God’s capacity to change?
- b) How do you connect to the idea of God as an entity who “cries and evolves”?
- c) In what ways does the concept of an “infinite” God match your understanding of God? What difficulties or challenges emerge from this idea for you?
- d) If attributes such as compassion, love, and justice are “divine before they are human,” what does this mean for us when we act in these ways?
- e) If it is true that contemporary Jewish social justice work rarely discusses God or theology, in what ways might we introduce a spiritually transformative idea of God into this work?
- f) What idea of God speaks most loudly and clearly to you, and why?

4:23

This mishnah purports to be a discussion of emotional intelligence; Rabbi Soloveitchik argues that in religious life, the totality of emotional experience is needed.

- a) How can we train our emotional intelligence—in prayer, in ritual, and in Jewish learning?
- b) Why do you think that this mishnah speaks about anger, mourning, vow-making, and degradation in the context of appeasement? How do these four states of being relate to one another, and what might their appearance in the context of this mishnah teach us?
- c) What is your answer to Rabbi Yanklowitz’s question: “If we know that emotional development is a key part of moral development, then why does so much of Jewish education consist of cognitive learning?”

CHAPTER FIVE

The introductory *mishnayot* of the fifth *perek* move away from the realm of human action and behavior, to the world of God's creation.

5:1

- a) Is there a relationship between the various lists of ten: utterances of creation, generations of God's patience, trials, miracles, plagues, and creations?
- b) What is the new idea of speech presented here? According to Rabbi Soloveitchik, what can prayer tell us about this relationship? What do you learn from this mishnah about human speech resounding in a world where many people get offended and hurt by others in social media?

5:3

- a) What is the relationship between patience and ritual change described in 5:3?

5:4

- a) In his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* 5:4, Rabbi Yanklowitz returns to the idea of overcoming or channelling our *yetzer hara* (discussed earlier in 4:19). Here, Rabbi Yanklowitz teaches that we—when we struggle with our inclinations—should “use all the temptations that appear before us and channel that energy toward the good, *rather than dismiss the temptation.*” Does this idea seem viable to you? What does this commentary add to your understanding of these *mishnayot*?
- b) Can you construct meaning, as Viktor Frankel argues, through the idea of a God who tests us?

5:5

Discussing the role of miracles and revelation in mishnah 5:5, Rabbi Yanklowitz notes that a tension exists “between the revelation of the past and the truth of contemporary spiritual life.”

- a) How does *Pirkei Avot* attempt to reconcile this tension?

5:6

In his teaching on *Pirkei Avot* 5:6, Rabbi Yanklowitz touches upon a question that is most painful for believing Jews: what is the role of God in a world full of pain?

- a) Where do you turn in times of spiritual doubt, and why?
- b) Which ways do this Mishnah and the accompanying commentary suggest to cope with human doubt?

5:8

Rabbi Yanklowitz reads this esoteric mishnah as being primarily about the centrality of Shabbat.

- a) Which aspects of Shabbat observance are not part of your current practice? What decision-making went into establishing your current practice?
- b) In what ways might you, as Rabbi Yanklowitz suggests, embrace alternative ways of mindful rest?

- c) To what degree does divine creation play a role in your theology and practice of Shabbat?

5:13-18

These *mishnayot* introduce taxonomies of human virtues, temperaments, and behaviors.

- a) How does R' Eliyahu de Vidas' concept of *nefesh* add to the discussion of mishnah 5:13?
- b) Is the idea presented here sufficient for a modern, capitalist-based society? Why or why not?
- c) How do you understand and actualize the idea of “investing in ourselves by investing in others?”
- d) Commenting on mishnah 5:16, Rabbi Yanklowitz articulates the general imperative encapsulated in this mishnah of giving *tzedakah*. What do the distinctions between the four individuals described here suggest regarding human nature and our obligations?
- e) Much of *Pirkei Avot* is about balance. When might anger be necessary?
- f) Why do you think anger is linked to arrogance? Can you feel any kind of anger without arrogance?
- g) What counts as “just” anger for you? How does this modify your understanding of mishnah 5:14?
- h) Rabbi Yanklowitz argues that “if our society is guided by comfortable, conflict-averse decision-making, how can we engage in the task to improve society?” How does this question relate to the articulation of different learning styles in mishnah 5:15?
- i) What does the Chasidic idea of “*chameitz* in the heart” suggest about the process of learning?
- j) Rabbi Yanklowitz wants us to prioritize Jewish virtues over social pressures. In what ways might you do this?

5:21

In a mishnah about influencing others to keep them from committing a sin, Rabbi Yanklowitz writes about the double responsibility Jews have for all human beings, but especially for fellow Jews.

- a) To what degree is the avoidance and prevention of sin a relevant issue for you? Why?
- b) Do you feel truly implicated in all of Jewry? In what situations do you feel a particularly strong responsibility toward fellow Jews? Does this inform your idea of sin and collective responsibility?
- c) In teaching that our responsibility as Jews is “to perpetuate holiness in all its manifold forms,” Rabbi Yanklowitz argues that “we must all be activists.” What drives you to action? How might the *mishnayot* studied here inform your sense of Jewish responsibility and action?

5:25

This mishnah outlines the relationship between learning and aging.

- a) What does the Kedushat Levi's idea of awe, as introduced by Rabbi Yanklowitz, add to your understanding of the chronology of learning and aging as taught in this mishnah?
- b) How do you distinguish between your own sense of *yirat p'nimit* and *yirat chitzonit*?
- c) How has your own sense of awe changed over time?
- d) How do wonder and awe impact your sense of religion, prayer, and vocation?
- e) How can you correct the tendency to lose a sense of wonder and awe over time?

5:26

In the concluding mishnah of this *perek*, Rabbi Yanklowitz presents four philosophical approaches to troubling Jewish texts, and finishes with an argument for the paramount purpose of studying Jewish text.

- a) Which of these four approaches works best for you? Which is the easiest, and which is the hardest?
- b) Rabbi Yanklowitz argues that the main reason for studying text is not to cherry-pick justifications of behavior, nor to fixate on troubling passages, but to “become motivated to act in the true spirit of *tikkun olam*.” Do you agree? What other purposes have you encountered, or could you imagine?

CHAPTER SIX

6:1

In his comments on mishnah 6:1, Rabbi Yanklowitz outlines his view on the spiritual development of a single human being, as well as of humanity in general. To him, Torah study paves our way to growth and holiness.

- a) Do you have a *torah lishmah*—Torah study for its own sake, and what does it look like?
- b) Even given the idea of studying Torah for its own sake, what reward seems to emerge from this practice?
- c) How does your Torah study contribute to your spiritual, intellectual, and personal growth?

6:2-3, 5

These *mishnayot* discuss the balance between study and practice. Writing about revelation, Rabbi Yanklowitz states that “the study of Torah cannot remain confined to discussion in academic circles. Torah must be lived,” and that we should “take profoundly inspirational and transformative moments from text and tradition and assimilate them into daily life.”

- a) Using his examples of prayer, rituals, Shabbat, and holidays, in what ways do text and tradition appear in your daily life?
- b) What inspires you most about Jewish text and tradition? How do they motivate you to incorporate them into your life?
- c) Which part of Jewish tradition “requires further work” in your life, as Rabbi Hoshaya asks?
- d) What does it mean for you to “let your performances exceed your learning”?
- e) Conversely, are you aware of times when Jewish social justice movements “neglect the Divine, the primary source of our sense of responsibility”? How can you work to ensure that God, study, and action stay intertwined, as these *mishnayot* propose?

6:8

Rabbi Yanklowitz teaches that our human emotions can “deeply affect the heavens.”

- a) Do you understand your emotional response to the world as impacting something beyond yourself? Explain.
- b) What would be the relationship between your emotions and God?
- c) Do you, as Rabbi Yanklowitz suggests, “take time to consider the power and uniqueness of our being and self-expression”? How is that expressed in your life and in your choices?

6:10 and 11

The final *mishnayot* emphasize one of the most salient themes of *Pirkei Avot*: balance in life and all of its endeavours.

- a) From where do you draw the power to “[transform] every encounter into an ethical embrace,” as Rabbi Yanklowitz demands?
- b) How do you resolve the tension between the physical and spiritual?
- c) Thinking of the teachings you have encountered in *Pirkei Avot* and Rabbi Yanklowitz’s commentary, how do you express your responsibility to the other?

And yet, despite the focus on balance, Rabbi Yanklowitz writes that “in ritual, we prioritize the right side over the left, to signify that love and kindness, *chesed*, outweigh strength and justice, *g’vurah*. In striving to emulate God, we cultivate both but work to ensure that *chesed* outweighs strength.”

- d) What compromises are necessary to ensure that *chesed* outweighs *g’vurah*?
- e) When is balance needed, and when is a steadfast dedication to love and kindness needed?
- f) How has studying *Pirkei Avot* helped you to think about the roles of balance and compromise in religious and secular life?