

Chapter 1 – Learning Guide

I-In-Class Discussion Questions

1-This chapter begins with a quote from *Pirkei Avot*. Why do you think a book about contemporary Jewish ethics begins with a quote from this particular source from our tradition?

2-The statement from *Pirkei Avot* with which the chapter begins reads as follows. “Beloved is man, for he was created in the image of God; still greater was this love in that it was made known to him that he was created in the image of God”(Avot: Chapter 3, Mishnah 14).How does the author of the chapter interpret this *mishnah*? How is it connected to Aaron’s story? How else can this statement be interpreted?

3-Would your analysis of this case differ if Shiela had asked Aaron to get medicine for her children instead of rice cakes? Would it make any difference what kind of medicine Shiela needed?

4-In the chapter, the camp director sides with his wife Shiela? Why do you suppose this is the case? Does it surprise you?

5-Does the chapter state whether or not this is a religious camp or not? Is this fact relevant to how you understand this story?

6-Suppose the tables were turned and Aaron was not an observant Jew. Would it be fair for a religious camp director to require his driver to observe ritual law?

7-Why is this chapter called “Defining Moments?”

8- “If we let others choose for us, as Aaron did in this case, it is their values that are becoming concrete and real in the world and not ours.” Explain this statement and provide at least one example of your own.

9-In the bible, we read, “And when the people saw that Moses delayed a long time in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together in front of Aaron and said to him, ‘Arise, make us gods, that will go before us...’ And Aaron said to them, ‘Pull off your golden earrings and bring them to me...’ And he took them from their hand, and formed it with a graving tool and he made it a molten calf” (Exodus: Chapter 32: 1-4). In what ways is Aaron’s camp experience similar to this story and in what ways is it dissimilar?

10-“Ethics emerges first from religion. The very same ability that helps us to stand up to an investment banker and tell him that we need to leave in order to get home for Shabbat may also, in the future, help us to stand up to the very same investment banker and tell him that we can’t participate in a sham business transaction either!” Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

II-Essay Questions

1-If you were in Aaron's situation, what would you have done?

2-According to Maimonides, true *teshuva* (repentance) occurs "When an opportunity presents itself for repeating an offense once committed, and the offender, while able to commit the offense, nevertheless refrains from doing so because he is penitent [feeling regret for having done wrong], and not out of fear or failure of vigor..." Does Aaron's decision to leave his job interview in order to make it home before Shabbat qualify as true *teshuva* under this definition?

3-"Quiet leadership is what moves the world." Do you agree or disagree and why?

4-Someone who is careful in observing shabbat and kashrut will also be careful in ethical matters. Do you agree or disagree and why?

III-Connections

The following excerpt is from a proposed amendment to a congressional bill. The amendment was authored by Stephen J. Solarz and Pat Schroeder. (Source: Congressional Record, May 11, 1987).

Mr. SOLARZ. Mr. Speaker, I rise to offer an amendment to the Defense Department authorization bill which would ensure that members of the Armed Forces will not be forced to choose between their sincere religious beliefs and a desire to serve their country. I am offering this amendment with my esteemed colleague from Colorado, PAT SCHROEDER. Our amendment would allow a member of the Armed Forces to wear religious apparel while in uniform provided that the apparel is neat and conservative and that it not interfere with the performance of the member's military duties.

The need for congressional action rose in response to the case of Capt Simcha Goldman. An orthodox rabbi, he was disciplined for wearing his yarmulke while on duty because it was a violation of the Air Force dress code. That code prohibits the wearing of headgear while indoors. Orthodox jews, by the dictates of their religion, are required to cover their heads at all times. Rabbi Goldman did not want to choose between his religious convictions and the desires to serve his country so he appealed the judgement against him. The U.S. Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court ruled against him. The Supreme Court's decision--by the narrowest of margins--5 to 4--ruled that the Air Force's perceived need for uniformed dress overrode Goldman's first amendment right. Opponents of this amendment argue that it would threaten uniformity and reduce military cohesion.

If you had been a member of Congress, would you have voted for this amendment or not? Please be as specific as possible.

IV-Personal Journal

1-Describe an event in your life that turned out to be a defining moment for you.

2-Describe your personal strengths and weaknesses. How do these character traits protect you, if at all, from the kind of situation Aaron faced?

3-When it comes to ethics, the person I have learned the most from is ...

4-Describe a recent action that you have taken, or an action that you might take in the near future, that would strengthen your character.

V-Group Project

Directions: Each member of the group must interview a parent or a grandparent about a defining moment that he or she experienced. How did the defining moment shape his or her future life? The group members should compare stories and describe some of the common features in all of the stories. Each group will present a 15 minute summary of their findings to the whole class.