



D'var Torah - Pirkei Avot

By Abby Gillman, Dec. 2, 2023

When times are bad, we turn to the book of Psalms. The Psalms capture our anguish, fear, and fervent hopes for God's attention and help. The first word of Psalm 130, Mima'makim, from the depths, *de profundis*, says it all.

I want to speak about a different work from the Jewish bookshelf, which, as much as the Psalms, has served as a resource for the Jewish people, that is, Pirkei Avot. There is a tradition of studying Avot on shabbat afternoon after Mincha between Pesach and Shavuot, one chapter each week – as is done here at Temple Emanuel. I learned to appreciate this book from my mother Sarah Fisher Gillman, who reported with great excitement about learning Pirkei Avot with Rabbi David Mirsky z'l (my friend Yehuda Mirsky's father) on Shabbat afternoon as young girl in Boro Park. Because it was studied on Shabbat afternoon, Avot is printed in each and every Siddur, between the pages of Shabbat mincha and maariv: see page 257 in Sim Shalo! This means Pirkei Avot is the most printed and most translated part of the Talmud.

The average Jew did not own set of Talmud, but every Jew owned a siddur. So even you only owned one book, you could learn at home. Printing Pirkei Avot in the Siddur matches the instruction in the very first verse of chapter one, to "rear many students" – it's the democratization of wisdom. Avot was never part of any school curriculum in my own education, but I wish I had had the chance to study this mishna with Rabbi Reuven Cohn zichrono l'vracha. I know many in our minyan (and my son Jacob) did have that chance. Reuven Cohn, and my mother, shetibadel l'chayim, are inspiring my drash today.

I used to think of Mishna Avot as simple sayings, not all that sophisticated. But since I began studying the form of Mashal or Jewish parable, I began researching the history and form of this unusual part of the mishna. I used three wonderful sources: a Lev Shalom Pirkei Avot, with double commentary of Gordon Tucker and Tamar Elad Applebaum, and a commentary by Adin Steinsaltz. Both of those commentaries have a single verse on each page, which is the ideal way to study them.

The third book I consulted is a fascinating study of the book in its Greco-Roman context by Israeli scholar Amram

Tropper. Tropper points out, for example, similarities between an aphorism by Greek physician Hippocrates: “Life is short, the Art long, opportunity fleeting, experiment treacherous, judgement difficult.” (Aphorisms 1:1).] and a saying by Rabbi Tarfon in chapter 2, verse 20: “the day is short, and the work is great, and the workers are sluggish, and the reward is bountiful, and the master is insistent”. This is called a five-part aphorism. (Another classic in this form is the saying from Rabbi Akiva in chapter 3:20.

The shop is open
shopkeeper extends credit
ledger is open
hand is recording
whoever may borrow, would do so.

Those verses by Rabbi Akiva and Tarfon are parables: little enigmatic stories or poems. The effect is created by the rhythm. My first observation today is that in Pirkei Avot, no less than in the Psalms, each chapter and each verse is carefully crafted and full of rhetorical and poetic techniques.

One technique is paradox:

“you are not required to finish the work, but nor are you free to abandon it.” “Everything is foreseen, yet free will is given.”

“If I am not for myself, who am I? But if I am only for myself, what am I?”

“Who is wise? One who learns from every person.”

The proverbs in Avot, as in the tradition of the *mashal*, or parable, the simplicity of the language belies the complexity of its meaning. The book is full of enigmas, and I want to open up some of these with you.

First: a little bit of background into the book as a whole.

Why is this mishna called Avot? Two explanations. “Fathers” could refer to the 60 or so men whose voices are heard; but the term “fathers” also connotes foundational ideas or principles. Avot is part of the Talmud – from *seder Nezikin* (damages), but there is no accompanying *gemara*, only the mishna. Avot contains 6 chapters – but the 6th was a later addition, it has a special name “Kinyan Torah.”

The sayings in Avot are all attributed to individuals, that is an extremely important detail. This is common in the mishna, because there are legal ramifications—who said it, who is the authority here? But attributions are actually very rare for collections of sayings or proverbs. And who is quoted? The most famous rabbis like Hillel, Shammai and Rabbi Akiva. And many others: a Roman convert named Avtalyon; Ben Bag Bag, Ben Hey Hey, and a Hellenized Jew named Antigonus of Sokho. Since the rabbis are identified by their towns and professions, we know that they come from diverse social classes, from judges to merchants; there is even a sandelmaker (*rabbi yochanan ha-sandler*). These figures lived over a 500 year period, from 300 BCE to 200 CE. In that period, Eretz

Israel was under Greek, Roman, and Persian rule (and was also independent,) so we are talking about a multilingual and multicultural world.

I want to share three points about this book: It's a hybrid work; it's a literary work; it's an enigmatic work.

Avot is a hybrid of a Rabbinical text and a Wisdom text. It's a mishna written in a time of transition. Notice that the first verse names the chain of transmission, or succession of Torah, trying to establish the authority of the rabbis to interpret and legislate in the post-biblical world. It seems secure, but it's also "nebulous" in the word of Gordon Tucker. Moshe received Torah from "Sinai." Why not from God?

Moreover, we don't know who the "zkeneim" are or who the "members of the great assembly:" were. It's actually a very controversial verse. The book opens this way to give the rabbis who received the Torah passed down from Moshe, the authority to speak in their own voices and – paradoxically, to produce this immensely creative text. The addition of a sixth chapter, "Kinyan Torah," to read before Shavuot solidifies the framing of Avot as a rabbinic work (continuous with Torah).

BUT Avot also belongs to the corpus of writing called Wisdom Literature. The first Jewish wisdom books are found in the Bible: Job; Proverbs (mishlei); and Ecclesiastes (Qohelet). Avot is most closely related to the biblical book of Proverbs. Both are collections of didactic sayings, some descriptive, others prescriptive, others metaphysical, others seem like they belong in a conduct manual for judges or practice books for scribes.

What is wisdom? In Hebrew "Hokhma"? Wisdom is different from Torah. "It's international and universalist" says Tucker. it teaches us about best conduct, piety, moral behavior: how to act, how to speak, how to respond to death and the big and small trials of human life. The wisdom in Job, Qohelet, and Mishlei addresses us as individuals, not as a group. Adin Steinsaltz put it this way: the purpose of Avot is not to help us to fulfill mitzvot. It does not pertain to the domain of that which is "chovah," obligatory. What we must do. Instead, it points us to the realm of that which is worth doing; desirable; which perfects us as human beings.

Second point is about the work's "literariness." Avot is chock full of literary techniques and patterns: rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, metaphors, similes. Rhetorical questions. Numbers. Chapter five is the most numerical chapter. It begins with 8 verses of 10 items each; then 2 lists of seven, and seven lists of four. See Verse 5:17. "There are four types of people who study with the sages: sponge, funnel, strainer, sifter. This teaching is not about memory, but the different ways that people share what they learn.

Hear the repetition in 3:21, saying of Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah:

Im ein...ein

Im ein...ein

These eight lines seem to create equivalencies between the terms $x=y$, $y=x$. But Tucker suggests that the form of this verse invites the reader to consider not terms that are identical, but an upward spiral, where $x(1)$ prime leads to y , but y leads to x to the second power.

One of the most prominent patterns is the large number of tripartite verses, or verses with three “legs.” This is a fascinating departure from biblical poetry, which mostly used bipartite verses. (Think of the opening of Ashrei: Ashrei yoshvei beitech: od yehallelucha sela.) Biblical style is referred as parallelism, and biblical scholars such as James Kugel have attempted to understand the subtle relationships between the two parts, or two legs of these bipartite verses.

In Avot chapter one, at least 11 verses have three legs, three clauses. What is the effect? Three is the sweet spot for learning. Gordon Tucker notes that according to Euclid, three points determine a plane uniquely. Three gives solidity; a four-legged table will wobble, but three-legged stool will never wobble. But there is also an enigma: what links the three discrete parts? How do we integrate them and understand them as part of one wisdom? It is a kind of riddle that we need to solve; or if you will, a secret that opens up the wisdom.

Let’s look at 1:6, a saying by Yehoshua ben Perahia: p. 258

Find for yourself a teacher

Acquire for yourself a study partner;

And be in the habit of judging all people favorably.

What connects these ideas ? Amram Tropper notes that the verse moves outwards, from a my most selective sphere of teacher, to my study partner, to then, all people. Three concentric circles. It may be easy to give a teacher and a close friend the benefit of the doubt; what about a stranger? in this case, the third may be the hardest to strive for.

And the most famous verse, 1:2. Adin Steinsaltz offers a beautiful interpretation of verse 1:2. The world stands on three pillars; or, three things justify creation. Adin Steinsaltz interprets that the last one, acts of lovingkindness, are the indirect outgrowths of the first two. In other words, the goal of intellectual act of learning Torah, and the emotional experience of worship, is to prepare us to become a kind human being.

Let’s look at 1:15, a saying from Shammai: Aseh Toratcha keva; emor m’at v’aseh harbeh; v’heve mekabel at kol ha’adam b’sever panim yafot.

Strive for consistency in your learning;
 be sure that your deeds exceed your words;
 and try to receive all people cheerfully.

But how do we link these three ideas together? What is the code? Maybe we can map these three ideas onto the three pillars in verse 2: Torah; worship; and the performance of deeds of lovingkindness. Thus: the first one is teaching us something about how to relate to Torah. Be consistent. The second is telling us about our relationship with God—don't only ask God for things, get out there and make those things happen; and the third about gemilut hasadim – how we relate to the humans in our environment. Again, we have concentric spheres of activity. And if so, receiving people cheerfully is not a trivial afterthought, but perhaps the proof of the pudding, so to speak.

My final point is about surprises.

As Adin Steinsaltz writes, these brief sayings are not complete in themselves. They give us only the beginning of the wisdom. They are intended to provoke us to complete the thought and draw our own conclusions. If you scratch the surface, you might be surprised to discover wisdom is just the opposite of what we might think. Which is another definition of wisdom. One quick example. I refer to Mishna 3:9: If I am studying, and I interrupt my studies to say “What a beautiful tree that is!” that is likened to a capital offense. But why is that such a crime? To notice a beautiful tree? I'm sure there are many who read this as parable about the tension between learning and being out in nature.

But according to Tamar El-Ad Applebaum, the tree is me! This story is a warning against narcissicism. It's just the opposite of what one might assume. We think of people learning as being shut away from the world. But she argues, the one who is immersed in learning is open to the full grandeur of the universe. If I pause and say, wow I am so brilliant! If I am distracted by the solitary tree, that is criminal, because it blocks my vision of the whole.

As you flip through the pages of Pirkei Avot, let yourself read this way. Observe Jewish and universal lessons; patterns and numbers; and riddles that need to be decoded. These are not just prepackaged sayings to put in your pocket. Think about the style and rhetorical techniques which shape the wisdom.

A book is called Avot turns its readers into children. Recall that in Judaism, the wise person or sage is called a Talmid Hacham. Talmid Hacham literally means the “wise pupil”. A sage is a person who never stops learning,

and as such, never stops being a child. So I invite you to start reading and begin your reverse journey of learning.

As the first verse says, the sage is not a solitary monk: but a person who “produces many students” (i.e. democratizes wisdom), and also knows when to put a “fence” around the torah, to guard the Torah from humans and when needed, to protect humans from the Torah, as Tamar Elad-Appelbaum writes.