

SAGE ADVICE

PIRKEI AVOT

WITH TRANSLATION

AND COMMENTARY BY

IRVING (YITZ) GREENBERG

Maggid Books

Contents

Preface ix

*Introduction: Divine Revelation and Human Wisdom
in Pirkei Avot* xv

Pirkei Avot 1

Chapter 1 5

Chapter 2 61

Chapter 3 105

Chapter 4 165

Chapter 5 231

Chapter 6 295

Sages Index 337

Pirkei Avot

כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשׁ לָהֶם חֵלֶק
לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא. שְׁנַאֲמַר: וְעַמּוּךְ
כָּלָם צְדִיקִים, לְעוֹלָם יִרְשׁוּ
אֶרֶץ נִצַּר מִטְעֵי, מַעֲשֵׂה יָדַי
לְהִתְפָּאֵר:

All of the People of Israel have a portion in the World to Come, as it is stated in Scripture: “Your people – all of them – are righteous; they shall inherit the land forever; they are the shoot that I planted, My handiwork in which I glory.”¹

This introductory phrase is not found in the text of Tractate Avot. It is taken from Mishna Sanhedrin 11:1. It was inserted to serve as an introduction to be read before each chapter.

All of the People of Israel have a portion in the World to Come

The Mishna in Sanhedrin goes on to list those who do not have a portion in the World to Come; they forfeit their share because of their beliefs or behaviors. Here, the sages omit the exceptions because they wanted to make a broad and bold statement about the goodness and worthiness of every Jew, learned or ignorant, aristocrat or commoner, male or female, young or old.

World to Come

One of the articles of faith in rabbinic tradition is that the physical world is real but constitutes only a fraction of the total reality. There is a spiritual world beyond this flesh-and-blood, mortal stage. In that world,

1. Isaiah 60:21.

human beings in spiritual form (traditionally called the soul) abide in and with the Divine Presence in eternal bliss.

They shall inherit the land forever

There is a play on words here. The prophet Isaiah literally means that once the Land of Israel is restored, the Jews will inherit it forever. The sages turn that phrase to mean that every Jew, by right, inherits a portion of the land that is forever (i.e., the world of eternal existence).

The shoot that I planted... My handiwork in which I glory

Having been created by God, the People of Israel are intrinsically precious. They inherit (i.e., are given as a gift) eternal bliss. This priceless divine gift is not given to them because of their actions, but rather is bestowed as a result of God's grace and pride of parenting.

Chapter 1

Mishna 1

מֹשֶׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי וּמִסָּרָה
לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ, וַיהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים,
וְזִקְנִים לְנָבִיאִים, וְנָבִיאִים
מִסָּרֵיהֶם לְאַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה.

Moses received the Torah at Sinai and he transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly.

הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים:
הוֹן מְתוּנִים בְּדִין, וְהַעֲמִידוּ
תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה, וְעָשׂוּ סִיג
לְתוֹרָה.

The Men of the Great Assembly said three maxims: Be measured in the legal process; raise up many students; make a fence for the Torah.

Moses received the Torah at Sinai

Pirkei Avot opens with a sketch of the chain of transmission from Moses to the sages of the Mishna. This chain constitutes the sages' statement that their teaching of Torah is the authentic and unbroken continuation – and the authoritative present incarnation – of the Torah given to Moses at Mount Sinai. This is also their reply to the claims of the other groups competing for the loyalty of the Jewish people which portrayed themselves as the carriers of the true Torah.

As underscored in the Introduction, the sages had to account for the remarkable transformation in actual religious life which characterized the way of Torah as lived in rabbinically led communities. Although the sages upheld and brought with them the entirety of biblical Judaism, the rabbinic iteration of Judaism looked very different. Two hundred

Chapter 1

years earlier, people worshiped God primarily by bringing sacrifices through intermediaries, the priests, who had been elected by God to their role. God was so dominant and transcending, so electrifying in presence, that direct contact with Him was death-dealing. One entered into the “shielded” presence of God only occasionally by visiting the Holy Temple in Jerusalem and going through special purification rites first. Less of the ritual life was practiced at home. The average Jew was uneducated, and rabbis did not exist.

Two centuries later, prayer was the central medium of communication with God. The Divine Presence was “encountered” everywhere in daily living. Home rituals, such as the reenactment of the Exodus at the Passover Seder, were universal. Torah study increased as the people became ever more active religiously. With the loss of the Temple, ritual purification fell to the wayside, except in the area of relations between husband and wife.

To their credit, the sages followed God into the hitherto unknown, finding new levels of instruction in the *Torah Shebe'al Peh*; they went into exile and new cultural settings with the *Shekhina*. They opened new channels of communication with God in prayer. They and the Jewish people found renewed, covenantal interaction with God and a revitalized faith and way of life. They grasped that Judaism was a covenant between Israel and God. They understood that the Torah of Moses was transmitted to the living generation, which was responsible to obey it, live it, expand it, and carry it through the new historical circumstances. They understood that preservation and renewal were inseparable, and that both revelation and the unfolding of the Torah were continuous and seamless.

Thus the sages lived and practiced the truth, which they proclaimed in this order of transmission, that the Torah was not one set of institutions or even one body of revealed law. The Torah was a covenantal chain whose substance and rules were transmitted from generation to generation. The charge of repairing the world was applied from civilization to civilization, in whatever form was necessary. The institutions would be transmitted and innovated as needed; all were included in the infinite Torah from Sinai, whose depths would continue to be plumbed until the final goal was reached. Thus this chain

of transmission (spelled out in chapters 1 and 2) refutes the Sadducees' position that the rabbinic way of life was a deviation from the classic Torah of the Jewish people.

In parallel fashion, this chain of transmission rebuts the emerging supersessionist claims of Christianity as well. As the teachings of Jesus spread among gentiles and his followers began to separate from Judaism to articulate a new religion, they claimed to be the "new Israel" or the "true Israel." They taught that Judaism had undergone a metamorphosis, that it had transformed into a new religion – a "new" testament.

At Sinai

Literally, from Sinai. This phrase attests to the divine nature of the Torah. It was not written by Moses, it was received by him. The sages teach that the Oral Torah, including the rabbinic tradition of understanding and applying the Written Torah, was also given to Moses at Mount Sinai (see Introduction): "'The Lord gave me the two stone tablets ... and on them were the exact words that the Lord had addressed to you on the mountain [Sinai]' [Deut. 9:10]. This teaches us that The Holy One, Blessed Be He, showed Moses [also] the minutiae of the Torah [the conjunctions, prepositions, and details in biblical verses that imply additional laws given over in the Oral Torah], the minutiae of the scribes [the subtle indications in the language of the Mishna from which the *Amora'im*, i.e., the sages of the Talmud, derived additional laws or spelled out further legal implications in the Mishna], and that which the scribes will innovate in the future [such as reading the Book of Esther and the other rabbinic legislation]" (Megilla 19b). The rabbinic tradition interprets the full meaning of the Written Torah; it also applies the Torah's laws, principles, and stories to later times and circumstances.

Transmitted it to Joshua

This mishna gives a thumbnail sketch of the chain of transmission of the Written and Oral Torahs. The tacit messages include: There is an unbroken chain of transmission so the later representatives and their rulings are to be given "equal" weight with the foundational Torah; Torah is the substance of an intergenerational, inter-civilizational covenant to perfect the world.

Joshua to the elders

Despite changing leaderships and variable locations, the intergenerational partnership goes on. The elders were the pre-monarchic leaders, mostly tribal, described in the biblical books of Judges and Samuel.

The elders to the prophets

In the books of Joshua and Judges, the elders appear to be mainly warriors and political leaders. The prophets, in their books, appear as individual vessels of divine revelation with a highly spiritual message, and with an authority built on transmitting the divine word. But the sages here present this *mesora* (chain of transmission) as unitary in nature. In rabbinic Midrash, the elders and prophets are associated with the chain of transmission, and their portraits are redrawn as rabbinic scholars and heads of courts.

The prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly

The prophets primarily spoke in the Land of Israel before the Destruction of the First Temple. The Men of the Great Assembly (the name given them by the sages) led Israel in the post-Destruction period. Under this category, the sages link together later prophets such as Zechariah, Haggai, Malachi, and leaders of the returnee community such as Ezra and Nehemiah, in the Persian era of Jewish history, ca. 515–320 BCE. The latter two leaders no longer had full prophetic status, but instead were deemed to have quasi-prophetic status. Religious practices associated with them are sometimes called *divrei kabbala*; literally, words of reception, or transmission. Words uttered by those earlier in the chain of transmission are ranked higher than rabbinic ordinances in terms of legal authority.

The era of the Men of the Great Assembly continued down to Shimon the Righteous (third century BCE). During this period, there was a transition from prophetic modes of revelation to the analytic and midrashic methods of interpreting the Torah's words. These interpretive methods are developed more fully in the rabbinic schools. The Talmud credits the Men of the Great Assembly with such innovations as the shift from the ancient Hebrew script to the Assyrian orthography used in Torah scrolls today, the establishment of formal, liturgically fixed prayers, the practice of reading the Torah publicly to the congregation three times a week (the full portion on Shabbat and a smaller

portion on Monday and Thursday)), and the expansion of education for children and adults.

It is striking that this model of the leadership in the chain of transmission omits the role of the kings and the priests, although the prophet Malachi states: “For the lips of the priest guard knowledge, and they will seek Torah [teachings] from his mouth.”² This omission may reflect the disillusionment with the priesthood due to corruption under the influence of Hellenism and/or the merger of priesthood with kingship during the Hasmonean dynasty. This merger violated the traditional separation of powers between the prophetic or spiritual leadership and the monarchy, and also led to the politicization and de-spiritualization of the priesthood. The sages actively opposed this union and were attacked by various rulers as a result.

Measured in the legal process

- Do not go to extremes.
- Be patient, not harsh or coercive, in applying the law to the community.
- The law works best when it moves the community moderately and steadily over time rather than trying to transform values or behaviors overnight. Revolutions often generate backlash and resistance. When the change is too drastic, it is often defeated by popular resistance, or the revolutionaries resort to harsh and tyrannical methods to impose the law.

Raise up many students

Educate the whole society. Do not let the Torah be the possession of a small, elite circle; it is meant to guide the lives of everyone.

The Men of the Great Assembly started the process of bringing Torah education to the masses. In the wake of Hellenism (and later, in exile) the masses would not stay loyal unless they were educated and brought to full understanding of and identification with the Torah. Despite the great success of popular Torah education, some sages

2. Malachi 2:7.

insisted that only a select few should be allowed into the rabbinic study house to become teachers. This was Rabban Gamliel's view when he served as *nasi* (patriarch of the Jewish community and head of the Torah academy).³ Others held that much larger numbers of students should be admitted. Once, as a result of an inter-rabbinic controversy, Rabban Gamliel was temporarily demoted. On that day, at least four hundred new students were admitted to the academy.⁴

More generally, in the first century CE, before the Destruction of the Second Temple, the sages and their predecessors were a small group within the Jewish community. The majority of the Establishment was of aristocratic background and/or the priestly class. The Sadducees' sectarian worldview was particularly strong in these groups. The Pharisees and their successors, the sages, had to struggle for leadership of the post-Destruction community. They essentially won the competition by educating many, many students. Those students in turn won the battle for the minds and hearts of the Jews by teaching widely, by democratizing education, and by raising up many of their own students over the centuries.

Make a fence for the Torah

To protect against violations of the Torah's boundaries, one should cordon off a wider area so people will be stopped before they enter into the forbidden zone. For example, one lights Shabbat candles and starts Shabbat eighteen minutes before sunset to avoid the danger of "work" at the actual beginning of Shabbat at sunset. A second example: The sages' category of *muktzeh* (that which is off-limits to touch or handle on Shabbat) is applied to money and tools which might be used to do forbidden labor on that day. Touching the money or the tool is not intrinsically forbidden on Shabbat. However, by prohibiting the handling of those items, the sages ensured that people would not take money and go shopping or use tools to build or shape objects, both of which are types of labor prohibited on Shabbat. It should be noted that when Nehemiah came to Jerusalem during the period of return to the

3. Berakhot 28a.

4. Ibid.

Land of Israel, he found widespread violation of the Sabbath laws with regard to both commerce and the use of tools. To establish a spirit of Shabbat, it was necessary to widen the prohibition of *muktzeh*.⁵

The tactic of preemptive or preventive fences recommended here worked better in some situations or generations than in others. In some cases, fences prevented people from straying from the straight and narrow. In other cases, people felt constrained and inhibited, and some broke away. So the extent of fence-building versus teaching the individual how to walk a fine line that may test boundaries is an educational judgment to be made in every generation and culture and in almost every situation. The Men of the Great Assembly felt that in their time, the way of fences worked better.

5. Shabbat 123b.