

פתיחת האכלת עושה

לע"נ
הרה"ח הרה"ת ר' שלום דובער ע"ה
בן הרה"ח הרה"ת ר' חיים משה ע"ה
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ולע"נ
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נדפס ע"י
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ומשפחתם שיחיו
אלפרוביץ



Touching the Depth

*A Journey
Through
Pirkei Avos*



Throughout this article, we will explore the Rebbe's unique perspective through the lens of the first Mishnah of Perek Daled, *Ben Zoma Omer*; as we introduce various angles of the Rebbe's analysis, we will return to this Mishnah.



What is Pirkei Avos?

There are dozens of *mesechtos* that focus on *halacha*, on things that we are *obligated* to do; Pirkei Avos teaches how to have good *middos* and *yiras Shamayim*; it teaches us *mili d'chasisdusa*, things that are above and *beyond* the letter of the law. As the Gemara tells us, “He who wishes to be a Chossid should fulfill... the matters of Avos.”¹

Overall, the Rebbe focused on Pirkei Avos as teaching us behavior *beyond* the obligation of Torah, and when we find Mishnayos that seem to be encouraging us to fulfill *halachos*, the Rebbe always asks: What is the *mili dichasisdusa* message here? How does this qualify as *beyond* our obligation?²

The primary setting for the Rebbe's *sichos* on Pirkei Avos was during the summer Shabbos farbrengens, which generally followed this order: After the first couple of *sichos*—usually general *sichos* about the significance of the day and so on—came the *maamar*. Then came the second half of the farbrengen, which focused on specific Torah-subjects: The Rebbe would take a Chumash, read a Rashi, and ask questions on it. Then he would read a selection from Likkutei Levi Yitzchak and ask questions on it. And if it was the summertime, he would read a Mishnah in Pirkei Avos and do the same. After a *niggun*, the Rebbe would answer the questions one by one. (Obviously, the *sichos* often included other subjects as well and didn't always fit this exact set-up.)

When the Rebbe analyzes a Mishnah, he doesn't just read it dryly and make some observations; he gets *involved* in the Mishnah and asks questions with a *shturem*; “This Mishnah is *ingantzen nisht farshtandik*! It is entirely not understood!” “One question... and then a bigger question... and then the *kushya gedola* that no-one even mentions!”³

Then when it comes to the answer, the Mishnah becomes *alive* before our eyes—what the Mishnah means to *us* and how it must change *our* lives. The lesson could be about the importance of *hiskashrus* and learning from every word of the Rabbeim, or about simple matters such as davening before work and not listening to recordings of *kol isha*. It can be teaching us lofty levels in *Torah lishma*, or philosophical understandings in the nature of creation.

Unlike the explanations on Rashi which generally followed a specific guideline—finding the *peshuto shel mikra* (and, *additionally*, the Chassidus and sometimes *halacha* components)—in Pirkei Avos there is no such protocol. One week the Rebbe would resolve the questions with beautiful illuminations in the basic meaning of the Mishnah, focusing on the understanding of the “*ben esser l'Mishnah*,” the ten-year-old studying Mishnah, and the following week he would resolve them with profound explanations according to Chassidus and Kabbalah. (On more than one occasion, the Rebbe explained a Mishnah according to all levels of *pardes*—*pshat*, *remez*, *drush*, and *sod*.)⁴

Pirkei Avos talks about many themes that are understood in an entirely new manner once seen through the lens of Chassidus—e.g. *bittul* to Hashem, studying Torah *lishma*, *ahavas Yisroel*—so when the Rebbe discusses a Mishnah already explained by *mefarshim*, it isn't only that the Rebbe is looking for a *better* explanation in *pshat*—he is illuminating the Mishnah according to the *giluy* of Chassidus.⁵

Sometimes, the Rebbe's interpretation seems to contradict those of the earliest *mefarshim*. There have been hundreds of *sefarim* written on Pirkei Avos throughout the generations: the first *pirush*, *Avos D'Rebbi Nosson*, was compiled by a Tanna, and this was followed by *pirushim*

When do we say Pirkei Avos?

The accepted practice is to study Pirkei Avos during the six weeks between Pesach and Shavuos. In addition, the Alter Rebbe writes in the Siddur, there are those who have the practice of doing it throughout the summer as well.

There are several reasons for it to be studied after Pesach:

1. That is when the world blooms following the winter, and people are involved with their physical health; to counteract the temptations that arise during this time, we learn Pirkei Avos.⁶
2. Since *derech eretz* comes before Torah, we study Avos as a preparation to receive the Torah on Shavuos, similar to what is accomplished through *sefiras ha'omer* to refine our *middos*. In addition, much of it is focused on Torah study, so it is an especially appropriate preparation for Shavuos.⁷
3. The Rebbe also explained that *kedusha* is more revealed in the world during the summer, because the *shemesh Havaya*—Hashem's "sun"—is burning more brightly, and it is therefore appropriate to study *mili dichasidusa* during that time⁸.

Based on this, the Rebbe explains that the custom of reciting Pirkei Avos throughout the entire summer until Rosh Hashanah follows the same reasoning.

1. It is a preparation for the giving of the second *luchos* on Yom Kippur. (Alternatively: because the Torah is always being given anew.)⁹
2. For some people it is enough to study Pirkei Avos one time around, at the beginning of the summer. But those that are *mehader*—or need to be extra careful—continue throughout the summer.¹⁰
3. The summer cycles of Pirkei Avos start on the *parshios* of Nasso, Pinchas, and Shoftim—corresponding to the word *nefesh*—because the purpose of Pirkei Avos is to purify even the lowest level of the *neshama*, the level of *nefesh*.¹¹

What is the Lubavitcher custom? It is unclear whether the Rabbeim recited Pirkei Avos throughout the summer (the Rebbe Rashab, for example, would study a few Mishnayos a week during the summer)¹². Until our generation, the common practice was to recite it only once. However, the Rebbe established the *minhag* of continuing throughout the summer, pointing to the fact that the Rabbeim said *maamarim* in the summer based on the *perek* of that week.¹³

The Rebbe said that each cycle of Avos builds on the previous one, each time proclaiming "Moshe received the Torah from Sinai" anew.¹⁴

by some of the greatest Rishonim (Rambam, Rashi) and early Acharonim (Tosfos Yom Tov, Bartenura, Maharal, etc). Every Mishnah has been discussed and explained multiple times. The Rebbe sometimes mentions that other *mefarshim* discussed the Mishnah—or that they missed out some essential questions—but many times he focuses only on the Mishnah itself.

On many occasions the Rebbe discussed, that in areas of *halacha*, the interpretation of the Tannaim—and later the Rishonim—is binding to all future generations. But Avos is coming to teach us *yiras Shamayim* and *middos tovos*, and everyone has the ability to learn their own interpretation in it—as long as it follows the *klolim* of Torah, and as long as one is careful not to distort the meaning. Therefore we find

that Rashi and Rambam (Rishonim) contradict the *Avos D'Rebbi Nosson*; the Bartenura and Tosfos Yom Tov (early Acharonim) contradict the Rishonim; and the same is true of the later Achronim like the Maharal¹⁵ and so on.¹⁶

(Furthermore, the Rebbe added: We have an *obligation* to innovate in Torah, so when one finds difficulties with an earlier explanation—no matter the author—he must toil to find an alternative one. As an example, the Rebbe notes¹⁷ that Rashi occasionally writes "*Lo yadaati*"—I don't know [the *pshat* meaning] of this passage in Chumash. He doesn't write "*Lo yadua*—it is *not known*," because every person who reads the Rashi has the ability and responsibility to find the explanation, as we stand on the shoulders of giants.)



There are many Mishnayos that the Rebbe illuminates the basic meaning of the words, giving us appreciation for the small details while providing an entirely new level depth of its message. Throughout this article, we will explore the Rebbe's unique perspective through the lens of the first Mishnah of Perek Daled, *Ben Zoma Oimer*; as we introduce various angles of the Rebbe's analysis, we will return to this Mishnah.

We will begin with the Rebbe's beautiful illumination of this famous Mishnah in its simple meaning, in the *pshat*:

בן זומא אומר, איזהו חכם, הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר (תהלים קיט) מכל מלמדי השכלתי כי עדותיך שיחה לי. איזהו גבור, הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר (משלי טז) טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומשל ברוחו מלכד עיר. איזהו עשיר, השמח בחלקו, שנאמר (תהלים קכח) יגיע כפיך כי תאכל אשריך וטוב לך. אשריך, בעולם הזה. וטוב לך, לעולם הבא. איזהו מכבד, המכבד את הבריות, שנאמר (שמואל א ב) כי מכבדי אכבד ובני יקליו:

Ben Zoma would say: Who is wise? One who learns from every man. As is stated (Tehillim 119:99): "From all my teachers I have grown wise, for Your testimonials are my meditation."

Who is strong? One who overpowers his inclinations. As is stated (Mishlei 16:32), "Better one who is slow to anger than one with might, one who rules his spirit than the captor of a city."

Who is rich? One who is satisfied with his lot. As is stated (Tehillim 128:2): "If you eat the toil of your hands, fortunate are you, and good is to you;" "fortunate are you" in this world, "and good is to you" in the World to Come.

Who is honorable? One who honors his fellows. As is stated (Shmuel I 2:30): "For to those who honor me, I accord honor; those who scorn me shall be demeaned."

In a beautiful *sicha*, the Rebbe explains that Ben Zoma transforms our perspective on each of these qualities¹⁸:

Wise: Our intuitive sense of a *chacham*, a wise person, is of someone who fully grasps and comprehends things; he is not naive, and he sees everyone's positive *and* negative qualities. So it would seem that *by definition* a wise person would learn from people who have something to offer, and *not learn* from someone who doesn't.

Ben Zoma transforms our perspective: A wise person is someone who learns from everyone.

Strong: Who do we consider strong? Someone who is physically powerful, with energy and the ability to lift heavy objects.

Ben Zoma transforms our perspective: A strong person is someone who knows how to *rein* in his energy, someone who can *overpower* his inclinations (which isn't referring to the *yetzer hara* specifically, but in general to a person's natural inclinations). For the power of control is more potent than strength itself.

Rich: A rich person isn't only someone who has money—it's a mindset, someone who is ambitious and constantly striving for more.

Ben Zoma transforms our perspective: True wealth is when one is content, for then he experiences heaven on earth.

Honorable: When we think of an honorable person, we imagine someone who knows how to receive respect and appreciates his own qualities. Honoring and associating with *briyos*, lowly people, is the exact opposite of honorable!

Ben Zoma transforms our perspective: True honor comes from honoring others.

The lesson from this Mishna, the Rebbe says, is that we cannot limit ourselves to serving Hashem with one approach, one *kav*; we must serve Hashem in all of these four general approaches.¹⁹

The Significance of the Author

Most of the *mesechtos* in Shas are arranged (roughly) by subject. If you want to learn about the *halachos* of marriage, you would look in Mesechta Kiddushin; for the laws of Shabbos, Mesechta Shabbos, etc.; and the Tannaim are quoted based on the subject matter.

But Pirkei Avos, the single *mesechta* of *mili d'chasidusa*, is organized very differently. It starts with a history of the oral tradition of Torah from Moshe through the generations, and as it introduces us to each person—in lieu of a biography—it quotes one (or more) of his teachings in *mili d'chasidusa*.

These aren't simply teachings that they *once* said—it is their message that they each embodied throughout their lives:

The *mefarshim*²⁰ explain that when Pirkei Avos uses the term that the Tanna says—*omer*—it's different than anywhere else in Shas. There are two terms the Mishnah uses when a Tanna says his opinion: *Amar* (said), and *omer* (says). *Amar* is used when someone is simply stating an opinion; but *omer* implies an argument (e.g. Rabbi Yehuda *omer* this-and-this, but Rabbi Meir *omer* this-and-this).

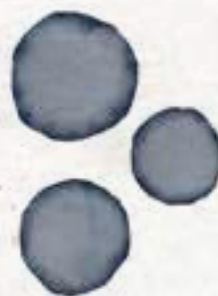
Pirkei Avos *always* uses the term *omer*—yet there are almost never any arguments. Why does it use this term? Because these quotes aren't simply things that the Tannaim *once* said—*amar*; in the past-tense—these are teachings that the Tannaim were *constantly*

saying—*omer*, presently. These statements reflect *who* each of these Tannaim were, how they served Hashem, and what they expected from us.

Now, in all areas of Torah the Rebbe searched for a connection between the author and the teaching (an approach emphasized by the Rebbe's father, Harav Levi Yitzchak). In Pirkei Avos, this approach is widely taken by the *mefarshim*, and the Rebbe develops it still further, unearthing connections even when they don't seem apparent. Sometimes it's about finding the *connection* between the Tanna and his message—a connection with his personality, an event that happened in his life, or another teaching of his—and sometimes *we can only understand the Mishnah* by knowing who said it.²⁴ Sometimes the connection is a positive one—where they are encouraging us to follow in their ways, or expressing their personality—and other times they are cautioning us *against* doing what they did.

Some interesting examples:

- **Yehoshua Ben Perachia** pushed *oso ha'ish* away “with two hands.” As the Gemara tells us, *oso ha'ish* once made an inappropriate comment, and Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Prachya excommunicated him and didn't accept his attempts to return. That eventually led to a major spreading of *avoda zara*. *Therefore, Rabbi*



Why is it called Avos?

1. Some *mefarshim* explain that it means “fathers” as in “teachers,” as in the common translation, Ethics of our Fathers.²¹
The Rebbe, however, rejects this explanation²² and explains:
2. *Avos* means causes or primaries; the teachings of Pirkei Avos come before anything else in the Torah, since *yiras Shamayim* is the necessary prelude to Torah.
3. On a deeper level, the Rebbe says that the teachings of the Tannaim express their approach to *avodas Hashem*, so the Tannaim are the *avos*—primaries—for their *toldos*—their teachings. Furthermore: The Tannaim's approach to *avodas Hashem*—as expressed in Pirkei Avos—guides their teachings throughout the rest of Shas, so the teachings of Pirkei Avos are the *avos* for the rest of Shas.²³

*Yehoshua warns us: Judge every person favorably, even when they don't deserve it.*²⁵

- **Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai's** entire being was invested in Torah; he was the first one in the *beis midrash* in the morning, and he didn't walk four cubits without Torah. For 40 years he taught Torah to the entire nation. *Therefore, he is the one who can make the statement, "If you have learned **much** Torah, do not take credit for yourself—it is for this that you have been formed."*²⁶
- **Rebbi Elazar ben Arach** excelled in the innovation and creativity of Torah, unlike his colleague Rebbi Eliezer who excelled in retaining the Torah of his

teachers. At one point in life Rebbi Elazar was separated from the other Chachamim and forgot his learning. *Therefore, as someone who primarily focused on creativity, he still warns us: Be diligent in the study of Torah, so that your innovations are based on your teachers and that you always retain your learning.*²⁷

- **Rebbi Shimon ben Yochai** was so invested in Torah that he was able to change the world with it, even bringing rain with his Torah study. *Therefore, he speaks about the importance of "Three who eat at one table and speak words of Torah," that Torah must permeate a person's physical world.*²⁸



In our Mishnah: Why is Ben Zoma the one who teaches this message to us?

The Rebbe explains that these four types—wise, strong, rich, and honored—are the descriptions of the four types of Yidden; only someone who truly knows and comprehends all the different types of Yidden can teach them all.

This is something that we find by Ben Zoma:

If someone sees 600,000 Yidden at one time, he says the *bracha* of "*Baruch Chacham Harazim—Blessed... who knows all secrets.*" This is because 600,000 Yidden includes all the different types of Yidden possible²⁹, and we therefore bless Hashem that "He knows their secrets"—although they are all so different, He knows the secrets in each of their hearts.³⁰

Obviously, seeing 600,000 Yidden in a single place is an extremely rare occurrence experienced by few—and the Gemara tells us that Ben Zoma was one of them. "Ben Zoma saw a multitude of Yidden (600,000) from a step on Har Habayis, and he said, *Baruch Chacham Harazim...*"³¹

The fact that Ben Zoma saw all the Yidden means that he saw and *recognized* all the different types of Yidden. Therefore it was he—and only he—who was able to give directives to all the four types of Yidden in our Mishnah.

Furthermore: we find that Ben Zoma *himself* possessed all these four qualities:

Wise: The Gemara tells us that someone who sees Ben Zoma in his dream should expect wisdom. He was also one of the four who entered the *pardes*.

Strong: "When Ben Zoma died, there were no more *darshanim*," the Gemara says. Kabbalistically *derush* is in Bina, which is connected to Gevura and strength.

Rich: Ben Zoma declared, "All nations come to my doorstep." He was wealthy and people came to him for merchandise.

Honored: Being a person with all of the above qualities, he was honored as well.

Therefore, it is he who teaches us the true meaning of all these qualities.

What's in a name?

The Frierdiker Rebbe once told³² the fascinating story of Reb Baruch Mordechai, rav of Babroisk, a Chossid of the Alter Rebbe who was a tremendous *gaon* and learned with the greatest scholars of his day.

In one episode, the Frierdiker Rebbe relates how Reb Baruch Mordechai's brother-in-law, the *rosh yeshiva* and *gaon* Reb Avigdor, came to visit him in Babroisk. A gathering was arranged in the big shul, where Reb Avigdor was to deliver a *pilpul*. As Reb Avigdor was waiting in the side room, the *chabadnitze*, he heard the sweet sounds of someone davening with heart-rending sincerity. He asked whose voice he was hearing, and he was told that it was Zalman Leib the *shmaiser*, a wagon driver.

Reb Avigdor mockingly said, "Zalmen Leib the *shmaiser* is *oich mir a davener*... He's no more than the heel of a *davener*!" Reb Baruch Mordechai didn't say anything. But afterwards Reb Avigdor repeated this comment publicly, and Reb Baruch Mordechai felt that he had to reply. "The heel of a *davener* is a great thing according to Torah," he said, "and brings benefits in three matters." Knowing the wisdom of Reb Baruch Mordechai, everyone waited to hear what he meant.

When he saw that they were unable to understand what he meant, he explained that this was a clear Mishna in Pirkei Avos: עקביא בן מהללאל אומר, הסתכל בשלשה דברים (*akavya=eikev=heel*) of a *davener* who praises Hashem (*mehalalel=hallel=praising*) says three things.

The Frierdiker Rebbe went on to say that although this was only a *tzachus*, it reflects the fact that Chassidus uplifts everyone, so that even the heel of a *Chassidisher davener* can give these three fundamental messages for a person's life.

In the *Teshuvos U'Biurom* column in *Kovetz Lubavitch*, a periodical published before the

nesius,³³ the Rebbe wrote³⁴ that there had been a strong response to this interpretation. It seemed that everyone agreed that it was no more than an allegorical interpretation that made no sense and had no basis in Chazal—how does *Akavya* son of *Mehalalel* become a *heel* who is davening and *praises* Hashem?! The difference was only this: Detractors found an opportunity to denigrate Chassidim, while people with a better attitude argued that there's nothing wrong with a cute vort. But Chassidim were upset that it had been so widely published.

Therefore, the Rebbe said, this would be a perfect example to show how everything in the *sichos* has a clear basis in Torah. The Rebbe went on to give a fascinating overview of the significance of names in the Torah—that the name *reveals* the character of a person, it even *affects* him, and that even a *parent's* name can affect their offspring.

Then the Rebbe adds an unbelievable thing: This specific interpretation of *Akavya ben Mehalalel* is actually written *explicitly*:

Mehalalel: The Midrash says that Mehalalel did *teshuva* and began *praising* Hashem.

Akavya: It is written in the Kisvei Ha'Arizal that the *neshama* of *Akavya* comes from the *heel* of Adam Harishon.

"This explanation of this 'odd' *tzachus* can serve as a good example for us," the Rebbe concludes, "that certainly all the sayings in the holy *sichos*, even those that seem surprising to us, have a good explanation. On such matters Chazal say, 'If you find it empty, it is from you, for you have not toiled in Torah.'"

Although, as mentioned above, many *mefarshim* search for connections with the personality or life-story of the Tanna, the idea of analyzing someone's name is uncommon. We find this approach very often in Harav Levi Yitzchak's writings, and in *Pirkei Aovs* the Rebbe sometimes does it as well.



In the Mishnah of Ben Zoma, too, the Rebbe explains that there's not only a message in Ben Zoma's life story and personality, as explained above, but also in his very name, Ben Zoma:

The first two Tannaim of the *perek* are called by their father's names—Ben Zoma and Ben Azai—but their real names were both Shimon. Now, when someone is called by

the name of his father, it has a non-honorable connotation (as we find when some Yidden referred to Moshe as “Ben Amram”). The *mefarshim* explain that they never received *semicha*³⁵ (at least at the point of them making these statements³⁶), and they are therefore given the lower befitting a student. Yet, the Rebbe says there’s a deeper significance:

This shows that Ben Zoma was a *mekabel*, a recipient: He remained a student, without the prominence of *semicha*—to the extent that he wasn’t even called by his own name!—notwithstanding the fact that he was on a very lofty level, as one of the four that entered the *pardes*. That’s why it is he who teaches us: *Who is wise? One who learns from every man*—something that requires *bittul* and humility.

This isn’t only expressed in the way we refer to him—but in his actual name too: Shimon. Chassidus explains that *Reuven*—seeing, *re’u*—symbolizes someone who *sees Elokus* and experiences it directly. *Shimon*—hearing, *shema*—is someone who doesn’t have a firsthand experience in *Elokus*, he only “hears” about *Elokus*, and serves Hashem with *bittul* and self-nullification.

Thus, “Shimon Ben Zoma” is the one who teaches us to have the *bittul* to learn from every man.

“Someone can argue: ‘I’m a great *rosh yeshiva*. How is it possible for me to learn from every person!?’ We tell him, ‘Remember the time that you were young, before you received *semicha*—when you weren’t even called by your own name!’ Later in life, too, every person has areas that they are on that level, and therefore we must learn from every person.”³⁷

The Alter Rebbe’s version

The Alter Rebbe printed the entire Pirkei Avos in his *siddur*. This would seem to be out of character: Printing was very expensive in those days, and the Alter Rebbe even omitted *tefillos* in order to save on printing.³⁸ For example, if you would be davening Shabbos Musaf from his original *siddur*, you would have to flip back to Shachris in order to find *Retzei* and *Modim*. Pirkei Avos is a part of Mishnayos which happens to be studied on Shabbos afternoon; so the Alter Rebbe could have simply written to read it from a *mishnayos*. Why the need to print it in the *siddur*?

The Rebbe explains (based on the Shaar Hakolel), that this is because there are variations in the wording and vowelization of the Mishnayos, and also in how exactly it is divided. In order to establish the correct version, the Alter Rebbe published Pirkei Avos in the *siddur*.

The Rebbe would often explain why the Alter Rebbe chose one version over the other; why

he chose the version that puts two seemingly unrelated Mishnayos together, why he chose the version quoting one Tanna and not another, and so on.³⁹ (The Rebbe also sometimes used the alternate version to understand the meaning of a Mishnah.⁴⁰)

[The division of the Mishnayos would seem to be a minor issue, almost an afterthought, but, as the Rebbe often pointed out, it can actually have a serious halachic ramifications:

If someone gets married on the condition that he is able to “*lishanos*”—that he knows Mishnayos—he is only halachically married if he knows three Mishnayos. Now, since the Mishnayos are not divided based on the quantity of teachings—i.e. some Mishnayos are long and contain several teachings from several people, while others are very short. Depending on the exact version of how the Mishnayos are divided, this person would be considered able *lishanos* or not—and married or not.⁴¹]



Back to the Ben Zoma Mishnah: In the first passage, “Who is wise? One who learns from every man”—Ben Zoma cites a proof from the *possuk*, “From all my teachers I have grown wise, for Your testimonials are my meditation.”

The second half of the *possuk*—“for your testimonials are my meditation”—seems to have no connection to the notion that one must learn from every person. Why is it included?

We find that some versions of Mishnayos⁴² indeed do not include the second half of the *possuk*—so why did the Alter Rebbe choose the version that does?⁴³

The Rebbe explains that this comes to resolve a fundamental question: As above, a wise person is someone who is far from naive. He truly understands things from all its angles, and he comprehends the positive and negative qualities of every person and thing (otherwise he would be a *shoteh*, a fool).

How can you expect him to learn from *everyone*, even someone with no positive qualities at all? He can be *nice* to them, he can have *ahavas Yisrael* to them as fellow Yidden, but how can he be expected to *learn* from them?

Therefore the Tanna tells us: Your *testimonials are my meditation*—everything in the world is a testimonial on Hashem. He is the only one who can create something out of nothing, and in every object and person, one can see how it is “testifying” on Hashem. That’s why he can learn from everyone—even someone with no qualities—for they, too, are a testimony on Hashem.

The Chassidus-In depth

As mentioned above, the Rebbe would often explain the Mishnayos according to Chassidus, revealing tremendous depth and exploring profound concepts of Chassidus and Kabbalah. Many Mishnayos have been explained by the previous Rabbeim, and they form the basis for fundamental teachings of Chassidus.



In our Mishnah:

The Arizal explains that these four attributes corresponds to the four letters of Hashem’s name:

Wise—*yud*, Chochmah.

Strong—*hei*, Bina.

Rich—*vov*, Tiferes.

Honored—*hei*, Malchus.

He concludes, “A person reading this Mishnah should have this intent.”

This means, the Rebbe explains, that it’s not enough to learn from this Mishnah how to reach *your own* completion—rather, *you should have this intent*. By studying this Mishnah you should come to the understanding that your four attributes come from Hashem’s four attributes (which then go on to create the four worlds and the four basic dimensions of each world).

So the Mishnah is both teaching us a lesson and telling us about the *sefiros* on high, as the Rebbe goes on to explain:

A person’s matters are divided into four categories: 1) As he is for himself; 2) When he elaborates on his ideas and brings them into words; 3) When he connects with other people, through his emotions; 4) When he *receives* from others.

The Mishnah is teaching us a lesson about these four categories of life, and also in the *sefiros* above:

1) Wise-Chochmah

In a person: Chochmah refers to him as he is for himself—when he has an abstract idea that cannot be explained and cannot be related to emotion, and certainly not to another person.

In sefiros: The *sefira* of Chochmah is far beyond the rest of the *sefiros*. This is alluded to in the *yud*, a point—the essential point that is beyond anything else.

The lesson: Who is wise? One who learns from every man.

In a person: True wisdom means that even when a person is on his own, before he talks to anyone, he learns from the essential fact that he met them.

In sefiros: The *sefira* of Chochmah is complete when it is revealed and descends to the lower levels.

2) Strong-Bina

In a person: Bina refers to the elaboration of an idea into an explanation; as Kabbalah explains, this is connected to strength.

In sefiros: This is how the “point” of Chochmah is revealed and elaborated into the long strokes of the *Hei*.

The lesson: Who is strong? One who overpowers his inclinations.

In a person: When do you see that a person is truly strong? When do you see that he truly comprehends? When his ideas are strong enough to affect his emotions, overpowering his inclinations.

In sefiros: The true completeness of the *sefira* of Bina is when it overpowers and guides the *middos*.

3) Rich-Tiferes/Middos

In a person: This refers to one’s relationship with other people; just as a rich person gives to others, through our emotions we give to other people.

In sefiros: This is how *Eloku*s is drawn down into the world, symbolized by the long line of the *Vov*.

The lesson: Who is rich? One who is satisfied with his lot.

In a person: When can you truly influence others? When you are happy with your lot.

In sefiros: The same is true on high.

4) Honored-Malchus

In a person: The final level is how a person receives from others; honor is something that you cannot give yourself, you can only receive it from others.

In sefiros: This refers to the *sefira* of Malchus, symbolized in the final *Hei* of Hashem’s name, which has the shape of a recipient.

The lesson: Who is honorable? One who honors his fellows.

In a person: When you honor others, they will reciprocate and honor you back.

In sefiros: The true honor of the *sefira* of Malchus is when it gives to the world, to the lowliest creations.⁴⁴ 

General sketches ON EACH PEREK OF AVOS



Below we will see how each of the *perakim* corresponds to the six *sefiros* of Chesed-Yesod, which is followed by *matan Torah* on Shavuot—Malchus. It is fascinating that this explanation has no source other than the Rebbe's *sichos*, as the Rebbe himself said at the time, "I haven't found this yet in the *maamarim*, but it seems that it has been brought in Chassidus, and it will be found with the proper study."⁴⁵

א | Perek Alef

Sefira: Corresponds to Chesed. It begins with receiving the Torah from Hashem, the greatest kindness possible, and concludes with *shalom*.

Set-up: It sketches out the *kabbalah* of Torah, beginning from Har Sinai all the way to the final generations of Tannaim (which is completed in the beginning of *perek beis*). It quotes one or more teachings from each respective person as they are mentioned. (It should be noted that Pirkei Avos traces the oral tradition exclusively through the family of *nesi'im*, Hillel and his descendants, unlike the Rambam, who cites the other great Tannaim of each generation).

Interesting pointers: The Rebbe explains that because each Tanna received from the Tanna before him, their teachings must be connected to each other. The Rebbe occasionally explained the connection of various Mishnayos in this manner: Shimon Hatzadik with Antigonus Ish Socho; Shmaya and Avtalyon with Hillel; and so on.

Furthermore: There were times when the Rebbe would explain entire strings of Mishnayos as building upon each other and sharing a theme, for example the entirety of the first and second perek⁴⁶. On the other hand, on one occasion the Rebbe said that even different parts of the same teaching can be explained on their own.⁴⁷

Mishnayos often discussed: Why does it say that Moshe received the Torah from *Sinai*, and not from Hashem? The Rebbe spoke about this many times, and once explained it according to *pshat*, *remez*, *drush*, and *sod*.

ב | Perek Beis

Sefira: Gevura. It begins with a reminder to calculate the value of *mitzvos* vs. *aveiros*, and to recognize that Hashem is always watching—themes of *din* and *gevura*. It concludes with Rabbi Tarfon's message that *the day is short, the work is much, the workers are lazy*.

Set-up: After completing the order of *kabbalah* with Rabbi Yehuda Hannasi (compiler of the Mishnah) and his son, Rabban Gamliel, the Mishnah goes back several generations and shares several more messages from Hillel. It then moves on to Hillel's student, Rabban Yochanan Ben Zakkai, describing the qualities and messages of each of his five students.

Interesting pointers: Some of the teachings of this *perek* and even more so of *perek alef* (and, to a lesser extent, throughout Avos) seem to be directed exclusively towards *dayanim* and leaders. The Rambam explains that this is the reason why Avos—a *mesechta* dealing with *midas Chassidus*—is curiously included in the Seder Nezikin, the order of damages; because these morals are especially directed towards leaders and *dayanim*.⁴⁸ In the *sichos*, the Rebbe often explains how these Mishnayos have messages for regular people as well.⁴⁹

Mishnayos often discussed: "Rebbi says, what is the straight path that person should choose? That which brings beauty to the doer and beauty from people." The Rebbe discussed this cryptic Mishnah on many occasions.



ג | Perek Gimmel

Sefira: Tiferes. The *perek* begins with, “Look at three things,” and the number three corresponds to Tiferes which unites the first two *sefiros* of Chesed and Gevura to become “three.”

Setup: Having concluded the order of tradition through the family of *nesi'im*, the Mishnah now brings various Tannaim and their teachings with no apparent order. Each Tanna is quoted once—some with a single teaching, some with more—with the exception of Rabbi Shimon Ben Yochai (quoted twice) and Rabbi Meir (quoted twice on his own and once by someone else).

Interesting pointers: Many times, a Tanna will have several teachings in the same Mishnah that seem to share no apparent connection, but here we find an example of two teachings from *two different* Tannaim in a single Mishnah that have no apparent connection to each other: Rabbi Channina Segan Hakohanim says that one should pray for the welfare of the government for without them people would swallow each other alive, and then Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon says that two people sitting together should study Torah and the Shechina will rest with them, if not it is considered a session of scoffers. Why aren't these simply divided into two Mishnayos?

The Rebbe gave various explanations throughout the years: That they are both a study in extremes (government versus people eating each other, Shechina versus a session of scoffers); or that a functional government is a necessary prerequisite to studying Torah in depth.

Mishnayos often spoken about: The first Mishnah seems to have a *musar* perspective: *Akavya ben Mehalalel would say... From where do you come? From a putrid drop. Where are you going? To a place of dust, of worm and of maggot. Before whom are you destined to give an account and reckoning? Before the King of the kings of kings.* The Rebbe explained how each line of the Mishnah targets a different type of person and a different level in *avodas Hashem*.

ד | Perek Daled

Sefira: Netzach, which receives from Chochmah but isn't Chochmah itself. Therefore it begins, *Who is a wise man?* It is discussing Chochmah, but outside of it (Chochmah itself would have no such question).

Setup: As in *perek gimmel*, *perek daled* quotes various Tannaim and their sayings with no apparent order.

Interesting pointers: There are many Mishnayos in Pirkei Avos that seem to be stating an obvious *halacha*, and they must be analyzed in order to reveal the deeper meaning. But in this *perek*, there is a Mishnah that seems downright odd. The Mishnah says, “Shmuel Hakatan would say, *בנפול אויבך אל תשמח ובכשלו אל יגל*, פן יראה ה' ורע בעיניו והשיב מעליו אפו” —a *possuk* from Mishlei, with nothing added whatsoever! How can this be quoted as Shmuel Hakatan's teaching?

The Bartenura explains simply that this was a *possuk* he would quote often. But the Rebbe says that if Pirkei Avos were to quote every Tanna's favorite *possuk*—the ones they repeated often—then Pirkei Avos would certainly have many more of these.

The Rebbe explained (as do other *mefarshim*) that by the very fact that he's quoting the *possuk* out of its original context, Shmuel Hakatan is changing the entire meaning.

Mishnayos often discussed: Unquestionably, the Mishnah most often discussed at farbrengens (and in Chassidus in general) is the cryptic Mishnah 13: *Rebbi Shimon would say: There are three crowns—the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood and the crown of sovereignty, but the crown of good name surmounts them all.* (In fact, in one farbrengen the Rebbe said that he would speak about another Mishnah on the *perek* only because he had already discussed this one that year⁵⁰.)

ה | Perek Hei

General theme: Hod.⁵¹

Setup: *Perek Hei* is very different than the previous *perakim*. The majority of Mishnayos are quoted without an author, and much of it is lists of things with specific numbers: Ten (1-6), seven (7-8), and four (9-15). Whereas the previous *perakim* were mostly *prescriptive*, explicitly teaching us what to do, *perek hei* is mostly *descriptive*, describing and explaining a slew of fascinating concepts and paradigms, but leaving it to us to figure out the message contained therein on our own. The Rebbe (and other *mefarshim*) often focus on finding the messages of these *mishnayos*.

Interesting pointers: Considering that the Rebbe explained Pirkei Avos over the years and that we go through it four times every summer, it is no surprise that he discussed the same Mishnah multiple times. Sometimes he said that he would be discussing a different part of it, but other times he would ask the same question and give a completely new explanation.

One interesting example in our *perek*: *There are four types among those who sit before the sages: the sponge, the funnel, the strainer and the sieve.* The Rebbe once explained⁵² it in a manner that roughly corresponds to the explanation of the early *mefarshim* (including the Avos D'Rabbi Nosson), saying that it refers to four different types of students. The Rebbe learns beautiful *horaos* for every person in their study of Torah, and also how it corresponds to four stages in a student's learning career. But then, a few years later⁵³, the Rebbe spoke about the Mishnah again, and based on a few major questions, took it from an entirely different perspective.

Mishnayos often spoken about: The first Mishnah discusses why Hashem created the world with 10 sayings instead of one, "It could have been created with one." Chassidus explains this Mishnah at length, about the difference between a world created by a single *maamar* vs. a world created by 10, and there are many *sichos* on it as well.

ו | Perek Vov

Sefira: *Yesod*. Just as *Yesod* is a *sefira* that is set apart from the first five—it is "outside the body"—the sixth *perek* is a *Beraisa* that was *added* to Pirkei Avos.

Setup: The original Mesechta Avos is only five *perakim*; the sixth is a *Beraisa* called *Kinyan Torah*—the acquiring of Torah. It was added to Avos in order to be recited on the sixth week between Pesach and Shavuot (and the Rebbe brings proof that it becomes part of Avos to an extent). As a *Beraisa*, the style of this *perek* is very different than the previous ones: it is much longer and more elaborative. Whereas the previous *perakim* include many short teachings, in this *perek* most of the Mishnayos/Beraisos bring out one, single point at length.

Interesting pointers: In this *perek* we find one of the only stories in Pirkei Avos, of Rabbi Yosei Ben Kisma telling of how he turned down an offer of a million golden coins and gems so as not to move away from the center of Torah. Rabbi Yosei tells his story at great length, with seemingly non-essential details ("he greeted me and I returned his greetings"), and flowery language ("Indeed, so is written in the book of Tehillim by Dovid the king of Israel"). The Rebbe explains how this and other details are essential to understanding the magnitude of what Rabbi Yosei was sacrificing and the lesson for us.⁵⁴

In a similar vein, the Rebbe explains how the wording of the other Mishnayos in this *perek*, as well, are exact—even when it seems long or when the wording seems odd.

Where to find THE REBBE'S BIURIM ON PIRKEI AVOS

There are many explanations throughout the Rebbe's Torah;
below are the primary collections and series.

Likkutei Sichos

In addition to *sichos* scattered throughout, there is a series of *sichos* on each perek in **volume 4** and **volume 17**.

Toras Menachem/ Sichos Kodesh/ Sefer Hasichos

The Rebbe began speaking about Pirkei Avos during the summer farbrengens early in the *nesius*, but these were a few *sichos* here and there, usually delivered between Pesach and Shavuot. In 5728*, the Rebbe explained Pirkei Avos every week throughout the summer, but the following year it was again only between Pesach and Shavuot.

From 5736* the Rebbe explained Pirkei Avos every week throughout the summer, (although the *sichos* vary significantly in length). One can usually find the questions on the Mishnah following the questions on Rashi and Zohar, and the answers in the *sichos* that followed. In 5748* the Rebbe explained the first Mishnah of each *perek* (as he did with the Rashis).

Audio

The *sichos* on Pirkei Avos were delivered during the Shabbos farbrengens, but in 5738* and 5739*, following the heart attack, the Rebbe farbrenged on Motzei Shabbos instead of Shabbos afternoon, and those farbrengens were recorded. Listening to these *sichos*, one can fully experience

the unbelievable *geshmak* of the Rebbe taking apart and farbrenging about the message of each Mishnah. *These farbrengens can be listened to on the Ashreinu.app.*

Biurim L'Pirkei Avos

Biurim L'Pirkei Avos is a two-volume collection of the Rebbe's *sichos* and letters on each passage in Avos. The Rebbe's explanations are scattered throughout Sichos Kodesh, Toras Menachem and Likkutei Sichos—so this collection serves a tremendous resource, although the original *sichos* should be consulted for the full length and depth. The first edition was published in the 5740s* with the Rebbe's oversight, compiled by **Rabbi Eliyahu Friedman**, who shared a couple of interesting nuggets about the printing:

- When the *Biurim L'Pirush Rashi* was compiled, the Rebbe did not allow them to use *sichos* that were not *mugah*, edited by the Rebbe. When they asked if they could use non-edited *sichos* for the Pirkei Avos, the Rebbe agreed.
- In the introduction by Rabbi Tuvia Bloy, it was written that they had not brought the part of the *sichos* that dealt with the explanation of the other *mefarshim*—whether the Rebbe was rebutting their explanation or strengthening it—דחייתם או חיזוקם. When the Rebbe edited the introduction, he switched the order of these words, so it read חיזוקם או דחייתם, with the positive element first.

In the sefer *Pirkei Avot* published by Kehos in English, many of the Rebbe's explanations have been adapted and included.

1. Likkutei Sichos vol. 17.
2. See for example Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol. 4 p. 127 that the Mishnayos are sometimes encouraging us to fulfill normal obligations in a *manner* that is beyond the letter of the law.
3. Sichos Kodesh 5733 vol. 2 p. 161 (Parshas Bamidbar).
4. See the explanation of Mishnah 1:1, *Moshe received the Torah from Sinai*, Shabbos Shemini 5731 (Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p. 28); see the explanations on Mishnah 1:14 *Im ein ani li, mi li*, Biruim L'Pirkei Avos p. 72-74.
5. Emor 5738 - Sichos Kodesh p. 268. Toras Menachem 5743 vol. 4 p. 1991. 5747 vol. 4 p. 358.
6. Midrash Shmuel in his introduction; Shabbos Nasso 5737 (Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p.1.)
7. Ibid.
8. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 4 p. 358.
9. Biurim L'Pirkei Avos ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid. p. 7
12. Reshimas Hayoman p. 187.
13. Toras Menachem vol. 5 p. 175.
14. Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p. 7
15. See the introduction to Derech Chayim.
16. Toras Menachem vol. 3 p. 1471, Likkutei Sichos vol. 17 p. 349.
17. Toras Menachem 5744 vol. 4 p. 2553.
18. See also Midrash Shmuel for a similar approach
19. Shabbos Korach, Balak 5740.
20. See Bartneura.
21. Tosfos Yom Tov.
22. See the *sicha* below as to why the literal translation cannot be accepted.
23. Toras Menachem Hisvaaduyos 5743 vol. 3 p. 1399; 1512 (Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p. 17).
24. See e.g. Mishnah 2-3 *Rabbi Shimon would say be careful in krias shma and tefillah*, Likkutei Sichos vol. 17 p. 356 (Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p. 122); also the explanation below about Rebbe Elazar Ben Arach.
25. Shabbos Pinchas 5728 (Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p. 55). For an alternative explanation, that this expresses the fact that Yehoshua Ben Perachia *did* try to bring him closer at a later stage, see Shabbos Behaaloscha 5741 (Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p. 53).
26. Shabbos Matos Masei 5737 (Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p. 104).
27. Shabbos Kedoshim 5746 (Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p. 125).
28. Shabbos Shelach 5728; Devarim 5740 (Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p. 141.
29. There are 600,000 general *neshamos* that are then divided into smaller parts, see Tanya perek 37.
30. Berachos 58a.
31. Ibid.
32. Kovetz Bikkur Chicago p. 18
33. See Kovetz Lubavitch, *Rebirth in a New World*, Derher, Elul 5775.
34. Teshuvos U'Biurim 1. Later printed in Igros Kodesh vol. 1 p. 287.
35. Bartenura.
36. See Toras Menachem 5748 vol. 3 p. 552; Sichos Kodesh 5748 Parshas Korach p. 19.
37. Sichos Kodesh Ibid.
38. Although, as the Rebbe quotes from the Rebbe Rashab, there is certainly a deeper reason as well.
39. For the above see Toras Menachem 5748 vol. 3 p. 553; Ibid. 5745 vol. 5 p. 2696; Igros Kodesh vol. 27 p. 326 in the bottom footnote.
40. See Motzei Shabbos Emor 5738, about the Rambam's version: הכל לפי רוב המעשה ולא לפי המעשה.
41. Likkutei Sichos vol. 4 p. 1175; vol. 17, p. 366; from *Chelkas Mechokek Even Ho'ezzer siman 36 s"v 40*. See also Sichos Kodesh 5736 vol. 2, p. 370.
42. See the language of the Bartenura here.
43. The Rebbe asked this general question several times, but this formulation is from Toras Menachem 5748 vol. 3 p. 553. At that farbrengen the Rebbe gave a different answer, see there; the answer below comes from the farbengens of Shabbos Korach and Balak 5740.
44. Sefer Hasichos 5748 vol. 2 p. 446.
45. Sichos Kodesh 5741 vol. 4 p. 616
46. Toras Menachem 5742 vol. 3, p. 1386.
47. See Shabbos Tavo 5743 on Mishnah 4:20 *do not look at the kan-kan*.
48. Introduction to Pirush Hamishnayos. See Shabbos Kedoshim 5744 (Biurim L'Pirkei Avos p. 32) that this is one of the reasons why the Mishnah says that Moshe received Torah from Sinai, for leaders need an emphasis on *bittul*.
49. Toras Menachem 5747 vol. 3, p. 474.
50. 5748.
51. The Rebbe didn't elaborate on the connection to the *perek*.
52. Biurim, p. 285.
53. Ibid. p. 286.
54. Chukas 5741