Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 47:

1. **Honor on the road.** Ravin returned from studying in Israel and was on the road with Abaye. Abaye’s donkey was in the lead, but Ravin’s donkey moved ahead and Ravin didn’t move his donkey back or apologize to Abaye. Eventually they got to the entryway of a synagogue, and Ravin said to Abaye, “Master, please go in first.” Abaye responded sarcastically, “Until now was I not the master?” He felt that Ravin had been disrespectful in letting his donkey go in front of Abaye’s on the road. But Ravin, who had been studying with Rabbi Yochanan in Israel, shared something he had learned: we don’t honor or show deference to one another while traveling. The exception is when entering a doorway that has a mezuzah. Some communities today, like Breslov and Chabad, downplay the importance of honor, making stories like this difficult to relate to. But in the Talmud, honor is a big deal. Probably about 20% of the stories in the gemara somehow involve honor, with one rabbi slighting or feeling slighted by another. Honor played a big part in how people saw themselves. Nonetheless, the gemara does not consider honor more important than safety. Traveling can be dangerous, and the most important thing is to get where you’re going safely. If one rabbi’s donkey pulls in front of another, it doesn’t really matter. All that matters is following the rules of the road. Even sages don’t get special treatment. It’s important for a rabbi to realize that in some situations, he is just a person like any other.
2. **Does a synagogue need a mezuzah?** Honor is not required on the road, except when entering a doorway that has a mezuzah. That is why Ravin showed deference to Abaye when they got to the synagogue. Except that synagogue didn’t have a mezuzah. In those days, synagogues were not required to have mezuzahs. So perhaps the rule is that honor is required in a doorway that *could* have a mezuzah. Why do we always put mezuzahs in our synagogues today if it’s not required? Perhaps because we treat synagogues differently today than we did back then. There are actually a lot of rules relating to the sanctity of a synagogue. For example, you’re not allowed to sleep in a synagogue. You’re not allowed to enter a synagogue just to socialize. You’re not allowed to eat in a synagogue. But today we don’t follow these rules. We have social events in our synagogues, and large kiddushim with food and drinks. Today when a synagogue is built, the rabbi and the board specifically make a declaration that it is being built on the condition that all the stringencies will not be followed. It could be that by doing that, they are creating a synagogue that doesn’t really meet the definition of synagogue. We call it a synagogue but it’s really, in certain respects, more like a home, so it must be treated like a home and mezuzahs must be put up.
3. **Using the language of your rebbe.** When the host makes the *hamotzi* and passes out bread to the guests, the guests need to wait for the host before eating. What do they wait for? The gemara says they wait either for the host to eat his bread or for the host to taste his bread. But don’t those mean the same thing? In fact they do, but the exact wording is important because when you repeat a teaching from your rebbe, you are supposed to quote it verbatim. It is actually human nature to do this. When we repeat something that we’ve learned, we try to remember exactly the way we heard it, even down to the teacher’s voice and mannerisms. And the gemara is saying that this is a good thing, because this way we get a deeper understanding of our teachers and the things we learn from them.
4. **Eating and drinking before *amen*.** It is *derech eretz* - proper etiquette - to wait for the host to eat his bread before eating your own. The host himself should not eat before everyone says *amen*. Rashi says this is because the *amen* is still part of the bracha, so just like you cannot eat before saying the bracha, you cannot eat before hearing *amen* because the bracha isn’t truly complete until *amen* is said. That may be true more for *birchos hanehenin* (brachos on food) than other brachos, because eating is an inherently selfish act. The *amen* is therefore required to bring the individual into the group. Tosfot brings up a story from Psachim daf 106 that seems to violate this gemara: Amaymar was visiting a town on Shabbos morning, and the people invited him to lead Kiddusha Rabbah (the Great Kiddush). He was confused about why they were calling it that, since the daytime kiddush is not as important as the Friday night kiddush. He thought perhaps it was because they added the same words to the daytime kiddush that are added to the nighttime kiddush after the *hagefen* bracha, but he didn’t want to ask. So he started making kiddush, and after the *hagefen* he paused and looked around. He saw an old man drink, and that’s how he knew that they weren’t expecting him to say anything else and he could drink his wine. But our gemara says that you cannot eat before the host, so how could this old man drink his wine before Amaymar did? There are four possible answers: 1) The rule might apply only to food and not to drinks. 2) The old man might have seen Amaymar hesitating and understood why, and he might have taken a sip specifically to show Amaymar that he had finished kiddush and could drink. 3) Based on the Yerushalmi, it could be that the rule only applies when the host is passing out bread to all of his guests at a Shabbos meal; when everyone has their own roll, there is no need to wait. In the story, everyone had their own cup of wine. 4) The Count of Kusi says that if the host hasn’t eaten yet because he is too busy giving out the bread, but everyone already has a piece, they do not need to wait for him. Tosfot concludes that we can deduce that when everyone has their own cup of wine (that is not *pagum*), they don’t need to drink from the actual cup of wine that the host used to make kiddush.
5. **A long *amen*.** The host cannot eat his bread until everyone has said *amen*. But he only needs to wait the normal amount of time it takes to say *amen*. If someone is schlepping it out, saying a very long *amen*, the host doesn’t need to wait for that. That person is making a mistake. It is important to pronounce *amen* correctly but one shouldn’t drag it out. But we have a *beraita* that says whoever says a long *amen* gets long years. How can it be that dragging out the *amen* is making a mistake but gets rewarded with long life? Tosfot explains that the difference is in the intention. You’re not supposed to take a long time to say *amen*; you’re supposed to say it with careful intention. That is what is meant by saying a “long” *amen*, and that will earn a reward of long life. The Maharsha takes a different approach, saying that it’s not a contradiction at all. Long life in itself is not necessarily a reward. If someone lives a long life but the years are filled with pain and struggle, that’s not a blessing. Quality of life matters much more than length. Just as the focus of long years should be on their quality rather than their number, the focus on the *amen* should be on its quality rather than its length.
An interesting note about *amen*: the gematria of the word *amen* is 91, which is equal to the gematria of two of G-d’s names (*yud kay vav kay* = 26; *aleph daled nun yud* = 65). By saying *amen*, it is as if you are transforming one level of the Divine into the other.
6. **Joining a meal late.** Rav and Shmuel were having a meal together, and Rav Simi joined them after they’d stopped eating but before they’d bentsched. Rav Simi started eating very quickly, and Rav said to him, “Are you trying to join us for the *zimun*? We already finished our meal.” Rav thought that since only the two of them had eaten together and their meal was already over, they could not do a *zimun*. But Shmuel said, “I like mushrooms, and you like partridge, right? So if I brought these foods now, we would eat them?” Rav said yes, and Shmuel said, “In that case, we weren’t really finished eating.” As long as you haven’t bentsched yet, you could still choose to eat more. You might have stopped eating because you don’t have any more food, but theoretically you could keep eating. Therefore your meal isn’t really over. The gemara has already discussed the markers of the end of a meal, so what is being added here? Here we see an opening for someone who joins a meal late to be a part of the group and join the *zimun*.
7. **An imperfect *zimun*.** The mishna lists several types of meals that present halachic challenges and asks whether a *zimun* should be done after these meals. For example, if you ate the produce of an *am ha’aretz*, should you have a *zimun*? What if there’s a question about whether or not *ma’aser* was taken from the food? What if the third person is the butler, or a waiter, or a *kuti* (from a group of converts whose conversion might not have been real)? The answer is that in all of these situations, you should have a *zimun*. They are all imperfect situations, but we learn that imperfections don’t necessarily prevent us from doing mitzvot. The Ishbitzer Rebbe says that every mitzvah has its own internal dynamics and its own purpose. Mitzvot should not be done by way of sin, but certain questionable things can be acceptable depending on the specific purpose of the mitzvah.
8. **The laws of an *am ha’aretz*.** A scholar can join in a *zimun* with a *kuti* but not an *am ha’aretz*. A *kuti* is trusted with this, even though his conversion is questioned, because when a *kuti* accepts a particular mitzvah we trust him in that area. What exactly is an *am ha’aretz*? We sometimes translate it as an ignoramus, but that’s not entirely accurate. Generally the term is used to describe someone we do not trust, either in the area of *ma’aser* or in the area of ritual purity. It is easy to understand why we would not count such a person for a *zimun* – we do not trust them to tithe properly, and a *zimun* cannot be done for food that was not tithed. Some rabbis suggest other definitions of *am ha’aretz*: Rabbi Eliezer says that we’re talking about someone who doesn’t read the Shema in the evening and the morning. Rabbi Yehoshua says it’s someone who doesn’t put on tefillin; Ben Azai says it’s someone who doesn’t have *tzitzit* on his garment. Rabbi Nosson says it’s someone who doesn’t have a mezuzah. Rabbi Nosson bar Yoseph says it’s someone who has children but doesn’t raise them in Torah learning. Others say it’s someone who learned Torah and mishna but never served Torah scholars. In one place the gemara says that there are things you can’t do with an *am ha’aretz*, such as taking their testimony, but in another place the gemara says you can take their testimony. This is a subject that has evolved over time. Later *amora’im* backed away from these *am ha’aretz* restrictions, because they didn’t want to create separate classes of people who would be in conflict with one another. Rav Hai Gaon noted that people didn’t keep this custom. More recently we have backed down even more from such divisions. The greatest change probably came with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, because he emphasized the importance of *ahavas yisrael* for every Jew, regardless of their level of spirituality or observance. Nonetheless, it can be a struggle even today to avoid making distinctions between groups. Some distinctions can actually be beneficial, like when Rav Moshe invalidated certain marriages. That might sound disrespectful to those groups, but the decision was incredibly helpful to everyone because it prevented a lot of people from being considered *mamzerim* and allowed so many new marriages, effectively helping us all unite into one nation.
9. ***Shimush* vs. book learning.** Some say that an *am ha’aretz* is someone who learned Torah and mishna but never served Torah scholars. Is it really that important to serve a Torah scholar? Yes, it really is. So much of halacha is *mesorah* (tradition). You can learn to open up the Shulchan Aruch and read about a halacha, but there is more to learning than that. The book learning is necessary, but a real rav must understand the real world. One cannot become a true Torah scholar without a mentor. *Shimush* - a relationship with a great sage - is vital. It is the only way to gain the needed understanding of *mesorah* and current practice and how they fit in with recorded halacha.
10. **Number 10.** What do you do if your community does not have enough men for a minyan? Can a child be counted? A child in a stroller can count as the tenth person for a *zimun*. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says that if you have nine men plus one non-Jewish servant you can make a 10-person *zimun*. Rabbi Eliezer once went into a synagogue and saw that they didn’t have a minyan, so he freed his slave and then they had ten people for a minyan. So must the slave be freed in order to be counted? In this case there were actually eight people plus two slaves, and Rabbi Eliezer freed one of the slaves. In general a Canaanite slave should only be freed for a Biblical mitzvah and not a rabbinic one, and minyan is a rabbinic mitzvah. So why can a slave be freed for minyan? Maybe because it is a communal mitzvah, and because any place where “*amen yehai shemai rabbah*” is said is a *mikdash me’at* and a place where G-d is joyous. Therefore taking a Canaanite slave and making a minyan with him is the highest thing a person can accomplish. But a child, under normal circumstances, cannot make a minyan. However, if you’re in a community that regularly has only nine men, ask a rav if you can complete the minyan with a child. He might allow it.