



# Pirkei Avoth: The Ethics of the Fathers

By Steve Cohen

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## **Pirkei Avoth: The Ethics of the Fathers**

Pirkei Avoth, (the Ethics of the Fathers) is a compilation of maxims assembled to enable the reader to glean the over-arching themes of sages of old.

This is the primary ethical tractate of the Talmud which, instead of expounding on a portion of the Torah, focuses on how we, as Jews, ought to conduct ourselves in various facets of daily life.

Many Jewish communities have the custom of learning Pirkei Avoth on the Sabbaths between Passover and Shavuot. The original custom was to learn one of the six chapters each week. In fact, many prayer books include Pirkei Avoth as part of the Shabbat afternoon liturgy.

Here is a sample and how to consider its meaning.

Teaching: The most counter-productive way to receive honor is to pursue it. -- Avoth Chapter 2:10

- Rabbi Eliezer said: "Let the honor of your friend be as dear to you as your own; and be not easily provoked to anger." -- Avoth Chapter 4:21
- Rabbi Elazar HaKafar said: "Jealousy, lust and [the desire for] honor put a man out of the world." -- Chapter 6:5
- Seek not greatness for yourself, and covet not honor more than your learning; neither crave you for the table of kings, for your table is greater than their table, and your crown is greater than their crown, and your Employer can be trusted to pay the reward for your labor.

Questions for Application:

1. What place does honor have in your life?
2. When Rabbi Elazar HaKafar says that the desire for honor puts a person out of the world what does he mean?
3. What is unseemly about seeking greatness for yourself?
4. What is noble about caring for the dignity and honor of others?

## **A Word**

Preoccupation with honor is distracting. It saps energy. It saps passion and it makes the self the center. At that moment, a person is no longer a part of the world. There is no vision, there is no mission, and there is no relationship to anything other than the self.

Here is the irony. Honor requires recognition from others. The act of pursuing honor is the biggest inhibitor for gaining the desired recognition. The pursuit of honor is often viewed as blatant dishonorable behavior. Honor is earned, but it cannot be the goal of your efforts.

Through the study of this concise tractate, you will have the opportunity to learn some of the history of the great thinkers in Jewish life. By looking up and reading about the Rabbis and Sages, you will gain



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insight into their times and challenges. By considering their teaching, you will learn to understand their passion for peace and living a holy life. And you will learn more about what members of the Jewish community are studying and applying to modern day scenarios.

## **No Justice, No Peace, No World**

Rabban Shimon Ben Gamliel says: “The world stands on three things: On truth, on justice and on peace, as it is written: ‘render the truth and peace-justice in your gates.’” (Zechariah 8:16)

## **A Word**

Shimon HaTzadik was the author of the statement that teaches that the world stands on Torah, divine service and acts of loving kindness. He lived in a world where the Temple was the center of Jewish life whereas Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel lived in a world in which the Temple had been destroyed. The focus of Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel was to work on those things that caused the destruction of the Second Temple while Shimon HaTzadik had a more personal vision of what brings about redemption.

Maybe Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel agrees that a personal world stands on Shimon HaTzadik’s three things, but if that person does not work for truth, justice and peace then that world will ultimately fall. Pirkei Avoth (Ethics or Sayings of the Fathers) is a collection of the ethical words of wisdom of the “fathers” of post-Biblical Judaism. For centuries it was the most widely read Jewish book, for there was no better introduction to Jewish piety, saintliness, love for God and man, and devotion to learning. Technically a part of the Mishnah, the legal commentary on the Bible, Pirkei Avoth is the mirror of the spiritual life of Rabbinic Judaism, and a record of the living experience of the sixty-five sages quoted within it. In traditional Jewish homes, it is studied on Saturday afternoons, a witness to the belief that “He who wishes to attain piety and virtue let him turn to the tractate Avoth.”

Pirkei Avoth does not teach that Jesus is the Messiah. As such, it is a text on man-made righteousness and attempts at self-driven holiness. Still it is wise for the Christian who wants to better understand and tell the Gospel to their Jewish friends to know what is important and then cross over to the lessons of God’s love through Jesus.

Imagine a scrapbook containing 400 years’ worth of wisdom from the leaders of each generation of Jews and you come close to grasping just what Pirkei Avoth represents. From Shimon HaTzaddik in 200 BCE to Yehuda HaNasi in 200 CE, Pirkei Avoth relates wisdom from multiple generations of the rabbis who crafted the foundations of Jewish Law as it exists today.

## **For More Information**

For more information about this resource, please feel free to contact us at:

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