

Parasha Emor

Muriel Gillick , May 13, 2017

The middle of May is my favorite time of year, when New England has finally awoken from the deep freeze and Newton is truly the garden city, but before the lawns become parched and the petals fall off the trees. So it's always a bit of a downer when we come to services—first of all, we're inside, and secondly, we find ourselves in the thorny, legalistic thicket of Leviticus. Today's parasha, Emor, is quintessential Leviticus. It enumerates in excruciating detail God's instructions to Moses with respect to how the Priests are to achieve ritual purity. After God finishes his disquisition to Moses about what the priests may or may not do to assure they are ritually pure—they may not shave their heads, they may not marry a divorcee, they may not have a broken arm or leg, etc.—he turns his attention to the animals. It turns out that they, too, must meet a variety of conditions in order to be sacrificed. Now the reason that all these exhortations about ritual purity are important because of the primacy of the Temple and its priests in biblical Judaism. For contemporary liberal Jews, the relevance of this entire section of Torah, nearly 2000 years after the destruction of the Second Temple, is at best obscure.

As it happens, the question of relevance is precisely the question that the rabbis struggled with after the Temple's destruction in 70 CE. Their answer is to be found in the collection of aphorisms called Pirkei Avot, the "Ethics of the Fathers," or literally, "the Chapters of the Fathers," compiled about 250 CE. As it also happens, we are now in the Days of Omer, the time between Pesach and Shavuot, between the time the Jewish people gained freedom from slavery and the time of their receiving the Torah. And what is it customary to do during the Days of Omer? It is supposed to be a time of mourning, symbolized by Jews not getting haircuts and not having weddings, some say to commemorate the death in a plague of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 students. 24,000? Really? In the pre-internet era, before Massive Online Open Courses boasted

enrollments of hundreds of thousands? In any event, there is a pause in the mourning on the 33th day of the counting of the Omer, Lag B'Omer ("Lag" for lamed/gimmel, or 33), when traditional Jews do get haircuts and may get married. And tonight is the beginning of Lag B'Omer. There is also a tradition during the Days of Omer to study Pirkei Avot on every Shabbat afternoon. So I thought it would be appropriate, even though it's still morning, to talk a bit about Pirkei Avot today. We will see why it is a good text to read in conjunction with all the laws governing ritual purity and Temple worship delineated in Leviticus. And for those who are not very familiar with Pirkei Avot, choosing to study it is an especially fitting activity for Lag B'Omer, which as I said begins tonight, because on this day we are encouraged to study something new.

Now there are a number of books that translate and discuss Pirke Avot. One of the best known is a book I have had on my shelf for many years, "Torah from Our Sages" by Jacob Neusner, published in 1984. Neusner died last year at the age of 84, having been an extraordinarily prolific if somewhat cantankerous scholar of Judaism—he edited or wrote over 900 books. That means that if he started, say, at age 24 and continued at the same pace for 60 years, he edited or wrote 15 books every year, or more than one a month. As someone who has written six books over a period of 30 years, I find it inconceivable that someone could turn out books at 75 times this rate. In any event, Neusner's specialty was the rabbinic Judaism of the Mishnah and Talmud, so he was particularly knowledgeable about Pirkei Avot, itself a tractate of the Mishnah, and I will refer to his commentary from time to time. I will also rely on a new book, "The People and the Books," by Adam Kirsch, a scholar at Columbia University, published in 2016, which explores the leading themes of 18 "classics of Jewish literature," including Pirkei Avot.

One of the main concerns of Pirkei Avot is to figure out how to preserve Judaism in the face of the loss of the Temple. Temple worship makes no sense without a temple, but for the

rabbis of the period, Judaism without a temple was as unthinkable as writing 15 books a year. It is hard for us today to appreciate the centrality of the Jerusalem Temple to Jewish life. But recall that ever since the reign of Josiah, King of Judah between 641 and 609 BCE, temple worship had been officially restricted to Jerusalem. During his reign a scroll was reportedly discovered that appears to have been Deuteronomy, a scroll that demanded worship of a single God at a central location—kind of a one God, one Temple philosophy. Mortified that he hadn't been following divine instructions, Josiah instituted reforms to restrict worship and celebration of the festivals to the Temple in Jerusalem. Evidently this had been the custom at the time the First Temple was built during the reign of King Solomon in the tenth century BCE. After Solomon's death, the unity he had brought to Judaism came undone. Concomitant with the splitting of the land into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah came the decentralization of worship—every city built its own temple. Josiah then reinstated the centrality of the Temple, which made its destruction by the Babylonians in 587 BCE particularly devastating. But with the end of the Babylonian exile and the building of the Second Temple, completed in about 516 BCE, the primacy of Temple worship was restored. And so things remained for almost 600 years.

To be sure, Jerusalem-centricity was not quite as monolithic as its priests believed. Simon Schama, in his book, *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000 BC-1492 AD*, spends a lot of time talking about the Jews of the Diaspora in the fifth century BCE—in Egypt. And one of the remarkable things about the Jews of Elephantine, Egypt was that they had their own temple. It was by all accounts a large one, a kind of replica of the Temple in Jerusalem, much like followers of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneersohn have erected look-alike versions of his Crown Heights, Brooklyn headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway all over the world. I read that at last count there were 13 such replicas, in locations from Seattle to Sao Paulo. But it

was a place where, in violation of Jerusalem's edict, there were priests and the priests conducted sacrifices. But what if neither priests nor sacrifices were permitted by the authorities, as was the case after the Romans' victory in 70 CE? How then was Judaism to survive?

The genius of the rabbis of the period of the Mishna was to come up with the answer. Instead of allowing Judaism to wither away, which was perhaps the most likely scenario, they re-invented Judaism so that it did not depend on the Temple in Jerusalem. And this was particularly challenging because, as Kirsch points out, the rabbis of the period after the destruction of the Temple, regarded *all* the mitzvot as equally important. They couldn't simply ignore those that they didn't like, as liberal Jews can today. Their challenge was how to *fulfill* the mitzvot that refer to the Temple.

What they did, as Neusner explains, was to once again shift the focus of Judaism, this time from a central location to people's homes. As it says in Deuteronomy: "you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy people." What had been the job of the priest became the job of every Jew. The Temple was everywhere—in every Jew's home and hearth. And instead of sacrificing animals, service to God, with the goal of achieving holiness, was to be performed by studying Torah.

Now if all the people were to participate in ritual sacrifice, which had now metamorphosed into studying Torah, then it follows that everyone had to achieve purity. But how could the extensive rules governing priestly preparedness, all those rules that we read so reluctantly when we get to the book of Leviticus, be required of the entire population? The rabbis of the third century CE made what I can only call a very Reconstructionist move. They accepted all the mitzvot as their obligation but interpreted them metaphorically. Being in a state of ritual purity was to be conceptualized of as receptivity or readiness to achieve holiness.

Only by mental and physical preparation could everyday people apprehend the divine in everyday life, which is what is meant by achieving Kadosh, or holiness.

Now one of the ways of “getting ready,” perhaps the one most strenuously endorsed by the early rabbis was, in the words of Pirkei Avot, “doing Torah.” But what exactly, Kirsch asks, did the rabbis mean by “doing Torah?” Was it just text study? And if so, what texts? Study of texts was certainly the main ingredient, and those scholars who devoted virtually all their time to such study were held in high esteem, constituting a kind of aristocracy. But at the same time, theory (study) was not to be divorced from practice. On the one hand, we have one rabbi saying “if one awakes during the night and the first words out of his mouth are not Torah, it would have been better for him...had he never been born.” Rather extreme. On the other hand, we have a different rabbi saying: “Study is not the main thing; doing is.”

Kirsch reconciles these two perspectives—“it’s all about studying Torah” and “it’s all about good deeds”—by suggesting that “doing Torah” requires both. The adages in Pirkei Avot are appealing and accessible because they talk about how to lead a good life; study of Torah gives us a way of thinking about problems, and following its laws encourages us to behave ethically. The laws are important because they “build fences around the Torah.” Concrete rules—for example about what to eat and when one is ritually impure—are guides to help people stay on the right path. We are always at risk of veering off course, tempted by the evil inclination; the rules are like the guardrails along the side of a mountain road. Not only do they make it more likely that we will stay on the road, but they also make driving less frightening. I remember driving with my husband and son Jeremy along Route 1 from Portland, Oregon to Oakland, California. It’s a winding road that goes through mountainous terrain and to the side is a steep drop, with the Pacific Ocean below. The scenery was magnificent but the road was terrifying. Guardrails would have been much appreciated.

So in the spirit of Pirkei Avot and the Days of the Omer and today's Parasha, let's do a little Torah. Let's look at a couple of the sayings in Pirkei Avot that I find particularly meaningful. How about: "One who learns when a child, what is he like? Like ink written on fresh paper. But one who learns when old, what is he like? Like ink written on a paper of erasures." It's interesting that Neusner says that clearly, this means you should learn when you are young, implicitly suggesting that those of us over 50 or 60—maybe even those of us over 20—are over the hill when it comes to learning new things. I think it says something quite different: it says we can continue to learn new things as we age, but we learn differently when we are older. When we try to understand something new, we take into account our previous mistakes, all our earlier failed attempts at understanding. Often knowledge is incremental, building on what came before; only rarely is it radically new. Those who write on a blank slate may be grievously ignorant of all the failed attempts at understanding that preceded them—at their peril.

Another saying, one that deals with another facet of learning: "He who learns from the young, what is he like? Like one who eats unripe grapes and drinks wine fresh from his winepress. But he who learns from elders, what is he like? Like one who eats ripe grapes and drinks aged wine." This suggests that a meaningful role for older people is to serve as mentors to the young. This is in fact the inspiration behind Soar 55, a program that I learned about from a participant and one of our members, Gerard Badler, a remarkable program in which retired people contribute their skills and experience to help nonprofit and public organizations grow and develop. It's the inspiration behind Marc Freedman's Civic Ventures, now rebranded as Encore.org, which helps older people find second or "encore" careers, in some instances serving as foster grandparents or classroom mentors.

It is worth pointing out that some of the most widely cited sayings from Pirkei Avot are often interpreted through a modern lens, with little recognition of the context in which they

were first uttered. So for example, we have the command: “reflect on 3 things—know where you came from, know where you are going, and in whose presence you will have to make an accounting.” We tend to analyze this as meaning it is good to understand our roots, our tradition and to aspire to do good in the world as we are accountable for our actions. Actually, Rabbi Ahabia ben Mahalel, acutely aware of the death and destruction all around him, answered the 3 questions after posing them, saying: “Where do you come from? From a disgusting drop. Where are you going? To a place of dust, worms, and maggots.”

In a similar vein, Pirkei Avot’s repeated admonitions to distrust and avoid dealing with the government must be understood contextually. The Jews were living in lands governed by the Romans. They did not have their own country. Their rulers were not elected; their interests and those of the Jews diverged. Hence the adage: “Love labor, hate power, and don’t try to become the...friend of the government” as well as the injunction: “Watch out for the government.”

But I digress. I began by saying that the rabbis whose wisdom is encoded in Pirkei Avot were engaged in a radical transformation of Judaism, an inspired, pragmatic, and democratic reformulation that gave new life to a seemingly moribund people. I’d like to conclude by suggesting that since that time, Jews have repeatedly re-invented themselves. Perhaps not so brilliantly or dramatically as the “Fathers,” but creatively nonetheless. The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 was surely the most far-reaching transformation. It allowed a renaissance of culture, ideas, and community among the shattered remnants of European Jewry, admixed with an earlier generation of Zionist pioneers and enriched by subsequent waves of persecuted Jews, principally from Arab lands and from the Soviet Union. But there have been lesser transformations as well. The Havurah movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which gave birth to Shir Hadash and many other egalitarian, participatory, community-oriented congregations, was arguably such a minor but nonetheless significant transformation. And today we may be on the

culmination of another transformation. To survive as a community in the face of encroaching age and loss while maintaining our spirit, our curiosity, our connectedness, and our traditions, we may need to redefine ourselves, just as our ancestors did before us. Perhaps the “Ethics of the Fathers” will inspire us to do exactly that in the coming years.

Jacob Neusner. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirke Avot*. NY: Rossel Books, 1984.

Adam Kirsch. *The People and the Books*. NY: Norton, 2016.

Simon Schama. *The Story of the Jews: Finding the Words 1000 BC to 1492 AD*. NY: Ecco, 2014.