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Introduction

This is a resource for anyone who wants to learn Jewish text and relate it to the world today. It goes book by book through the first order of Mishna (*Seder Zeraim*, or the Order of Seeds) and samples texts that may be especially relevant in a moment of communal crisis.

The subject of *Seder Zeraim*, ostensibly, is agriculture and food production. Like all rabbinic literature, however, it meanders into many adjacent fields, frequently touching topics of gratitude and charity. At precisely a moment in history when those things feel fraught, hard, and more important than ever, I believe this seder is uniquely relevant to us today.

How to use this book

Each mishna is presented below in Hebrew and English, followed by a brief explanation, and concluding with reflections or questions for further pondering. I suggest reading the text first, in Hebrew or in English, and using the reflection and question section as a jumping off point for your thoughts or discussions with a friend. The direct English translations lack important context that is needed to understand the mishna. The explanations below fill in those gaps and will make the mishna comprehensible.

These texts can be learned alone or in discussion with others, sequentially or at random, jumping to whichever page seems interesting. If you disagree with something I've written, if you and your partner are convinced the other person is misinterpreting something, if you find yourself connecting the text back to a random article you read on the subway two years ago, if you aren't interested in the question I asked but thought of a much more interesting question instead, if you kind of forget the text the next day but remember something powerful you learned about your partner, you're probably doing it right. There are many right ways to learn a text. The only wrong way is any way that makes you want to stop and not do it again.

Masechet Berachot

ברכות א:א Berachot 1:1

כָּל מָה שֶׁאָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים עַד חֲצוֹת, מִצְוַתוֹן עַד שֶׁיַּעֲלֶה עֲמוּד הַשָּׁחַר... לָמָּה אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים עַד חֲצוֹת, כְּדִי לְהַרְחִיק אֶת הָאָדָם מִן הָעֲבֵרָה:

Wherever the Sages say “until midnight,” the mitzvah can really be performed until dawn. Why, then, did they say until midnight? To keep people far from sin.

The Seder about agriculture and food starts off, appropriately, with a tractate about blessings and prayer. The Sages teach that one may recite the evening Shema until midnight. Rabban Gamaliel, quoted here, lets us know that when the Sages say “midnight,” the actual law is that you have all the way until dawn. They intentionally publicize the stricter time, however, to make sure that no one misses the real deadline.

Reflections and questions

As we are all embarrassingly aware, stores across the country are experiencing runs on toilet paper. To stop the irrational behavior tomorrow, the government might announce, “Citizens, we are opening a new toilet paper factory in every city to ramp up production. We expect a major surplus by the end of the week.” This is not true, but it would stop the destructive behavior that is, ironically, causing a toilet paper shortage.

Is it ever appropriate to lie to the public to keep them from harm?



Illustration by Stephanie Hays, the Seattle Times

ברכות א:ג Berachot 1:3

בית שמאי אומרים, בערב כל אדם נטו ויקראו, ובבקר יעמדו, שנאמר "ובשכבך ובקומך."
The students of Shammai say: In the evening everyone should lie down to recite the Shema, and in the morning stand up to recite it, as the verse says, "when you lie down and when you rise up."

ובית הלל אומרים, כל אדם קורא כדרךכו, "ובלקחך בדרךך..."
The students of Hillel say: Everyone should recite it in their own way, as the verse says, "And when you walk on your way."

אמר רבי טרפון, אני הייתי בא בדרך, והטתי לקרות, כדברי בית שמאי, וספנתי בעצמי מפני הלסטים.
Rabbi Tarfon said: I was once walking on a journey and I reclined to recite the Shema like the students of Shammai advised, and I was nearly killed by robbers.

אמרו לו, כפי היית לחוב בעצמך, שעברת על דברי בית הלל:
The Sages replied: You deserved to pay with your life for going against the words of Hillel's students.

Rabbi Tarfon explains that he decided to literally lie down on the road to recite the evening Shema, against the law of Beit Hillel who taught that one need not be so literal. During Rabbi Tarfon's failure to follow normative practice during a dangerous journey (as most were in those days), he was nearly killed by a band of highway robbers.

Reflections and questions

Rabbi Tarfon deviated from the prescribed practice and was nearly killed for it. His peers' response was savage, "You deserved it." There is an urge to say this to people who are breaking social distancing recommendations or their quarantine, but the sad reality is we live in a world where too many people can't afford to follow the advice that will lessen the pain of all. There are also the punishing psychological effects of social distancing that affect us all differently.

What "best practice" or recommendation are you having a hard time following?

ברכות א:ה Berachot 1:5

מְזַכְרִין יְצִיאַת מִצְרַיִם בַּלַּיְלוֹת. Recall the exodus from Egypt at night.

This mishna teaches that one should remember each night the miracle of the liberation from slavery in Egypt.



Painting by Richard McBee

Reflections and questions

Every night I tell myself I won't check the headlines before bed, and every night I fall asleep refreshing the front page.

What are your thoughts or rituals as you fall asleep in these times?

ברכות ב:ה Berachot 2:5

חֲתָן פְּטוּר מִקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע בְּלַיְלָה הָרִאשׁוֹן A newlywed is exempt from saying the *Shema* on the wedding night.

I choose to interpret this mishna as saying that the mitzvah of marriage is so special and the joy of marriage so great that it takes priority over the lesser requirement to recite the evening Shema.

Reflections and questions

So many simchas are deflating around us and are lost forever. I see people posting advice for how to have a wedding with 10 people in places where gatherings over that amount are prohibited. People having babies without any visitors. Defending a dissertation online and then simply closing the laptop.

What simcha has passed you by in these times?

ברכות ב:ו Berachot 2:6

רַחֵץ לַיְלָה הָרִאשׁוֹן שְׁמֵתָה אֶשְׁתּוֹ. אָמְרוּ לוֹ
תְּלִמִּידָיו, לֹא לַמְדַתְנוּ, רַבֵּנוּ, שְׂאֵבֶל אָסוּר לְרַחֵץ.
אָמַר לָהֶם, אֵינִי כְשֶׁאֵר כָּל אָדָם, אֶסְטָנִיס אֲנִי:

Rabban Gamaliel bathed on the first night after the death of his wife. His students asked, “Our teacher, didn’t you tell us that mourners are not supposed to bathe?” He replied, “I am not like the average person; I am very delicate.”

Rabban Gamaliel was asked by his students why he doesn’t follow the normative halakha of refraining from bathing when in the bitterest stage of grief, freshly after the death. In a “do as I say, not as I do” moment, he responds that he is frail and requires an exception to the law.

Reflections and questions

With a little luck, this virus spares the young and otherwise healthy. We aren’t all young, healthy, or lucky.

Are you אֶסְטָנִיס, delicate, during this time? What do you wish people knew? What do you wish people were doing differently?

ברכות ד:ה Berachot 4:5

הָיָה רוֹכֵב עַל הַחֲמֹר, גֵּרַד. וְאִם אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לִירֹד,
יִחָזֵיר אֶת פָּנָיו, וְאִם אֵינוֹ יָכוֹל לְהִחָזֵיר אֶת פָּנָיו,
יִכּוֹן אֶת לְבוֹ פְּנֵיגַד בֵּית קֹדֶשׁ הַקְּדוּשִׁים.

If you are riding on a donkey, get down to pray.
If you are unable to get down, turn your face
toward Jerusalem. If you cannot turn your face,
direct your heart toward the Holy of Holies.

This mishna gives the contingency plan for praying when you can't be in the most ideal stance of standing and facing Jerusalem.

Reflections and questions

So many virtual minyanim. So many lonely daveners. So many people who cannot, or should not, leave the house to join their community.

Where could you not go today? Where is your heart facing?

ברכות ה:ה Berachot 5:5

שְׁלוּחוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם כְּמוֹתוֹ One's messenger is like oneself.

This is a recurring phrase in Jewish legal literature to mean that your designated agent has the same legal power, in most situations, as you yourself do.

Reflections and questions

While this was meant legally, we can think of it emotionally as well. Unfortunately, in the era of not just working remotely but also rejoicing and grieving remotely, it is a hypothesis that we have been testing a lot lately.

Do you agree with this mishna, that you have the same power without being physically present?

How have you been present for someone, without being there in person?

ברכות ו:ג Berachot 6:3

על החמץ ועל הנובלות ועל הגובאי אומר
שהכל... רבי יהודה אומר, כל שהוא מין קלקלה
אין מברכין עליו: One recites a blessing over vinegar, unripe fruit,
and locusts. Rabbi Yehuda says, "One does not
bless over things which come from a curse."

Vinegar, unripe fruit, and locusts are all edible (and kosher) but all come with loss attached to them. Vinegar because it is soured wine, unripe fruit because it would have been better for them to have ripened before falling from the tree, and locusts because, though they are edible and a source of protein, their presence means they have destroyed the fields and left you with nothing else to eat. If you find yourself eating these things, it means you are experiencing some sort of loss. Should you bless over these things? Halacha says yes, Rabbi Yehuda says no.

Reflections and questions

Social distancing brings hardship, but also some modest blessings for those of us who are inclined toward introversion, without young children at home, without tendency for anxiety, and who are still making a living. Personally, I've found a trove of undisturbed time for my own learning projects. I find myself wondering, however:

Do we give thanks for these small blessings, or do we withhold gratitude, knowing that it comes with a more serious loss?

ברכות ט:ד Berachot 9:4

הַנִּכְנֵס לְכַרְדָּן מֵתַפִּיל שְׁתֵּים, אַחַת בְּכַנִּיסָתוֹ וְאַחַת בִּיצִיאָתוֹ. One who enters a city should recite two prayers on the way in, and two on the way out.

Entering a large city was perceived as (and perhaps was) dangerous then.

Reflections and questions

It feels dangerous now to enter public spaces. We aren't sure who is sick, whether we'll be safe, whether we're keeping others safe, and, if crossing a border, whether we'll definitely be allowed to go home again.

What are you hopeful for when you go into public? What are you thankful for when you leave?

ברכות ט:ה Berachot 9:5

חַיֵּב אָדָם לְבָרֵךְ עַל הָרָעָה כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהוּא מְבָרֵךְ עַל הַטּוֹבָה . A person is obligated to bless over the bad just as one blesses over the good.

This is the final mishna of masechet Berachot, maybe a surprising way to end a tractate all about blessings.

Reflections and questions

What do you think the editor of this text was trying to say by placing this mishna last?

Masechet Peah

פאה א:א Peah 1:1

אלו דברים שאין להם שיעור. הפאה, והבכורים, והראיון, וגמילות חסדים, ותלמוד תורה. These things have no prescribed measure: peah, first fruits, showing up, acts of kindness, and the study of Torah.

Field owners are required to leave a corner (“peah”) of their field unharvested for the poor to come and collect. The Torah does not prescribe a fixed minimum or maximum for peah (though the Rabbis later specified at least 1/60th of your field.) “Showing up” is a figurative translation (the Hebrew is “being seen” or “appearing”) and refers to appearing before the Temple during the pilgrimage holidays of Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot. First fruits has its own tractate (“Bikkurim”) at the end of Seder Zeraim. All of these things have no minimum or maximum measure according to Torah law, nor is there any lower or upper limit for doing kindness or for learning Torah. Any amount, whether it’s your first mitzvah of the day or the 100th, is considered a praiseworthy act.

Reflections and questions

I see people taking on learning projects of all sorts with their downtime, from pipe cleaner art to dusting off a musical instrument to learning a new language. I also see a proliferation of memes reminding people that no one *has* to be uber productive during these times. Just staying inside and doing nothing is an act of resistance against this disease. Surviving, managing your anxiety, and staying healthy are enough.

What’s your project, big or small, these days?

פאה א:ב Peah 1:2

אין פוחתין לפאה מששים, ואף על פי שאמרו
אין לפאה שעור. הכל לפי גדל השדה, ולפי רב
העניים, ולפי רב הענוה:

Even though it was taught “peah has no prescribed measure,” do not give less than a 60th. You should give according to the size of your field, the needs of the poor, and the degree of your humility.

People with more to spare should give more than the minimum, as should people living amongst a great number of needy people, or people who desire to live humbly.

Reflections and questions

Just one week into serious shutdown, we hit 3 million filings for unemployment, a truly unprecedented economic crisis in American history and one which is only expected to worsen for the time being. What duty do those with “a large field” have at a time like this? What duty do those with “a small field” have?

פאה ב:א-ד Peah 2:1-4

אמת המים שאינה יכולה להקצר באחת, רבי יהודה אומר, מפסקת. ... ואינו מפסיק לאילן אלא גדר ... וחרוביו, כל הרואין זה את זה.

A stream of water that prevents you from standing on one side and reaping your grain on the other side is considered a divider. For a field of trees, only a fence is considered a divider. For carob trees, nothing is a divider, as long as the trees can still see each other.

When it comes to a field of grain, a mere stream of water that is wide enough to prevent you from reaching out and reaping on the other side is considered as dividing the field into two such that you must give peah for each side of the stream. Fields of trees, however, are not considered divided so easily -- only a fence will split a tree field in two. For carob trees more specifically, however, even a fence does not divide. As long as the carob trees can "see" each other, they are considered as belonging to the same field (and only one peah needs to be given.)



"carob, olive and kerkis" by simonsterg

Reflections and questions

In a time of physical distance, are people more like grains, trees, or carobs? When are we truly separated -- when we can no longer easily touch each other, when a physical divider comes between us, or when we have lost sight of one another?

פאה ג:ז Peah 3:7

הכּוֹתֵב נִכְסָיו שְׁכִיב מְרַע, שֵׁיר קַרְקַע כָּל שְׁהוּא, One who, while deathly ill, writes all his
מִתְנַתּוֹ מִתְנָה. לֹא שֵׁיר קַרְקַע כָּל שְׁהוּא, אֵין possessions off to someone else and leaves
מִתְנַתּוֹ מִתְנָה. nothing for himself, his gift is not a gift.

If, under the anxiety of death, you write off all of your earthly possessions to a friend, but subsequently survive, the document is null and void. The medieval commentator Bartenura said that this is because people generally do not wish to leave themselves “laid bare” (penniless) -- we can assume the document was only intended to be valid if you actually died.

Reflections and questions

When people think they are dying, they do things they regret. When people think the world is ending, they behave in ways they would not normally. We allow people to rescind choices they made under duress, and we forgive people decisions they made in moments of fear.

Besides fist fights over toilet paper, what should we nullify when we come out at the other end and realize the world wasn't ending? What will we need to forgive each other for when this is all over?

What systems crashed for good? What truths were laid bare that we need to remember going forward?

פאה ד:ג Peah 4:3

נָטַל מִקְצֵת פֶּאֶה וְזָרְקָה עַל הַשָּׂאָר, אֵין לוֹ בָּהּ כְּלוּם. If someone came and collected their share of peah and then threw it on the remainder of the peah in an attempt to acquire all of it, they forfeit it all.

If a poor person tries to take more of their share by depriving others, they lose even what rightfully would have been theirs. Normally, you can legally acquire an object by throwing something that belongs to you over it. The scene of a poor person throwing their cloak over the produce implies that they are trying to keep others from collecting. In this instance, the rule is that they are not allowed to collect any peah.

Reflections and questions

Crises bring out opportunists, but sometimes an earlier, more subtle crisis created the opportunist to begin with. What should happen to the people in economic straits who are trying to make a buck by hoarding and then reselling sanitizer, masks, and toilet paper?

פאה ה:ד Peah 5:4

בַּעַל הַבַּיִת שֶׁהָיָה עוֹבֵר מִמָּקוֹם לְמָקוֹם, וְצָרִיךְ לְטוֹל לְקַט שְׂכָחָה וּפָאָה וּמַעֲשֵׂר עָנִי, יִטּוֹל, וְקָשְׁיָחֵזֵר לְבֵיתוֹ יְשֻׁלָּם, דְּבָרֵי רַבִּי אֶלְיעָזָר.

Rabbi Eliezer says, “A homeowner who was traveling from place to place, and found themselves needing to take charity designated for the poor, should take it. When they return home, they should pay it back.”

וְחֻכְמֵי אֲמָרִים, עָנִי הָיָה בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה:

The Sages, however, say, “That home owner was a poor person at the moment, and therefore was entitled to the charity.”

Rabbi Eliezer says that a person who is normally of means but experiencing temporary hardship should take the charity that they need, but then pay it back, because they aren't really entitled to the help. The Sages disagree. If you are poor in the moment, then you are poor full stop and deserve the same resources as any other poor person.

Reflections and questions

With each city that shutter its shops, people who previously felt secure are finding themselves facing uncertainty.

What is our responsibility to people who are needy now, but were not yesterday and may not be tomorrow?

What is their responsibility to us once they recover?

Whose approach do you think is better, Rabbi Eliezer or the Sages?

פאה ח:א Peah 8:1

מאימתי כל אדם מתרין בקקט. משילכו הנמושות.

When does *leket* (grain left behind by accident during reaping which the Torah tells us to leave for the poor) become permitted for anyone to take, whether poor or not? Once the elderly poor have collected and departed.

Leket is considered as belonging rightfully to any poor person who comes and takes it. After a certain period of time, however, the leket goes up for grabs for anyone, including the original home owner (for example, if there aren't many poor people in the area.)

Reflections and questions

There's a recognition in this mishna that the elderly may need a little extra time to take what they need before the masses come. This feels relevant in an era when the stores are packed and some common daily goods are hard to come by. Some stores are holding an early hour opening especially for the elderly who need a non-crowded hour to shop.

What do older community members need most from us now?



Visits with loved ones through the window of a nursing home.

Photo from Signature Health's Fb page.

פאה ח:ט Peah 8:9

כל מי שאינו צריך לטל ונוטל, אינו נפטר מן העולם עד שיצטרך לבריות
Anyone who does not need to take charity but takes anyway will not depart from this world without one day really needing to take charity.

This tractate, full of all the ways in which the community is required to support the poor, ends on a warning. If anyone abuses the system by feigning poverty, they will find themselves experiencing poverty first hand sooner or later. (This is a mishnaic version of our grandparents' threat, "I'll give you something to cry about!") It's worth noting that this threat leaves the punishment up to some higher power -- the mishna describes no clear way of verifying whether someone is poor, and no formal punishment at the hands of the courts. Indeed the system of peah outlined in this tractate relies heavily on the community trusting people are poor if they say they are.

Reflections and questions

What's the bigger threat to our community now -- people taking help who should not, or people not getting help who need it?



*A doctor in San Francisco speaking with people experiencing homelessness.
Photographer: Josh Edelson*

Masechet Demai

דמאי ג:ב Demai 2:2

הַמְקַבֵּל עָלָיו לְהִיּוֹת נְאֻמוֹ, מְעַשֵּׂר אֶת שְׁהוּא
אוֹכֵל, וְאֶת שְׁהוּא מוֹכֵר, וְאֶת שְׁהוּא לוֹקֵחַ, וְאֵינוֹ
מִתְאַרְחֵם אֶצֶל עַם הָאֶרֶץ.

One who accepts upon themselves being trustworthy with regard to tithes must tithe whatever they eat, whatever they sell, and whatever they buy, and they may not be hosted by the common folk for a meal.

In the land of Israel, before any produce could be eaten, some had to be donated to the priests, levites, and the poor. The regular, uneducated folks, while they certainly removed some tithes, did not always scrupulously follow the tithing laws. Any produce bought from an uneducated Jew was therefore called demai, or doubtfully tithed produce. A subcommunity formed among the highly educated who were trustworthy (ne'eman) to tithe fully. The bonds of trust tied them together, but the loss was the ability to eat at any Jew's home (analogous to the modern conflicts around kashrut in differing communities.)

Reflections and questions

This mishna reminds me of “isolation communities” -- a small circle of families and friends who decide to only have contact with one another. They can move freely amongst one another's homes, but any outside contact at all breaks the bubble. The system, relying on self-discipline and honesty, widens their possible human contact while also maintaining a sharp division between them and the outside world. As I enter my third week of no human contact besides my spouse, part of me wishes I had formed an isolation community with others. But part of me also knows that drawing such a bold line is hard for everyone, and that the system crumbles with there is just one breach in trust. I trust my wife and I to be נְאֻמִים, trustworthy, to each other, but I'm not ready to trust others so fully.

Would you trust others in an “isolation community” to maintain a perfect community boundary?
Would you trust yourself?



העמוד הזה נוצר על ידי תוכנת המחשבה

11.11.19

דמאי ג:ה Demai 3:5

הנותן לפנדקית, מעשר את שהוא נותן לה, ואת שהוא נוטל ממנה, מפני שהשודה לחלף. אמר רבי יוסי, אין אנו אחראין לרמאיו, אינו מעשר אלא מה שהוא נוטל ממנה בלבד:

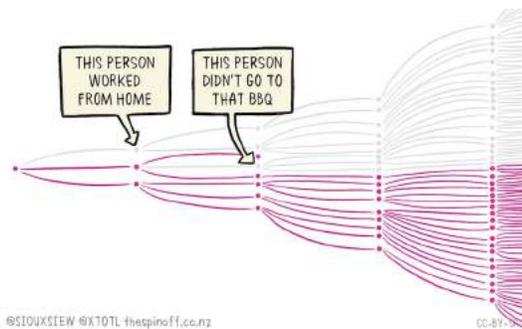
One who deposits food with an innkeeper must tithe both what he gives to her and what she gives him, because she might exchange your produce with her own. Rabbi Yose says, “We are not responsible for cheaters. He need only tithe only that which he takes from her.”

The mishna teaches us that we must tithe any food we receive from an innkeeper (who is an am ha'aretz and does not scrupulously tithe). Not only that, but if we give her food to store for us (like using a communal fridge at a B&B), we must tithe it before we give it to her. The reason is that an innkeeper might deceitfully take some for herself. Rabbi Yose disagrees with this, saying that we do not need to take responsibility for others' deception. If she steals your produce, then she will eat it untithed. We bear no moral responsibility for her actions.

Reflections and questions

During a pandemic, we learn very quickly that every individual's missteps have ripple effects that extend far beyond themselves. One person cheated on her quarantine in South Korea, for example, and a line of 61 deaths can be traced directly back to her. The good news, however, is that every individual's correct actions also have far reaching ripple effects for good. If one person stays at home and watches Netflix, the memes astutely remind us, they heroically save an uncountable number of lives. In such times, when rule breaking is not a mere matter of nibbling untithed produce but literal life and death, democracies are forced to weigh these logarithmic effects of personal choices against the individual freedom we hold so dear.

What responsibility do we have to ensure others do not break rules?



An infographic by Toby Morris (The Spinoff) showing the power of individual choice to combat spread of disease.

דמאי ד:ד Demai 4:4

מי שקרא שם לתרומת מעשר של דמאי ולמעשר
עני של נדאי, לא יטלם בשבת. ואם היה כהן או
עני למודים לאכל אצלו, גבאו ויאכלו, ובלבד
שיודיעם:

One who had designated the levite's tithe of *demai*, or the poor man's tithe of produce that had certainly not been tithed, he should not physically separate them out on Shabbat. But if the priest or the poor man regularly ate with him, they may come and eat provided that he informs them.

The host is feeding his Shabbat guests tithes that rightfully belong to them. What appears to be a generous act of hosting is tainted by cheapness -- he's essentially offloading the tithes that he is already required to give. The mishna states that this is legal as long as the host informs the guests that they are eating food that is actually theirs.

Reflections and questions

Being prescribed or employed to do some act of kindness without telling the recipient that it is your official duty is גניבת דעת, *gneivat da'at* ("stealing the mind.") It is deception by omission. The person might, after all, feel indebted to you, repay your kindness, or honor you as generous when you do not deserve it.

This reminds me of some community organizers who are not upfront about their role when they befriend people with skills they are looking to organize. Another example might be appointed greeters in informal minyanim. The recipient just thinks the person is seeking friendship with them and may not realize that it was part of their duties. In many communities, people are now scheduling turns to check in on elderly or vulnerable neighbors (from a safe distance).

Are acts of interpersonal kindness more meaningful when the recipient thinks they are organically and spontaneously given? Why or why not?

What is lost when people check in on each other's wellbeing according to an organized system of obligations? What is gained?

Masechet Kilayim

כלאים ג:ה Kilayim 3:5

נוטע אדם קשות ודלעת לתוך גמא אחת, ובלבד שתהא זו נוטה לצד זה, וזו נוטה לצד זה, ונוטה שער של זו לכאן, ושער של זו לכאן. שכל מה שאסרו חכמים, לא גזרו אלא מפני מראית העין.

One may plant a cucumber and a gourd in the same hole, as long as they lean toward opposite sides. And one should tilt the leaves of the plants in opposite directions, since anything that the Sages prohibit, they only prohibit because of *marit ayin* (the appearance to the eye).

The Torah forbids farmers from mixing different kinds of seeds together (kilayim refers to any forbidden mixture of seeds, animals, or clothing.) The Rabbis added extra precautions to guard against things that had the appearance of impropriety, even if the action wasn't, strictly speaking, against the rules. Here, the two plants share an indentation in the ground, but the farmer should be careful that to an outsider, these species don't look mixed together. Tilting the leaves away from each other ensure that passersby won't be scandalized by the sight of kilayim.

Reflections and questions

We're living in times where we are deeply affected, on a literal physical level, by others' actions. If someone is standing too close in a supermarket line, or if they cough into their hand and then touch the doorknob, they are potentially exposing others to a dangerous illness. For better and for worse, we are more attuned to what others are doing these days. Sometimes this leads to embarrassing misunderstandings (scolding someone with a cart overflowing with toilet paper only to realize it belongs to the employee restocking the shelves), misplaced judgments (side-eying the person buying 10 bottles of Lysol, not realizing they are a school nurse distributing them to classrooms), and dangerous interference (telling someone the mask her doctor prescribed should only be used by medical professionals and won't help her anyway.)

Have you misunderstood someone lately based on external appearances?

Has someone misunderstood you?

Should the external appearance of a situation matter?

כלאים ה:א Kilayim 5:1

כָּרֵם שְׁחָרַב, אִם יֵשׁ בוֹ לְלֶקֶט עֶשְׂרֵי גִפְנִים לְבֵית סֵאָה, וְנִטְוְעוֹת כְּהִלְכָתוֹ, הֲרִי זֶה נִקְרָא כָּרֵם וְל.

When is an abandoned vineyard still considered a vineyard? If one can harvest ten vines within a *beit seah* of land, and they had been planted in an organized manner, this is a “poor vineyard.”

כָּרֵם שֶׁהוּא נְטוּעַ עַרְבּוּבָא, אִם יֵשׁ בוֹ לְכוּן שְׁתַּיִם נֶגֶד שְׁלֹשׁ, הֲרִי זֶה כָּרֵם; וְאִם לֹא, אֵינוֹ כָּרֵם.

When is a vineyard in disarray still considered a vineyard? If there are at least 2 vines opposite 3, then it is a vineyard. Without this, it is not a vineyard.

רַבִּי מֵאִיר אוֹמֵר: הוֹאִיל וְהוּא נִרְאָה כְּתַבְנִית הַכָּרְמִים, הֲרִי זֶה כָּרֵם.

Rabbi Meir says, “Because it has the general appearance of a vineyard, it is a vineyard.”

This mishna is concerned with the distinction between a vineyard, which is treated strictly with regard to kilayim, versus a few lone vines, for which there is more leniency. The mishna teaches that to be considered a vineyard proper, the field needs a certain density of vines within a confined space, as well as a minimal organization to the vines. Rabbi Meir disagrees, and holds that anything that has the appearance of a vineyard to a casual passerby is considered a vineyard.

Reflections and questions

Pick something from your daily life: school, work, minyan, leisure time, family time. When is it a abandoned and a little thin? When is it mixed up, but still recognizable? When is it beyond recognition?

Does its תְּבִנִית, how an outsider would see it, matter?



Just After, painting by Matthew Adelberg.

כלאים ו:ה Kilayim 6:5

איזהו אילן סרק? כל שאינו עושה פרות. What defines a barren tree? Any that do not produce edible fruit.

Laws of kilayim treat the barren tree differently than the fruit-bearing tree. This mishna teaches that a barren tree is defined as one which produces no edible fruit. Note that in modern Hebrew, סרק also means futility. This is a (perhaps unintentionally) harsh term to describe a tree which happens to not produce fruit edible by humans.

Reflections and questions

At the time of this writing, unemployment is surging around us. Even those lucky enough to be able to work remotely are finding it hard to live up to productivity norms without regular human contact. People are having to redefine themselves, for better or for worse, outside the very narrow context of employment and productivity.

What are you when you are not employed?

What are you contributing right now, even if not as “productive” in the traditional sense?

Kilayim 8:6 כלאים ח:ו

כָּלֵב, מִיֵּן חֲזֵה.	A dog is a wild animal.
רַבִּי מֵאִיר אֹמֵר: מִיֵּן בְּהֵמָה.	Rabbi Meir says, "It is domesticated."
חֲזִיר, מִיֵּן בְּהֵמָה.	A pig is domesticated.
עֲרוּד, מִיֵּן חֲזֵה.	The African ass is wild.
הַפִּיל וְהַמֶּנְקֵה, מִיֵּן חֲזֵה.	The elephant and the monkey are wild.
וְאָדָם מְתַר עִם כָּלֵם, לְמִשְׁךְ וְלַחְרֵשׁ וְלַהֲנִיג.	And man is permitted with all of them, to pull, to plow, or to drive.

For some reason, this mishna occupies itself with describing whether animals are domesticated or wild. (While kilayim does apply to animals, yoking any two species together for work is forbidden. It does not matter whether they are domesticated or wild.) It probably reflects the list of animals for whom it was not very obvious to all whether it is wild or domesticated. Curiously, the only disagreement comes with the dog. The author of the mishna refrains from categorizing homo sapiens either way, and also teaches that we are not considered kilayim when we combine with any animal to do work.

Reflections and questions

If there is anyone enjoying quarantine, it probably has four legs.

Have you had a partnership with an animal during this time? What has the animal contributed? What have you contributed?

Is your animal more of a חֲזֵה (wild) or a בְּהֵמָה (domesticated)? What are people?



This is me and my cat Hickory.

Masechet Shevi'it

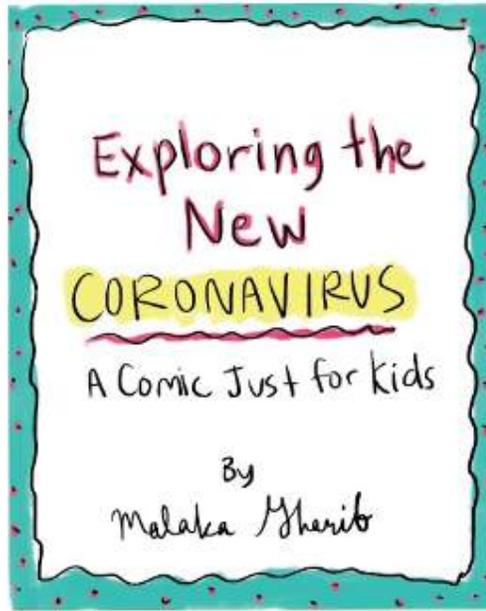
שביעית א:ח Shevi'it 1:8

עד אימתי נקראו נטיעות? רבי אלעזר בן עזריה
אומר, עד שִׁיחֵלוּ. רבי יהושע אומר, בת שבע
שָׁנִים. רבי עקיבא אומר, נטיעה כשָׁמָה.

How long are plants considered saplings? Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah says, “Until they are permitted for common use.” Rabbi Yehoshua says, “When they are 7 years old.” Rabbi Akiva says, “As long as people still call it a sapling.”

This tractate's topic is the Shemita year. Every 7th year we are required to cease from all agricultural work and let the land lie fallow: all produce in the fields becomes ownerless, anyone can eat from anyone else's field, and all debts are nullified. Field work must stop well before the Shemita year begins (which makes sense because if you are caring for your field up until New Year's Eve, you're probably hoping to do some agriculture in the new year itself.) In most cases, one should cease work on their tree fields by Shavuot (early summer), about 3-4 months before the New Year. Saplings, however, have more lenient rules, as they are delicate and require extra care. One may work a field with saplings right up until the eve of Rosh HaShanana.

This mishna asks how long a tree is considered a sapling. Rabbi Elazar's answer, “until they are permitted for common use” requires some explanation. For the first 3 years, a sapling is considered off-limits (“orlah,” a masechet of its own further below) and cannot be used for anything. The 4th year the fruits are considered holy, and must be brought to Jerusalem and eaten in a state of purity. If one is not able to carry the 4th year fruits to Jerusalem (the journey is too long for the fruits to keep well, for example, or there is too much fruit to carry), you redeem the fruit with money instead, bring the money to Jerusalem, and buy a meal there. Rabbi Elazar, therefore, is saying the plant stops being a sapling in the 4th year (if you redeem its fruit) or the 5th year (when the fruit becomes permitted for any use). Rabbi Yehoshua gives a simple answer, 7 years, and Rabbi Akiva says that the plant is a sapling as long as the average person would call it a sapling.



It's a word you might have heard at school or online or on T.V.



This coronavirus is a newly discovered virus. It causes a disease called COVID-19.

A comic book for kids about coronavirus by Malaka Gharib, NPR.

Reflections and questions

We are told to take heart in the fact that our current pandemic, unlike many strains of flu, seems to be mild in the young. Some have gone so far as to propose that youth volunteers decontaminate the subways since they seem immune to the serious effects of the disease. (This reflects an extremely poor understanding of public health as well as statistics, and thankfully the proposal was rejected.)

Still, I see parents and teachers everywhere trying their best to protect children from the virus' other effects: destabilization of normal life, disruption of livelihood, danger toward grandparents and other beloved elders. Many parents are restricting as best they can their child's access to news and media, protective of their child's mental health.

In what ways are children are more vulnerable in these times than adults?

What age child does not need to be shielded from news and information about world events?

What responsibility do adults have toward managing a child's emotional reactions to world crises?

שביעית ה:ו Shevi'it 5:6

אלו כלים שאין האמן רשאי למכרם בשביעית:
מחרשה וכל כליה, העל, והמזרה, והדקר.

These are the tools that may not be sold in the seventh year: A plow and its accessories, a yoke, a winnowing tool, or a prong.

אבל מוכר הוא מגל יד ומגל קציר, ועגלה וכל
כליה.

But he may sell a hand sickle, or a scythe, or a wagon and its accessories.

זה הכלל: כל שמלאכתו מיחדת לעברה, אסור;
לאסור ולהתיר, מתיר.

This is the general principle: any tools used only for work that is forbidden in the 7th year may not be sold; if it is used both for permitted types of work as well as forbidden types, then it may be sold.

People cannot sell an item that can only be used illegally, but they can sell something of dubious legality if there is plausible deniability of the buyer's intention. In the first part of the mishna, we learn that selling agricultural tools are forbidden. These are tools that would work the land or perform mass processing of food, which was not allowed during a shemita year. While agriculture was forbidden during Shemita, people were allowed to collect food for themselves from the fields, and the second part of the mishna lists tools that are used for harvesting by hand modest amounts of food.

Reflections and questions

What role do companies have in preventing people from going against city ordinances or the advice of public health officials?

Is the burden on the buyer not to do something illegal with the purchase, or is the burden on the person selling?

In cities that forbid gatherings of more than two unrelated people, should public parks and hiking trails close?

שביעית ז:ג Shevi'it 7:3

אין עושין סחורה בפרות שביעית Don't make a profit off 7th year fruits.

When the whole community has stopped working and all produce becomes hefker (ownerless and free to all), no one should be selling food for a profit. The rules of shemitah also have a stop valve against hoarding: once the fields run dry of any particular item, you have to empty your storage of that item and make it hefker. Shemita is a radical act of trusting the environment to provide as well as trusting your community to overcome their capitalist urges and abide by fair play rules.



Click image to open expanded view



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Medical mask for \$387, a common sight on Amazon in the early days of the outbreak.

Reflections and questions

Would it be wise if we decreed אין עושין סחורה בפרות מגפה, do not make a profit off the “fruits” of a pandemic? What if we decreed that if all the stores ran dry of beans, for example, everyone had to bring out their beans and leave them on the sidewalk for all to take for free?

שביעית יג Shevi'it 10:3

פרוזבול, אינו משמט. זה אֶחָד מִן הַדְּבָרִים
שֶׁהִתְקִין הֵלֵל הַזֶּה; כְּשֶׁרָאָה שֶׁנִּמְנְעוּ הָעָם
מִלְהַלוֹת זֶה אֶת זֶה, וְעוֹבְרִין עַל מֵה שֶׁכָּתוּב
בַּתּוֹרָה (דברים טו): "הִשָּׁמֵר לָךְ פֶּן יִהְיֶה דְבַר עִם
לְבָבְךָ בְּלִיעַל" וְגו', הִתְקִין הֵלֵל פְּרוֹזְבוּל.

A loan made under the regulations of *prozbul* is not cancelled in the 7th year. This was one of the reforms of Hillel the Elder. When he saw that people refrained from lending, and thus were transgressing what is written in the Torah, “Guard yourself against the evil urge to refrain from lending when *shemita* approaches,” Hillel enacted the *prozbul*.

One of the most famous rabbinic inventions, prozbul was a workaround that allowed creditors to collect debts, even if they remained outstanding during a shemita year. While this clearly violates the Torah law that all debts are remitted during the shemita year, it maintains the other important Torah law that we give freely to a neighbor in need of a loan. Hillel noticed that it had become psychologically or financially impossible for people to give loans close to a shemita year, knowing that they would likely lose the money.

Reflections and questions

Some say that stringent travel restrictions and quarantines backfire because they result in people lying or fleeing, further complicating containment. Instead of someone answering honestly at the airport, for example, that they've recently traveled in New York City, they might lie about their travel history because they are afraid of being barred entry. With more flexible rules, the same person would disclose their travels, receive instructions for self-monitoring, and check-in with a public health nurse or using an automated app to report symptoms. Ironically, lax enforcement of travel restrictions, some argue, may better uphold the spirit of the law (the spirit being, of course, effective containment of the disease.)

Do you agree that sometimes you must violate the letter of the law to keep its spirit? Can you think of another example?

What rules are in place now that are having unintended consequences? How might relaxing them protect their “spirit”?

שביעית י:ט Shevi'it 10:9

הַמְחִיזֵר חוֹב בְּשָׁבִיעִית, רוּחַ הַחֲכָמִים נוֹחָה
הַיָּמֵנוּ. One who repays a debt in the *shemita* year, the
spirit of the Sages is pleased with them.

The tractate ends with a moral exhortation (though not one with legal force) to go above and beyond the letter of the law to repay your debts that shemita canceled.

Reflections and questions

Why do you think this tractate ends this way?

What ways have you seen an organization or an individual go above what was legally or contractually required of them during this crisis?



Screenshot from a YouTube video on how to make a face mask by the Turban Project.

Masechet Terumot

תרומות א:ז Terumot 1:7

אין תורמין, לא במדה, ולא במשקל, ולא במנין. Don't give *terumah* by measure, weight, or exact count.

Terumah is the tithe that is given to kohanim, which at a minimum was 1/60, or about 2%. Because kohanim did not own their own land, they relied on terumah and other priestly gifts for sustenance. One is advised in this mishna against measuring donations to the kohanim too closely. This is sort of the Jewish version of the faux pas of making change in the collection plate. It looks cheap, and the precise calculation denigrates the charity.

Reflections and questions

We live in a world obsessed with quantification. Various tracking apps can tell you how many steps you took, how many times you moved in your sleep, how many grams of protein you ate, and how many hours you looked at your phone this week. For the past few weeks, our collective obsession has been with a wholly different set of numbers: how many infections, how many deaths, what likelihood of death for each age bracket, how many ventilators left, how many ICU beds available.

What's a number you've been tracking? What's something you want to lose count of?

When do numbers cheapen human lives? When do they honor human lives?

תרומות ג:ח Terumat 3:8

המתכונן לומר תרומה ואמר מעשר, מעשר ואמר תרומה, עולה ואמר שקמים, שקמים ואמר עולה... לא אמר כלום עד שיהיו פיו ובלבו שוין:

One who meant to designate something as terumah but accidentally said “Levite’s tithe”, one who meant to designate something as the Levite’s tithe but accidentally said “terumah” has said nothing at all, until heart and mouth are one.

Separating out tithes is largely a verbal process. Of course, physical separation is needed, as is handing over the gift to the recipient. But once you verbally designated something as “terumah,” it becomes terumah and is now strictly off limits for any other purpose. This mishna deals with the power of language alone. If you say something by accident, do you create that reality? Or does your intention matter? The mishna teaches us that, at least when it comes to tithing, language can only go as far as your intention, and vice versa.

Reflections and questions

Public officials wavered for a long time in whether to name the coronavirus a “pandemic.” Hairs were split, hands were wrung, and meanwhile the public scratched its collective head. As red dots splattered tracking maps in swaths of red, it sure as hell looked like an out of control, worldwide spread of disease.

Does your perception of the crisis change depending on words being used? Did the word “pandemic” matter to you?

What words have struck fear? What words have been reassuring?

תרומות ד:ג-ד Terumot 4:3-4

שְׁעוֹר תְּרוּמָה, עֵין זָכָה, אֶחָד מֵאַרְבָּעִים. בֵּית
שַׁמַּי אֹמְרִים, מְשַׁלְּשִׁים. וְהַבִּינוּנִית, מִחֲמֹשִׁים.
וְהַרְעָה, מְשַׁשִּׁים ...

The measure of *terumah* is as follows: to be generous, give 1/40. The students of Shammai say 1/30. To be mediocre, give 1/50. To be miserly, give 1/60.

הָאוֹמֵר לְשְׁלוּחוֹ, צֵא וְתָרַם, תּוֹרַם כְּדַעְתּוֹ שֶׁל בֹּעֵל
הַבַּיִת. אִם אֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ דַּעְתּוֹ שֶׁל בֹּעֵל הַבַּיִת, תּוֹרַם
כְּבִינוּנִית, אֶחָד מִחֲמֹשִׁים

If one says to a messenger, “Tithe my produce and give *terumah* on my behalf,” and the messenger doesn’t know what measure the owner of the produce meant, they should give according to the mediocre rate of 1/50.

Everyone is obligated to give terumah, but a sliding scale is provided based on how generous you want to be. This mishna assumes a default spirit of mediocrity when it comes to tithing.

Reflections and questions

Do you think at baseline people are stingy, mediocre, or generous?

Do you think a crisis temporarily changes that baseline? If so, in which direction and why?

תְּרוּמוֹת ח:יא Terumot 8:11

הָיָה עוֹבֵר מִמְּקוֹם לְמְקוֹם וְכַבָּרוֹת שֶׁל תְּרוּמָה בְּיָדוֹ, אָמַר לוֹ נְכָרִי, יְתֵן לִי אַחַת מֵהֶן וְאַטְמָאָהּ, וְאִם לֹא, הָרִי אֲנִי מְטַמֵּא אֶת כָּלָהּ, רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר, יְטַמֵּא אֶת כָּלָהּ, וְאֵל יְתֵן לוֹ אַחַת מֵהֶן וְיְטַמֵּא. רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אוֹמֵר, נִגִּיחַ לְפָנָיו אַחַת מֵהֶן עַל הַסֵּלַע:

A hypothetical scenario: You are walking from place to place with loaves of *terumah* in your hand, and a gentile stops you and says, “Give me one of those loaves that I might defile it. If you don’t, then I’ll defile all of them.” Rabbi Eliezer says, you should let the gentile defile all of them rather than hand over one. Rabbi Yehosha says, leave one in front of him on a rock.

Terumah was considered sacred and needed to be safeguarded against impurity. The villainous gentile in this story seems to be aware of that, and wishes to disrespect and humiliate you, a poor Jewish traveler minding your own business. You now face a moral dilemma: pick out one loaf and hand it over, knowing that you are actively participating in its defilement, or refuse, knowing that the gentile will just defile all the loaves by force? This mishna is speaking about bread, but the subtext is obvious (and comes out explicitly in the following mishna, not quoted here.) If the gentile were talking about a human life instead of a loaf, the dilemma obviously becomes much harder.

Reflections and questions

While hypothetical trolley problems and the mishnaic version of bread-defiling gentiles are the stuff of intellectual fancy, the moral dilemma is all too real. When should you sacrifice one to save the many, and how do you live with yourself afterwards?

Although we have not yet come to this dire of a measure, Italian physicians have already drafted a proposal for ventilator triage and some warn that the U.S. should start penning its own. In other words, we are considering creating guidelines to decide who gets life saving treatment, and who is left to die. It’s hard to imagine a first world nation even using the phrase “ventilator triage” outside a dystopian fiction.

What values or realities are driving Rabbi Eliezer? What values or realities are driving Rabbi Yehoshua?

What values or realities would drive your decision in a situation like this, ה”ר?

Masechet Ma'asrot

מעשרות ה:ז Ma'asrot 5:7

חורי הנמלים שָׁלוּנוּ בְּצֵד הָעֵרְמָה הַחִיבָת, הָרִי אֱלוֹ חִיבִים: The stockpile of grain inside an anthill must be tithed if the anthill was near an untithed stack overnight.

Here we see evidence of how careful and meticulous the system of tithing was. Even the small pieces of grain inside an anthill must be repossessed and added back into the tithing calculations. This tractate is about the tithe that goes to the Levites. The Levites were a tribe with special religious duties who were not allowed to own land. They required tithes, therefore, for sustenance. The kohanim (priests) were a special subsection of Levites who performed Temple rites and also lived off various tithes.

Reflections and questions

In this mishna, something that might have been easily forgotten -- a small amount of grain stolen and hoarded away in an anthill -- is reclaimed as significant.

What small thing do you have to offer in these times, that you might feel at first glance is insignificant?



Shanna Bonner Groom of Murfreesboro, TN organized a “bear hunt” from the windows for neighborhood kids. The event started with a facebook post to her friends, and has taken off around the world.

מעשרות ד:ב Ma'asrot 4:2

תִּינוּקוֹת שֶׁטָּמְנוּ תְּאֵנִים לְשַׁבָּת, וְשָׁחֲרוּ לְעִשְׂרוֹ, לֹא יֵאָכְלוּ לְמוֹצָאֵי שַׁבָּת עַד שֶׁיַּעֲשֶׂרוּ. Children who hid figs to eat on Shabbat and forgot to tithe them first should not eat them after Shabbat until tithing them.

Children hid a special Shabbat treat for themselves during the week, but they accidentally forgot to tithe the treat first. Normally, you are not required to tithe small snacks. All eating on Shabbat, however, was considered important and therefore even a snack on Shabbat needed to be tithed. This may also reflect a desire to observe Shabbat with a higher ethical standard than one reasonably lives by on a daily basis. Since tithes are not separated on Shabbat, the children can't eat them until Saturday night, and even then only after tithing them (even though it is no longer Shabbat and therefore eating an untithed snack would have been permitted had these not been so designated). This mishna teaches three things: 1) that setting aside food for Shabbat, even if only a small snack, makes it liable for tithing; 2), that a child's intention to eat something on Shabbat carries legal weight; and 3) once designated for Shabbat, the food is permanently liable to be tithed, even if you end up not eating it on Shabbat.

Reflections and questions

This mishna shows the special power of Shabbat -- even a child's thought about food they want to eat on Shabbat permanently affects the food's legal standing. We are called on, child and adult alike, to be holier on Shabbat and engage in our day of rest with a finely tuned moral compass. The challenge of isolation and the increased dread of the mundane world makes Shabbat more difficult for some in these times. For others, it is a most welcome visitor and easy to greet each week.

What is your relationship with Shabbat right now? Has it changed since isolation?

Masechet Ma'aser Sheni

מעשר שני א:א Ma'aser Sheni 1:1

מעשר שני, אין מוכרין אותו, ואין ממשכנין אותו, ואין מחליפין אותו, ולא שוקליו כנגדו. One may not sell the second tithe, use it as a collateral for a loan, barter with it, or use it to compare the value of something else.

Every 3rd year of the shemitah cycle, people set aside 10% of their produce and bring it to Jerusalem, to be eaten with their family in a state of ritual purity. If the produce is unwieldy to bring, people redeem it on money and bring the money to Jerusalem to purchase food. This is sort of like a vacation fund, except where the destination is chosen for you. The ma'aser sheni system is one of the many ways that Jerusalem is preserved as the center of communal life, even as Jews spread out across the country. It also ensures that even as people pursue wealth, they keep in mind noncapitalist ideals and values.

Reflections and questions

I don't refer to ma'aser sheni as a "vacation fund" to lessen the holiness of it, but rather to uplift the holiness of vacation. You take time off from the regular grind, stop being a tool for productivity, relax with people you love, and eat well.

We Americans treat time off as a luxury and vacations as a privilege for the pampered. What if we lived in a society where everyone, even the poor, could set aside 10% of their income every 3 years -- money which became untouchable by taxes or the repo man -- and then were required to take a vacation with that money?

In the ancient world, the vacation revolved around eating, Jerusalem, and tahara, or spiritual purity. What should a modern mandatory vacation revolve around and why?

מעשר שני ה:יג Ma'aser Sheni 5:13

השקיפה ממעון קדשך מן השמים (דברים כו,
טו), עשינו מה שגזרת עלינו, אף אתה עשה מה
שהבטחתנו.

“Observe from your holy abode in heaven” -- the significance of reciting this verse when declaring that you have tithed appropriately is, “We have done what asked, now you do what you promised.”

During Pesach people were required to do vidui, confession, in which they declared that they had removed all of the previous year's tithes from their homes and given them away appropriately. This declaration involved reciting certain psukim, which the mishna here interprets as a sort of bargaining with the God. The person is saying, “I did everything that was asked of me; I took care of the poor and the landless in our borders. Now, you, God, do what you promised!” This may have been an especially loaded declaration during Pesach, which is the very beginning of the harvest and still weeks away from the main crops. In an agricultural society, people may have begun to feel anxious about what the year would bring during this time.

Reflections and questions

In our current time of anxiety and uncertainty about the future, do you find yourself bargaining with a higher power (whether God, chance, or other things outside your control)?

Do you find it meaningful in these times to be especially scrupulous with your behavior or ethics? Why or why not?

Masechet Challah

חלה א:א-ב Challah 1:1-2

חמשה דברים חייבים בחלה, החטים והשעורים והכסמין ושבילת שועל ושיפון. הרי אלו חייבין בחלה... האוכל מהם פזית מצה בפסח, יצא ידי חובתו. פזית חמץ, חייב בהקרת.

The five grains from which one must separate and donate *challah* are wheat, barley, spelt, oats and rye. One who eats an olive-sized portion of matzah made from these grains on Pesach has fulfilled his obligation. One who eats an olive-size portion of hametz made from these grains is liable for spiritual excommunication.

This tractate of mishna is about the laws of challah, the portion of dough that was given to a kohen if you were baking a sufficient quantity of bread out of one of the 5 major grains. The opening mishnayot of this tractate define which grains are considered bread when baked, and notes that this is the same parameters for defining matzah and chametz for Pesach purposes. "Spiritual excommunication" is a clumsy translation for karet, literally, "cutting off." What exactly it entails is never clearly defined in the Tanakh, though in later literature it was understood as losing one's share in the world-to-come. In other words, it is a spiritual repercussion that is not enforceable by a human court.

Reflections and questions

This mishna pins down a definition of "bread," which in our ancestors' grain-based agriculture was seen as basic human sustenance. On Pesach, we eat the poorest possible form of this: matzah, bread without any leavening or flavor beyond the cardboard box it came in. It is a holiday in which we deny ourselves the food item that was once practically synonymous with the very word "food," and live on joy, community, and gratitude instead (plus calories from other sources besides bread.) This Pesach many of us will experience dampened joy and very limited community.

What sustenance is missing from your Pesach this year? What is still there?

What do you hope you'll say about this Pesach years from now?

חלה א:ח Challah 1:8

עֶסֶת הַקִּלְבִּים, בְּזֶמַן שֶׁהָרוּעִים אוֹכְלִין מִמֶּנָּה,
חִיֵּבֵת בַּחֲלָה... וּמְבָרְכִין עָלֶיהָ, וּמְצַמְנִין עָלֶיהָ,
וְנֹעֲשִׂית בְּיוֹם טוֹב, וְיוֹצֵא בָּהּ אָדָם יְדֵי חוּבָתוֹ
בְּפֶסַח.

The dough of dogs, when shepherds eat it, is obligated in *challah*. One recites the blessing for bread over such dough, recites *birkat hamazon* after eating it, can bake it on a holiday, and (if unleavened) can use it to fulfill the obligation to eat matzah on Pesach.

אִם אֵין הָרוּעִים אוֹכְלִין מִמֶּנָּה, אֵינָה חִיֵּבֵת
בַּחֲלָה... וְאֵין מְבָרְכִין עָלֶיהָ, וְאֵין מְצַמְנִין עָלֶיהָ,
וְאֵינָה נֹעֲשִׂית בְּיוֹם טוֹב, וְאֵין אָדָם יוֹצֵא בָּהּ יְדֵי
חוּבָתוֹ בְּפֶסַח.

If shepherds do not typically eat from it, it is not obligated in *challah* if an individual were to eat from it. Similarly, one should not recite a blessing over it, nor recite *birkat hamazon*, nor bake it on a holiday, nor can it be used to fulfill the obligation to eat matzah on Pesach.

In ancient times, the sharp division between animal food and human food that we appreciate today was more of a continuum. This mishna deals with bread that is at the limit of edibility by humans -- dough of such a poor quality that one would feed it to dogs. If it is still edible to shepherds (who apparently had an unrefined palate), however, then if a person does eat it, it is considered human food in every respect. The dog dough acquires the rights of human food (for example, you can do work on a holiday in order to make it) as well as the responsibilities of human food (for example, giving challah.) If the food is of such bad quality, however, that even shepherds would not touch it, then it is not considered human food at all. If you find yourself eating it (out of distress, curiosity, or by accident), you are not required to relate to it legally as food.

Reflections and questions

Many of us are feeling insecure about the food supply, despite reassurances that the supply chain remains undisturbed and no real shortages exist. Still, with social distancing measures, trips to the grocery store are (or should be) much less frequent than before, and many common items are sold out. Many, many people are also food insecure at baseline, and the loss of wages is severely exacerbating that. Still others are relatively privileged, but have simply never cooked for themselves before and are finding the learning curve steep.

What have you eaten lately that you would not have before the pandemic? Has your own limit of edibility changed?

How has isolation changed your relationship with food in general?

חלה ב:ג Challah 2:3

הָאִשָּׁה יוֹשֶׁבֶת וְקוֹצֶה חֲלָתָהּ עֲרֻמָּה, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהִיא יְכוּלָה לְכַסּוֹת עֲצָמָהּ, אֲבָל לֹא הָאִישׁ. A woman sits and separates *challah* while she is naked, since she is able to cover herself, but not a man.

In a fun reversal of tznius expectations, this mishna allows a woman to recite the blessing for separating challah while naked, but not a man. Generally, reciting a blessing with genitalia showing is frowned upon. According to this mishna, however, women have an easier time covering their genitals (for most women, simply sitting in a chair and closing or crossing their legs will provide more coverage than most men in the same position). What I appreciate about this mishna is, first of all, the normalization of men doing household chores. Secondly, this mishna recognizes that some days you just don't feel like getting dressed.

Reflections and questions

This mishna describes an all too familiar scenario to many of us in these times. Maintaining norms around dress and hygiene can be challenging when working from home or unemployed. Even when we can manage to make our upper halves presentable for a Zoom call, there isn't always an incentive to put on clean pants every day. (Lest you think you're the only one struggling in this department, WalMart has reported an uptick in shirt sales and a drop in pants sales since the outbreak.)

What do you need to feel “decent” and ready to face the day?

Are you finding wearing clothes & changing them regularly challenging?

How do you think your gender influences your ease or difficulty with this?

חלה ד:י-יא Challah 4:10-11

נתאי איש תקוע הביא חלות מביתר, ולא קבלו
ממנו. . . בן אנטוניוס העלה בכורות מבבל, ולא
קבלו ממנו.

Nittai, a man from Tekoa, brought *challah* from Beitar, but the priests would not accept it. Ben Antigonus brought up firstlings from Babylon, but the priests did not accept them.

This tractate ends with rejected gifts. The people described here lived in the Diaspora, where most of the tithing and priestly gift obligations do not apply. They wished, nevertheless, to bring donations but they were turned back.

Reflections and questions

People deeply desire to be useful and helpful, especially in times of crisis. So much so, in fact, that some say the best time to donate blood is 6 weeks *after* a disaster. Supposedly, so many people rush to donate in the immediate wake of tragedy, that when all the blood starts to expire in 6 weeks, the real shortage begins. Often in times of crisis, however, what is needed most is a very specific type of expertise or equipment, and the public's desire to do *something* quickly becomes a hindrance to strained organizations who now find themselves fielding thousands of calls and trying to organize a well intentioned but untrained volunteer corps. In this particular crisis, we are told that the most help we can be is to sit at home and do nothing. This is naturally frustrating for the human mind, whose instincts are to be active and helpful when others are suffering.

Has your help been turned away? What was that like?

Why do you think most people find it hard to “be helpful” simply by staying home?

Why do you think the tractate about gifts ends with rejected gifts?

Masechet Orlah

Orlah 1:3 ערלה א:ג

איִלָּן שֶׁנִּגְעַקַר וְהִסָּלַע עִמּוֹ, שֶׁטָּפוּ נְהַר וְהִסָּלַע עִמּוֹ,
אִם יָכוֹל לְחַיּוֹת, פְּטוּר, וְאִם לֹא, חֲזָב.

If a tree was uprooted and its soil together with it, or if a stream swept it away and its soil together with it, if it could have lived on its own from that amount of soil, it is exempt from becoming *orlah* again. Otherwise, it becomes *orlah* again.

This tractate deals with the topic of newly planted fruit trees. The saplings are off limits for all human purposes for the first three years of its life (during which time they are called “orlah”), a delicate period when plucking its fruits might cause undue strain. In the 4th year, the tree is considered hardy enough to withstand harvesting. These 4th year fruits have a special status, however, and cannot be eaten in any ordinary manner. They are brought carefully to Jerusalem where the owner eats them in a state of spiritual purity. (Similar to ma’aser sheni, if the fruits are too heavy or too perishable, their worth is redeemed on coins and the money is brought to Jerusalem instead.) In the 5th year, the tree becomes permitted for any regular use, and from then on there are no restrictions on the fruits. This mishna deals with the scenario of a mature tree, past its orlah phase, that is uprooted. Depending on how much soil came with it when it was uprooted, it may become orlah again when replanted.

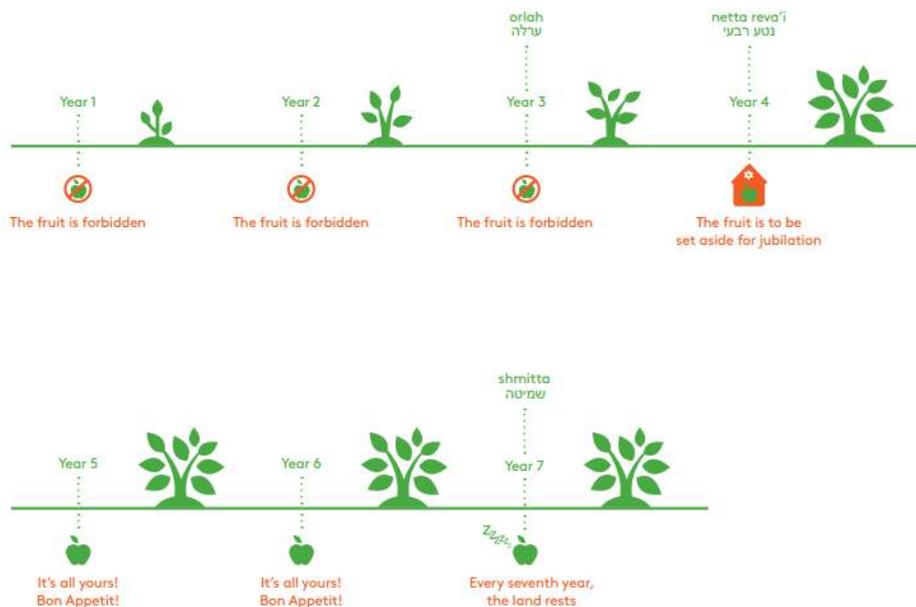


Chart of the agricultural cycle for trees, from *Do Not Destroy: Trees, Art, and Jewish Thought* (Contemporary Jewish Museum)

Reflections and questions

Uprooting is, obviously, hard on trees. If enough dirt comes with it, however, it's as if the tree hasn't really moved at all. Everything it needed -- soil, nutrients, roots -- came with it, and replanting is relatively easy. If the uprooting was more traumatic, on the other hand, the tree is destabilized. Replanting brings vulnerability as it tries to strike root in a new environment. This mishna may also be a way of thinking about people experiencing upheaval. Every time we are uprooted from a familiar environment, we experience hardship -- but sometimes we are ripped away from all the things (physical and otherwise) that we really need to feel stable, and with replanting comes a period of extended adjustment or fragility.

As once permeable borders hardened and normal life shut down, many found themselves uprooted. University campuses turned themselves upside down and shook out all their students. Foreign countries shooed away non-nationals.

What uprootings have you experienced lately?

What do people need to take with them to still feel grounded?

What do people in a state of *orlah* need to become hardy again?

Masechet Bikkurim

ביכורים ג:ג Bikkurim 3:3

הַקְרוֹבִים מִבֵּיָאִים הַתְּאֵנִים וְהַעֲנָבִים, וְהַרְחוֹקִים מִבֵּיָאִים גְּרוּגְרוֹת וְצִמוּקִים. וְהַשּׁוֹר הוֹלֵךְ לִפְנֵיהֶם, וְקַרְנָיו מְצֻפּוֹת זָהָב, וְעֵטְרַת שֵׁל זֵית בְּרֹאשׁוֹ. הַחֲלִיל מְכָה לִפְנֵיהֶם, עַד שֶׁמִּגִּיעִים קְרוֹב לִירוּשָׁלַיִם. הַגִּיעוּ קְרוֹב לִירוּשָׁלַיִם, שָׁלְחוּ לִפְנֵיהֶם, וְעֵטְרוּ אֶת בְּפוּרֵיהֶם. הַפְּחוֹת, הַסְּגָנִים וְהַגְּזָבָרִים יוֹצְאִים לְקִרְאָתָם. לְפִי כְבוֹד הַנִּכְנָסִים הָיוּ יוֹצְאִים. וְכָל בְּעָלֵי אֲמָנוּת שֶׁבִירוּשָׁלַיִם עוֹמְדִים לִפְנֵיהֶם וְשׂוֹאֲלִין בְּשָׁלוֹמָם, אַחֲיֵינוּ אֲנָשֵׁי הַמָּקוֹם פְּלוּגֵי, בְּאַתֶּם לְשָׁלוֹם:

Those who live nearby Jerusalem bring fresh figs and grapes. Those living further away bring dried figs and raisins. An ox goes before them, its horns laid with gold, and a crown of olives on its head. A flute player leads the way until they reach the outskirts of Jerusalem. Once they near the city, they send messengers ahead and they decorate their first fruits. The governors, deputy priests, and Temple treasurers then come out to greet them. The number that come out depends on the number of people entering. All artisans in Jerusalem stand before them and greet them, “Our kinsfolk, from such-and-such place, you have come in peace!”

This mishna describes the festive, elaborate ritual of bringing first fruits of the season (bikkurim) to the Temple. Farmers, whether rich or poor, brought samples of their first crop to Jerusalem during Shavuot amid much fanfare and decorum. In addition to Temple officials, the non-farming public would also join, showing honor to the people who grow food for the country. This yearly celebration ensured that no one forgot, at least not for too long, whom they have to thank for feeding them.

Reflections and questions

Grocery store workers have found themselves on the front lines of a pandemic, providing a critical, yet often unthanked and poorly paid service, while literally risking their lives. Many report that their managers have forbidden them from wearing the personal protective equipment that would keep them safer (gloves and a mask, for example) out of callous pursuit of customers' comfort, who might be startled by the sight of a mask.

The procession described in the mishna makes the workers visible and honors them publicly. Why aren't our society's food workers more visible today?

What do we owe the people who supply our food in dangerous times?

ביכורים ג:ז Bikkurim 3:7

בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה, כָּל מִי שִׁידַע לְקָרוֹת, קוֹרֵא. וְכָל מִי שֶׁאִינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ לְקָרוֹת, מְקָרִין אוֹתוֹ. נִמְנָעוּ מִלְּהִבִּיא, הִתְקִינוּ שֶׁיְהוּ מְקָרִין אֶת מִי שִׁידַע וְאֶת מִי שֶׁאִינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ:

At first, anyone who knew how to recite the first fruits declaration would recite it themselves, and anyone who did not know how to recite would repeat after the priest. But then people refrained from bringing the first fruits, so the Sages enacted that everyone would repeat after the priest, whether they knew the words themselves or not.

After the ceremonious procession of first fruits reached the Temple, each farmer would recite a Biblical passage recounting the miraculous exodus from Egypt and entry into the promised land (the same passage which makes a prominent appearance in the maggid section of the Haggadah.) In a striking modern parallel, the farmers quickly became so embarrassed of not knowing the words that they stopped showing up. To remedy this, the kohanim would recite the passage for everyone and the farmer would repeat after them. This mishna is a striking admission that sometimes the biggest barrier to Jewish practice is the manual articulation of Hebrew words in one's mouth, often overlooked as a "low level" skill.

Reflections and questions

Today Jews in isolation are having to learn how to "do Jewish" without the support of their communities, rabbis, and sometimes their parents. Many will find themselves nervously leading a seder for the first time this year, or solely responsible for their own tefillah, or navigating unprecedented halakhic questions on their own, and many may feel unprepared for the task. Meanwhile, religious leadership in various communities are scrambling to balance what leniencies the שעת הדחק (pressing hour) calls for versus which compromises will destabilize a way of life. Many rabbis have proposed holding Pesach seders or kaddish minyanim on Zoom, for example.

What makes people feel comfortable leading a Jewish practice?

What accommodations do you think your community needs right now? What leniencies do you think undermine a custom or practice?

What do you expect from a Jewish leader, besides just being able to recite Hebrew?

ביכורים ג:יב Bikkurim 3:12

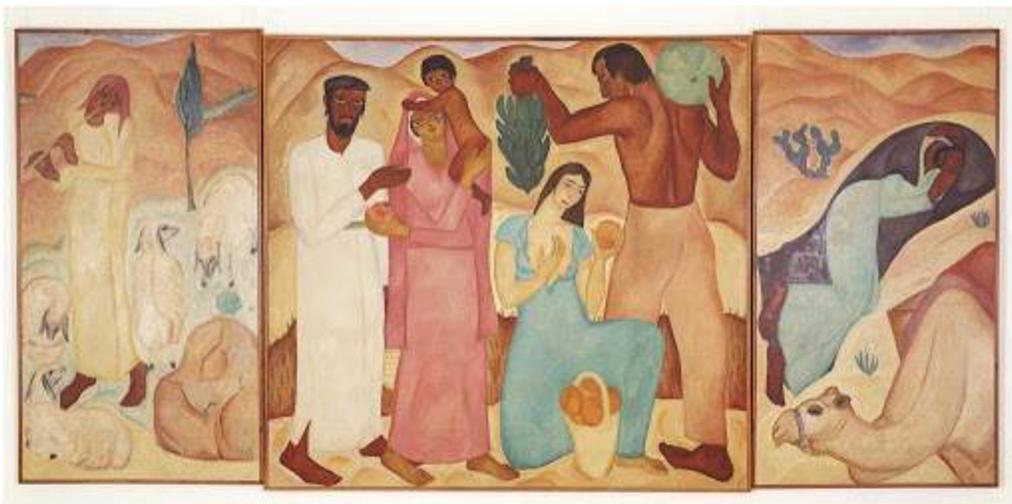
...הקדושי המקדשthe holies of the holy place.

These are the original closing words of Seder Zeraim (though if you are interested in Mishnaic discussion of gender, check out the appended Chapter 4 of Bikkurim.) The seder began in masechet Berachot with the question, “When do we recite the Shema in the evening? When the kohanim enter to eat their terumah.” This seder all about agriculture starts with people in prayer and ends at the holiest of places.

Reflections and questions

In a time of severely restricted mobility, where is a holy place you can still access?

Why do you think the seder ends with these words?



First Fruits, Reuven Rubin

Acknowledgments

Hebrew text of the Mishna comes from Sefaria. English translations are my own & are influenced by Bartenura and Kehati commentary, as well as in some cases by R' Joshua Kulp's excellent, comprehensive English explanations which are available on Sefaria and the Conservative Yeshiva's website.

Stephanie Hays is an illustrator and designer. See more work at haysstephanie.com

You can see more of Richard McBee's paintings of Biblical subjects at richardmcbec.com. His website also has a ton of resources for learning more about Jewish art.

You can learn more about the "Talmud Comics" illustrator Yonah Lavery-Yisraeli and her cool projects at museumeinharod.org.il/en/tosafot/

The carob tree photo is a random picture I found on Flickr, from the user simonsterg. I don't know anything else about him, but he's got some cool photos.

Signature Health is a nursing home in Lafayette, Indiana.

Josh Edelson is a news and corporate photographer. His website is edelsonphotography.com

Coronavirus cartoons and infographics are drawn by Toby Morris, with help from Dr Siouxsie Wiles, as published by *The Spinoff*, a New Zealand online magazine. More of this excellent work can be found at thespinoff.co.nz

Matthew Adelberg is a Baltimore painter whose breathtaking fusion of Talmud and personal life (as well as other subjects) can be found at matthewadelberg.com

Malaka Gharib, a reporter with NPR, created a helpful book for help talking to kids about coronavirus. The full, printable work can be found at npr.org

The Turban project is a website with patterns, instructions, and videos to make face masks and head coverings for people in need. See turbanproject.com for patterns and more info.

Shanna Bonner Groom's bear hunt has morphed into all other kinds of contact-free neighborhood spin off games. Time magazine recently covered the story.

Do Not Destroy: Trees, Art, and Jewish Thought is an excellent resource for Jewish educators. It was made in 2012 by Contemporary Jewish Museum. You can download a copy at thecjm.org

Reuven Rubin's (1893-1974) work can be seen at rubinmuseum.org.il

About this project

This project was born as much of the world waits in dread, but it contains teachings that are, I hope, both heartening and honest. Before the world stopped, I had been learning Seder Zeraim, the first of the six sedarim of the Mishna, as part of a personal project. I was approaching a siyyum when nearly all minyanim were cancelled indefinitely. I decided to take advantage of extra free time to share my learning in a different format.

For the past few years, I have been reclaiming Mishna as the foundational learning text. Although Talmud has the reputation for “serious learning”, it is often just too damn hard for the average Jew to learn well and truly retain. I spent years learning Talmud and much of that time was frustrated with my own brain and learning limitations. Somewhere deep in the weeds of *Hullin*, I temporarily lost a love of text. Discovering the world of mishna rekindled it. By learning about 1.5 chapters a day of Mishna, I can complete the Six Orders once every year. If you would like some encouragement on joining me in this cycle, see the next page. :)

Thank you for letting me share my learning with you. If you'd like to share any thoughts or point out any errors, it would make my day if you email me and let me know (jonah.naftali@gmail.com).

Learn well!

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jonah".

Six reasons to learn Mishna

1. You can cover a satisfying amount of ground in a short period of time. Learning about 1.5 chapters a day, you will cover the entire Mishna in under a year. Learning a seder or a masechet is also a completely reasonable year goal. By comparison, for most people who work full time and are not professional Jewish educators, learning just a masechet of gemara in a year (and learning it *well*) is a very tall order.
2. Mishna is a reasonable learning goal for virtually everyone. If you have minimal Hebrew, you can follow along in the original while making use of the extensive English aids out there (including a clear explanation of every single mishna on Sefaria under the "modern commentary" tab.) If your Hebrew is better, you can learn any of the many commentaries, all of varying complexity.
3. It's one of the few things that is good to study if you're likely to be interrupted. Because it's written in discrete, short chunks, there are plenty of natural stopping points. It's perfect for riding the bus, sitting in the doctor's office, or passing the time when you showed up somewhere too early again.
4. There's a little bit of everything. Mostly law, but also parshanut, aggadah, mussar, and history.
5. It gives you a good overview of Shas. This makes learning gemara, on a purely technical level, a lot easier because you can catch intracanonial references more often. But it also enriches and deepens the learning of gemara. Where sugyot fall within the scope of a masechet can reveal a hidden layer of what the sugya is all about.
6. It gives you a great overview of Jewish life and law. There are plenty of things that relate to modern life -- from practical halacha (looking at you, *Berachot*) to interpersonal values (*Nezikin*) to communal peacekeeping (strangely, *Gittin*). You also get to feel some nostalgia for the days when we were all farmers (*Zeraim*), when the kohanim used to cheat at Eenie-Meenie-Miny-Moe to win Temple honors (*Yoma*), when the purification waters were thrown out of the windows so often that people were slipping and falling in the puddles (*Parah*), or when the debate was still playing out whether Kohelet would make it into the canon (*Yadayim*).

