

Ethics of the Fathers (*Pirkei Avot*) 5:7 פרקי אבות ה:ז

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Note on translations: In each translation, **bold words** represent relatively direct translations of the Hebrew text. Regular printed text represent words that are not “in the text” but are implied. (Words in parenthesis) represent further words of explanation.

Ethics of the Fathers 5:7

פרקי אבות ה:ז

שבעה דברים בגולם ושבעה בחכם חכם אינו מדבר בפני מי שהוא גדול ממנו בחכמה ואינו נכנס לתוך דברי חבירו ואינו נבהל להשיב שואל כענין ומשיב כהלכה ואומר על ראשון ראשון ועל אחרון אחרון ועל מה שלא שמע אומר לא שמעתי ומודה על האמת וחלופיהו בגולם:

Seven things are said **regarding an unrefined person** and **seven things** are said **regarding a wise person**. The **wise person does not speak before one who is greater than s/he in wisdom, does not enter the words of his fellow** (i.e. does not interrupt), **is not hurried to respond to a questioner** (the Hebrew term, נבהל, has a certain connotation of confusion as well, suggesting a certain lack of thought and clarity being put into a rushed response), **asks according to the subject** (i.e. asks questions that are relevant to the subject matter), **responds in accordance with the halakhah** (Jewish law), **speaks regarding what is first first, and regarding what is second second** (i.e. speaks in order), **and regarding what s/he has not heard s/he says “I have not heard”** (i.e. rather than pretending to have known whatever the other person has taught him/her. Alternatively, this could mean that if one is asked a question and responds based on logic, rather than from knowledge of a dispositive text, s/he should indicate that s/he is doing so), **and accepts the truth** (this is understood to mean that the wise person will admit when someone else has a convincing argument against his/her point). **And their opposites** (i.e. the opposites of these traits) **are said regarding the unrefined person**.

Avot d’Rabi Nattan Text A, 1:37¹

מסכתות קטנות מסכת אבות דרבי נתן נוסחא א פרק לז

The main text of Avot d’Rabi Nattan (ARN) is largely the same as the text in Pirkei Avot, but certain words are additional. This likely indicates that the compiler of ARN has a slightly different text of Pirkei Avot. The significant differences in the text are underlined.

שבעה דברים בגולם ושבעה בחכם חכם אינו מדבר בפני מי שגדול ממנו בחכמה ובמנין. ואינו נכנס לתוך דברי חבירו. ואינו נבהל להשיב. שואל כענין ומשיב כהלכה. אומר על ראשון ראשון ועל אחרון אחרון. על מה שלא שמע אומר לא שמעתי. ואינו מתבייש ומודה על האמת. וכנגדו נאמר בגולם בחלופין:

Seven things are said **regarding an unrefined person** and **seven things** are said **regarding a wise person**. The **wise person does not speak before one who is greater than s/he in wisdom or numbers** (this may mean in number of years or number of people who agree with his/her point), **does not enter the words of his fellow** (i.e. does not interrupt), **is not hurried to respond to a questioner, asks according to the subject, responds in accordance with the halakhah, and speaks regarding what is first first, and regarding what is second second, regarding what s/he has not heard s/he says “I have not heard” and is not embarrassed** (this could refer to the previous phrase, and mean s/he is not embarrassed to admit not having heard something in the past, or could refer to the next phrase, and mean that the person is not embarrassed to admit when another person has presented a convincing argument), **and accepts the truth. And their opposites** (i.e. the opposites of these traits) **are said regarding the unrefined person**.

¹ A brief overview of Avot d’Rabi Nattan from Wikipedia:

Avot de-Rabbi Nathan (Hebrew: אבות דרבי נתן, usually printed together with the minor tractates of the Talmud, is a Jewish aggadic work probably compiled in the geonic era (c.700–900 CE). Although Avot de-Rabbi Nathan is the first and longest of the "minor tractates", it probably does not belong in that collection chronologically, having more the character of a late midrash. In the form now extant it contains a mixture of Mishnah and Midrash, and may be technically designated as a homiletical exposition of the Mishnaic tractate Pirkei Avot, having for its foundation an older recension (version) of that tractate. It may be considered as a kind of "tosefta" or "gemarah" to the Mishna Avot, which does not possess a traditional gemarah. Avot de-Rabbi Nathan contains many sentences, proverbs, and incidents that are not found anywhere else in the early rabbinical literature (Cashdan 1965). Other rabbinical sayings appear in a more informal style than what is found in the canonical Mishna Avot redacted by Judah I.

הכם אינו מדבר לפני מי שגדול ממנו בהכמה ובמניין זה משה שנאמר וידבר אהרן את כל הדברים אשר דבר ה' אל משה ויעש האותות לעיני העם (שמות ד' ל') וכי מי ראוי לדבר משה או אהרן. הוי אומר משה שמשה שמע מפי הגבורה ואהרן שמע מפי משה. אלא כך אמר משה אפשר שאדבר במקום שאחי גדול ממני עומד שם לפיכך אמר לו לאהרן דבר. לכך נאמר וידבר אהרן את כל הדברים אשר דבר ה' אל משה:

THE WISE PERSON DOES NOT SPEAK BEFORE ONE WHO IS GREATER THAN S/HE IN WISDOM OR NUMBERS: This is Moses, as it is said: “And Aaron spoke all the things which the LORD spoke to Moses and did the signs before the nation” (Exodus 4:30). And was it fitting for Moses to speak or Aaron? Say Moses should have spoken, because Moses heard from the mouth of the Almighty and Aaron heard from Moses’ mouth. However, Moses said thus: Is it possible that I should speak in the place of my brother, for my brother who is greater than me stands there.² Therefore, he said to Aaron, “you speak.” Therefore it is said, “And Aaron spoke all the things which the LORD spoke to Moses”

ואינו נכנס לתוך דברי חבירו זה אהרן שנאמר וידבר אהרן וגו' הן היום הקריבו את הטאתם ועולתם וגו' (ויקרא י' י"ט) אלא ששתק עד שיסיים משה את דברו ולא אמר לו קצר דבריך ואח"כ אמר אל משה הן היום הקריבו ואוננים אנחנו.

AND DOES NOT ENTER THE WORDS OF HIS FELLOW: This is Aaron, as it is said, “And Aaron spoke, etc. . . . just today they sacrificed their sin offerings and burnt offerings, etc.” (Leviticus 10:19) (The scene here is immediately following the death of Aaron’s two sons. Moses gets upset and yells at Aaron’s surviving sons for not eating the meat of the sin offering. Aaron responds with an explanation why it would not have been appropriate for his sons to have eaten the sacrificial meat). **However, he (Aaron) was silent until Moses finished his words and did not say (to Moses) “cut your words off”, and afterwards he said to Moses, “Just today they sacrificed . . .” (Lev. 10:19) and we are *onenim* (an *onen* is one who has lost a close relative and has not yet performed burial. An *onen* is generally exempt from all Jewish ritual requirements).**

ויש אומרים משכו אהרן מתוך הצבור לחוץ ואמר לו משה אחי ומה מעשר הקל אסור לאונן לאכול ממנו טאת חמור לא כ"ש שתהא אסורה לאונן. מיד הודה לו שנאמר וישמע משה וייטב בעיניו (שם שם כ') ובעיני הגבורה:

Some say Aaron pulled Moses from the congregation to outside the congregation and said to him, “Moses my brother, just as *ma’aser* (tithes) which are lenient in their legal treatment, it is forbidden for an *onen* to eat from them, the sin offering, which is strict in its legal treatment, is it not all the more so that it should be forbidden to an *onen*. Immediately, Moses conceded to him³, as it is said, “And Moses heard (often the word שמע, heard, has a connotation of acceptance) and it was good in his eyes” (Lev. 10:20) and it was pleasing in the eyes of the Almighty.

ARN continues to discuss this incident with Moses, Aaron, and Aaron’s sons.

(כיוצא בו ויקצוף משה על אלעזר ועל איתמר בני אהרן (שם שם ט"ז). מכאן אמרו כשאדם עושה משתה לתלמידיו אינו נותן פניו אלא בגדול. וכשהוא קוצף אינו קוצף אלא על הקטן שנאמר ויקצוף על אלעזר ועל איתמר מלמד שאף אהרן היה בקצפון.

(Similarly, AND MOSES⁴ WAS ENRAGED WITH ELAZAR AND WITH ITAMAR THE SONS OF AARON. (Lev. 10:16) From here they (the sages) said that when a person makes a party for his/her friends, s/he only ??honors?? (literally “gives his face”) to the great (i.e. to the greater scholars) and when s/he gets enraged, s/he only gets enraged (i.e. lashes out) with the minor, as it is said, “And Moses was enraged with Elazar and Itamar” (the verse continues “the remaining sons of Aaron”) which teaches that Aaron also was part of the anger.

² For a discussion of Aaron’s stature versus Moses’ stature, see below p. 2, “Aaron was greater than Moses.”

³ Note that the Hebrew word הודה, here translated as “conceded” is the same word used in *Pirkei Avot and ARN* in saying that a wise person “accepts” the truth).

⁴ Although the word “Moses” appears in the introduction to this paragraph, it is not part of the verse in Lev. 10:16.

אהרן היה גדול ממשה וגדול מאהרן הקב"ה. ולמה לא דבר עם אהרן על שלא היו לו בנים עומדים בפרץ שאלו היו לו בנים עומדים בפרץ אלעזר ואיתמר לא גרם חטא לנדב ואביהוא):

Aaron was greater than Moses, and greater than Aaron was the Holy One Blessed Is He. And why didn't God speak with Aaron (i.e. why was Moses, rather than Aaron, the main prophet)? Because he did not have children who stand in the breach (i.e. who intercede against improper action), for had he had children that stand in the breach, Elazar and Itamar, sin would not have been caused to Nadav and Avihu.)

כיוצא בו באברהם אבינו כשהיה מתפלל על אנשי סדום אמר לו הקב"ה אם אמצא בסדום חמשים צדיקים ונשאתי לכל המקום בעבורם (בראשית י"ח כ"ו) גלוי וידוע לפני מי שאמר והיה העולם שאלו היו מצוין בסדום ג' או ה' צדיקים לא גרם בה עון אלא המתין הקב"ה את אברהם עד שסיים דבריו ואח"כ השיבו שנאמר וילך ה' כאשר כלה לדבר אל אברהם (שם שם ל"ג) כביכול אמר לו הרי אני נפטר שנאמר ואברהם שב למקומו (שם שם):

Similarly, with our patriarch Abraham, when he prayed for the people of S'dom the Holy One, Blessed Is He said to him (Abraham) "If I find in S'dom fifty righteous people in S'dom, I will I will spare the entire place for their sake." (Gen. 18:26) It was revealed and known before the One Who Spoke And the World Came Into Being that had there been found in S'dom three or five righteous people, perversion (alt: punishment) wouldn't have been caused there (i.e. things would not have been as bad) however, the Holy One Blessed Is He waited with Abraham until he (Abraham) finished his words and then responded, as it is said, "And the Lord left after He finished to speak with Abraham," (Gen. 18:33) as if it were possible, He (God) said to him (Abraham) "I am leaving," as it is said, "and Abraham returned to his place." (id.)

ואינו נבהל להשיב זה אליהו בן ברכאל הבוזי שנאמר אמרתי ימים ידברו (איוב ל"ב ז) מלמד שהיו יושבין ושותקין לפני איוב. עמד היו עומדין. ישב היו יושבין. אכל היו אוכלין. שתה היו שותין. עד שנטל מהם רשות [וקלל את יומו] שנאמר ואחרי כן פתח איוב את פיהו ויקלל את יומו וגו' ויאמר יאבד יום אולד בו והלילה אמר הורה גבר (שם א' ב' וג'). יאבד יום שבא אבי אצל אמי ואמרה לו אני הרה. ומנין שלא ענו בערבוביא שנאמר ויען איוב ויאמר. ויען אליפז התימני ויאמר. ויען בלדד השוחי ויאמר. ויען צופר הנעמתי ויאמר. ויען אליהו בן ברכאל הבוזי ויאמר. סדרן הכתוב אחד אחד. אלא להודיע לכל באי עולם שאין חכם מדבר לפני מי שגדול הימנו בחכמה ואינו נכנס לתוך דברי חבירו ואינו נבהל להשיב:

IS NOT HURRIED TO RESPOND: This is Elihu son of Berakhel, the Buzite, as it says "Days should speak" (Job 32:7) (i.e. those who have lived more days should speak first. In Job, 3 of Jobs friends philosophize with Job about his travails and do so at great length. Elihu, a younger man, only chimes in after the three friends have finished). This teaches that that they (Job's other three friends) were sitting and being silent before Job. When he (Job) stood, they (Job's friends) would stand. When he sat, they would sit. When he ate, they would eat. When he drank, they would drink. Until he (Job) took permission from them to speak [and cursed his days]. As it is said, "After this, Job opened his mouth and cursed his day (of birth), etc., and he said 'let my day of birth be lost, and (let be lost) the night when they said 'a male is conceived.'"' (Job 3:1,3) Which means "let the day that my father came beside my mother and she said to him 'I am pregnant' be lost." And from where do we know that they didn't respond in a mixture (i.e. all answering at once), because it is said, "And Job responded," "and Eliphaz the Timanite responded," "and Bildad the Shuchi responded," and Tzophar the Na'amati responded," "and Elihu son of Berakhel the Buzite responded." Did scripture order them one by one? Rather, this is to teach everyone who comes into the world, that a wise person does not speak before one who is greater than s/he in wisdom, does not enter the words of his fellow, and is not hurried to respond.

שואל כענין זה יהודה שאמר אנכי אערבנו (בראשית מ"ג ט'): שואל שלא כענין זה ראובן שנאמר ויאמר ראובן אל אביו את שני בני תמית (שם מ"ב ל"ז):

ASKS ACCORDING TO THE SUBJECT: This is Judah, who said “I will be his (Benjamin’s) guarantor” (the verse, Gen. 43:9, which is part of Judah’s asking that Jacob allow Benjamin to join the brothers in going to Egypt for food, continues “from may hands you may ask for him, if I don’t bring him to you and set him before you, I will have sinned toward you for all days.”). **Asking not according to the subject, this is Reuben, as it is said, “And Reuben said to his father, “you may kill my two sons”** (the verse, 42:37, continues, “if I don’t bring him (Benjamin) to you, give him into my hands, and I will return him to you.”).

Note that neither Judah nor Reuben are asking questions in this supposed explanation of “asking according to the subject.” Instead, they seem to be examples of appropriate and inappropriate ways to make a request. It is not unusual for commentaries to become less exacting and less detailed as they go further into a text.

ואומר על ראשון ראשון זה יעקב. ויש אומרים זו שרה. ועל אחרון אחרון אלו אנשי חרן:

AND SPEAKS REGARDING WHAT IS FIRST FIRST: This is Jacob. **And some say this is Sarah.** **AND REGARDING WHAT IS SECOND SECOND, these are the people of Charan** (Abraham’s birthplace).

No explanation is given as to how these particular figures are associated with these phrases. The association to Jacob may be Genesis 31:31-32, where Jacob responds first to Lavan’s asking why Jacob ran away, and second to Lavan’s accusations that Jacob stole Lavan’s idols. See Rashi on 31:31.

ומודה על האמת זה משה שנאמר ויאמר ה' אלי הטיבו אשר דברו (דברים י"ח י"ז). וכן הקב"ה הודה על האמת שנאמר כן בנות צלפחד דוברות (במדבר כ"ז ז):

AND ACCEPTS THE TRUTH: This is Moses, as it is said, “and The LORD said to me, ‘they have done well in what they have said.’” (Deut. 18:17, regarding the Israelites at Sinai no longer wanting to hear God talking to them directly). **And so too, the Holy One Blessed Is He accepts the truth, as it says, “the daughters of Tzelophchad have spoken correctly.”** (Numbers 27:7, regarding Tzelophchad’s daughters’ claim that they should inherit Tzelophchad’s estate in Israel, in absence of sons to inherit).