Talmud Brachot Top Ten Teachings, Daf 62:

1. **Violating boundaries for Torah**. It was taught in a *beraisa*: Rabbi Akiva recounted how once he secretly followed Rabbi Yehoshua into the outhouse and learned three things: not to defecate facing east or west, not to defecate standing, and not to wipe with the right hand. When Ben Azai heard this story he was appalled, and he asked Rabbi Akiva how he could have been so impudent towards his teacher Rabbi Yehoshua as to violate his privacy. Rabbi Akiva responded, “It is Torah, and I need to learn Torah.” In another *beraisa*, the same exact story is told except with Ben Azai watching Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yehuda challenging Ben Azai for his impudence. Why would the gemara have two identical stories about different rabbis? Either there was some confusion about who the story was actually about, or it did indeed happen twice – first Rabbi Akiva followed Rabbi Yehoshua and shocked Ben Azai, and years later Ben Azai, having absorbed the Torah of his master, did the same thing. But why would Ben Azai have needed to follow Rabbi Akiva to the outhouse if Rabbi Akiva had already taught Ben Azai what he’d learned from Rabbi Yehoshua? Because sometimes a teacher says something but, with time, does not deem it important enough to follow. Ben Azai wanted to see if Rabbi Akiva embodied the modesty he had witnessed, if he actually put into practice what he’d learned from his teacher. Since the second story is identical to the first, it is clear that Rabbi Akiva did internalize the lesson. We see from these stories that Torah cannot be studied only in the beis midrash. It must be observed in real life, even in uncomfortable situations. Although a number of the details of the laws regarding bathroom etiquette have changed since the times of the gemara due to a number of factors, the core of modesty, safety, and humility remains.
2. **When intimacy is holy.** Rav Kahana once hid under the bed of his teacher Rav. He witnessed Rav taking time to speak to his wife in a very intimate way, using words that seemed inappropriate for someone of Rav’s stature who was known not to speak idle words. Then Rav was intimate with his wife, and it was with tremendous lust as if it was the first time. When Rav discovered Rav Kahana hiding, he threw him out and reprimanded him, but Rav Kahana said, “It is Torah, and I need to learn.” For Rav, being with his wife was not merely a base physical act. It was a mitzvah, both because physical intimacy can create children and because a husband has an obligation to satisfy his wife. Therefore the lustful talk beforehand was preparation for a mitzvah. According to the Kabbalists it goes even further: the unity between a husband and wife represents the unification between the Holy One Blessed Be He and the Shechinah, which realigns and brings redemption to the world. In that sense, Rav was embodying a spiritual desire that made his physical desire for his wife far more powerful than ordinary desire. While, on a simple level, Rav Kahana broke many rules by watching his teacher in a private moment, he learned a valuable lesson: that the Torah does not frown on healthy intimacy but instead elevates it in the proper context.
3. **Keeping the right hand clean.** One of the lessons Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azai learned was that after using the outhouse, one shouldn’t wipe with the right hand. The gemara offers a number of reasons for this. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says it is because the right hand is used to tie the tefillin onto the left hand. This leaves us with an obvious question: It is the left hand that the tefillin are tied onto, so shouldn’t we avoid wiping with the left hand? The purpose of the tefillin is to subjugate the heart towards the will of Hashem. The hand is “tied” so that it does not wander after the follies of the heart but instead stays focused on what is good and holy. We use the right hand, the stronger hand, to tie the tefillin onto the left hand because the right hand has a sense of right and wrong. The right hand is supposed to be a role model for the left hand, and if we allow it to become unclean with excrement the left hand will reject its message of obedience. As the saying goes, you must first improve yourself before you can try to improve others. The right hand must be clean in order to tie tefillin onto the left hand.
4. **Unearned praise.** A professional eulogizer once gave a eulogy, in the presence of Rabbi Nachman, in which he described the deceased as “modest in his ways.” Rabbi Nachman asked the eulogizer if he actually knew this to be true. Did he know for a fact that the deceased had acted modestly when he went to the bathroom? The gemara asks, why did this matter so much to Rabbi Nachman? It has long been a common practice for eulogies to include excessive praise of the deceased. The answer is that there is a *beraisa* that says that just like those who pass away are punished for their transgressions, so too eulogizers and those who listen politely and say *amen* are punished for exaggerated praises. But why is exaggerated praise such a terrible thing, and why would people be punished even for just saying *amen*? Because truth is important, and praising those who don’t deserve it takes away from those who do. When we praise everyone, regardless of their actions, we lower our expectations for true goodness and make it seem meaningless. The audience that answers *amen* deserves part of the blame because those who lie and exaggerate rely on willing audiences who don’t care about objective truth. The audience that lacks integrity and cares only about going along with the crowd is dangerous. These people will elect fake leaders and eventually call darkness light. It’s a slippery slope, and Rabbi Nachman was not willing to let things slide.
5. **The king’s clothing**. As punishment for cutting off a piece of King Saul’s garment, David was unable to be warmed by clothing in his old age. The gemara is referring to the story in I Samuel, Chapter 24, in which King Saul, while searching for David with the aim of killing him, went to relieve himself in the very cave where David and his men were hiding. He then took a nap in the cave, and when David’s friends saw the king there, unprotected, they tried to convince David to take the opportunity to kill the king. But David refused. Instead, he cut off a piece of King Saul’s garment, and when King Saul left the cave he followed him out and confronted him from a safe distance, showing King Saul that he could easily have killed him but did not. Why would David be punished for cutting King Saul’s clothing? Surely it was a better option than killing him. On a practical level, we learn from this this how important it is to treat our clothing, and certainly other people’s clothing, with respect, and to be careful not to cause damage to anyone else’s clothes. But this story is about more than clothing. Remember that this page of Talmud has been discussing modesty in the outhouse. King Saul is praised for leaving the 3,000 men he was with and finding a private spot in a cave to relieve himself. Rabbi Elazar taught that even there he covered himself with his clothing like a sukkah. Moreover, a king’s garments are a symbol of his rule. When King Saul realized what David had done, he said, “and now I know that you will become king and that the kingship will remain in your hands” (I Samuel, 24:21). Yalkut Shimoni (134) points out that the prophet Samuel had told King Saul that his kingdom would be given over to someone who would tear his clothing. So while David tearing the garment was a message that he could have killed the king and chose not to, it also symbolically represented the vulnerability of King Saul’s rule. For taking advantage of King Saul’s modesty in this way, David was punished measure for measure: when he grew old, his own garments, representing the power of his throne, no longer provided him with warmth and safety.
6. **The consequences of poor word choice**. After the confrontation in the cave, David had another opportunity to confront King Saul from afar. During this confrontation, David said to King Saul, “If G-d has incited you against me, let Him be appeased by a mincha offering” (I Samuel 26:19). The gemara says David was punished for accusing G-d of being an inciter (a *maysis*), because that word is usually reserved for a person who convinces others to worship idols. The punishment was that at one point during his reign, King David forgot the basic law that people should be counted using half shekels rather than directly. He therefore counted people the wrong way, and as a result a devastating plague broke out. How is this a fair punishment for using an inappropriate word? Because the sin was a stumble, and the punishment was a similar stumble. It must be that there were also other reasons for the plague, because it does not make sense that so many died simply as a punishment for King David. But because he made a mistake, the plague that was deserved for other reasons came about through another mistake. See Ben Yehoyada in Yuma 22b and here.
7. **The plague and its ending.** Chapter 24 of II Samuel tells the story of the plague that came when King David counted people the wrong way. The chapter begins, “The anger of Hashem flared up against Israel and He incited David against them” (II Samuel, 24:1). The use of the word “incited” suggests a connection to the story of David confronting King Saul, because as we’ve discussed, this plague was a punishment for that incident. Rashi comments that he doesn’t know what it was that caused G-d’s anger to flare at this time. Perhaps we can learn something from this comment: when something bad happens, we shouldn’t rush to find an explanation for why it happened. Rather than worrying about what sins people might have committed to earn the tragedies that befall them, we should focus our energy on helping. The plague killed 70,000 people before G-d put a stop to it. Finally, verse 16 tells us: “When the angel sent his hand to Jerusalem to destroy it, G-d regretted the destruction and told the destroying angel ‘You are hurting the people enough (*ba’am rav*), stay your hands.’” The gemara interprets “*am rav*” as “a great in the nation,” explaining that it was the death of the great Rav Avishai ben Tzeruya, who was equal to the majority of the Sanhedrin, that atoned for the people’s sins and stopped the plague. The death of a holy person can be a powerful atonement because such a great loss leads people to awaken to teshuva. The loss of a leader like Rav Avishai ben Tzeruya, who gets his strength from Torah, is significant enough that it can take the place of Jerusalem and save the city from further destruction.
8. **What did G-d see?** I Chronicles chapter 21 repeats the story of the plague. But in this version, when G-d tells the angel to stop the destruction we see slightly different wording: “G-d **saw** and regretted the destruction and told the destroying angel… (I Chronicles, 21:15). What exactly did G-d see that caused Him to relent? Rav says He saw the patriarch Jacob. “When he **saw** them, Jacob said, ‘this is the camp of Elokim,’ and he called that place Machanaim” (Genesis 32:3). This is the last verse in parshas Vayeitzei, which begins with Jacob’s vision of angels ascending and descending a ladder. Rashi on that vision says the angels of the land of Israel were ascending the ladder, because they can’t leave Israel, and the angels who would accompany Jacob outside of Israel were descending. Similarly, on the last verse in the parsha Rashi comments, based on a Medrash Tanchuma, that *machanaim* refers to two camps: one for the angels who were with Jacob outside of the land and one for the angels of Israel who came to greet him. Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes, was working to transform the world. He was bringing back the angels of the land outside of Israel and connecting them, for a little while, with the angels of Israel in his camp, Machanaim. The Mei Hashiloach explains that what Jacob **saw** was the complexity of how things could be good or bad in that situation. To bring out the best possible outcome, he invoked the name Elokim, the Source of judgment, but also the word “*zeh*,” which is associated with comfort. Perhaps it is this way of seeing that allows G-d to transition from judgment to solace, and thus end the plague.
9. **The Binding of Isaac**. Shmuel says that what G-d saw was the ashes of Isaac. When G-d stopped the destroying angel and ended the plague, the angel was at the granary of Arnon Hayevusi. This eventually became the site of the Temple, but long ago it had been the site of the Binding of Isaac. When Abraham was walking with Isaac on the way to the mountain, thinking he was about to sacrifice his son, he said to Isaac, “G-d will **show** the sheep for the burnt offering, my son” (Genesis 22:8). The word “show” here has the same root as the word “saw.” In the end, of course, Abraham did not sacrifice Isaac but instead offered a ram in his place. The Mei Hashiloach points out that Abraham’s test at the Binding of Isaac had two parts: First he had to be willing to put his love for G-d ahead of his love for his son, and then, having achieved a mindset that would allow him to sacrifice the son he loved, he had to stop himself from going through with it. Because G-d does not demand the kind of loyalty that takes away the strong natural love between a parent and a child. Instead, G-d provided a ram to be the sacrifice, and the ashes of that ram took the place of Isaac. The burnt offering replaces what many cultures used to do with human sacrifice. The Binding of Isaac revealed what an offering is really about, and according to Shmuel that was the “sight” that caused G-d to relent.
10. **The site of the Beis Hamikdash.** Rabbi Yochanan says the sight that caused G-d to relent was the Beis Hamikdash. The gemara seems to favor this opinion, and in fact it makes a lot of sense because, as we’ve noted, the destroying angel was standing at the future site of the Beis Hamikdash when G-d relented. Not only that, but the story of the plague is immediately followed by King David’s purchase of that land for the purpose of eventually building the Beis Hamikdash there. So why did we need any other opinions? Perhaps those other opinions add depth regarding the purpose of the Beis Hamikdash and the reason that location was chosen. Each rabbi’s opinion reflects the elements and ingredients that he thinks are the most essential to the Beis Hamikdash.