

Chapter 2 – Learning Guide

I-In-Class Discussion Questions

1-The statement from *Pirkei Avot* with which the chapter begins reads as follows. “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And, being for myself only, what am I? (Avot: Chapter 3, Mishnah 14) How does the author of the chapter interpret this *mishnah*? How is it connected to Sarah’s story? How else can this statement be interpreted?

2-The chapter introduces the “problem of the weak will?” What is it and what are some additional examples?

3-Are students more likely to cheat on a take home exam? Do you think it’s fair for a teacher to give a take home exam?

4-What is the difference between rationality and rationalization?

5-Sarah rationalizes that this situation was one of “moral ambiguity.” What does this mean? While this phrase does not seem to apply in this situation, can you think of another example where it might be appropriate? Or, is the phrase “moral ambiguity” always an example of rationalization?

6-Why is cheating an example of *geneivat daat*?

7-Sarah said there were three reasons why she didn’t cheat. How does the third reason differ from the first two?

8-What is the difference, if any, between “cheating” and “being a cheater”?

9-Sarah claims that she will not cheat in the future? After reading this chapter, are you convinced that this is true?

10-Does everyone really have a *yetzer hara* and a *yetzer hatov*?

11-What is the single most important reason for scoring well on an exam?

II-Essay Questions

1-It's always wrong to cheat. No amount of rationalization will ever justify cheating. True or false. Explain your answer.

2-People who cheat in school are more likely to cheat later in life. True or false. Explain your answer.

3-The following statement was endorsed by a unanimous vote of the Roshei Yeshiva of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) and affiliate of Yeshiva University (March 31, 2003).

Cheating is an egregious halakhic and ethical violation. When students turn aside as others cheat, they communicate to their peers that they find such behavior tolerable...Any student who becomes aware of cheating during the upcoming period of final examinations, be it before, during or after the fact, should report the incident to the office of the dean...This is the case even in situations where only one student witnessed the violation. Each witness should report all relevant information, taking care to report exactly what he witnessed, including the identify of the perpetrator(s) if he can identify him/them. The reporting student is ensured confidentiality under all circumstances. Students who cheat and are reported on should understand that their friends did so because they [are] unwilling to tolerate an immoral culture around them.

The RIETS faculty believes that demanding students to report on classmates known to be cheating will improve the ethical climate of the university. Do you agree or disagree with this belief? Do you think there might be other ways to reduce cheating that could be used either with this proposal or as a partial substitute for it?

4-Ben Azzai taught that the reward of a *mitzvah* is the *mitzvah* (Pirkei Avot: Chapter 4, Mishnah 2). What does this mean?

III-Connections

In business, some of the most important things that bosses look for are integrity and strength of character. Consider the following statement from a former chief executive officer of one of the biggest companies in the world:

In reference to the qualifications of new board members, [our] corporate governance guidelines emphasize “the qualities of strength of character, and inquiring and independent mind, practical wisdom and mature judgment.” It is no accident that we put “strength of character” first. Like any successful company, we must have directors who start with what is right, who do not have hidden agendas, and who strive to make judgments about what is best for the company, and not about what is best for themselves.

Do you believe that this statement captures what it really means to be a leader in today’s world? Would your opinion of this statement change if you were told that the author was Kenneth Lay, the chief executive officer of Enron, whose company was engaged in one of the most notorious corporate scandals in history?

IV-Personal Journal

1-Have you ever cheated? If so, why? If not, why not?

2-When are you most likely to start coming up with rationalizations for your behavior?

3-In the *mishna* with which the chapter began Hillel asks a rhetorical question, “being for myself only what am I? If you had to answer this question, how would you?”

4-Describe a recent action that you have taken, or an action that you might take in the near future, that makes it less likely that you would cheat if given the opportunity?

V-Group Project

Directions: Develop a set of five rules for your class or school on the topic of cheating.

VI-Vignette--How Bad Does Josh Want an A?

Josh was tired. He had been up most of the night studying for his Principles of Accounting final. Josh was a good student, but because of his very hectic schedule, he now had little time to prepare for this exam.

Josh had received a B+ on the midterm and was hoping for at least an A- on the final. He believed that this aspiration was quite reasonable as other students who had taken Professor Kava had told him that the final was usually easier than the midterm. Whether or not this was really true is another story.

Professor Kava had not made any of his previous exams available for the students to have as a practice exam. Josh felt this was unfair. Other teachers, in other sections of the same course, had provided old exams to help students. With just one day left before the final exam, Josh decided to call his older brother Steve for some help. Steve was now working as an accountant with one of the major accounting firms.

Josh's brother Steve had been an exceptional student when he had Dr. Kava just two years before. "Calm down," Steve said. "It's just an accounting exam. It's not like it's real life or anything."

"That's easy for you to say. You've already got a good job. I've got to get through this and I'm running out of time," Josh whined.

Steve loved playing the part of big brother. "I'll tell you what, Josh. I've got my old exam somewhere around here. What if I fax it up to you?"

"That would be great." Josh felt calmer now than he had in days. A few minutes later he was in the library working on the old exam. "This really isn't so bad," he muttered to himself. "I'm just not sure about question 3."

Josh tried to find his roommate, Ben, who was also a student in Dr. Kava's class. Josh showed him the old exam and asked him if he knew how to do question 3. Ben, who had received the highest grade in the class on the midterm, looked at the old test and smiled. "Ya, no problem. I went through this whole exam last night. I sure hope we get an exam this easy tomorrow."

Avi had overheard this conversation and began to chuckle to himself. "I don't know about that. I have a good feeling that your test is gonna be much harder."

Ben and Josh looked up from the old test and asked Avi how he knew so much about their test. He didn't even have Kava for accounting. "Well, from what I hear, a few guys in the class bought a copy of this year's exam from one of the security guys." Maybe Josh was naive, having grown up far from the New York metropolitan area, where many of his classmates were from. "I don't believe you," he said.

"Don't believe me. It doesn't really make any difference to me. But, hey, if I wanted an A as bad as you do, I know what I'd do. And, it sure wouldn't be wasting my time on question 3. I can guarantee you one thing, that's not going to be on the exam."

Early the next morning, about a half hour before the exam was scheduled, Dr. Kava got a phone call from the Academic Vice President. "I've got some bad news. I think some of the students may have a copy of your exam." Dr. Kava dejectedly hung up the phone.