



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

Rabbi Yaakov Hillel

Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

Perek Alef, Mishnah Vav (part 2)

1:6 Yehoshua ben Perahiah and Nitai HaArbeli received from them. Yehoshua ben Perahiah says, make a teacher for yourself and acquire for yourself a friend. And judge every person favorably.

Writing

The *mishnah* says, **and acquire (*keneh*) for yourself a friend**. The Hidda writes that in this context, we should read the word not as *keneh* but as *kaneh*, literally a reed, used in former times as a writing implement. In fact, the Sages instruct us to use a reed as a pen when writing a Torah scroll (*Taanit* 20b). Reeds were unavailable in Eastern Europe, so it became customary to use a feather quill instead.

Writing is an excellent aid to comprehension and clarification. **And a *kaneh* should be your friend** means that we should become so accustomed to writing down our Torah thoughts and novellae that our pen is literally our best friend.

Why is it so important that we write down our own Torah thoughts and make detailed notes as we learn?

We tend to relate more seriously to what we write than to what we say. We may speak very freely, unleashing a flood of words with little thought, because they are here and gone in a flash. We are more careful with our written words, which are preserved for generations to come. The Rambam writes that not everything one thinks should be spoken, not everything one speaks should be written, not everything one writes should be publicized, and not everything printed should be published (Introduction to *Moreh Mevuchim*). Writing has a, special enduring significance.



Writing helps us clarify our thoughts. It is also an excellent assist to memory. Let us say that we have learned a topic and written up our conclusions and ideas. Then, while learning another topic, we come across something related to the earlier material. We jot down a reminder to refer back to our notebook, only to discover that we already have notes on a number of important relevant points, which we otherwise would not have remembered. Learning this way greatly expands our knowledge and comprehension, building and developing it on a much wider base.

Taking the Time

Rabbi David HaCohen Sakli, the author of *Kiryat Hannah David*, discusses our Sages' teaching, "One who enjoys the labor of his hands is greater than one who fears Heaven" (*Berachot* 8a). How are we to understand this statement? A workingman who does *not* fear Heaven is obviously on a very low spiritual level. However, if he has a solid fear of G-d and also makes an honest living, he has a definite advantage over the individual who is G-d-fearing but not self-supporting, because he supports himself without accepting charity.

Rabbi David HaCohen Sakli offers an original explanation of our Sages' teaching. He writes that they refer here to two different types of Torah scholars. One will put intensive effort into learning a topic in very great depth. He is totally involved, working the topic through, discussing it, perhaps also lecturing on it. He covers the material fully and arrives at some interesting scholarly conclusions, but he sees no reason to record these conclusions in writing. If his ideas are correct, he feels, surely anyone who learns the topic will reach the same conclusions, so that it is unnecessary to write them down. And if they are not correct, it would certainly be a waste of time to commit his errors to writing. Either way, he decides, right or wrong, documentation is superfluous. He knows what he has learned and is now eager to move ahead, with no further time wasted. This type of scholar is the individual described by our Sages as "one who fears Heaven." His piety does not allow him to waste precious time writing up what may be obvious on the one hand or incorrect on the other. His main intention is to go on to the next topic, continuing uninterrupted in his learning.

Then we have the Torah scholar who "benefits from the labor of his hands." He too has learned in depth. He has completed his investigation and summing up of the topic, and is ready to move on to a new challenge, as was his colleague, the G-d-fearing scholar. The difference is that he goes one step further and takes the extra time to write down his original interpretation of what he has learned. While it does not add anything new to his knowledge, he exerts himself to do it nonetheless, and he will reap the benefits of this "labor of his hands." His notes will help him when he



returns to the topic at a later time, as human memory is unfortunately quite fallible. Also, if his novellae are good and have been preserved, he can teach them to other students, whether orally, in writing or in print.

The gains extend to the World to Come as well, as our Sages tell us: “A Torah scholar whose words are cited in his name in this world, his lips move in the grave” (*Yevamot* 97a). A Torah scholar works out an interesting interpretation of a Talmudic topic, and after his passing a student or a colleague repeats the idea in the originator’s name. When this happens, our Sages tell us, the scholar’s “lips move in the grave,” as if he were still alive. He is resurrected through his Torah. If his words had not been preserved and made available for study and repetition, this could not have happened.

As we see, there are many benefits to writing. It is an aid to comprehension, and it helps us better organize and develop our thoughts. It also helps us to remember, allows us to pass on our learning to others, and preserves our novellae beyond our own lifetime. We may speak rather casually, but are much less likely to write casually. We want our writing to be on a high standard, and may often find that we put more into our learning in order to produce a better, clearer, more thorough written piece. **A *kaneh* should be our friend**, because writing improves the quality of our learning.

Written Judgment

How does this interpretation connect to the continuation of the *mishnah*? In this context, how and when should we **judge every person favorably**?

As we said, the Hidda interprets **make a teacher for yourself** as a reference to amassing an extensive library. Let us imagine that we are learning from such a **teacher** – a work of Torah authored by a distinguished scholar. We read the words, re-read them, and frown. They do not fit well with the way we understand the topic, and we totally disagree with his premise. Our trusted **friend** – a ballpoint, the contemporary equivalent of a reed – is readily at hand, and we express our opinion with a few scrawled words in the margin.

We would do well to take a moment to think before we start scribbling. Have we fully exerted ourselves to understand exactly what the author is saying? Might it be that it is not he who has missed the point, but we? Perhaps we have not studied the topic in sufficient depth, and that is why we do not agree with him. The correct thing to do, then, is to **judge him favorably**.



As we see, the Hidda derives three important pieces of advice from this *mishnah*: we should learn from the works of great scholars; we should record our Torah novellae in writing; and we should accord the Torah of other scholars due respect, even if we think we disagree.

Probably...

Make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every person favorably.

The connection between the first two parts of the *mishnah* is obvious: we learn from a teacher and we also learn with a study partner. The *Tanna* continues, **and judge every person favorably**, or in other words, we should always give others the benefit of the doubt. What does this expression mean, and how does it connect to the beginning of the *mishnah*?

Perhaps we see someone doing what looks exactly like a sin. There appears to be no question – what else *could* it be? Yet even so, we are obligated to try to think of an explanation which would justify his actions, suspicious as they may seem. The Rambam's explanation of this *mishnah* is especially interesting. He writes that if we observe a *tzaddik* doing a deed which is unquestionably sinful, we must nonetheless assume that his actions are entirely proper, even if it is difficult for us to grasp how this is so. At the same time, if we see an individual who is commonly known to be wicked engaged in an act which appears to be a *mitzvah*, we should assume that there must be something wrong, and that he is probably acting on negative ulterior motives.

However, if the situation is so clearly obvious, when do we have the opportunity to **judge every person favorably**? One way or the other, who is left for us to **judge**?

The Rambam writes that this *mishnah* refers to the man in the middle, who is neither all-out righteous nor all-out wicked, G-d forbid. We really do not know what he is or how to assess his actions, so we should give him the benefit of the doubt, and try to view his behavior in a favorable light. Although we do not quite understand what he is up to, we should assume that there is probably a good reason for his actions, and that they are permitted, possibly even praiseworthy.

Doing Battle

The issue of judging favorably in reference to Torah scholars and the authors of works of Torah is more serious than we may realize, as we find in the saintly Ohr



HaHayyim's words in *Perot Genosar* on *Yoreh Deah* (Introduction and *Hilchot Tola'im* 84:13).¹

The Ohr HaHayyim censures those who dare to speak against the Early Authorities, and even rebukes those who question the words of outstanding Later Authorities such as Rabbi Yehudah Rosannes without fully understanding them. He explains why Rabbi Rosannes' monumental work, *Mishneh L'Melech*, was not published by the author in his lifetime, but in a later generation by Rabbi Yaakov Kuli. This saintly scholar did not want his writings to be studied by students who could not entirely comprehend them. Their very ignorance might cause them to be critical, and they would be punished for their temerity, G-d forbid. The Ohr HaHayyim goes on to say that he forbids anyone who is not truly scholarly and learned, and does not learn in depth for Hashem's honor, to study his works. Of one who does so without fulfilling these conditions he writes, "I will punish him."

Rabbi David Pardo, author of *Mizmor L'David* on *Yoreh Deah*, cites the Ohr HaHayyim's warning to those who do not learn in depth and for the sake of Heaven (*Hilchot Tola'im* 57a). He writes that we cannot take this statement literally. We know that our great Torah scholars have no need of our approval. Especially from their vantage point in the World of Truth, "flatterers will not come before them" (*Iyov* 13:16). They can do without our pious, loudly spoken reassurances that of course, they are right and we are wrong, and how could anyone possibly think otherwise? In addition, we will make little progress in learning if we are afraid to ask questions when we do not understand; we must use our minds intelligently. The Early Authorities did in fact question the great scholars who came before them, and the Later Authorities questioned the Early Authorities.

The problem is not with the notion of asking a question, but with the arrogant way we may be tempted to ask it. Even as we question we should be respectful, and fully aware of the fact that we may well be wrong.

How, then, Rabbi Pardo asks, can we take the Ohr HaHayyim's warning literally? We must learn in depth before studying his works, but how are we to learn in depth *without* first studying his works? He says that it was specifically from the Ohr HaHayyim that he learned how to learn in depth! Even after studying the Ohr HaHayyim's books, he writes, he could not yet say he that he really considered

¹ Rabbi Hizkiah di Silva, known by the title of his classic work *Pri Hadash*, was one of the greatest of the Later Authorities. He had strongly held opinions and was often critical of earlier scholars, openly questioning their words and conclusions. The Ohr HaHayyim wrote *Pri Toar* to defend the words of the Early Authorities against the questions of the *Pri Hadash*, and the two works were printed together under the title *Perot Genosar*.



himself to be one who learns in sufficiently great depth, although he did try to learn for Hashem's honor (see *Sede Hemed*, *Kelale HaPoskim*).

Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin cites our Sages' teaching that one of the forty-eight means through which Torah is acquired is "he makes his teacher wise" (*Avot* 6:6), through intelligent questions. Our Sages use the phrase "the battle of Torah" (*Sanhedrin* 111b), describing Torah study as war and its students as warriors. They also teach that even a father and son, or a teacher and student, who learn Torah together and engage in heated debate over the meaning of what they are learning, ultimately part as the best of friends (*Kiddushin* 30a). A student may not accept his teacher's words without question; at times, it will be his question or insight which sheds important light on the topic. This is the meaning of our Sages' teaching, "and sit in the dust at their feet" (*Avot* 1:4). *MITABEK*, literally translated as "sit in the dust," is related to the word *le'he'avek*, to wrestle (see *Bereishit* 32:25). We are enjoined to grapple with the opinions of the great Torah scholars of the past, as recorded in their books, in our quest for true understanding of Torah.² However, at the same time, our arguments should be respectful and deferential, keeping in mind that we are not at all in their league. We may do battle with them, but that battle should take place "at their feet," in the humble position where we rightly belong (*Ruah Hayyim*, *Avot* 1:4).

As we see, proper respect for great Torah scholars is critically important. Often we are too ignorant to understand what they are saying, and yet we overflow with pointed comments... We forget who they are, and certainly who we are in comparison. Our Sages provide a remedy for this tendency. When we learn a Torah sage's teaching, "It should be as if the scholar who said the words is there before our eyes" (*Shekalim* 7b).

Practically speaking, what does this mean?

Perhaps we are learning from one of the Ben Ish Hai's many works of Torah. We read what he has written on a halachic topic and we decide that we disagree. For our own good, before making a disparaging comment about this giant's reasoning or ruling, we would do well to stop and think. We should pause long enough to conjure up a vivid, lifelike image of the Ben Ish Hai, watching intently as we peruse his masterwork. We look at the printed words, and then look up at their author. The critical words do not just freeze up on our tongue – we dare not even formulate them in the privacy of our mind. Who are we to differ with his opinions or question his conclusions, let alone with complacency, condescension, or conceit? Now let us imagine further that we wish to make a few remarks about the writings of the Hafetz

² See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:4 for a fuller discussion of this topic.



Hayyim, the Hazon Ish, or any of the other great Torah scholars of generations past. If they were present, would we still speak up? Who here is the donkey, and who the man (see *Shabbat* 112b)?

Our attitude toward earlier Torah scholars should be one of deference and respect, molded by a distinct awareness of our own humble worth as compared to theirs. If we disagree with them, we should realize that it is probably *our* mistake. We should do them the justice of studying their words with the careful attention they deserve, so that hopefully, we will understand at least something of their superior knowledge (see *Orot Elim* on *Masechet Shekalim*).

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