



## **Sicha Summary**

Chelek 17 | Pirkei Avos | Perek 1

### **The Mishnah:**

Shammai would say: Make Torah study a permanent fixture of your life. Say little and do much. And receive every person with a pleasant countenance. (*Avos* 1:15)

### **The Questions:**

- 1) What is the thematic link between the *Mishnah's* three clauses?
- 2) Why is it important to know that Shammai taught this *Mishnah*?
- 3) *Pirkei Avos* teaches a person to go “beyond the letter of the law.” How are the directives in this *Mishnah*, “beyond the letter of the law”?

### **The Explanation:**

The first *Mishnah* of this chapter teaches that the three pillars upon which the world stands are Torah study, Divine service (prayer), and good deeds. Ideally, a person should strive to be fully invested in all three pillars. Practically, however, it is difficult to do so. Shammai teaches that given the choice of the three pillars, a person should “make Torah study a permanent fixture of your life.”

But what should this intensive Torah study be focused on? Seemingly, the purpose of study is to lead to action. Shammai insists, however, that study should be pure from any external motivation, even the necessary motivation of performing *mitzvos* properly. “Say little” means that instructive Torah study that “says,” — that instructs a person how to behave — should not be the focus of Torah study. A person should study Torah for its own sake.

This, of course, does not mean, however, that a person should lose respect for the importance of actual *mitzvos*. Shammai says, “do much” — a person must still perform *mitzvos*, and not in a minimally acceptable fashion, but with great dedication, excitement, and attention — “much.”

After instructing a person to be totally invested in intensive Torah study, a person may think that he should fraternize only with people who further these goals and do not hinder his studies.

Shammai therefore concludes, “receive every person with a pleasant countenance.” One must be pleasant and kind toward every person, even those who may distract you from your studies.

How is a person expected to fulfill these contradictory expectations — to be fully immersed in study, and yet to perform *mitzvos* profusely, and yet at the same time, to be patient and available to every person?

The name “Shammai” is etymologically connected to the Hebrew word “*shumah*” — “to appraise.” (*Moed Katan* 5a) Shammai teaches that if a person appraises his time properly, he will discover that he has ample resources to fulfill these directives.

A deeper idea as to why it was Shammai who presented these teachings in the *Mishnah*: The common theme in each of the *Mishnah*’s three clauses is to treat each element as an end in and of itself, not as a means to an end. Torah should be studied for its own sake, *mitzvos* should be pursued passionately for their own sake, and people should be received pleasantly, no matter their stature.

This is reflective of the Divine truth that G-d, the Torah, and the Jewish people are one. Just as G-d is the ultimate objective truth that serves no other end, so too, Torah and the Jewish people are ends in and of themselves.

This reality, however, will only be plainly apparent with the coming of Moshiach. Shammai, however, saw reality through the lens of the Messianic era; that is why the law will follow Shammai at that time. It is Shammai, therefore, who instructs us, and thereby enables us, to live in accordance with that eventual reality in the present — to treat Torah, *mitzvos*, and our fellow Jews as important for their own sake, and not for any extraneous purpose.