

# Pirkei Avot

*Ed. note: For some inexplicable reason, Pirkei Avot's presence in Torah Tidbits throughout the years has been very spotty. It really should be a regular feature in TT. Even though we're into the second round of Pirkei Avot this year, we'll give it a good try.*

**Some background:** Somewhere in the past (next time you see Rabbi Wein, ask him when), the custom developed to learn a chapter of Mesechet Avot each week between Pesach and Shavuot. Slight problem - there are 5 p'rakim in Avot and there are six Shabbatot between Pesach and Shavuot. (In Israel, there can be seven, but that's another story.) A sixth chapter was formed from mishna-like writings known as B'raitot. Whereas the five chapters of Avot deal with ethical teachings for a good and proper life, the sixth chapter focuses on Torah and the life of those dedicated to Torah study. This is particularly appropriate for the Shabbat before Shavuot, the Auf Ruf Shabbat of the People of Israel and HKB"H, so to speak.

Further down the line, the custom modified in some (many) communities to continue learning a chapter each Shabbat throughout the long days of summer.

We now read/learn Pirkei Avot each Shabbat from after Pesach until the Shabbat before Rosh HaShana.

This allows us to learn through Avot

four times each year - with each time having a different background and atmosphere.

The first time around, the background is the Omer period, the time that Bnei Yisrael improved and grew from the depths of impurity in Egypt to be worthy of standing at Har Sinai to receive the Torah. In the spirit of B'CHOL DOR VADOR, in every generation... (see Lead Tidbit), we study Avot as a way of undergoing a similar self-improvement, as did that first generation of the Jewish Nation.

Then comes the second round that happens to have a neutral background or no specific background - take your pick. In the six weeks that follow Shavuot, we review the teachings of Avot, let's say, for their own value. The calendar is not focusing us in any particular direction.

The third round of Avot is divided between the Three Weeks of mourning the Churban, as well as the other tragic events that are also associated with the period from 17 Tammuz to Tish'a b'Av. When we study the teachings of Avot this time, we cannot help but try to apply the teaching to effect a TIKUN - repair - of the various causes of the Churban and tragedies. The second half of Avot during that third round falls during the rest of the month of Menachem Av, weeks of comfort and consolation. Thoughts of the destroyed Batei HaMikdash now point us in the direction of the Geula

- provided we internalize and apply the lessons of Avot towards the improvement of each of us as individuals and of all of us collectively, as part of Klal Yisrael.

The fourth time we study Avot is during Elul. The approaching Yamim Nora'im become the backdrop for that review. And each different part of the calendar colors the way we understand what we are learning. It is interesting that the fourth time around, in Elul, we do not have enough Shabbatot to do a perek each week, so we double up the last couple of weeks before Rosh HaShana. That adds a frenzied pace to our learning, which seems to fit with the Slichot period.

**WITH ALL OF THAT SAID**, let's take a look at a mishna from this week's Perek, chapter 3. Numbering of mishnayot within the chapters of Avot differ from the volumes of Mishnayot to Siddurim. This mishna is sometimes on its own and sometimes part of a mishna with its neighbor. Let's call it Avot 3:9...

רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר: הַמְהִילךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ וְשׁוֹנֶה,  
וּמִפְסִיק מִמְשַׁנְתּוֹ וְאוֹמֵר: מַה נֶּאֱמַר אֵילָן זֶה  
וּמַה נֶּאֱמַר נֵיר זֶה, מֵעֵלָה עָלָיו הַכָּתוּב כְּאֵלוֹ  
מִתְחַיֵּב בְּנִפְשׁוֹ.

R' Shimon (some attribute this teaching to a R' Yaakov) said, He who is walking by the way and is reviewing (in his mind) what he has learned, and breaks off from his review and says, How fine is that tree, how fine is that field,

him the Scripture regards as if he were putting his life in jeopardy.

The standard question on this mishna is what is so bad about admiring nature that one who does it should be considered to be putting his life in danger. The standard answer is that when one is learning Torah, he must not interrupt for anything. Even admiration of G-d's Creation.

Permit me to suggest a deeper understanding - one that can be found, in part, in different commentaries and in my own personal experience.

The key phrase to understanding and appreciating this mishna is UMAFSIK MIMISHNATO, and he breaks off from his learning. Perhaps if one's admiration of G-d's Nature were part of his learning, part of his Torah experience, the matter would not be considered so negative or serious. But if one compartmentalizes his mind with Torah in one section and the study of nature (or science in general) in another - that's a serious problem.

Let me illustrate with a life-changing experience I had at Yeshiva University, about 50 years ago.

6:00pm lab session for Comparative Vertebrate Anatomy. We were soon to dissect a dogfish shark, but first we reviewed its external features. Teacher of the course: Dr. William Etkin z"l. Most all of us in the lab that

evening had prepared well for the class. And Dr. Etkin tested us. Pectoral fins, pelvic fins, caudal fin, and - of course, the famous dorsal fin of a shark (some have two), the one that gets the scary music when it appears above the surface of the water in various and sundry movies. Not the dogfish's though. Hole shark is about a foot long (30cm) in total. Not scary at all.

After the fins, Dr. Etkin pointed to the body of the shark and asked us about its covering. Placoid scales we said. Correct he responded. And then he paused, pretending that a thought had just occurred to him.

Wait a minute, a shark as fins and scales? Then it must be kosher.

The guys in the class made some feeble attempts to explain why a shark - which has scales and fins - is NOT kosher. Nothing convincing.

Dr. Etkin, who was a traditional Jew, but not fully observant by Orthodox standards, paused. Then he asked us a very serious question. Did any of you, last night when you were studying the dissection manual, and you read over and over again that a shark has fins and scales, did you think there was a question to ask? Forget the answer - did you think there was a question?

We all admitted that we hadn't.

He then asked us what we had done between 2:45 and 3:00 that afternoon. Momentarily puzzled by this

question out of left field, we thought and answered - we davened Mincha.

He continued: You spent the morning davening, learning in the Beit Midrash, had a gemara shiur, a Torah class, a Navi class, Halacha shiur... and then you davened Mincha. What did you do after Mincha when you faced several more hours of secular courses? Did you close one door in your mind and open another?

A Torah Jew must keep his Torah mind fully active 24/7 (he didn't use that term - according to Google, it has been around only since the 80s) and apply it to EVERYTHING you study and experience in life.

I cannot think of a lesson in my life that impacted me more than Dr. Etkin's (yesh, indeed!).

And there it is: UNAFSIK MIMISH-NATO? Never. That is dangerous for a Torah Jew. Thank you Dr. Etkin for that and all the bio I learned from you. But mostly that lesson.