

## Chapter 3 – Learning Guide

### I-In-Class Discussion Questions

1-The statement from *Prieki Avot*, with which the chapter begins reads as follows. “‘What is mine is mine and what is yours is yours’ – this is the average type; but some say this is a characteristic of Sodom” (Avot: Chapter 5, Mishnah 10). How does the author of this chapter interpret this *mishnah*? How is it connected to Yosef’s story? How else can this statement be interpreted?

2-Why didn’t the teacher just postpone the exam?

3-“Trust is a fragile asset.” What does this statement mean? Why is this observation so important in this chapter?

4-In what specific ways is this case different than Aaron’s and Sarah’s situations?

5-Why do you think the author believes that Yosef’s actions created a loving community “if just for an hour or so?”

6-Who was Rosa Parks? In what way did she show “moral imagination?”

7-Do you agree that Theodore Herzl was a moral artist?

8-How does Shimon ben Shetach’s decision to return the pearl to the heathen demonstrate *derek eretz*?

9-In what ways was Yosef’s dilemma similar to Shimon ben Shetach’s? In what ways was his dilemma different?

10-If Shimon ben Shetach was correct and his students were wrong, why does the midrash bother to record the students’ position–“all the world agrees that if you find something which belongs to a heathen, you may keep it”?

### II-Essay Questions

1-In your opinion, what are the three most important characteristics of a loving community?

2-In *pirkei avot* we learn that *derek eretz* comes before Torah. In what specific ways does the story of Shimon ben Shetach demonstrate this insight?

3-This chapter concludes as follows: “Ethics is about changing the very rules of how the game is played in a positive and more inclusive way.” Here’s why this statement is true...

### III-Connection

The following is an excerpt from an article written by Jeffrey Swartz, the Chief Executive Officer of Timberland:

I found a *Gemara* in *Berakhot* in which Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai and Rabbi Yishmael are having a discussion. Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai is talking about agriculture. He says, “Hey!” (and I’m obviously paraphrasing just a tiny bit here)—“If a man were to spend his time winnowing and sowing and reaping and threshing at the time of the blowing wind, what will become of Torah?”

I looked at that and thought, uh-oh, he’s talking to me. I work hard during the day. I travel all over the world for Timberland. I’m busy. I’m home for *Shabbat*, thank God, but I’m busy. I don’t know what will become of Torah. Good question. Is there an answer? So I read on, and Rabbi Yishmael says yes, there is an alternative. He calls it *minhag derekh eretz*.

I remember something I learned from my rabbi. Only one time each day do you say a blessing for studying the Torah. “*La’asok b’divrei torah*.” *La’asok, ish asaikim*—the same *shoresh*, the same root—*asak*, meaning business or duty. I finally understood what Rabb Yishmael was trying to tell me. It’s not about stealing five minutes of Torah here, or five minutes of Torah there. *La’asok b’divrei torah*, to be immersed in the words of torah. That’s not just when you’re sitting with the *Gemara* in front of you; and it doesn’t require heading into the cave like Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai and his son. My simple understanding of it means that my job as an *ish askim*, as a businessman—everything I do, when I hire somebody, when I work with a customer, when I sit in a boardroom—that’s supposed to be *la’asok b’divrei torah*. You only say that blessing once during the day because it’s supposed to last every minute of the day.

At Timberland what we do is make boots. But *who* I try to be while I do what I do, is an *ish askaim*. (Quoted from the “Moral Responsibility of Corporations, by Jeffrey Swartz, **The United Synagogue Review**, Spring 2000, p. 21.)

Questions:

1-Go to the Timberland home page. To what extent do the corporate activities of Jeffrey Swartz's company reflect the beliefs stated in this quote? Be as specific as possible.

2-Is it really possible to bring one's Judaism into the marketplace?

3-Is this an example of moral imagination as described in the body of this chapter?

4-Find the passage that Swartz is referring to in the *gemora*. Is his reading of this passage true to the actual words of the text? How does this passage compare to the story of Shimon ben Shetach quoted in the body of the chapter?

#### **IV-Personal Journal**

1-When it comes to ethics, my Jewish hero is ...

2-When it comes to ethics, my non-Jewish hero is...

3-The person in my family who best exemplifies ethical artistry would have to be...

4-Think of someone with whom you would like to have a more trusting relationship. What have you done or what could you do to achieve this goal?

#### **V-Group Project**

Develop and implement a project that helps the world become a more loving place, "if just for an hour or so." Your project should be creative and should help at least one other person.

#### **VI-Vignette**

##### **Black or African American: What's the Difference?**

Akiva has always been a good student. So it was no surprise to his parents when he decided to go

to college. Both of his parents were Sephardic Jews, born in Morocco, and had lived there until they were almost 20 years old. Neither of them had the opportunity to attend college, nor did any of Akiva's three older brothers choose to go. Each of them were now working in the family's successful construction business. Construction was hard physical work, but as the family business gained a reputation for consistently high quality output and honesty, the company prospered so much so that the family was able to purchase a beautiful home in Englewood, NJ, one of the most prestigious suburbs in the New York metropolitan area. The new house was within easy walking distance to the synagogue and this was something that was very important to the whole family.

Akiva's father, Ezra, was proud of the fact that his son was a college student, but he was equally proud of Akiva's brothers who were as hard working and ambitious as he himself was. Ezra knew that if it you wanted to make it in America, you had to be willing to work hard and get your hands dirty.

As Akiva began his senior year in college, he started thinking about what he would do after graduation. Many of his friends were going on to graduate schools of one sort or another. For the first time in his life, Akiva began to seriously consider law school. As Akiva put it, "There are many things in this country that I would like to be different and I feel that a legal education would empower me to make a difference."

Ezra was not as happy about the prospects of law school as he had been about college four years earlier. He felt that it was time that Akiva got on with his life. Nevertheless, Akiva took the LSAT exam and got a decent score. Ezra told Akiva about his reservations and explained to him that in his view, unless you got into a top 10 law school, it's pretty much a waste of time. He believed that you could make a lot more money in business than you could as a lawyer graduating from a mediocre law school. If you want me to pay for law school, his father explained, get into a top 10 school, otherwise, you're on your own, son.

As Akiva opened his first law school application, he got to the section where they ask about race. "I came to the most misunderstood name: African American or Black. Now, while I am not Black in any sense, I am African American. Both of my parents were born in Africa." The possibility of checking off the box for African American was a compelling option for Akiva and just might solve his problem. Akiva knew that his LSAT scores were good, but not quite good enough to get him into the very best law schools. If he said that he was African American, though, this might make the difference between getting in and not getting in. In Akiva's words, "The term African American is a term that is used to be politically correct. There is no doubt in my mind that they are referring to black people, however to call someone a black is a little derogatory. Now, if you truly think about it, I am more African American than most black people. Most likely their families have been in the US for more than one generation. I am only one generation removed from my African status. Now, even though I know law schools are referring to Blacks when they write African Americans, is it unethical [for me] to check that box off?"

**Question:** Is this an example of moral imagination, or something else altogether?

