Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 64:

1. **A home for the Shechinah.** The gemara records a number of ways that different rabbis would praise the people who hosted them when they convened in Yavneh to form the Sanhedrin. Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Yossi Haglili explained that Oved Edom was blessed with a miraculously large family because he hosted the Ark of the Covenant in his home, and hosting the Ark was actually easier than hosting Torah scholars. Torah scholars have to be fed and cared for in a way that the Ark did not. It follows that the reward for hosting Torah scholars should be even greater than the reward for hosting the Ark. The Ark represents the idea of the resting of the Shechinah. It was constructed specifically for the purpose of both revealing and limiting the intensity of the Divine light in a specific place, so that from that place the light could illuminate the rest of the world. After the Destruction of the Temple, the Shechinah could primarily be found within the four cubits of halacha. By hosting and caring for the rabbis, the people of Yavneh sanctified the material world and allowed for the Shechinah to rest in the place of the Sanhedrin. As we come now to the end of *Maseches Brachos*, this is a good reminder of the reason that we make *brachos* before and after we eat: to seek permission to partake of this world, and to elevate the physical world into a place where the Shechinah can rest.
2. **Forcing the moment.** Rabbi Nachman explains that Moses hitting the rock is an example of forcing the moment, not just because he lost his patience but because he used his power instead of words of prayer. He wasted an opportunity to use prayer to connect the community who stood before him with the “Rock” of Ages, the G-d Who helps us sort out difficult circumstances. Strong communication between people and their leader that enables the leader to truly represent the people and bring their concerns to Heaven is critical for a deeper understanding of Torah. But leaders sometimes misread situations and choose to rely on strength rather than humility or to focus on themselves rather than the people they are supposed to represent. The gemara here can be interpreted in different ways, but the bottom line is that people are often opportunistic and like to take advantage. But while taking advantage often seems to work out, we can also see the downside of taking something that you don’t have the capacity to maintain or even truly understand. Patience, humility, and prayer are essential to getting you to the right place, even if they seem to slow you down.
3. **Learning not to take advantage.** “The moment” is a time when someone, an individual or a group, has a need. “Forcing” means taking advantage of that need and inserting yourself as the answer when in fact you are not qualified for that role. We must remember the teaching that there is no person who doesn’t have his time. It can be difficult to know when the timing is right for important things, especially if you are offered an opportunity to take advantage. Davening for help to avoid forcing the moment requires patience, self-evaluation, and ethics. We must learn to recognize the difference between a moment we should not force and a moment that truly calls for action.
4. **Sinai vs. the Uprooter of Mountains.** Rav Yosef used to be called “Sinai” because of his extensive knowledge of *mishnayos* and *beraisos*. His contemporary Rabbah was known as the “Uprooter of Mountains” because of his sharp and analytical mind. The great academy of Bavel was looking for a new leader, so they sent a question to the sages of Israel: which is better, a Sinai or an Uprooter of Mountains? Rashi in Horayos 14 explains that the Torah was given to Moses at Mount Sinai in a clear and organized way, with the important principles and the details laid out systematically. To be like Sinai means to have an organized grasp of the *mishnayos* and *beraisos*. An Uprooter of Mountains, on the other hand, is someone who may not be as well versed in every mishna and *beraisa* but is brilliant enough to be able to resolve contradictions with intense insights. Both types of people can be found today. There are those who diligently apply themselves to learning the Talmud and the major codes of law practically by heart, and there are those who do not have the same breadth of learning but who can resolve complex questions with brilliant understandings. Which is better? The problem with the Uprooter of Mountains is that sometimes a brilliant insight isn’t necessary. Sometimes that complex contradiction you resolved so brilliantly wasn’t a contradiction at all, and you would have known that if you’d had a bit more information. The Maharsha on Arachin 14 explains this gemara in the context of a midrash about how Mount Sinai was chosen. The midrash says that other taller and more beautiful mountains wished to be the site of the Revelation, but Mount Sinai was chosen because it was humble. Since the other mountains wished for the Torah, they were brought near Mount Sinai during the Revelation. But because of their arrogance, on some level their connection to the Torah was not complete. The Maharsha suggests that the Uprooter of Mountains is sometimes like one of those arrogant mountains. Their relationship with Torah is more fleeting, lacking the humility of Sinai. A great mind that is lacking humility may not see the sweetness of Torah as she lowers herself to the broken and the humbled.
5. **Rav Yosef’s decision.** The response came back from Israel that Sinai would be a better choice than the Uprooter of Mountains, because everyone needs a master of wheat. They meant that Rav Yosef’s vast knowledge would be a more reliable source of law than Rabbah’s brilliance. Why “master of wheat”? Most societies at that time relied on bread and other wheat-based staples to keep them fed. Meat and fish, while tastier, were not consistently or readily available. So the sages of Bavel offered Rav Yosef the position as head of the Yeshiva of Bavel. But Rav Yosef had heard from a Chaldean (an astrologer) that he would be a ruler for two years and then would pass away. Since he didn’t want to die so soon, he declined the position and it was given to Rabbah, who served for 22 years until he passed away. Rav Yosef then took over for two and a half years. Did Rav Yosef really not take the position because he was afraid to die, or was it more that he did not feel worthy because of Rabbah’s brilliance? During the 22 years of Rabbah’s tenure, Rav Yosef never had a bloodletter come to his home. This can be interpreted in two ways: either that he never acted like an important person and would therefore go to the bloodletter rather than letting them make a house call, or that he studied Torah so diligently before Rabbah that he never had time for bloodletting. Most commentaries follow the first interpretation, but it could be that Rav Yosef subjugated his learning to Rabbah, making himself available if needed but never upstaging Rabbah by lecturing publicly.
6. **Astrology.** “Chaldean” usually means astrologer. The gemara in Shabbat 156a records a debate in which Rabbi Chanina ascribes power to the constellations while Rabbi Yochanan believes that Israel isn’t under the influence of astrology. Interestingly, Rashi points out that Rabbi Yochanan isn’t saying that astrology is meaningless, but rather that through prayer and merit people can create good mazal for themselves. This opinion is actually well-represented in the Talmud, which contains many stories of Jews who according to astrology should have had bad fortune but were saved by good deeds. But Pesachim 113b prohibits going to Chaldeans based on the verse “*tamid tih’yeh im Hashem Elokeichem*” – Be wholehearted with Hashem your G-d (Devarim 18:13). So how could Rav Yosef make this decision based on the word of a Chaldean? Perhaps because he did not actually ask the Chaldean; it says only that he was told. In addition, we know the job of *rabbanus* is not healthy, so it wouldn’t be unreasonable to guess that taking that job might be something that would shorten his life.
7. **Rav Yosef’s diligence.** Rav Yosef said about Shavuos: “If not for this day (the giving of the Torah), how many Yosefs would there be in the marketplace?” (Pesachim 68b). Rabbi Shtienvartzel teaches based on this saying that Rav Yosef used every single day to study Torah diligently. If he’d ever pushed off his studying and said, “I’ll do it tomorrow instead,” he would not have become “Sinai,” the embodiment of Torah. Perhaps he was called Sinai not just because of his vast knowledge, but because of the inner transformation the Torah he studied created in him. He was constantly fasting and praying that Torah would not leave his descendants. At some point he became blind and forgot a lot of his learning (Nedarim 41a), but his student Abaye restored his memories by reviewing what Rav Yosef had taught him.
8. **The G-d of Jacob.** Psalms 20:2 promises that the G-d of Jacob will answer us on the day of distress. Rabbi Avin asks, why is G-d called the G-d of Jacob and not the G-d of Abraham or Isaac? Because when carrying a heavy beam, the owner should approach the thick part. Rashi explains: when a group of people is putting a beam into a structure, the owner of the beam will make the most effort to position it correctly, even if it means he must shoulder more of the burden. Jacob, as the father of the Sons of Israel, is the owner of the beam. It is his responsibility, even more than Abraham’s and Isaac’s, to help save his house. Jacob is often seen as the paradigm of the people of Israel, because all of his children stayed in the fold despite their pronounced differences. The father whose children fight but still come back together is the true owner of the home.
9. **Eating with a Torah teacher.** Yerushalmi Eruvin 5:1 talks about the importance of seeing one’s Torah teacher and the importance of serving a Torah teacher, and especially of serving them food. If even visiting a Torah teacher is like receiving the Shechinah, how much more so to assist them and to eat with them! The eating table represents the Altar, where a sacrifice transforms an animal into something that is consumed by Heavenly fire. We, too, have the capacity to transform some aspect of our physical selves into Divine satisfaction, and sharing a meal with a Torah scholar allows for this transformation to happen. Torah learning is deeper than words. It imbues the food, the vessels, the company, the table, and the wine into a transformative experience.
10. **How to be a Torah scholar.** *Maseches Brachos* concludes with the teaching that *talmidei chachamim* (Torah scholars) increase peace in the world. Isaiah 54:13 says, “and all of your children (*banayich*) shall be learned of the Lord and much peace of your children.” Don’t read the word as *banayich*, says the gemara, but rather as *bonayich* (builders). Because Torah scholars build peace in their time. The Ben Yehoyada quotes his son Rabbi Yaacov, who explains that they key to peace among the rabbis is humility. *Talmid chacham* literally means “a student of sages.” Those who think they have nothing left to learn will be arrogant and will always be fighting with other sages. To be a true *talmid chacham*, one must be humble enough to realize that he can always learn more from others. He must treat other scholars with respect and listen deeply to what they teach. Torah learning is the key to our salvation and to the rebuilding of our people, but Torah learning without humility builds nothing. It promotes strife rather than unity and love. May we merit to learn with a sense of unity and humility to other scholars of Torah and consider them our teachers.