

Unlike the previous four chapters, most of the *mishnayot* (plural of mishnah) in Pirkei Avot Chapter Five are anonymous. They are organized numerically: events and character traits listed in groups of ten, seven, and four. This was an aid to memory in a predominantly oral culture (remember, the mishnah was compiled in writing ~200 C.E.).

Pirkei Avot 5:24 (sometimes listed as 5:23 or 5:26) states:

בֶּן־הַיְהִי אָמֵר, לְפָנָים צְעָרָא אָגָרָא:
Ben Hei Hei said: According to the effort/labor is the reward.

The interpretive tradition claims Ben Hei Hei is a convert who feared *malshinim* (informers) would report him to the Roman authorities. Ben Hei Hei means son of Hei (the fifth letter of the Hebrew alphabet). This is the letter God adds to Abram's and Sarai's names affirming the covenant. Ben Hei Hei is identifying himself as a Jew, albeit in "insider" coded language.

Nowadays we say, commonly, "You get out of it what you put into it." This would seem to agree with Ben Hei Hei. But it's also true effort doesn't always yield a reward. To this, the rabbis say the reward will arrive not in this world, but in the world to come.

Questions to consider:

1. Would Ben Hei Hei support the practice of awards and trophies for participation in events?
2. Does Ben Hei Hei mean you should never give up trying, even if you never experience any visible success?
3. How does Ben Hei Hei's teaching "speak" to today's product/achievement-oriented society?