



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

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Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

Perek Alef, Mishnah He

1:5 Yosse ben Yohanan of Jerusalem says, let your home be open wide, and let the poor be members of your household. And do not converse excessively with a woman. They said this of one's own wife, how much more so of another man's wife. From here our Sages said, one who speaks excessively with a woman does evil to himself and neglects Torah study, and in the end he will inherit *gehinom*.

The Guest List

In the previous *mishnah*, Yosse ben Yoezer taught us, "let your home be a meeting place for scholars." In this *mishnah*, Yosse ben Yohanan also relates to shaping the character of one's home, but from another angle. Rather than advocating hospitality exclusively for Torah scholars, he encourages us to follow the example of our Forefather Avraham, the prototype of perfect *hachnassat orhim*. He did not limit his guest list to pious rabbis and scholars. He welcomed everyone, throwing his home open to idol worshippers and other disreputables and doing his best to teach them about the Creator. Although more demanding and less rewarding, this is true *hachnassat orhim*.

It is very pleasant – not to mention a great honor – to host the acclaimed and the eminent. It is less gratifying to usher in a shabby, unwashed beggar and invite him to sit at your table, eat your food, perhaps even sleep in your bed if necessary. He certainly needs the attention and the hospitality more than a prominent *rosh yeshivah* does, but realistically, who wants him as a guest? It may be uncomfortable to have him, but as Yosse ben Yohanan teaches us, this is true fulfillment of the *mitzvah*.



There is another factor to keep in mind as well. *Hachanassat orhim* is an obligation, not merely a social occasion. If we happen to like entertaining, and invite over friends whose company we enjoy, we are not really fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *hachnassat orhim*. Providing food and a roof and bed for those who lack these necessities, even if they are not the most pleasant or celebrated of visitors, is the type of *hesed* exemplified by our Forefather Avraham.

At Home

These words carry another message as well. **Let your home be open wide:** when we host the poor in our home we should be generous and openhanded, making them welcome and comfortable without counting the cost. However, we may understand the continuation of the *mishnah* as “let the members of your household be poor.” Our own family should be taught to live simply and modestly, without luxuries and excess, and to appreciate what they have. They should not grow accustomed to the good life, because they will become incapable of doing without it.

I personally am familiar with a wealthy man who was raised in this manner. He told me that growing up, he had no idea that his father was extremely well off – until the day he lost his money! His father had wisely chosen to keep his true financial status a secret, so that his family would not become attached to a high standard of living which they might not always be able to maintain.

We find this principle in our Sages’ insight into the *ben sorer u’moreh* described by the Torah. The “wayward and rebellious son” who dies by public stoning is no more than a *bar mitzvah* boy brought up to expect that he will get whatever he wants, the minute he wants it. Raised like a prince, he will stop at nothing to satisfy his appetites (*Devarim* 21:18-21, Rashi; *Sotah* 69a). Had he learned some basic frugality at home, he would not have come to such a terrible end. If we train the **members of our household** to live as if they were **poor**, we will spare them much grief.

However, in our generation especially, we must be extremely careful. The reality of the times is that society as a whole lives on an affluent scale, and most people today cannot handle a lifestyle which deviates greatly from contemporary norms. This is especially true of wives and mothers coping with the problems of managing a home on a minimal budget, and children who may be put off by the difficulties of life in a Torah home, G-d forbid. Children need to see that we can be generous with them when appropriate. Finding the ideal balance between a stingy existence and undue luxury is essential, for many reasons.



As we said, even if we are well-off today, we have no guarantee that this will always be the case. If we are used to luxurious standards, it will be painfully difficult for us to cut back should circumstances change. In addition, quiet, modest living does not attract attention or jealousy, while showy, expensive habits put us at risk of an *ayin hara*, literally an “evil eye.”

There is something else to consider as well. If we constantly pursue pleasure, we will find that we work against ourselves: we deprive ourselves of the enjoyment of pleasure. Whatever we have will seem bland and boring, because we always want more. Rather than enjoy G-d's blessings, we will always be reaching for an elusive new high that we can never achieve – because as soon as we have it, it too becomes old and stale. As our Sages tell us, “Man does not die with [even] half his desires in hand. If he has one hundred, he wants two hundred” (*Kohelet Rabbah* 1:34).

Our Sages also mention an exception to the principle of careful spending. They teach that man's entire yearly income is allotted for him on Rosh Hashanah, other than the money he spends on honoring the Sabbath and the Festivals, and the cost of his children's tuition for Torah study. If this is where he chooses to save, his income will be cut back accordingly. If he spends more on these *mitzvot*, he will be granted more from Heaven (*Betzah* 16a).

Even if we generally avoid unnecessary expenditures, it is proper to be more openhanded in preparing for Shabbat and Jewish holidays. However, this type of spending must also be logical and considered. Our Sages are not telling us to splurge heedlessly on expensive delicacies which we cannot afford, with the justification that it is “all in honor of Shabbat” – and then find ourselves in need of community support. So too, if we are shopping for an outfit for Shabbat, there is no reason to buy the most expensive item in the store even if it is way beyond our budget, relying on our Sages' promise that Hashem will reimburse us.

Our Sages' instructions mean that we should honor Shabbat by spending somewhat more than we do for weekdays. If we extend ourselves – in keeping with our means – to be a little freer with expenses for Hashem's holy days, He will repay us, and we will lose nothing by fulfilling the *mitzvah* in the best way we can.

Pure Hesed

Yosse ben Yohanan of Jerusalem says, let your home be open wide, and let the poor be members of your household. And do not converse excessively with a woman. They said this of one's own wife, how much more so of another man's wife.



In the first part of the *mishnah* Yosse ben Yohanan discusses hospitality. In the second part he shifts to minimizing social contact with women, an apparently unrelated topic. What connection is there between these two parts of the *mishnah*?

We have followed Yosse ben Yohanan's advice and flung open our doors to all comers, the indigent alongside the illustrious. In fact, our Sages describe just how this should be done. "Rabbi Yitzhak said, one who gives a penny to a poor person is blessed with six blessings, and one who appeases him is blessed with eleven blessings" (*Baba Batra* 9b). In other words, it is not enough to open the door with a sigh and gruffly motion the miserable fellow in; our poor guest should feel comforted and comfortable. If we are kind and gracious and encouraging, we will be blessed for our efforts many times over, which is certainly very fine and admirable.

However, it stands to reason that at least some of our unfortunate, unhappy guests will be women who need support and hospitality no less than their male counterparts. This is the time to stop and note the continuation of the *mishnah*. The very same *Tanna* who encouraged indiscriminate open house also said, **and do not converse excessively with a woman**. A male host should not feel personally obligated to lavish friendship and conversation on female guests (see *Midrash Shmuel*, citing the Abarbanel). The same is true of women who come to the door to collect charity. While a pleasant reception and words of encouragement may be in order as they go about their often thankless task, it should be from woman to woman, certainly not extended by the man of the house to a woman at the door. The same applies also to women returnees to observant Judaism, who may be in need of counseling and warmth. Here too we must learn from Avraham, the greatest master of outreach and *hachnassat orhim* ever: "Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women" (Rashi on *Bereshit* 12:5, citing *Bereshit Rabbah* 39:14).

Conversation with any woman other than one's wife should definitely be kept to the barest minimum, as we learn from an incident related in the *Gemara* (*Eruvin* 53b). Rabbi Yosse Hagalili was on his way to the city of Lod. He reached a fork in the road and was unsure of which route to take, when he happened to see Rabbi Meir's wife Beruriah.

"Which way do we take to Lod?" he asked her.

"Foolish Galilean," she said. "Didn't the Sages say, 'do not converse excessively with a woman'? You should have [just] said, 'which to Lod?'" In this sensitive field, it is far better to err on the side of caution.



However, perhaps we notice that a woman is going through hard times, and it seems to us that it would be a big *mitzvah* and a tremendous act of *hesed* to help out with encouragement and understanding and attention – just talking, of course, nothing more. The *yetzer hara* is most eager to have us engage in such wonderful *mitzvot* and noble acts of *hesed* as often as possible. Lengthy personal conversation opens the door to much more complex relationships, and they are forbidden.

Perhaps this is why the Torah uses a surprising term in its description of a prohibited incestuous relationship: “it is *hesed*” (*Vayikra* 20:17). This type of relationship is perverted, misguided *hesed* which is carried to excess. *Hesed* must *always* be kept within halachic bounds. Our Sages tell us, **do not converse excessively with a woman**, and we, devout, disinterested souls that we are, say, “But isn’t it a big *hesed*?” A man who is friendly and warm to a woman not his wife may be boosting her morale and building up her self-esteem. He is making a fellow Jew happy – what a tremendous *baal hesed* he is!

The Torah does indeed describe this sort of behavior as *hesed* – overdone, corrupted *hesed* which slides into immorality. If we overstep the Torah’s bounds, we will be destroyed along with our *hesed*. In just one tragic instance, a pious and well-meaning individual began counseling a couple experiencing marital problems. He became so involved and developed such a compassionate, sympathetic, *hesed*-filled relationship with the *wife* that he lost control of himself altogether... may Hashem spare us. **One who speaks excessively with a woman does evil to himself and neglects Torah study, and in the end he will inherit *gehinom*.** What was this would-be marriage counselor’s undoing? His overconfidence. He spent too much time with a woman, time which would have been better used for learning. From there he fell deeply into sin. What positive **end** can there possibly be to such a story?

As Needed

Do not converse excessively with a woman.

The Torah has a very realistic understanding of human weakness, and it guides us accordingly. Forbidden relationships do not start at the end. They start at the beginning, with a quick hello, perhaps eventually followed by some harmless small talk. The Sages tell us to welcome the poor into our homes, but they also tell us how to do it: with warmth and kindness, by men to men and by women to women.

We may be surprised to note that the our Sages’ caution against excessive



speech with women is in fact a *kal v'homer*¹ derived from the primary injunction against speaking **excessively with... one's own wife!** Let us understand what our Sages are saying, as well as what they are *not* saying.

With their profound knowledge of human nature, our Sages warned us against unnecessary, excessive, conversation, albeit harmless, because they understood where it can lead. This is all the more true concerning improper or coarse talk, even between a husband and wife. They cite the verse, “He relates to a person what he spoke of” (*Amos 4:13*). Rav said, even excessive, unwarranted conversation between a man and his wife is recounted to a person when he dies” (*Hagigah 5b*).

What constitutes excessive conversation with **one's own wife**? Obviously, our Sages did not speak of refraining from necessary dialogue. There is a major difference between engaging in talk which is immodest, inappropriate, or ill timed, and ignoring a wife's need for and right to sensitivity, warmth, and attention. When a woman needs her husband's encouragement or help, it is a *mitzvah* for him to provide them. This is especially true of Torah scholars living on a limited income. Their wives undergo great difficulty in operating a home on a tight budget, and they need and deserve heartfelt expressions of caring and gratitude, as they continue to support the Torah study of their husbands and children.

Everyone is different. It takes a great deal of wisdom to correctly gauge and meet another party's needs, and yet not err in the opposite direction. A husband's obligations to his wife as outlined in the marriage contract are based on her feelings, which may not necessarily be identical to his. To cite a rather mundane example, just as he expects her to learn to cook what he likes and would be disturbed if she did not make the effort, his handling of their relationship should be geared to her, and yet, be properly balanced. Each case is individual.

From here our Sages said, one who speaks excessively with a woman does evil to himself and neglects Torah study, and in the end he will inherit *gehinom*.

With these words, the *Tanna* warns us against the spiritual decline that begins not with shocking sins, but with overindulgence in permitted pleasures. The Sages instituted *Takanat Ezra* (immersion after seminal emission even under permitted circumstances, such as having relations with one's wife), “so that Torah scholars should not be with their wives [constantly], like roosters” (*Berachot 22a*). Incessant

¹ *Kal V'Homer*, a fortiori reasoning, is a method of reasoning used by our Sages; what is true in a lenient case is surely true in a more severe case



conversation on intimate matters and frequent intimate contact, even with one's own wife, fosters increased desire. One who is caught up in the quest for gratification may find that the permitted becomes drab and dull, so that he now craves a taste of forbidden pleasures, G-d forbid.

He **does evil to himself**, falling into the sin of wasting semen through his absorption in lusts. Not surprisingly, he will be left with little interest in **Torah study**. **In the end**, G-d forbid, he will have lost all control and succumb to the urge for forbidden relations, whether with his own wife when she is ritually impure, or even worse, with another man's wife; **he will inherit *gehinom***.

All the more so another man's wife.

The problems in conversing excessively with **another man's wife** are so obvious that they hardly require elaboration. The craving for forbidden relationships is unbelievably powerful; no one can claim to be immune. This is true even of Torah scholars. Our Sages relate incidents where great *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* were sorely tempted, to show us that everyone, no matter who he is, must guard against temptation (see *Kiddushin* 81). On one occasion, the *Amora* Abbaye overheard an unmarried man and woman plan to rise early the next morning and travel out of town together. Abbaye decided to go along unobserved, to prevent them from sinning. When the two parted ways without incident, Abbaye admitted that had he been in this man's position, he would not have been able to withstand the temptation as he had. It pained him greatly that he, a Torah scholar, was weaker than a simple, unlearned Jew when faced with a trial. A colleague comforted him by pointing out that "the greater the individual, the greater his evil inclination" (*Sukkah* 52a).

Out of Bounds

We should so distance ourselves from sin that we do not even discuss it as a reality; just speaking about it already suffices to taint us. We learn this from our Sages' teaching concerning a *sotah*, a married woman who is accused of immoral conduct. A *sotah* underwent a painful, humiliating public ordeal which established her guilt or innocence (*Bamidbar* 5:11-31). Immediately following the laws of a *sotah* are those concerning a *nazir*, who voluntarily takes on various forms of abstinence, including refraining from wine (*ibid.* 6:1-21). Our Sages explain the connection between the two topics: "Anyone who sees a *sotah* in her ruin should foreswear wine for himself" (*Sotah* 2a).



The correlation is obvious. The sight of the *sotah*'s degradation and frightening end served as a powerful lesson about the wages of sin, so shocking as to inspire voluntary abstinence from wine, which is intimately linked to immoral conduct.

An interesting question is asked in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak Ze'ev Soloveitchik of Brisk. It would seem that one who witnessed the *sotah*'s fall had seen enough of punishment to deter him from transgression forever. What need had he of the extra restrictions imposed upon a *nazir*? Surely after watching the *sotah*'s suffering, he would never dare do wrong.

The answer is testimony to our Sages' profound understanding of the workings of man's mind and soul. The Brisker Rav explains that exposure to sin changes our perception of sin. Even simply speaking or hearing about it transforms it from something unthinkable and impossible to something that does, after all, take place. And while we have seen that sinners are punished, we may be tempted to think that sometimes, perhaps, they are not... The individual who observes the ruin of the *sotah* is very well advised to take on additional fences against sin. Knowing for a solid fact that sin can and does occur, he requires the extra reinforcement of abstaining from wine to keep him from stepping across a line that is no longer considered impassable.

We find this concept in our Sages' teaching concerning the commandment to eradicate the memory of Amalek after their attack on the Jews in the desert (*Midrash Tanhuma Ki Tetze*, Chapter 9). They use the analogy of a boiling hot bathtub. At first, no one dares to so much as immerse a toe, for fear of being scorched. Then a brazen individual jumps directly into the tub. While he personally sustains severe burns, he cools off the tub for all those who follow.

The Jewish nation had only recently left Egypt, delivered from bondage through a series of spectacular miracles which left the surrounding nations in fear and awe of G-d's chosen people. Then came Amalek, who dared to do battle with the Jews. True, they lost the battle, but the Jews were no longer perceived as an unassailable people. If Amalek could attack them, anyone could.

The same principle may be applied to sin in general. If we see that someone else was capable of transgressing, our fear simmers down from a rolling boil to merely lukewarm. We are no longer afraid to extend a toe, and eventually, to jump right in.

We find this principle in Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin's explanation of the Torah's commandment to judge our fellowman favorably, giving him the benefit of the doubt (*Vayikra* 19:15, Rashi, citing *Sifra*, *Kedoshim* 4). This obligation relates primarily to one whose actions are obscure; they may be legitimate, but it is equally possible that



they are improper. In such a case, we are to judge him favorably and assume that his behavior was not sinful (Rambam, *Perush HaMishnayt* on *Avot* 1:6).

Rabbi Yehoshua Leib explains this commandment on a more profound level. We must judge favorably, not because it is really certain that no sin was committed, but rather, to distance *ourselves* from any association with sin, even if only in thought. This is because viewing sin as a real possibility brings us one step closer to commission (*She'elot U'Teshuvot Maharil Diskin*, end of Vol. I). It follows that any discussion of sin should be as brief as possible, only as necessary for instruction and rebuke.

The Power of Speech

Our Sages teach us that the very worst of sins can begin with excessive, inappropriate speech. In describing a case where a woman was seen speaking to a man in public, they use the term “speaking” as a euphemism for an immoral act (see *Ketubot* 13a). They cite the verse, “This is the way of an adulterous woman. She eats and wipes her mouth and says, I have not sinned” (*Mishle* 30:20). Speaking and eating, both related to the mouth, are interpreted as symbolic of the sin of immorality (see Rashi), because the familiarity of conversation is often the first step leading to outright sin.

All of man’s limbs were created for a specific purpose. Improper use of a given limb wastes its potential force, similar to the concept of wasting semen. For example, one who uses his G-d-given power of vision to view forbidden sights is wasting his capacity for sight. One who uses his power of speech to engage in forbidden talk is wasting his capacity for speech (*Shelah, Shaar HaOtiot, Ot Kuf, Kedushah*).

The *Sefer Yetzirah* (Chapter 1) equates the covenant of circumcision to the covenant of speech. *Brit Kodesh*, literally “the sacred covenant” or circumcision, is a euphemism for marital relations. The term *brit*, covenant, is also used in reference to the mouth, as in our Sages’ teaching, “A covenant was made with the lips” (*Moed Katan* 18a et al). This means that just as forbidden intimate relations violates the *brit*, so does misuse of the power of speech. The covenant of circumcision relates to actual forbidden physical contact, while the power of speech forges an emotional link, which can lead to this forbidden physical contact.

Both our speech and our consumption of food should be kept clean and pure. Gluttony, forbidden foods, profanity and slanderous gossip all defile the mouth. Talk which is clean, and food consumed as a means to maintain good health so that we can serve Hashem, elevate the mouth into an organ dedicated to His service. The



same is true of the *brit kodesh*. Immorality defiles it, while marital relations for the sake of Heaven are imbued with sanctity. If we are casual and careless in our speech, we can fall into sins related to immorality. If we guard and elevate our speech, we will be capable of living a life of purity and holiness.

Intimate relations between a man and woman form a strong connection and attachment. Suggestive looks and speech can be the first step in forming this connection and attachment. The prohibition involved is severe in the extreme, may G-d spare us. It is important to realize that where immorality is concerned, the evil inclination does its very best to urge us along into taking the first step, harmless as it may seem. Once he has started us on the path, one step leads easily to the next, and before we know it we are very, very far gone. Our Sages teach that "There is no guardian against immorality" (*Ketubot* 13b). A taste of sin generates a powerful, growing appetite that can become irresistible; no caution can be too great. The Hidda makes this point with an interesting play on words. The sequence of the Orders of the *Mishnah* is *Nashim* (Women), followed by *Nezikin* (Damages). The two concepts are intimately connected. If we are not sufficiently careful in guarding against undue familiarity with women, damage is the inevitable result (*Igrot HaHidda*, 28b).

Our Sages knew us well, and advised us to go to the other extreme as a safeguard. They tell us, **do not converse excessively with a woman. They said this of one's own wife, how much more so of another man's wife.** If we refrain from unwarranted conversation on intimate matters even with our own wives, we erect a fence which protects us from stumbling into the very worst of sins.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.