

Pirkei Avot - Natan Brenner

Chapter 2 Mishna 5:

Hillel would say: Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not believe in yourself until the day you die. Do not judge your fellow until you have stood in his place. Do not say something that is not readily understood in the belief that it will ultimately be understood [or: Do not say something that ought not to be heard even in the strictest confidence, for ultimately it will be heard]. And do not say "When I free myself of my concerns, I will study," for perhaps you will never free yourself.

“Do not separate yourself from the community”:

People need to participate emotionally and physically in the community.

One of the words for community in Hebrew is Tzibur. Inside the word, you can find a summary of the community meaning. The first two letters come from Tzadikin (rightness), the bet comes from binonim (average person) and the reish for rashaim (bad people). A community is formed by all these three groups and we need each individual with all their particularities in order to create a healthy community.

The pursuit of Torah and mitzvot makes the whole community actively involved.

Your bad actions reflect and influence the rest of the community; all Jews are responsible for each other and the balance of the world's judgment may hang on a single one of our actions.

Isolation is weakening; vibrant Judaism requires a community. Do not become evil by insulating yourself.

Always be in a community.

If you are in a bad neighborhood or community, better to live in solitude than having bad influences and making you live far from God's path.

God entrusted Israel with the Torah and with a national mission, as a nation, not a collection of great individuals.

“Do not believe in yourself until the day you die”:

One should never become complacent about his/her financial or professional achievements as well as about his/her Torah knowledge, mitzvot or community involvement.

There is always place for improvement fulfilling mitzvot, studying Torah, or being involved in the community until the last day of your life.

Our “yesterdays” determine neither our “todays” nor our “tomorrows”; we need to work to improve ourselves until the last day. We need constantly to work to make this world better as an image of god creation and expectations from us.

“Do not judge your fellow until you have stood in his place”:

Until you are in the position of other person, you can't judge.

Another interpretation is that you can't judge until you know all the personal background from that person.

Do not judge someone when he/she is away from their familiar surroundings. At home is where they will act more natural and they will not try to make a good impression.

“Do not say something that is not readily understood in the belief that it will ultimately be understood [or: Do not say something that ought not to be heard even in the strictest confidence, for ultimately it will be heard]”:

When you talk, be sure your ideas and message are clear because people can take them out of context.

One should not make a statement which is not intended to be heard. Walls have ears and secrets are known at some point.

Reason and understanding are not something fixed and clear cut at all times: understanding takes time, we can hear but we are not ready for the next step. This is one of the reasons why we read the Torah every year again from the beginning. Each year we have a different understanding from the same text.

“And do not say "When I free myself of my concerns, I will study," for perhaps you will never free yourself”:

Never is an ideal time to study, not postpone the process. Do it every day, at any free moment during the week as a routine. The perfect day never will come.

We can apply the same concept for being involved in the community as a volunteer or leader as well as for making a donation of money to charities and organizations. Do it now, do not wait until an ideal time in the future where you will have more free time or more money.

Always have time to volunteer in organizations and have the opportunity to do good acts and deeds in your community.

Mishna 18:

"Rabbi Shimon said: Be careful with the recitation of the Shema and the prayers. When you pray, do not regard your prayers as a fixed obligation but rather as [the asking for] mercy and supplication before G-d, as the verse states, 'For gracious and merciful is He, slow to anger, great in kindness, and relenting of the evil decree' (Joel 2:13). Do not consider yourself wicked in your own eyes."

“Be careful with the recitation of the Shema and the prayers”:

It is important to be aware of prayers schedule:

Morning Shema: first quarter of the day light hours

Morning Shmonei Esrei: First third of the day light hours

Mincha afternoon: between half hour after midday and sunset.

Evening Maariv and Shema: after night fall

Having created a time set for the prayers, it helps people to behave as a big kaal (community) no matter where you live. Every Jew prays at the same time as a big community.

In addition, having the same time set and having the need for minyan, encourage people to pray together as a community.

The pray from a community is stronger and more effective than individual prayers.

Studying Torah is an activity that we must do at any available time, however, praying needs specific times.

It's very important to recite the Shema in our connection with God. It contains many of the main articles of Jewish faith.

Be conscious of what we are talking to God: not do it automatically or in a robotic way. Be aware and put attention at the words and the timeframe.

Prevent distractions during Shema and Shmonei Esrei. You need to concentrate in your thoughts, deeds and words because we are in a conversation with God and we are at that time appealing to him for mercy and grace. You need to pray slowly, being carefully to pronounce correctly every word.

Pray with the heart. Prayers should be guided by our inspiration, reflecting what each individual had to express at that moment. Historically, the prayers weren't written. The Sheliach sabbur leaded them in a moment of inspiration, answering to the people's needs and supplications. Prayers were written down only by the time of the Great Assembly a few centuries BCE, when they find the perfect balance between the prayers. Today the prayers are institutionalized in a perfect formula.

“Do not consider yourself wicked in your own eyes”:

When you judge yourself to be a wicked person, you don't have motivation or hope to improve. You always will act according to your expectations.

One may become prisoner of his self-image. You can always improving by praying and doing mitzvot.

Fulfilling God expectations from us helps us to raise our standards of behavior.

Conclusion: Prayers and mitzvot makes as a community. Israel is strong only when we act as a community, being responsible for each other. Our mission as a people is to fulfill God's requests and try to improve the world as close as possible as to the ideal in his creation. As a nation, we have a connection with God that we fulfill through our prayers and mitzvot. We need to study continuously Torah in order to know the expectations and be aware of our divine mission as a nation.

The Psalms: Featuring 121 – Bernie Kahn

Sources:

Pathways Through the Bible by Mortimer J. Cohen. The library of Rabbi Joshua Neely. From the lectures of Rabbi Dr. Louis Jacobs, The United Kingdom's first Conservative Rabbi as described at www.MyJewishLearning.com

The Book of Psalms – The TeHillim – Praises

The first book of the third section of the Hebrew Bible – The Ketuvim – Sacred Writings - following the Torah and the Prophets(Nebi'im) Including Proverbs, Job, The Song of Songs, Lamentation, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra – NeHemiah

Superscriptions are names of authors and instruments to be played as accompaniment.

There are psalms for each day of the week and reflections for holidays or festivals. #1 is as if an introduction and #150 is as if an epilogue. Four(#41, 72, 89, and 106) are of concluding themes which the Midrash interprets as if there are 5(five) books.

David composed psalms in all five books, and is the assumed and final author, though Solomon, Asaph, the sons of Korah, Ethan, Herman, and Moses(#90) are named and others are unnamed. The Talmud, in Bava Batra, 14b, authorship is illustrated. It states that David compiled and authored. Seventy-two(72) are attributed to or concern David, the others are considered “orphans.” 2 Samuel 23:1 describes David as “the sweet singer of Israel.” Today, the Book of Psalms is an anthology. (#137 speaks of a period centuries after David) There is no agreement as to the age of the psalms.

During the Talmudic Period, no psalms were liturgic but for that of Hallel. Post-Talmudic liturgy included psalms, gradually over the centuries. Daily services include #'s 100, 145, and 150. Shabbat and Festivals include 19, 34, 90, 91, 135, 33, 92, and 93. Each day, the psalm of the day is recited. #24 is recited on the return of the Torah on weekdays while #29 is recited on Shabbat. Psalm #27 is the Penitential Psalm recited during the month of Elul until HaShanah Rabbah, the final day of Sukkot. Before the evening service at the end of Shabbat, Psalms 144 and 67 are recited, Psalm 104 is read during the morning service of Rosh Hodesh(New Moon) and Mincha services of Winter Shabbats. Kabbalists of the 16th Century recited Psalms 95 – 99 and 29, reflecting the six(6) days of creation of Friday night services, universally applied to this day and scattered through the prayer books used today.

Psalms of Assents – Shir Ha-Ma'aloth -Going up the Steps of the Temple, from the Court of Women to the Court of Israelites, sung by the Levites and others, and recited as pilgrims climbed the hills to Jerusalem, fifteen psalms(15) represent the 15 steps. “To go up” is the action used in the return from Babylon, these psalms were composed for the simcha shared by home-comers. Similar concepts are for the celebration of return to the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. There are no specific accounts for the superscription. The Psalms, a collection of songs and anthems, are sung to reverse unhappy thoughts to cheer oneself and the group.

Psalm 121 – A Song of Ascents

I will lift up mine eyes unto the mountains:

From where shall my help come?

My help comes from the Lord,

Who made heaven and earth.

He will not suffer thy foot to be moved;

He that keepeth thee will not slumber.

Behold, He that keepeth Israel

Doth neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord is thy keeper;

The Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand.

The sun shall not smite thee by day,

Nor the moon by night.

The Lord shall keep thee from all evil;

He shall keep thy soul.

The Lord shall guard thy going out and thy coming in,

From this time forth and forever more.

The Book of Ruth - Debbie Meitin

What are the megillot?

- 5 megillot, originally on scrolls, part of Ketuvim (The Writings)
- Ruth – Shavuot
- Song of Songs (Shir Hashirim) – Pesach
- Ecclesiastes (Kohelet) – Sukkot
- Lamentations (Eycha) – Tisha B'Av
- Esther – Purim
- 3 different trope patterns – Eycha, Esther, the other 3 megillot

What is Ruth about?

- Was probably originally part of the book of Judges then separated out, probably written by Samuel
- Took place “when the judges judged”
- Historical description of everyday life in Bethlehem – Elimelech, a man of wealth and standing, driven from his home by famine to Moab. He took his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Machlon and Chilyon. In the Talmud, Elimelech is said to be arrogant and not anxious to return to Israel. As a result, Elimelech dies in exile, then his sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. They only married once their father was dead, marrying out of the faith, and remained in Moab with Naomi for 10 years. The sons then died, as our sages say, for the sin of giving up the thought of ever returning to Israel, and they had no children. As this point, Naomi was left with no husband and no sons, and decided to return to her people in Bethlehem.
- Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their families in Moab and begins her return to Israel. Ruth insists on accompanying her with the famous text “Entreat me not to leave you and to return from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.”
- When they return, it is the beginning of the barley harvest (the Omer). Ruth wants to glean after the reaping (as was the law for the poor) and Boaz, a good man from Naomi’s husband’s family, notices Ruth helping the reapers. Once Boaz realizes who she is, having heard of the kindness she showed to Naomi, he asks his reapers to be kind to Ruth and treat her with respect, even giving her some of the harvest to take to Naomi.
- Once Naomi hears of Boaz’s kindness to Ruth, she is very happy, hoping that this will mean good fortune for Ruth and herself. Ruth places herself near Boaz one evening, while he is resting, and her presence reminds him of his obligation to his dead relatives by taking possession of her husband’s estate, as well as marrying Ruth.
- First Boaz talks with another of Elimelech’s kinsmen to see if he will wish to acquire all that was Elimelech’s and the sons, including land, and to take Ruth as his wife. This relative says no, as he was already married, so Boaz acquired all this, including marrying Ruth.
- Ruth and Boaz had a son named Obed. Naomi helped to raise him and he was truly the son of both Ruth and Naomi. Obed became the father of Jesse, the father of King David. The bloodline is traced from Judah whose son was Perez, born to Tamar.

Why is this read on Shavuot?

- Shavuot is also called Chag Habikkurim, the holiday of the first fruits. It is a harvest festival and harvest is a key component of the story.
- The Revelation on Mount Sinai marked the formal acceptance by the Israelites of the Torah and religion of Judaism, which was embraced so completely by Ruth. It is said that acceptance of the Torah entails suffering and sacrifice for us just as it did for Ruth.
- There is a legend that King David died on Shavuot.
- Acceptance of the Israelites marrying converts to Judaism and the convert here, Ruth, is very accepting of Judaism.

Sefer Tomer Devorah – Richard Knapp

Tomer Devorah (Hebrew: תומר דבורה, English: The Palm Tree of Deborah) was written in the middle of the 16th century by Moses Cordovero, a kabbalist in Safed (Sfat), Israel. This short text deals mostly with the Imitation of God through the acquisition of divine traits, especially those of the sephirot. The first edition was published in Venice in 1588. Although not widely read among Jews today, it has been popular in the mussar tradition, one strain of Jewish ethical literature started by Rabbi Israel ben Zev Wolf Lipkin Salanter (1810-1883), which focuses on the individual cultivation of the middot, or qualities of God, by linking them to ethical concerns. It is popular in that tradition to read through this text in the days before Yom Kippur. Tomer Devorah, of course, came centuries before. . In medieval Hebrew, middah (Plural middot) has two prominent meanings. One refers to ethical values or to moral qualities of the human soul. The other refers to divine attributes. In kabbalistic literature, the term refers specifically to the sefirot, the manifested attributes of God expressed through the emanations or divine potencies. Through observance of God's commandments, and by the performance of the moral virtues, one imitates and sustains the divine attributes from which these laws and values originally derive. The title, Tomer Devorah is borrowed from Judges 4:4-5,

4. And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, judged Israel at that time.5. And she lived under the palm tree of Deborah [tomer Devorah] between Ramah and Beth-El in Mount Ephraim; and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment.

The author, Rabbi Moses ben Jacob Cordovero or Moshe Cordevero (1522-1570 CE) was a leading mystic in 16th-century Safed in Ottoman Palestine. He is known by the acronym the Ramak (רמ"ק standing for "Rabbi Moshe Cordovero"). In the years following the Medieval circles of Kabbalah, which had been centered around the Zohar (ca.1290-1325 CE), attempts were made to give a complete intellectual system to its theology. Influenced by the earlier success of Jewish philosophy in articulating a rational study of Jewish thought, Moshe Cordovero produced the first accepted, complete systemization of the profound ideas of Kabbalah. His rational school of Cordoveran Kabbalah represents one of the pivotal developments in the historical evolution of Kabbalah. Immediately after him in Safed, Isaac Luria articulated a subsequent, successive paradigm for Kabbalistic theology, with new revealed doctrines and organization of previous Kabbalistic thought. Lurianic Kabbalah was seen by its followers as harmonious with, and a deeper interpretation of the Zohar and the system of the Ramak. Lurianic Kabbalah mostly superseded Cordoveran, but some schools continue to follow the system of Moshe Cordovero. Both articulations gave Kabbalah an intellectual completion to rival Jewish philosophy (Hakira), and under the influence of the esoteric development of mystical thought in 16th-century Safed, Kabbalah replaced Hakira as the fundamental theology of Judaism, both in scholarly circles and in the popular imagination.

Cordovero -- Biographical Highlights:

- 1522: Born in Tzfat, Israel to a distinguished family of Spanish descent, originally from the town of Cordova. At the time, Israel was then under Ottoman Turkish rule.
- Studies under Rabbi Yosef Caro (author of the Shulchan Aruch)
- At age eighteen, is the youngest of four great rabbis to be ordained by Rabbi Yaakov BeRav - the others are Rabbi Yosef Karo, Rabbi Moshe of Trani, and Rabbi Moshe Galanti.
- 1542: At age twenty, becomes a student of his brother-in-law, Rabbi Shlomo HaLevi Alkabetz (composer of the famous Friday night prayer, Lecho Dodi), with whom he studies the esoteric aspect of Torah, the Kabbalah.
- 1548: Completes his classic "Pardes Rimonim" (Garden of Pomegranates)
- 1550: Opens an academy for the study of mysticism. Students include Rabbi Eliyahu di Vidash (author of Reishit Chochma), Rabbi Abraham Galanti, Rabbi Chaim Vital.
- In the last year of Ramak's life, the Arizal comes to Tzfat and becomes his student.
- 1570: Passes away at age forty-eight, on the 23rd of Tammuz. The Arizal eulogizes him and observes that the bier bearing Ramak to his burial place is preceded by a pillar of fire. Ramak's revered teacher, Rabbi Yosef Caro exclaims, "Here lies the Ark of the Torah."

Published Writings: Pardes Rimonim (Orchard of Pomegranates); Ohr Yakar (The Precious Light); Ohr Ne'erav (Pleasant Light); Sefer Alimah Rabti (The Great Work of 'to Elim'); Shiur Komah (Measurement of Height); Sefer Gerushim (Book of Divorcements); Tomer Devorah (The Palm Tree of Deborah)

Some Concurrent Events in World History:

1492 – Jews expelled from Spain – Columbus lands in America

1520-29: Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan discovers the Philippines during the first global circumnavigation - Monks burned alive for following teachings of religious reformer Martin Luther - Manhattan discovered by Italian navigator Giovanni da Verrazano.

1530-49: England's Henry VIII marries his mistress Anne Boleyn and renounces authority of the pope - Inquisition of Pope Paul III of Rome conducts trials of heretics - Protestants burned at the stake - Nikolaus Copernicus publishes theory of a sun-centered solar system - Europeans first visit Japan introducing firearms - Ivan IV becomes first czar of Russia; marries Anastasia of the Romanov family.

1550-59: French astrologer Nostradamus publishes a book of prophecies - Pope Paul IV orders Rome's Jewish quarters to be walled in - Elizabethan age of England begins when Mary Tudor is succeeded by Elizabeth.

1560-70: John Calvin's followers publish the Geneva Bible containing chapter and verse numbers - Italian artist Michelangelo dies - Anglican Church established in England - Gerardus Mercator develops the Mercator projection map, representing the world in terms of latitude and longitude, greatly simplifying navigation - Portuguese overrun previously established French colony and found Rio de Janeiro - Ivan the Terrible publicly executes most of his advisers.

Chapter One of Tomer Devorah ----A few selections

[The Imitation of God's ways:] It is proper for man to imitate his Creator, resembling Him in both likeness and image ["And God said: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness..." (Gen. 1:26)] according to the secret of the Supernal Form [I.e., of the Primordial Supernal Man-Adam Kadmon]. Because the chief Supernal image and likeness is in deeds, a human resemblance merely in bodily appearance and not in deeds debases that Form. [i.e., the chief Supernal image and likeness is in active deeds. The Kabbalists think of the Sephirot as mainly attributes, ways in which the divine Providence manifests itself as activities -deeds]

Of the man who resembles the Form in body alone it is said, "A handsome form whose deeds are ugly." For what value can there be in man's resemblance to the Supernal Form in bodily limbs if his deeds have no resemblance to those of his Creator? Consequently, it is proper for man to imitate the acts of the Supernal Crown (Keter), which are the thirteen highest attributes of mercy [According to the Rabbinic interpretation of Ex.34:6-7 , there are thirteen divine attributes of mercy to be mentioned in prayer (Rosh Hashana 17b)]. The Kabbalists, however, speak, in addition, of thirteen higher attributes, belonging to Crown, which contains no judgment, hinted at in the verses:

מי-אל כְּמוֹד נִשְׂא עֵוֹן

Who is a God like unto Thee, that beareth iniquity

וְנִבְרַח עַל-פְּשָׁע לִישְׂאָרֵית נִהְלִיתוּ

And passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?

לֹא-הִתְחַזֵּק לְעַד אָפוּ כִי-תִפֹּץ חֲסֵד הוּא

He retaineth not His anger for ever, Because he delighteth in mercy.

יָשׁוּב יְרַחֲמֵנוּ

He will again have compassion upon us;

יִכְבֹּשׁ עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ

He will subdue our iniquities:

וְתִשְׁלִיךְ בְּמַצְלֹת יָם כָּל-חַטָּאתָם

And Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.

תִּתֵּן אֱמֶת לְיַעֲקֹב חֲסֵד לְאַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר-נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְתָּיִנוּ מִימֵי קֶדֶם

Thou wilt show faithfulness to Jacob, mercy to Abraham as Thou has sworn unto our fathers from the days of old.

(Micah 7:18-20)

Hence it is proper that these thirteen attributes, which we shall now expound, be found in man.

Middah I Patience-- Who is a God like unto Thee?

This refers to the Holy One, Blessed is He, as a patient King [Who has been insulted]. Who bears insult in a manner that is above human understanding. For behold, without doubt, there is nothing hidden from His providence. Furthermore, there is no moment when man is not nourished and does not exist by virtue of the divine power which flows down upon him. It follows that no man ever sins against God without the divine affluence pouring into him at that very moment, enabling him to exist and to move his limbs. Despite the fact that he uses it for sin, that power is not withheld from him in any way. But the Holy One, Blessed is He, bears this insult and continues to empower him to move his limbs even though he uses the power in that moment for sin and perversity offending the Holy One, Blessed is He, who, nonetheless, suffer it. Nor must you say that He cannot withhold that good, God forbid, for it lies in His power in the moment it takes to say the word 'moment' to wither the sinner's hand or foot, as he did to Jeroboam. And yet though it lies in His power to arrest divine flow - and He might have said: 'If you sin against Me do so under your own power, not with Mine' - He does not, on this account, withhold His goodness from man, bearing the insult, pouring out His power and bestowing of His goodness. This is to be insulted and bear the insult, beyond words. This is why the ministering angels refer to the Holy One, Blessed is He, as 'the patient King.' And this is the meaning of the prophet's words: "Who is a God unto Thee?" He means: 'Thou, the good and merciful, art God, with the power to avenge and claim Thy debt, yet Thou art patient and bearest insult until man repents.' Behold this is a virtue man should make his own, namely, to be patient and allow himself to be insulted even to this extent and yet not refuse to bestow of his goodness to the recipients.

Middah II Tolerance ---That Beareth Iniquity

This is greater than the preceding quality. For a destroying angel is created whenever a man sins, as we have been taught : "He who commits a sin acquires a prosecutor (Heb: Mashhit) for himself, who stands before the Holy One, Blessed is He, saying: 'So-and-so made me.'" As no creature can exist without the divine flow of power how does the destroying angel who stands before Him exist? It would only be right if the Holy One, Blessed is He, were to say: 'I will not nourish this destroying angel, let him go to the one who made him to be sustained by him.' If He were to say this the destroyer would at once descend to snatch the sinner's soul or to cut it off or the sinner would be obliged to expiate his offence in creating the destroyer by suitable punishment unto the latter is made naught. The Holy One, Blessed is He, does not behave in this fashion. He bears the sine and endures it. He nourishes the destroyer and sustains it as He does the whole world until one of the three things happens. Either the sinner repents and makes an end of the destroying angel by the severity of the penances he inflicts upon himself. Or the righteous Judge brings the destroyer to naught by bringing suffering or death upon the sinner. Or the sinner descends to Hell to pay his debt. This is the meaning of Cain's plea: 'My sin is too great to bear,' interpreted by our Rabbis of blessed memory as: "Thou bearest (that is to say, Thou nourisheth and sustaineth) the whole world; is my sin so heavy that Thou canst not bear it (that is, sustain it until I repent)?" This is the greatest quality of tolerance that He nourishes and sustains the evil creature (i.e., the mashhit) brought from which a man should learn until the latter repents. From which a man should learn the degree of patience in bearing his neighbor's yoke and the evils done by his neighbor even when those evils still exist. So that even when his neighbor offends he bears with him until the wrong is righted or until it vanishes of its own accord and so forth...

Middah V He retaineth not His anger forever.

This is yet another divine quality, that even when man persists in sinning the Holy One, Blessed is He, does not persist in retaining His anger and even when He does, it is not for ever but He allows His anger to abate even when man does not repent; as we find in the days of Jeroboam, son of Joash , that the Holy One, Blessed is He, restored the border of Israel. Though they were unrepentant calf-worshippers He had mercy upon them. Why did He have mercy upon them? Because of this quality of not retaining His anger forever. On the contrary, He allows His anger to lose its force and though the sin still lingers He does not punish but ever longs, compassionately, for man's repentance. Hence it is written: 'For I will not contend for ever, neither will I bear grudge.' For the Holy One, Blessed is He, shows both severity and tenderness to Israel for their benefit.

This is the quality which a man should make his own in dealings with his neighbor or his own children who suffer as a result he should, because of this, not persist in his rebuke nor linger in his anger but make an end and not retain ire for ever. This applies even where such anger is permissible: for instance, in the case expounded by the Rabbis on the verse: 'When thou seest the ass of thine enemy ...,' they explain [Pesachim 113b] that this enmity refers to the man who sees his neighbor commit a sin but when there is no other person present so that he cannot be testified against in a Court of Law. In this case it is permitted to hate the sinner for the offence he has committed but, nonetheless, the Torah says: azov ta'azov immo ("Thou shalt surely help him"), explained by the Rabbis to mean: "Thou shalt leave aside that which is in thy heart." It is a religious duty to encourage him lovingly, and, perhaps, this way of dealing with him will succeed. This is the very quality of which he have spoken: "He retaineth not His anger forever."

Our text translation is from: Moses Cordovero, Tomer Devorah, The Palm Tree of Deborah English Translation by Rabbi Louis Jacobs, Third Edition (New York:Sepher-Hermon Press, 1960, 1974, 1981)

Summary of the portions and main points of Chapter 1

Middah 1: Patience. Allow Yourself to be Insulted מי אל כמורך

Just as God gives us the power to sin against Him, we too must be patient and allow ourselves to be insulted and not refuse to bestow goodness to those who do so to us.

Middah 2: Tolerance. Nourish One Who Has Sinned Against You נשא עון

This is higher than the 1st. Just as God continuously nourishes the one who sinned against Him, we must nourish our neighbor even when his/her evils against you still exist.

Middah 3: Forgiveness. Pardon The Sinner עבר על פשע

This is even higher than the 2nd. Just as God rights the sin and washes its stains away, we must pardon our neighbor who sinned against us and cleanse them.

Middah 4: Remember, All Israel is related, one to the other. Desire That No Evil Befall Your Neighbor לשארית נהלת

Just as God treats Klal Yisrael, the Community of Israel, as His family, we too must treat our neighbors like family and desire in their well-being. Your neighbor's honor should be as dear to you as your own; for you both are one. Speak no evil of him nor desire that evil befall him. Just as God desires neither our disgrace nor our suffering because we are His relatives, so too, a man should not desire to witness evil befalling his neighbor nor see his neighbor suffer or disgraced. These things should cause you the same pain as if he you were the victim.

Middah 5: Let Your Anger Go לא החזיק לעד אפו

Just as God does not persist in retaining His anger when man persists in sinning, we too must not persist in rebuke nor linger in anger, even when it is justified rather we must encourage our neighbor lovingly. In dealing this way with our neighbor, he/she will succeed.

Middah 6: Overlook Offense. Delight In Your Neighbors Goodness כי הפץ חסד הוא

Just as God looks beyond the sins of Klal Yisrael and rejoices in our goodness, so too we must delight in our neighbors' goodness, even when we are offended or provoked, if the offender has good points in that he/she is kind to others or he/she possesses some other good quality this should be sufficient to soothe your anger so that your heart is pleased with him/her and delights in the kindness he/she does. And we should say: 'It is enough for me that he/she possesses this good quality.'

Middah 7: Cultivate Hesed, Kindness. Show Greater Kindness To Those Who Sinned Against You and Have Now Repented ירחמנו ישוב Just as God views the Baal Teshuva, a repentant sinner on a higher status than a tzaddik, a saint, so too we must not feed hatred from former anger at a friend rather when we see that our neighbor wants to love us we should show him/her a greater degree of kindness and love than formerly. We should say: 'Behold he is to be compared to the penitents in whose place the perfectly righteous cannot stand.' And we should encourage him/her to a far greater degree than those who are perfectly righteous, namely, those who have not offended us."

Middah 8: Avoid Retribution. Hide The Evil That Your Friend Has Done to You יכבש עונותינו

Just as God does not allow the evil a sinner does to shine beyond his good deeds, so too we must make this quality our own; not to subdue the good a neighbor had done and to remember the evil he/she has done. On the contrary, we should subdue evil, forget it and reject it so that evil does not dwell within us. But the good our neighbor had done should always be arraigned before us and we should remember this good so that it prevails over all the deeds his neighbor has done. And we should not say, "If he/she has done good to me he/she has also

behaved badly to me,' so that the good is forgotten." We should not do this, but with regard to the evil his neighbor has done to him he should allow himself to be appeased in every possible way. But the good should never be removed from our sight and we should hide ourselves from the bad as far as we possibly can, just as God does.

Middah 9: Compassionate Forgiveness. Forgives-Saves Suffering Sinners ותשליך במצלות ים כל חטאותם
Tzaddikim welcome suffering, in order to find atonement; for there are sins which only suffering or death can purge. God decrees suffering upon the repentant sinner, upon which Sama'el immediately appears to claim his debt. However, so that Israel becomes pure, God allows the goat to bear their sins. Therefore, just as God allows others to claim someone's debt of suffering, if our neighbor is crushed through suffering as a result of sins he/she should not be hated, because he/she has been disgraced and he/she is your brother/sister. We should welcome those who suffer and are punished and have mercy upon them. On the contrary, we should save them from their enemies and should not say: 'Their sufferings are the result of their sins but we should have compassion upon them.'

Middah 10: Be Fair-Truthful to The Truthful תתן אמת ליעקב

Just as God who possesses a quality of truth which accords with strict justice and uprightness with those who are no more than average, to perfect them in accordance with the quality of truth, so too we should behave in truth and uprightness to our neighbors that follow the quality of truth to the letter of the law, without perverting justice.

Middah 11: Encourage Compassion and Mercy in others. Show Greater Love to Those Who Go Beyond the Letter of The Law חסד לאברהם

Just as God treats better those who go beyond the letter of the law and shows great compassion and mercy, so too if we are only a little patient with others we should be exceedingly patient with those who go beyond the letter of the law and show compassion to them, going beyond the letter of the law that we follow with regard to others. These should be especially important to us and exceedingly beloved and they should be our friends.

Middah 12: Avoid Insult. Be Good to the Wicked for They are Still Sons of Abraham אשר נשבעת לאבותינו

Just as God applies Zechut Avot, the privilege of our ancestors to the wicked, so too we must. Even when we meet with the wicked we should not behave cruelly towards them nor insult them but have mercy upon them saying: 'Even so, they are the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If they are not worthy their fathers were worthy and upright and he who brings disgrace upon the children brings disgrace upon the fathers and I have no wish that the fathers be despised through me.' And we should conceal their shame and improve them as much as is in our power.

Middah 13: Try to find the good in others. Be Good to the Wicked for They Once Were Innocent מימי קדם

Just as God recalls someone's good deeds from their birth when they have no more merit of their own of Zechut Avot left, so too even when we cannot find any good plea on someone's behalf we must say that there was a time when they had not sinned. And in that time or in former days they were worthy. And we should recall the good they have done in their youth and remember the love of 'them. In this way no person will be found an unworthy recipient of goodness nor unworthy to be prayed for and to have mercy shown to him.

The Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith – Michael Fineberg

What do Jews Believe? This is a far more difficult question than you might expect. Judaism has no dogma, no formal set of beliefs that one must hold to be a Jew. In Judaism, actions are far more important than beliefs, although there is certainly a place for belief within Judaism. In answer to this question, the great codifier of Torah law and Jewish philosophy, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon ("Maimonides" also known as "The Rambam" 1135-1204 CE), compiled what he refers to as the Shloshah Asar Ikkarim, the "Thirteen Fundamental Principles" of the Jewish faith, as derived from the Torah. The Rambam lived at a time when both Christianity and Islam were developing active theologies. Jewish scholars were often asked to attest to their faith by their counterparts in other religions. The Rambam's 13 principles of faith were formulated in his commentary on the Mishnah (tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 10). They were one of several efforts by Jewish theologians in the middle ages to create such a list. By the time of Maimonides, centers of Jewish learning and law were dispersed geographically. Judaism no longer had a central authority that might bestow official approval on his principles of faith. Maimonides refers to these thirteen principles of faith as "the fundamental truths of our religion and its very foundations." These principles, which Rambam thought were the minimum requirements of Jewish belief, are:



- 1. God exists - I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is the Creator and Guide of everything that has been created; He alone has made, does make, and will make all things. Maimonides writes "There is a Being, perfect in every possible way, who is the ultimate cause of all existence. All existence depends on God and is derived from God."**
- 2. God is one and unique - I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is One and that there is no unity in any manner like His and that He alone is our God, who was, and is, and will be. As Maimonides said, "If one even allows himself to think that there is another deity other than God, than he violates the commandment, 'You shall have no other gods before me.'**
- 3. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, has no body, and that He is free from all the properties of matter, and that there can be no (physical) comparison to Him whatsoever. Maimonides explains anthropomorphism in Scripture as follows: "In many places our holy scriptures does speak of God in physical terms. Thus we find concepts such as walking, standing, sitting and speaking used in relation to God. In all these cases, though, scripture is only speaking metaphorically. In the Talmud our sages teach us that "The Torah speaks in the language of man" (Berachot, 31b).**
- 4. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is the first and the last. Rambam writes further the "God is the absolute first and that everything else in the universe is not first relative to Him."**
- 5. I believe with perfect faith that to the Creator, Blessed be His Name, and to Him alone, it is right to pray, and that it is not right to pray to any being besides Him. Maimonides elaborates, ""God is the only one we may serve and praise....We may not act in this way toward anything beneath God, whether it be an angel, a star, or one of the elements. There are no intermediaries between us and God. All our prayers should be directed towards God; nothing else should even be considered."**
- 6. I believe with perfect faith that all the words of the prophets are true. Maimonides adds, "We must realize that there exist human beings who have such lofty qualities and achieve such great perfection that their souls become prepared to receive pure spiritual wisdom. Their human wisdom can then become bound up with Creative Mind of God and they can receive an inspired emanation from it. This is prophecy, and those people who achieve it are prophets."**
- 7. I believe with perfect faith that the prophecy of Moses our teacher, peace be upon him, was true, and that he was the chief of the prophets, both those who preceded him and those who followed him. "Moses was superior to all prophets, whether they preceded him or arose afterwards. Moses attained the highest possible human level. He perceived God to a degree surpassing every human that ever existed. God spoke to all other prophets**

through an intermediary, but Moses alone did not need this; this is what the Torah means when God says "Mouth to mouth, I will speak to him."

8. I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah that is now in our possession is the same that was given to Moses our teacher, peace be upon him. Maimonides states, "We do not know exactly how the Torah was transmitted to Moses. But when it was transmitted, Moses merely wrote it down like a secretary taking dictation...." Maimonides' dictation theory of inspiration of the written Torah (Torah shebikhtav) is debatable by many Jews, despite his warning that those who question it are infidels. Actually, most Jews today, including many Orthodox Jews, are amenable to "higher criticism" of the Scriptures, indicating that, for example, the Masorah is valid and that the Masoretes compared all extant textual variations when attempting to create a definitive text (i.e., the Masoretic text).

9. I believe with perfect faith that this Torah will not be exchanged, and that there will never be any other Torah from the Creator, Blessed be His Name. This Torah and no other was transcribed from God and we may not add to it or remove from it, neither the written or oral law. Maimonides explains further, "If any prophet comes to alter the Torah, we immediately know that he is a false prophet. It does not matter whether he is Jewish or gentile, or how many signs and miracles he performs. If he says that God sent him to add or subtract a commandment he is a false prophet. The same is true if he teaches that the commandments were only given for a limited time and not forever."

10. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, knows all the deeds of human beings and all their thoughts, as it is written, "Who fashioned the hearts of them all, Who comprehends all their actions" (Psalms 33:15). Maimonides explains "The tenth principle is that God knows all that men do, and never turns His eyes away from them. It denies the opinion of those who say "God has abandoned His world".

11. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, rewards those who keep His commandments and punishes those that transgress them. The greatest reward is to draw near to God and Olam HaBa'ah (the World to Come) and the greatest punishment is Kareit (spiritual excision)

12. I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah; and even though he may tarry, nonetheless, I wait every day for his coming. The concept of the Messiah, the "Anointed One" who will one day come to deliver his people from oppression at the beginning of an era of world peace has been the sustaining hope of the Jewish people for generations. Messiah is the instrument by whom God's kingdom is to be established in Israel and in the world. This hope runs throughout the entire Tanakh. Maimonides is ascribed to have said: "If a king will arise from the House of David who is learned in Torah and observant of the mitzvot, as prescribed by the written law and the oral law, as David his ancestor was, and will compel all of Israel to walk in the way of the Torah and reinforce the breaches; and fight the wars of God, we may, with assurance, consider him the Messiah. If he succeeds in the above, builds the Temple in its place, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is definitely the Messiah. If he did not succeed to this degree or he was killed, he surely is not the redeemer promised by the Torah..." (Mishneh Torah). Rambam's statement is probably the definitive rendering of the traditional Jewish view on the subject.

13. I believe with perfect faith that there will be a revival of the dead at the time when it shall please the Creator, Blessed be His name, and His mention shall be exalted for ever and ever. Perhaps due to the natural human disposition to reject such a radical concept, Maimonides goes to great length to emphasize its importance: "Resurrection of the dead is one of the fundamental principles in the Torah of our master Moses. "There is neither Jewish faith nor any attachment to the Jewish faith, for an individual who does not believe in this" (Introduction to Perek Helek). In his Mishneh Torah, too, Maimonides concludes that both the one who denies the concept of resurrection of the dead or the one who denies the coming of the Messiah are among those who have forfeited their share in Olam Haba - the Hereafter (Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Teshuvah 3:6). According to Rambam, when one believes all of these fundamental principles and his belief is clear and strong, he enters the community of Israel which is commanded to love him, to have mercy on him and to behave toward him with all the manners of brotherhood that have been commanded upon a man toward his fellows by God. If one fails to truly believe even one of these principals he has left the community and He is called apikorus and "one who cuts the plantings."

Acceptance of the Principals

Maimonides' 13 principles were controversial when first proposed, evoking criticism by Crescas and Joseph Albo. They evoked criticism as minimizing acceptance of the entire Torah (Rabbi S. of Montpellier, *Yad Rama*, Y. Alfacher, *Rosh Amanah*). The 13 principles were ignored by much of the Jewish community for the next few centuries. (Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought, Menachem Kellner). Over time two poetic restatements of these principles (Ani Ma'amin and Yigdal) became canonized in the Jewish prayer book. Eventually, Maimonides' 13 principles of faith became the mostly widely accepted statement of belief.

The successors of Maimonides, from the 13th to the 15th century — Nahmanides, Abba Mari ben Moses, Simon ben Zemah Duran, Joseph Albo, Isaac Arama, and Joseph Jaabez — narrowed his 13 articles to three core beliefs: Belief in God; in Creation (or revelation); and in providence (or retribution). Others, like Crescas and David ben Samuel Estella, spoke of seven fundamental articles, laying stress on free-will. On the other hand, David ben Yom-Tob ibn Bilia, in his "*Yesodot ha- Maskil*" (Fundamentals of the Thinking Man), adds to the 13 of Maimonides 13 of his own — a number which a contemporary of Albo also chose for his fundamentals; while Jedaiah Penini, in the last chapter of his "*Behinat ha-Dat*," enumerated no less than 35 cardinal principles. Isaac Abravanel, in his "*Rosh Amanah*," took the same attitude towards Maimonides' creed. While defending Maimonides against Hasdai and Albo, he refused to accept dogmatic articles for Judaism, criticizing any formulation as minimizing acceptance of all 613 mitzvot.

The thirteen foundations of Rambam are very basic and general principles. Yet as basic as these principles are, the necessity of believing each one of them has been disputed at one time or another, and the liberal movements of Judaism dispute many of these principles. Unlike many other religions, Judaism does not focus much on abstract cosmological concepts. Although Jews have certainly considered the nature of God, man, the universe, life and the afterlife at great length (see Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism), there is no mandated, official, definitive belief on these subjects, outside of the very general concepts discussed above. There is substantial room for personal opinion on all of these matters because Judaism is more concerned about actions than beliefs. Judaism focuses on relationships: the relationship between God and mankind, between God and the Jewish people, between the Jewish people and the land of Israel, and among human beings. Our scriptures tell the story of the development of these relationships, from the time of creation, through the creation of the relationship between God and Abraham, to the creation of the relationship between God and the Jewish people, and forward. The scriptures also specify the mutual obligations created by these relationships, although various movements of Judaism disagree about the nature of these obligations. Some say they are absolute, unchanging laws from God (Orthodox); some say they are laws from God that change and evolve over time (Conservative); some say that they are guidelines that you can choose whether or not to follow (Reform, Reconstructionist).

WE ALL STOOD TOGETHER – Cathy Swerdlow

My brother and I were at Sinai
He kept a journal
of what he saw
of what he heard
of what it all meant to him

I wish I had such a record
of what happened to me there

It seems like every time I want to write
I can't
I'm always holding a baby
one of my own
or one for a friend
always holding a baby
so my hands are never free
to write things down

And then
as time passes
the particulars
the hard data
the who what when where why
slip away from me
and all I'm left with is
the feeling

But feelings are just sounds
the vowel barking of a mute

My brother is so sure of what he heard
after all he's got a record of it
consonant after consonant after consonant

If we remembered it together
we could re-create holy time
sparks flying

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Questions for Discussion:

- 1) What is going on in the poem – what is the p'shat?
- 2) What is the poet's dilemma, what is her experience of Sinai? How is it different from her brother's? What is the "journal" her brother kept?
- 3) What is the significance of the poem's title?
- 4) How does the poem speak to your life – your understanding of revelation?
- 5) The poem explores a tension between "particulars"/"hard data" and "feelings" – how is your Jewish life and practice informed by each side of that tension? How do you mediate that tension in your understanding of revelation, of Torah?
- 6) Are there ways in which, like the poet, you feel 'outside the norm' of Jewish experience? How do you find yourself in the Sinai story?

Mitzvah Reduction – Rabbi Joshua Neely

Rav Sim'lai taught: 613 commandments were given to Moses, 365 negative ones, corresponding to the number of the days of the solar year, and 248 positive commandments, corresponding to the parts of man's body. Said Rav Hammuna: What verse proves this? Moses commanded us Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob (Deu 33:4, which we sing at hagbah). The numerical value of the letters of Torah is 611. This doesn't include, I am and you shall have no other gods, since these have come to us from the mouth of the Almighty (and not from Moses).

David came and reduced them to 11: A Psalm of David: Lord, who shall dwell in Your tabernacle, and who shall dwell in Your holy mountain? (i) He who walks uprightly and (ii) works righteousness and (iii) speaks truth in his heart and (iv) has no slander on his tongue and (v) does no evil to his fellow and (vi) does not take up a reproach against his neighbor, (vii) in whose eyes a vile person is despised but (viii) honors those who fear the Lord. (ix) He swears to his own hurt and changes not. (x) He does not lend on interest. (xi) He does not take a bribe against the innocent (Psalm 15).

1. He who walks uprightly: this is Abraham. (Gen 17:1).
 2. and works righteousness: this is Abba Hilkiyahu.
 3. speaks truth in his heart: for instance Rav Safra.
 4. has no slander on his tongue: this is our father, Jacob: My father might feel me and I shall seem to him as a deceiver (Gen. 27:12).
 5. does no evil to his fellow: he does not go into competition with his fellow craftsman.
 6. does not take up a reproach against his neighbor: one who befriends his relatives.
 7. in whose eyes a vile person is despised: this is Hezekiah, king of Judah, who dragged his father's bones on a rope bed.
 8. honors those who fear the Lord: this is Jehoshaphat, king of Judah, who, whenever he would see a disciple of a sage, would rise from his throne and embrace and kiss him.
 9. He swears to his own hurt and changes not: this is Rabbi Yochanan.
 10. He does not lend on interest: not even interest from a gentile.
 11. He does not take a bribe against the innocent: such as Rav Ishmael bar Rav Yosi.
- He who does these things shall never be moved.

When Rabban Gamaliel reached this verse of Scripture, he would weep, saying, If someone did all of these, then he will never be moved, but not merely on account of one of them.

They said to him, Is it written, Who does all of these things? What is written is only who does these things, meaning, even one of them. For if you do not say this, then there is another verse of Scripture of which we have to take account: Do not defile yourselves in all of these things (Lev. 18:24). Does this mean that one is unclean only if he touches all of these things, but not if he touches only one of them? Doesn't it mean even one of them? Here too it means that even one of these things is sufficient.

Isaiah came and reduced them to 6: (i) He who walks righteously and (ii) speaks uprightly, (iii) he who despises the gain of oppressions, (iv) shakes his hand from holding bribes, (v) stops his ear from hearing of blood (vi) and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil, he shall dwell on high (33:25-26).

1. He who walks righteously: this is our father, Abraham: For I have known him so that he may command his children and his household after him (Gen 18:19).
2. speaks uprightly: this is one who does not belittle his fellow in public.
3. he who despises the gain of oppressions: for example, R. Ishmael b. Elisha.
4. shakes his hand from holding bribes: for example, R. Ishmael b. R. Yosi.
5. stops his ear from hearing of blood: who will not listen to demeaning talk about a disciple of rabbis and remain silent. For instance, R. Eleazar b. R. Simeon.
6. and shuts his eyes from looking upon evil: that is in line with what R. Hiya bar Abba said.. For said Rav Hiya bar Abba, This is someone who does not stare at women as they are standing and washing clothes. Concerning such a man it is written, he shall dwell on high.

Micah came and reduced them to 3: It has been told you, man, what is good, and what the Lord demands from you, (i) only to do justly and (ii) to love mercy, and (iii) to walk humbly before God (6:8).

1. only to do justly: this refers to justice.

2. to love mercy: this refers to doing acts of loving kindness.

3. to walk humbly before God: this refers to accompanying a corpse to the grave and welcoming the bread.

Isaiah again came and reduced them to 2: Thus says the Lord, (i) Keep justice and (ii) do righteousness (Isa 56:1).

Amos came and reduced them to a single 1, as it is said, For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel. Seek Me and live. Rav Nahman bar Isaac objected, Maybe the sense is, seek me through the whole of the Torah?

Rather, Habakkuk came and based them on 1, as it is said, But the righteous shall live by his faith (Habakkuk 2: 4). Makkot 23b