Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 63:

1. **Blessings in the Beis Hamikdash.** The mishna tells us that during the First Temple period, at the end of a blessing people wouldn’t simply answer *amen* but would say “*ad olam*” – until the world. But when the Tzedukim came and said there is only one world, this was changed to “*min ha’olam ve’ad ha’olam*” – from this world until the next world. “Tzedukim” here might be referring to the b’nei Tzadok, who didn’t believe in the World to Come, but it is more likely a mistranslation. Other versions of the text say “heretics.” The gemara expands on the point, saying that “*amen*” is not actually an adequate response to a blessing. Instead, the leader should add “*min ha’olam ve’ad ha’olam*” to the end of the blessing, and the response should be “*Baruch shem kevod malchuso le’olam va’ed* – Blessed be the Name of His Kingship forever and ever.” But why is this response allowed? It is an angelic prayer, which Moses overheard on Mount Sinai. Usually we say this prayer only in a whisper, because it’s as if we stole it from the angels. But Ben Yehoyada explains that the prayer doesn’t only belong to the angels. In the *uva letzion* prayer, which contains the verses of *kedusha*, we quote Targum Yonasan on Isaiah 6:3 – “Holy on earth the work of His strength” – and on Ezekiel 3:12 – “Blessed is the honor of Hashem from the place of the abode of His presence.” The theme of *kedusha* is that just as G-d’s presence is felt in Heaven, so too does it manifest in the Beis Hamikdash. And because the Beis Hamikdash is the place where the Shechinah rests, it is actually the perfect place for the angelic prayer. Therefore in the Beis Hamikdash you don’t have to whisper the prayer in secret as if you’re not worthy to utter it. You are using it to recognize the Shechinah in the place where it dwells. The place is similar to the day of Yom Kippur, when we can say “*baruch shem*” out loud because we are like angels.
2. **The tradition of our mothers.** The mishna relates next that it was instituted that a person should greet his friend with G-d’s name, the way Boaz greeted the workers in his fields by saying “G-d be with you,” and they responded, “G-d bless you.” The angel who spoke to Gideon in chapter 12 of the book of Judges used a similar greeting: “G-d is with you, strong man.” This way of greeting people seems to be against the Torah, because the Torah tells us not to use the name of G-d casually. Maybe Boaz was actually wrong to greet his workers this way, and maybe the angel who spoke to Gideon was making a prophecy rather than a casual greeting. But we have another verse: “Don’t be embarrassed because your mother is old.” We shouldn’t assume Boaz didn’t know any better. He had a tradition, a *mesorah*, from his mother. Sometimes we have traditions that seem like they contradict halacha, but halacha is not as black and white as that. The people who are the greatest are the ones who have a *mesorah* of what they learned from their mothers. It might seem like Boaz’s way of greeting people went against the Torah, but we have to trust the Torah of our mothers. Proper observance of halacha requires an understanding of customs. The great halachic authorities do not rely on written sources alone; they also observe and learn how pious Jews live. These customs are just as much a part of proper observance. But we also need to double-check our customs to make sure that incorrect customs do not develop. Only a healthy balance between the law and the custom can ensure that we are following the Torah of our mothers and our fathers.
3. **Violating the law for the sake of Heaven***.* Perhaps we can justify Boaz’s apparent violation of halacha with a principle we’ve mentioned before: “*Eis la’asos lahashem, heferu Torasecha*” – there is a time to act for G-d, they have nullified Your law. Sometimes holy people are able to nullify G-d’s law because the time requires it. This, however, is a very problematic teaching, because it can easily be abused. Rav Chaim of Volozhin, arguing against the innovations of the chassidic movement, said that this verse refers specifically to Eliyahu on Mount Carmel, when he brought sacrifices in a place it would normally be forbidden (because it was outside the Sanctuary) in order to sanctify G-d’s name. Only in this specific situation, and perhaps a few others such as writing down the Oral Torah when it was in danger of being forgotten, could the law be nullified; we cannot use this principle today to justify violating the law whenever it seems expedient. But the Mei Hashiloach considers prayer to be another situation that is important enough to justify nullifying the law. Since his rebbe, the Yid Hakadosh, taught that it is more important to pray with *kavanah* than to pray on time, the Mei Hashiloach says we can nullify the law regarding times for prayer so that we can take the time needed to prepare ourselves to have the proper intention, even if that preparation time will take us beyond the time the prayers are supposed to be recited. Others have used the principle to justify giving women a Torah education and opening Chabad houses in places where it’s known people will most likely drive on Shabbos.
4. **When to learn and when to teach.** It was taught in a *beraisa*: Hillel the Elder says, when it’s a time of gathering, you distribute. This means if you see that most rabbis are studying but not teaching others, you should become a teacher. But if enough others are teaching, you should find the greatest teachers of the generation and learn from them. When great people are teaching you should leave them to it and just learn from them, but if nobody else is stepping up to teach then you must take responsibility. You might feel you are not qualified to take on that responsibility because you are not a great rabbi, but extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures.

If Torah is dear to the generation, it’s a good time to teach. But if the generation doesn’t care for Torah, gather your own wisdom. Even though every learned person has an obligation to teach Torah, *eis la’asos lahashem, heferu Torasecha* – this obligation is nullified when no one is paying attention, and so you should spend your time learning rather than teaching. And when the opportunity arises to learn from a great teacher, do not let it pass. Often when a great rabbi comes to town, the more learned members of the community don’t show up to hear him speak. Perhaps they feel that since the rabbi is lecturing for the general public the Torah he teaches will not be on the highest level. But this is a mistake. It is better to go listen to that lecture, because to hear the shiur of a Torah giant is more important than the Torah you might be learning alone at home.

1. **Know G-d in all your ways**. Bar Kappara says, “What is a small teaching that the whole Torah is dependent on? In all your ways know G-d, and He’ll straighten your path.” Rava adds, “even when it comes to sin.” What does it mean to know G-d in all your ways? That everything you experience in life, all your highs and lows, your successes and failures, should add to your awareness of G-d’s presence. When you earn a livelihood, you should see G-d pulling the strings. When you study science, it should be with a desire to understand the world that G-d created. Strive to see Him everywhere you look, even when you’re not specifically engaged in the fulfillment of a mitzvah. What about Rava’s addition that this should apply even when we sin? One way to understand this is that it’s about teshuva, because true teshuva can bring us closer to G-d than we were before we sinned. Or perhaps it’s about the sin itself, as the gemara says elsewhere that a sin for the sake of Heaven can be as great as a mitzvah done for the wrong reason. Or perhaps it is like Moses’s prayer after the sin of the Golden Calf: “Now if You will forgive their sin [good], but if You don’t, erase me from the book You have written” (Exodus 32:32). Maybe the lesson is that we, like Moses, should be willing to sacrifice our souls for the sake of something bigger.
2. **Diamond cutting.** Bar Kappara says a person should always teach his son a clean and easy trade. The gemara suggests a specific trade: diamond cutting. Perhaps this is why the diamond-cutting industry has historically been heavily Jewish. Another opinion says stitching garments. Ben Yehoyada tells a story: There was a very wealthy man who had a son, and the son was raised in the lap of luxury. When the boy was 18 his father wanted him to learn a trade, so he hired the best silversmith to train him. The boy wasn’t interested, but despite his best efforts he learned a lot from the silversmith. But then the boy didn’t practice what he learned, preferring to just spend money and not work. The father died and the son got married, taking millions of dollars from his father’s assets. But years later, the money ran out. So the son, remembering the trade he had once learned, opened a silversmith shop. And though he’d never been interested in learning, he had been taught by the best, and it turned out he had skill. He was able to make a good living as a silversmith. Every time he used the equipment, he would bless his father’s soul. His wife was confused. When he’d opened his father’s vault and taken millions of dollars he hadn’t blessed his father, so why was he doing it now? He explained that he’d taken the millions of dollars for granted and it hadn’t occurred to him then to thank his father. But now he finally realized how wise his father had been in insisting that he learn a trade, and so he blessed his father every time he was able to practice that trade to support himself and his family. This is an important lesson to learn. The money we have should not be taken for granted, and we can’t guarantee that it will always be there. But if you learn a trade, you will always be able to support yourself.
3. **Letting people in.** Rebbe says you shouldn’t have too many friends in your house. Of course hospitality is a good thing, but it can be important to set limits. Not everyone has our best interests at heart, and some of our “friends” might not be who we think they are. In addition, the more people you share a secret with, the less likely it is to stay secret. So while we may want to be friends with the whole world, we should learn to be wise and discerning about who we let in.
4. **Recognizing your own weaknesses.** Why does the Torah put the laws of the *nazir* right after those of the *sotah*? Because someone witnessing the test and punishment of the *sotah* was likely to make the decision to separate himself from wine. The Mei Hashiloach draws an important lesson from this about how the Torah works. The Torah contains a lot of commandments and instructions, teaching us how to live correctly. But simply following all of the laws laid out by the Torah is not necessarily enough to ensure that you will be a good or successful person. Because those laws are universal, and each person is unique. Halacha can’t possibly be tailored to each individual’s specific challenges and weaknesses. But it can provide a mechanism for recognizing those specific challenges and weaknesses and finding ways to manage them. For example, different people react differently to alcohol. There is no need for the Torah to ban alcohol universally, because for some people alcohol poses very little threat. But for others, alcohol consumption can have serious negative effects. The law of the *nazir* and its connection to the *sotah* teaches us to examine ourselves, to think about what might cause us to behave badly and take steps to separate ourselves from temptation. The Mei Hashiloach understood that the rabbis of the Talmud learned from the concept of the *nazir*’s vow that it is sometimes necessary to create fences to temper our behavior in order to safeguard the mitzvos.
5. **Sharing pain with G-d**. If a person makes the name of G-d a partner in their problems, G-d will give them a double portion of livelihood. We tend to be self-absorbed about our problems. But part of seeing G-d everywhere we look is realizing that when we have problems, the Shechinah shares in our pain. Learning to recognize that brings us closer to G-d and helps us to see more of the bigger picture of the universe at work. Chassidus teaches that when you pray for someone else, you will be answered first with the things you yourself need. Why? Each soul is like a leaf or a twig on a giant tree. Generally, in order for your prayers to be answered the flow of Divine energy has to make its way up the trunk and then through the larger branches until it eventually reaches your specific twig or leaf. But when you pray for someone else, you activate the core of the tree because you’re not specifically focused on yourself. Then the answer can come directly from the source without having to travel all the way through the tree, and your prayers will be answered faster.
6. **Calendar conflict.** Rabbi Chanina, the nephew of Rabbi Yehoshua, was trying to calculate the calendar. But he lived outside of Israel, and the sages of Israel didn’t like what he was doing. Two rabbis from Israel were sent to deal with Rabbi Chanina. Rather than telling him the real reason they’d come, they simply told him they wanted to learn Torah, and he praised them. But then when he was lecturing, they kept contradicting him, attempting to undermine him and show his students he wasn’t to be trusted. Finally he asked them what was going on, and they told him the truth: the other rabbis didn’t want him making a calendar outside of Israel. He attempted to defend himself by saying that Rabbi Akiva ben Yosef once established a calendar outside of Israel, but they said he shouldn’t compare himself to Rabbi Akiva, who was an exception to the rule because of how great he was. Why is it such a problem to establish a calendar outside of Israel? On a simple level, it’s because Torah is supposed to emanate from Israel. Looking more deeply, G-d sanctifies the people of Israel and the people of Israel sanctify time, and such a task can only be done in Israel, the place of the Jewish people. In fact, the midrash says that the reason Moses wanted to badly to enter Israel was that he wanted to sanctify the months and he couldn’t do that from outside Israel. But if even Moses couldn’t establish a calendar outside of Israel, how could Rabbi Akiva have been granted an exception? It could be that the reason Moses couldn’t set the calendar before entering Israel was that Joshua’s job of conquering and sanctifying the land was so connected that he had to be the one to establish the calendar. But Rabbi Akiva, the architect of rabbinic law, had a quality that would allow him to set the calendar even outside of Israel because he truly was unique, not just in scholarship but also in his self-sacrifice.