

Translation:

They each said three things. Rabbi Eliezer said: Let the honor of your fellow be as precious to you as your own; do not be easily angered; and repent one day before your death. And warm yourself beside the fire of the Sages, but beware of their glowing coals lest you be burned, for their bite is the bite of a fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion, and their hiss is the hiss of a serpent, and all their words are like coals of fire.

Maimonides

Be not easy to provoke [means] do not ready yourself to anger and fury.

They have hyperbolized in denouncing anger and fury, and the severest among their teachings is their statement: Everyone who is given to anger is as if he worships an idol. They juxtaposed this with the statement "Neither let there be a strange god in you (i.e., anger) nor shall you bow down to a foreign god (i.e., idolatry)," meaning to say that the two matters are

equal. And repent one day before your death. One does not know when one will die, perhaps today, perhaps tomorrow; thus let all one's days be in repentance. However, his statement, Be warmed before the fire of the sages, is not of the statements with which he reproved. Rather, it is from what he heard from someone else and he used to relate it, therefore it was not excluded from his total teaching. The intention through this counsel is-that he said to you: When you befriend sages and magnanimous men, be neither familiar with them nor overbearing toward them. Rather, let their friendship be [of such manner whereby you are able] to make

הם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים.
 רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר, יְהִי כְבוֹד
 חֲבֵרְךָ חָבִיב עֲלֶיךָ כְּשֻׁלְךָ, וְאַל תְּהִי
 נוֹחַ לְכַעוֹס. וְשׁוּב יוֹם אֶחָד לְפָנָי
 מִיָּתְדֶךָ. וְהוּי מִתְחַמֵּם כְּנֹגֵד אוֹרֵן
 שֶׁל חֲכָמִים, וְהוּי זֹהִיר בְּגַחְלָתוֹ
 שֶׁלֹּא תִכְוֶה, שְׁנִשְׁיכְתָּן נִשְׁיכַת
 שׁוּעַל, וְעִקִּיצְתָּן עִקִּיצַת עֶקְרֵב,
 וְלַחִישָׁתָּן לַחִישַׁת שָׂרָף, וְכָל
 דְּבָרֵיהֶם כְּגַחְלֵי אֵשׁ :

known to them that you will draw near at the time that they will draw you near. Do not continue to draw near to them beyond that which they will draw you near, lest you impair their impression of you and their love will turn into enmity, and you will not obtain from them the benefit which you expect. He compared this with one who warms himself at a fire: If he were to sit at a proper distance from it, he would derive pleasure in its warmth and will profit through its light. However, if he were to act with negligence to- ward himself and would continue to draw near to it, he would be burned, and the benefit will become harm to him. This is the

meaning of his statement by way of the parable, Be 'Warmed before the fire of the sages, but be cautious of their glowing coals lest you be burned. Subsequently, based on this, he continued to warn and said, do not think that if they were to bite you with their tongue you may return and placate them with words and they will be mollified. In truth, they will not hearken to the

voice of the charmer, just as the serpent does not hearken to it, as it was said: "... they are like the deaf asp that shuts her ear. Which does not hearken to the voice of charmers...." You may know this from the incident of Gehazi in which he acted with effrontery toward his master Elisha, for he was smitten with a loathsome malady, as was made clear from the words of the sages with regard to the subject of "And there were four leprous men...." Similarly [in the incident of Jesus the Nazarene] with Rabbi Joshua ben Perachiah. In each instance the detriment which they incurred was made clear, and others who overstepped the bounds of propriety.

PIRKEI AVOT 2-11

Rav Chaim of Volozhin

(As Read by Chanoch Levi in "*Ruach Chaim*")

Let your friend's honor be as beloved to you as your own, and do not anger easily. These two traits complement each other. Let your friend's honor be as beloved to you as your own. People tend to minimize the measure of honor that they receive from others, but view honor that they give to others with the presumption that they have granted a tremendous favor. Let the honor that you receive from your friend seem as valuable as the honor you accord him. Repent one day before you die. Rav Eliezer recommends daily repentance, but Hillel recommended constant repentance (Avos 1:14). If not now, when? Man cannot relax his guard for even one moment. This concept provides us with a refutation of one of the evil inclination's arguments. The evil inclination employs three tactics to prevent man from repenting. It convinces a person that he really is righteous and does not need to repent. It encourages him to delay repentance until old age. It points out that repentance due to love for Hashem is much better than repentance due to reverence, so why not wait until you reach the higher level of repentance. Man responds, "I am poor, close to death in my youth, I have born Your awe" (Tehilim 88:16). I am poor in good deeds, I am not righteous. I am close to death even in my youth, for I do not know when I will die. I bear the awe of Hashem and recognize that at least I must repent due to

reverence; hopefully, love will follow. Warm yourself opposite the fire of the Sages. A live coal is not actively burning, but the potential flame is there. By stirring it and blowing on it, one can fan the ember into a flame that can be used for light and warmth. However, one must remain at a distance in order to avoid being burned. The words of the Sages are short and couched in simple language. By stirring them, i.e., delving deeply into their meaning, they will be fanned into a flame of tremendous wisdom. This wisdom will enlighten and warm the student. Nevertheless, one must keep a distance in order not to delve into issues which are forbidden. Otherwise, one may be burned. Their bite.. .their sting. . .their hiss. The Sages utilized three types of bans and excommunications to punish wrongdoers. These types, in descending order of severity, are Here, the Mishnah refers to them as the Sages' bite, sting, and hiss. All their words are like fiery coals. This is a reference to a very minor form of excommunication called If a student realizes that his teacher has some complaint about his behavior, he must voluntarily conduct himself with ... for a short period of time.