**Perkei Avot: Chapter Two**

Source: Chabad.org

**1.** Rabbi [Judah HaNassi]\* would say: Which is the right path for man to choose for himself? Whatever is harmonious for the one who does it, and harmonious for mankind.

Be as careful with a minor mitzvah as with a major one, for you do not know the rewards of the mitzvot. Consider the cost of a mitzvah against its rewards, and the rewards of a transgression against its cost.

Contemplate three things, and you will not come to the hands of transgression: Know what is above from you: a seeing eye, a listening ear, and all your deeds being inscribed in a book.

**2.** Rabban Gamliel the son of Rabbi Judah HaNassi would say: Beautiful is the study of Torah with the way of the world, for the toil of them both causes sin to be forgotten. Ultimately, all Torah study that is not accompanied with work is destined to cease and to cause sin.

Those who work for the community should do so for the sake of Heaven; for then merit of their ancestors shall aid them, and their righteousness shall endure forever. And you, [says G‑d,] I shall credit you with great reward as if you have achieved it.

**3.** Be careful with the government, for they befriend a person only for their own needs. They appear to be friends when it is beneficial to them, but they do not stand by a person at the time of *his* distress.

**4.** He would also say: Make that His will should be your will, so that He should make your will to be as His will. Nullify your will before His will, so that He should nullify the will of others before your will.

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.

**5.** He would also say: A boor cannot be sin-fearing, an ignoramus cannot be pious, a bashful one cannot learn, a short-tempered person cannot teach, nor does anyone who does much business grow wise. In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man.

**6.** He also saw a skull floating upon the water. Said he to it: Because you drowned others, you were drowned; and those who drowned you, will themselves be drowned.

**7.** He would also say: One who increases flesh, increases worms; one who increases possessions, increases worry; one who increases wives, increases witchcraft; one who increases maidservants, increases promiscuity; one who increases man-servants, increases thievery; one who increases Torah, increases life; one who increases study, increases wisdom; one who increases counsel, increases understanding; one who increases charity, increases peace. One who acquires a good name, acquired it for himself; one who acquires the words of Torah, has acquired life in the World to Come.

**8.** Rabban Yochanan the son of Zakkai received the tradition from Hillel and Shammai. He would say: If you have learned much Torah, do not take credit for yourself---it is for this that you have been formed.

**9.** Rabban Yochanan the son of Zakkai had five disciples: Rabbi Eliezer the son of Hurkenus, Rabbi Joshua the son of Chananya, Rabbi Yossei the Kohen, Rabbi Shimon the son of Nethanel, and Rabbi Elazar the son of Arach. He would recount their praises: Rabbi Eliezer the son of Hurkenus is a cemented cistern that loses not a drop; Rabbi Joshua the son of Chananya---fortunate is she who gave birth to him; Rabbi Yossei the Kohen---a *chassid* (pious one); Rabbi Shimon the son of Nethanel fears sin; Rabbi Elazar ben Arach is as an ever-increasing wellspring.

[Rabbi Yochanan] used to say: If all the sages of Israel were to be in one cup of a balance-scale, and Eliezer the son of Hurkenus were in the other, he would outweigh them all. Abba Shaul said in his name: If all the sages of Israel were to be in one cup of a balance-scale, Eliezer the son of Hurkenus included, and Elazar the son of Arach were in the other, he would outweigh them all.

**10.** [Rabbi Yochanan] said to them: Go and see which is the best trait for a person to acquire. Said Rabbi Eliezer: A good eye. Said Rabbi Joshua: A good friend. Said Rabbi Yossei: A good neighbor. Said Rabbi Shimon: To see what is born [out of ones actions]. Said Rabbi Elazar: A good heart. Said He to them: I prefer the words of Elazar the son of Arach to yours, for his words include all of yours.

He said to them: Go and see which is the worst trait, the one that a person should most distance himself from. Said Rabbi Eliezer: An evil eye. Said Rabbi Joshua: An evil friend. Said Rabbi Yossei: An evil neighbor. Said Rabbi Shimon: To borrow and not to repay; for one who borrows from man is as one who borrows from the Almighty, as is stated, ``The wicked man borrows and does not repay; but the righteous one is benevolent and gives'' ([Psalms 37:21)](https://www.chabad.org/16258#v21). Said Rabbi Elazar: An evil heart. Said He to them: I prefer the word of Elazar the son of Arach to yours, for his words include all of yours.

They would each say three things:

Rabbi Eliezer would say: The honor of your fellow should be as precious to you as your own, and do not be easy to anger. Repent one day before your death.\*\* Warm yourself by the fire of the sages, but be beware lest you be burned by its embers; for their bite is the bite of a fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion, their hiss is the hiss a serpent, and all their words are like fiery coals.

**11.** Rabbi Joshua would say: An evil eye, the evil inclination, and the hatred of one's fellows, drive a person from the world.

**12.** Rabbi Yossei would say: The property of your fellow should be as precious to you as your own. Perfect yourself for the study of Torah, for it is not an inheritance to you. And all your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven.

**13.** Rabbi Shimon would say: Be meticulous with the reading of the *Shma* and with prayer. When you pray, do not make your prayers routine, but [an entreaty of] mercy and a supplication before the Almighty, as is stated ``For He is benevolent and merciful, slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness, and relenting of the evil decree'' ([Joel 2:13)](https://www.chabad.org/16170#v13). And do not be wicked in your own eyes.

**14.** Rabbi Elazar would say: Be diligent in the study of Torah. Know what to answer a heretic. And know before whom you toil, and who is your employer who will repay you the reward of your labors.

**15.** Rabbi Tarfon would say: The day is short, the work is much, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Master is pressing.

**16.** He would also say: It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it. If you have learned much Torah, you will be greatly rewarded, and your employer is trustworthy to pay you the reward of your labors. And know, that the reward of the righteous is in the World to Come.

\* Rabbi Judah HaNassi, compiler of the *Mishnah*, is referred to in the Talmud as ``Rabbi.''

\*\* "Rabbi Eliezer would say: Repent one day before your death. Asked his disciples: Does a man know on which day he will die? Said he to them: So being the case, he should repent today, for perhaps tomorrow he will die; hence, all his days are passed in a state of repentance. Indeed, so said Solomon in his wisdom ([Ecclesiastes 9:8)](https://www.chabad.org/16470#v8): 'At all times, your clothes should be white, and oil should not lack from your head'" (Talmud, Shabbat 153a).

Mishna, Pirkei Avot 2:1

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2

רבי אומר איזוהי דרך ישרה שיבור לו האדם כל שהיא תפארת לעושה ותפארת לו מן האדם

[Pirkei\_Avot.2.1](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.2.1)

Rabbi Judah HaNassi would say: Which is the right path for one to choose for oneself? Whatever is harmonious for the one who does it, and harmonious for humankind. [Translation by chabad.org. Edited for gender neutrality]

3

**Response Questions: Answer in complete sentences**

1. What does this text mean by "harmonious"? What does "harmony" imply? (Google the definition if unsure)
2. Why is it important that what one chooses to do with their life be harmonious for both themselves and humankind?
3. How can you use this text to reflect on your own life path?

4

**Time Period:** Rabbinic (Maccabees through the Talmud)