

Midrash Shmuel A Collection of Commentaries on Pirkei Avot Compiled by Rabbi Shmuel Di Uzeda Translated into English by R. Moshe Schapiro And R. David Rottenberg Quotes

Even a talmid chacham should not feel embarrassment for earning his living through toiling in some seemingly demeaning profession. This is what the mishna means by "Love your profession, scorn the holding of public office" — the last clause of the mishna teaches that a person who does not adopt a trade runs the risk of becoming suspected of committing theft by the authorities.¹

Anyone who teaches Torah is obligated to weigh his words carefully in order to ensure that his message is clearly understood by his disciples. One's statements should be precise and unambiguous, leaving no room for misinterpretations.²

The mishna also warns against becoming overly dependent on one's peers to identify one's faults. Instead, one should rely on his own ability to introspect and thereby detect his own faults. This is what is meant by "if I am not for myself, who is for me?" Paradoxically, even a person who does not rely on others for self

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critique must take care not to neglect his obligation to give rebuke to his peers. This is the meaning of "and when I am for myself, what am I?"³

One way to gain honor is by having numerous servants. One who feels compelled to seek honor in this manner should hire poor and destitute Jews. In this manner, he will help the poor.⁴

4-22 Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: "Do not appease your fellow in the time of his anger; do not console him while his dead lies before him; do not investigate his vow at the time he makes it; and do not attempt to see him at the time of his degradation...Similarly, giving constructive criticism to someone who has suffered degradation as a result of having succumbed to his Evil Inclination must be done only at the appropriate time, for otherwise it will cause more harm than benefit. If the rebuke is given too early, the transgressor might not be capable of withstanding the emotional turmoil brought about by the criticism. Instead, he is liable to lose all hope of ever repenting, which will likely cause him to rebel against HaShem in every way. Indeed, a person who gives constructive criticism at the improper time transgresses an explicit precept of the Torah: "Do not place a stumbling block Before a blind man"⁵

³ 63

⁴ 98

⁵ 266

Elisha ben Avuyah said: "One who studies Torah as a child, to what can he be likened? To ink written on fresh paper. And one who studies Torah as an old man, to what can he be likened? To ink written on smooth paper." ...The mishna teaches that information learned during one's youth is easily absorbed by the mind, and, consequently, it will remain with him even in his old age. Moreover, it will be enhanced by the wisdom that comes with old age. Just as ink written on fresh paper is easily read, so, too, the information stored while the mind is still young can be easily accessed. In contrast, a person who only begins to study later on in life will assimilate the information with great difficulty, for his mind is analogous to ink on erased [smooth] paper, which is difficult to read. Also, an older person has more responsibilities than a younger person, and so, he has less time at his disposal to dedicate towards study.⁶

The similarity between illegal use of Sabbatical fruit and sins punishable by death can also be understood according to Shlomo HaMelech's warning not to steal from the poor. Shlomo warns that HaShem defends the poor who have been robbed. Now, since poor people rely on the Sabbatical fruits for their sustenance, a person who denies the poor this right in effect endangers the lives of the poor. Just as murder is punishable by death, so, too, preventing a

⁶ 270-271

destitute person from sustaining himself from Sabbatical fruit, which is tantamount to murder, is also punishable by death.⁷

The Torah commands that judges be appointed in every Jewish settlement, and that these judges pass down a fair and just verdict. Concerning these two obligations, the verse says, "Judge the poor and destitute." That is, even the poorest man must be entitled to fair judgment. However, if enough judges are not made available to deliberate law suits, then the judicial system will fall short of providing fair judgement to all. Litigants will be forced to wait for protracted periods until they are brought in front of a judge, and wronged parties will have no alternative but to suffer the injustice perpetrated against them.⁸

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⁷ 309

⁸ 310