**Yadayim, Chapter Four, Mishnah Six**

**Introduction**

The final three mishnayot of the tractate contain disputes between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Our knowledge of these groups is quite vague. We know that the rabbis sided with the Pharisees, although the rabbis don't exactly see themselves as Pharisees. Assumedly this is because this division mostly ceased after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. Josephus, the first century historian, divides the Jews into three "philosophies"—Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes. The New Testament mentions both the Pharisees and Sadducees. And there is a bitter argument over who the Dead Sea Sect was—some believe they were Sadducees, but this is not generally accepted.

In these mishnayot the Sadducees complain against various halakhot of the Pharisees. There is an echo of this in a text called "The Halakhic Letter" found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. In this letter, the Jews living in Qumran write of their halakhic disagreements with those Jews running the show in Jerusalem. There is some affinity between the halakhot of the writers living in Qumran and the Sadducees as presented in rabbinic literature. Rather than conclude that this means that these Jews were "Sadducees" I think it is more appropriate to say that these Jews had a halakhic system similar to the Sadducees. They may indeed have been Essenes (this is the general consensus); the differences between Essenes and Sadducees may be based on other issues besides halakhah.

In any case, these three mishnayot are fascinating because they afford us a glimpse into what kinds of things Second Temple religious leaders were arguing about.

**Mishnah Six**

1. The Sadducees say: we complain against you, Pharisees, because you say that the Holy Scriptures defile the hands, but the books of Homer do not defile the hands.
2. Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai said: Have we nothing against the Pharisees but this? Behold they say that the bones of a donkey are clean, yet the bones of Yohanan the high priest are unclean.
3. They said to him: according to the affection for them, so is their impurity, so that nobody should make spoons out of the bones of his father or mother.
4. He said to them: so also are the Holy Scriptures—according to the affection for them, so is their uncleanness. The books of Homer which are not precious do not defile the hands.

***Explanation***

**Section one**: The reason these complaints against the Pharisees are found in tractate Yadayim is that the first of the Sadducees' complaints is the subject at hand (pun intended). The Sadducees seem to know of two types of books, the works of Homer (not Simpson) and the Holy Scriptures. Clearly the latter are holy while the former are not. So why then do the Pharisees say that the Holy Scriptures defile the hands whereas the works of Homer do not?

**Section two**: Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai explains by playing devil's advocate. All agree that the bones of a donkey do not defile. Only the flesh of a dead impure animal defiles, not the bones (see Toharot 1:4). Interestingly, Rabbi Yohanan seems to mention the "donkey" because in Hebrew "donkey" is "hamor" which sounds like Homer—pun intended! In any case, a donkey's bones do not defile but human bones, even those of one's parents do. Why should this be, he rhetorically asks?

**Section three**: Rabbi Yohanan's words force the Sadducees to admit to a principle. Defilement is a way to force people not to make profane use out of a beloved object. If human bones were ritually clean, people might make spoons out of the bones of their parents (okay, I admit this sounds strange—would people really do such a thing?).

**Section four**: Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai now uses that very principle to respond to the Sadducees. Homer's works are not beloved and therefore they don't defile the hands. But clearly the Holy Scriptures are beloved and therefore they do. This is similar to how I explained the prohibition at the outset of this issue (3:2).