

Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 32:

The number 32 is written in Hebrew with the letters *lamed bet*. These letters spell the word *lev*, which means heart. This page is the “heart” of the talmud.

1. **Do we actually have free will?** Rabbi Chama says in the name of Rabbi Chanina, “If not for these three verses, the enemies of the Jews would collapse.” “Enemies of the Jews” is actually a euphemism used to refer to the Jews. The first verse is one from the story of Elijah, when he argued with G-d after the famous incident with the prophets of Baal. Even after that spectacle there were Jews who were worshiping Baal, and Elijah argued with G-d on their behalf. He said to G-d, “You made them be bad.” The second verse is one we say in our prayers on the High Holidays: “*ki hinei kachomer b’yad hayotzer*” - we are like the pot guided by the potter’s hand. The third verse is about Messianic times: “I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” These three verses are essentially saying that our actions are not our own; everything is from G-d. But how can it be that we don’t have free will? The Torah, after all, tells us to “choose life.” If we don’t really have choices, how can we do that? Not only that, but the entire Biblical system of reward and punishment makes no sense without free will. Maimonides, therefore, strongly opposes this concept. In his laws of teshuva and in Hilchot Deyot, he talks about the necessity of believing in free choice. Because if our actions are not up to us, how could we be rewarded or punished for them? But perhaps there is a difference between having choices and having true free will. We don’t make choices in a vacuum. We base our decisions on a number of factors beyond our control, such as our predispositions, our practical options, our histories, and our health. So perhaps all we really have is the illusion of free choice. The Ishbitzer Rebbe reconciles the Talmud with Biblical texts by suggesting that we are responsible for our actions as if we have free will, because on some level we do. However, while we experience decision-making as if we have total control, often that is not the reality of the situation. Maimonides’s arguments in favor of free will are accepted as fact by most of the Orthodox world, but people don’t realize that the reality might be more nuanced. The Ishbitzer Rebbe’s view is perhaps more in line with the Talmud.
2. **Christine Hayes on Divine law.** Rabbi Elazar says that Moses spoke with audacity to G-d after the sin of the Golden Calf. He accused G-d of setting the people up to sin by giving them too much wealth. G-d was so angry that He wanted to wipe the Jews out and start a new nation from Moses, but Moses fought on behalf of the Jews. Just like Abraham did when G-d wanted to destroy S’dom, and like Elijah did later after the incident with the prophets of Baal. When G-d said, “Leave me alone, I am going to destroy the people,” Moses understood that it was up to him to intercede. He had become weakened when he learned of the sin, but now he became strong, and he prayed fervently for G-d’s mercy. He held on to G-d the way you might cling to a person’s garment and refused to let go until G-d agreed to forgive the people. He said that if G-d destroyed His people, the nations of the world would see and would think that He did not have the power to keep the promise He had made to bring the Jews to Israel. And Rabbi Yochanan says that G-d gave in to Moses’s arguments and forgave the people as Moses requested. G-d had made a vow to destroy the Jews for their sin, and in a sense He couldn’t undo this vow. But Moses could. I recently heard a lecture by Christine Hayes, one of the preeminent teachers of the Bible and Rabbinic Judaism at Yale University, in which she compared and contrasted the Greco-Roman and Talmudic perspectives on Divine law and natural law. She argued that in the Greco-Roman conception, Divine law is immutable, universal, and natural. It follows specific principles, which can be discovered and understood by philosophers, and it never changes. It

doesn't need to be written down, and in fact shouldn't be because putting it into writing could distort it. But the Talmudic conception of Divine law is different. We don't see a G-d Who is perfect, Who knows all and decides all and cannot be influenced. We see a G-d Who got angry but Whom Moses was able to placate. We see a G-d Who thought He could destroy His people with no consequences and had to be convinced otherwise by Moses. We see a G-d we can influence. Sometimes we don't just take His word; sometimes we argue and speak to Him with audacity.

3. **The Zohar on the tradition of arguing with G-d.** The Zohar adds a bit of extra nuance to this discussion about speaking to G-d with audacity. All of the Torah is really the names of G-d in conversation, and the prophets are particularly tuned in to that conversation. Sometimes a prophet can talk down to G-d because he is embodying a level of Divinity that is in some way superior to the aspect of the Divine that he is speaking to.
4. **Earth isn't forever.** "Remember the patriarchs, Your servants, that You swore to them by You." When G-d made His vow to the Patriarchs, He swore on His own name. Why? Because His name is eternal. If He swore by Heaven and Earth, the vow would be limited the way Heaven and Earth are limited. Scientists expect Earth to last for a few billion years, but not forever. But G-d's name will last forever, and so will His vow. But this raises an interesting question: when there is no Earth, where will we be? If the end of Earth means the end of humanity, then G-d's vow to His people doesn't need to last longer than the Earth. Perhaps this is where we get the idea of an afterlife, in which we might continue to exist even when the physical world no longer does. According to Maimonides, at some point in the future there will be a *techiyat hameitim*, when the dead will return and we will all live in the Messianic age, but that period will not last forever. Eventually the world will end, and we will continue on in a different kind of existence, without physical bodies.
5. **Interesting ways of punctuating the torah.** When Moses is arguing with G-d after the Golden Calf, he brings up the promise G-d made to the Patriarchs: "Like You said to them, 'I will multiply them like the stars of the sky and all of this land that I have said.'" Rabbi Elazar asks why the verse switches from "you said" to "I said," and suggests adjusting the punctuation. He says the first part of the verse is said by Moses, and the second part of the verse is G-d saying He forgives the people and will give them the land as He promised. However, this reorganization of the dialogue is not *p'shat*, and it's not really necessary. The simple understanding of the verse, that "I will multiply...that I have said" is a direct quote, does make sense, though we never actually see G-d saying those exact words.
6. ***Psukei d'zimrah*: to skip or not to skip?** If you're late to shul, should you skip *psukei d'zimrah* in order to catch up to the congregation? And if you do, do you have to say *psukei d'zimrah* later, when you've finished davening? Rabbi Simlai says that we learn from Moses to always arrange the praise of G-d and then pray. When Moses prayed to G-d in Parshat Va'etchanan, begging to be let into the Land, he began with praise. And though the prayer was not completely successful, Moses was allowed to view the Land from atop a mountain. The question is, what praise are we supposed to start with? Is Rabbi Simlai referring to *psukei d'zimrah*, which we say before we get to the Shema and Shemonah Esrei, or to the first three blessings of the Shemonah Esrei, which we use to sing G-d's praises before getting down to the business of asking Him for things? The halacha is that if you're late to shul and you won't have time to say *psukei d'zimrah* before the congregation gets to the blessings of the Shema, you can skip *psukei d'zimrah* so as to say the blessings of the Shema and the Shemonah Esrei with the congregation. If you have a little bit of time, you should recite *baruch she'amar*, *ashrei*, and *yishtabach* before skipping to the Shema blessings. If *psukei d'zimrah* is meant to be the praise that we say before we begin our prayers, then there's no point going back to it at the end once you've skipped it. But if the

praise before the prayer is just the first three blessings of the Shemonah Esrei, then perhaps *psukei d'zimrah* is something separate and there is a value to making it up at the end of your davening. It's a machloket. Some people compromise by saying *psukei d'zimrah* at the end without the brachot.

7. **Competition is part of our tradition.** Rabbi Elazar says tefillah is better than good deeds. How do we know? There was no one greater in good deeds than Moses, and yet it was only when he prayed that he was answered. Tosfot does not like the simple reading of the gemara, and says that it doesn't really mean you should choose tefillah over good deeds. Rather, it means that doing good deeds alone is not enough; prayer is still needed. Maharsha and other commentaries disagree, saying that the gemara actually is showing a preference. If you have a choice between tefillah and good deeds, choose tefillah. The gemara then gives several more examples of comparisons between mitzvot. For example, fasting is better than charity, because charity is done only with money, while fasting is done with the body. There is an element in the mitzvah of fasting that is not present in charity. If one mitzvah is "better" than another, it's because the better mitzvah has something extra to it that the lesser doesn't.
8. **Missing the Temple.** Rabbi Elazar says that tefillah is better than korbanot. But if that's true, then is it such a big deal that we no longer have the Temple? We are not able to bring korbanot today, but we still have tefillah, which is apparently greater. So maybe we've moved on from needing the Temple. However, Rabbi Elazar also says that since the Temple was destroyed, the gates of prayer have been closed. The people used to misuse korbanot. They would sin as much as they wanted and assume it didn't matter as long as they brought a korban to "atone." The prophets would often admonish the people for relying on korbanot in this way. There is some danger of falling into the same trap with tefillah, but it is not at the same level, and this could be the reason that tefillah is greater than korbanot. But today, with the Temple destroyed and the gates of prayer closed, our tefillah is not nearly as effective. There is definitely something missing. And yet the gates of tears are still open. Our sincere cries will still be heard, and feeling genuinely sad about not having the Temple can help with that.
9. **Iyyun tefillah leading to depression.** Rav Chiya bar Abba says in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, someone who prays for a long time and goes into it deeply - *iyyun* tefillah - will eventually come to have a broken heart. Spending time on prayer is good, but it isn't good to pray too hard and too specifically. *Iyyun* tefillah means an exacting type of prayer, needing your prayers answered in exactly the way you asked. If you pray for something very specific and feel that you absolutely must be granted that specific thing in a specific way because you prayed for it, you will end up heartbroken. That's not what prayer is meant to be. Mature prayer is not a list of wants; it's more about asking how to handle difficult situations. We should aim for a certain level of understanding that we can't get everything we want. We should focus on what G-d wants from us rather than what we want from G-d.
10. **How many stars are there?** The Talmud says the number of stars is 10 to the 18th power. That actually isn't so far off, which is impressive considering when the Talmud was written.