

Fill Your Own Cup Year Two June Sessions – Mishna Avot – Ethics of our Ancestors Chapter 4

1) Mishna Avot 4:20

Elisha ben Abuyah said: He who learns when a child, to what is he compared? To ink written upon a new writing sheet. And he who learns when an old man, to what is he compared? To ink written on an erased writing sheet.

Rabbi Yose ben Judah a man of Kfar Ha-babli said: She who learns from the young, to what is she compared? To one who eats unripe grapes, and drinks wine from one's vat; And she who learns from the old, to what is she compared? To one who eats ripe grapes, and drinks old wine.

Rabbi Meir said: Don't look at the container but at that which is in it: there is a new container full of old wine, and an old [container] in which there is not even new [wine].

משנה אבות ד:כ

אֶלִישָׁע בֶּן אֲבוּיָה אוֹמֵר, הַלּוֹמֵד יֶלֶד לְמַה הוא דוֹמֶה, לִדְיוֹ כְתוּכָה עַל נְיָר חָדָשׁ. וְהַלּוֹמֵד זָקֵן לְמַה הוּא דוֹמֶה, לִדְיוֹ כְתוּכָה עַל נְיָר מַחוּק.

רָבּי יוֹסֵי בַר יְהוּדָה אִישׁ כְּפַר הַבַּבְלִי אוֹמֵר, הַלוֹמֵד מְן הַקְּטַנִּים לְמֵה הוּא דוֹמֶה, לְאֹכֵל עֲנָבִים קהוֹת וְשׁוֹתֶה יַיִן מְגְּתוֹ. וְהַלוֹמֵד מִן הַנְּכִים לְמַה הוּא דוֹמֶה, לְאֹכֵל עֲנָבִים בְּשׁלוֹת וְשׁוֹתֵה יַיִן יַשַׁן.

רָבִּי מאיר אוֹמֵר, אַל תִּסְתַּכֵּל בַּקּנְקן, אֶלָּא רְמַה שֶׁיֶשׁ בּוֹ. יֵשׁ קּנְקן חָדָשׁ מָלֵא יָשָׁן, וְיָשָׁן שָׁאָפָלוּ חָדָשׁ אִין בּוֹ:

2) Avot DeRebbe Natan 6:2

What were Rabbi Akiva's beginnings?

It is said: He was forty years old, and he had not yet studied a thing. One time, while standing by the mouth of a well.

He inquired, "Who hollowed out this stone?"

They said to him: It was water falling upon it consistently every single day." They said: "Akiva, haven't you read that 'water wears away stone' (Job 14:19)? -

At that, Rabbi Akiva created a Kal Vachomer (deduced for himself): If the soft can hollow out the hard, how much more so will words of Torah that are hard as iron will engrave my heart, which is mere flesh. He immediately returned to learn Torah.

He and his son went to sit with those who teach children.

He said: Rebbe – teach me Torah!

Rabbi Akiva took hold of one end of a child's tablet, and his son of the other end. The teacher wrote down alef and bet for him, and he learned them; alef to tav, and he learned them; the book of Leviticus, and he learned it. He went on studying until he learned the whole Torah. Then he went and sat before Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua. "My masters," he said, "reveal the sense of Mishnah to me."

When they told him one halakhah, he went off to reason with himself. This alef, he wondered, what was it written for? That bet - what was it written for? This teaching - what was it uttered for? He kept coming back, kept inquiring of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Joshua, until he reduced his teachers to silence.

אבות דרבי נתן ו:ב

מה היה תחילתו של רבי עקיבא? אמרו: בן ארבעים שנה היה ולא שנה כלום. פעם אחת היה עומד על פי הבאר.

אמר, מי חקק אבן זו,

אמרו לו, המים שתדיר נופלים עליה בכל יום. אמרו לו, עקיבא אי אתה קורא "אבנים שחקו מים".

מיד היה רבי עקיבא דן קל וחומר בעצמו: מה רך פסל את הקשה, דברי תורה שקשה כברזל על אחת כמה וכמה שיחקקו את לבי שהוא בשר ודם.

מיד חזר ללמוד תורה.

הלך הוא ובנו וישבו אצל מלמדי תינוקות. אמר לו, רבי למדני תורה.

אחז רבי עקיבא בראש הלוח, ובנו בראש הלוח. כתב לו אלף בית ולמדה. אלף תיו ולמדה, תורת כהנים ולמדה.

היה לומד והולך עד שלמד כל התורה כולה. הלך וישב לפני רבי אליעזר ולפני ר יהושע. אמר להם, רבותי, פתחו לי טעם משנה. כיון שאמר לו הלכה אחת, הלך וישב לו בינו לבין עצמו.

אמר, אלף זו למה נכתבה, בית זו למה נכתבה, דבר זה למה נאמר, חזר ושאלן והעמידן בדברים.



3) Babylonian Talmud Hagigah 15a

Our rabbis taught: Once Aher was riding on a horse on Shabbat, and R. Meir was walking behind him to learn Torah from him.

Aher said to him: "Meir, turn back (hebrew - return), for I have already measured by the footsteps of my horse that thus far extends the Shabbat limit." (There is a limit of 2000 cubits surrounding the city that one may not cross on Shabbat - y.e.)

He replied: "Then you too should return!"

Aher answered: "I have already told you that I have already heard from behind the curtain, *Return*, *rebellious children* (Jeremiah 3:22) - except Aher."

תלמוד בבלי חגיגה טו.

תנו רבנן :מעשה באחר שהיה רוכב על הסוס בשבת, והיה רבי מאיר מהלך אחריו ללמוד תורה מפיו. אמר לו: מאיר, חזור לאחריך, שכבר שיערתי בעקבי סוסי עד כאן תחום שבת. אמר ליה: אף אתה חזור בך. אמר ליה: ולא כבר אמרתי לך: כבר שמעתי מאחורי הפרגוד שובו בנים שובבים - חוץ מאחר.

4) Rabba Rachel Kohl Feingold, If Only

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Rabbi Yitz Greenberg explains that this last line is here to challenge the previous two teachings. We may think that we need to be young in order to be a student, and we may think that only the elders have something to teach. But in reality, there are young people who have wisdom beyond their years. There are older people who have the curiosity and openness of the young. Do not judge a wine by its vessel!

This teaching begins by acknowledging our instinct towards "if only". If only I were younger, I would be able to study. If only I were older, I would have something to teach. But R' Meir is recognizing that saying "if only" is not necessary. These limitations need not hold us back.