

Sayings of the Fathers

A Messianic Perspective
on Pirkei Avot

William Mark Huey



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Get yourself a teacher,
find someone to study with,
and judge everyone
favorably

Avot 1:6

Pirkei Avot

YEAR ONE

Introduction to Year One

For the last few years, the joy of participating in the Counting of the Omer between the Passover season and *Shavuot* has been a major highlight in which I have encouraged many to participate. However, the verses that refer to this annual command are not full of any great detail about how to specifically “Count the Omer”:

“You shall also count for yourselves from the day after the Sabbath, from the day when you brought in the sheaf of the wave offering; there shall be seven complete Sabbaths. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall present a new grain offering to the LORD” (Leviticus 23:15-16).

This minimal description forced me to find a means for encouraging people to count the seven weeks between the Festival of Unleavened Bread to the Feast of Weeks or *Shavuot*. Several years ago (2004), while doing some research on the subject, a series of meditations from the Book of Psalms came to my attention that were used as a basis for daily reflection. The principal psalm that was considered each day was stated to be quoted by the priests at the altar in Jerusalem when they were offering up the morning and evening sacrifices that burned continually before the Lord:

“For the choir director; with stringed instruments. A Psalm. A Song. God be gracious to us and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us—Selah. That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations. Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for You will judge the peoples with uprightness and guide the nations on the earth. Selah. Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. The earth has yielded its produce; God, our God, blesses us. God blesses us, that all the ends of the earth may fear Him” (Psalm 67:1-7).

Psalm 67 became a backdrop for going before the Holy One on a daily basis. Coupled with it were a series of psalms that at times providentially seemed to line up with some of the Torah portions that were being studied and discussed on a weekly basis. Witnessing the Father’s handiwork in answering many personal questions throughout this fifty-day period was extremely encouraging for me. Eventually, these reflections were compiled into a book entitled *Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot*. It is available from Outreach Israel Ministries for those who like to have a tool for daily reflections centered on the Word of God.

During the course of the Omer Count in 2006, I was contacted by a friend who pointed out that one of the traditional Jewish topics for study during this time period for a certain number of communities (especially Sephardic) was the Mishnah tractate *Pirkei Avot* (פרקי אבות), meaning Sayings of the Fathers. After consulting several English translations of the *Pirkei Avot*, including some commentaries by Jewish Rabbis, I discovered that it is the most widely known and studied of the sixty-three tractates of the Mishnah. This past year (2006), I have read it numerous times to discern what it communicates to Torah students. Other than a few areas where it might deviate from Scripture and Apostolic teaching, I found it very enlightening. When I coupled this with the realization that Yeshua and His Disciples were probably aware and influenced by some of these teachings passed down through the ages, or at least similar sentiments, I concluded that it would be instructional to let the Holy Spirit guide us on a tour of the *Pirkei Avot*.

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The *Pirkei Avot* essentially contains the teachings of the Sages of Judaism on the conduct of human life and thought from the time of Moses down to the era of Rabbi Judah, who is credited with the compilation of the Mishnah or Oral Torah sometime in the late First Century to Second Century C.E. The following is a summation of the *Pirkei Avot* and its importance in the Jewish theological tradition:

“By tracing (in its first two chapters) the uninterrupted transmission of tradition from the Sinaitic revelation through the leading *tannaim* of the generation after the destruction of the Second Temple, the treatise provides the credentials, as it were, of these teachers and their subsequent students. In effect, it declares that in these teachers and their loyal disciples will be found **the unbroken and authoritative instruction which began at Sinai**. Thus *Avot* serves as the underpinning of the authority of the Mishnah as a whole.

“The sages in this continuous tradition from the Men of the Great Assembly are not merely listed in ‘genealogical’ or roll-call fashion but their ‘platforms’ are also quoted. Along with the editorial report (in the first two chapters) that Master B took over from Master A, an important statement is also attributed to each master. This statement, originally, was not an expression, however, of just one more personal view, bon mot, or some general moral maxim, but apparently a formulation of a fundamental principle or policy or program the Pharisaic leader and (later) the leading *tanna* directed to his own generation. Taken together, these sayings reveal the convictions which shaped the Pharisaic and the early dominant tannaitic schools: **that the principal task was to raise many disciples; that the pillars on which society rests are the Scriptures, worship, and acts of piety; that the duty of man, regardless of consequences, is to serve God; that the company of the sages is to be preferred above all; that a household is to be governed by certain proprieties; that proper associations are to be cultivated, proper procedures are to be followed in the administration of justice; that one must engage in work rather than seek power and political influence; that it is no light responsibility teachers assume; that priests have social obligations over and above their ritual ones; that consistency and practice and decency toward all men are what count; that study of Torah is of prime significance; that there are right ways of human conduct to adopt and wrong ways to avoid**. To these statements, which constituted the original core of the treatise (1:1–15; 2:8–14), later were added reflections and teachings of the sages who were the students of Johanan b. Zakkai’s most outstanding students, and those of other sages too (some famous from the period before the destruction of the Temple, many from the middle of the second and the following century). In this way, the first four chapters of *Avot* preserved those teachings and emphases of the *tannaim* which reflected what most concerned classical Judaism: the claim of high antiquity for the Oral law; the nature and destiny of man; the permanent centrality of Torah; the doctrine of reward and punishment; the approved course for man in his life in this world in expectation of the world to come” (*EJ*).¹

After much prayer and consideration, I decided that taking a contemplative review of the *Pirkei Avot* would be beneficial in enhancing our personal walk with the Messiah of Israel. While these sayings and their conclusions are not considered to be “Scripture,” you will note that many of them are distinct interpretations of what various Scriptures from the Tanakh were understood to communicate. Every single one of us in our walk of faith can, and has benefited, from the collective wisdom of those who have come before us, and Messianics considering the Jewish theological heritage is no exception.

¹ Judah Goldin, “Pirkei Avot,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica. MS Windows 9x*. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

Introduction to Year One

This series of teachings offers two years of reflections, plus an additional six days, that are compiled from my 2006 and 2007 Counting the Omer series. I primarily use the translation *Pirkei Avos* by Rabbi Avrohom Davis (New York: Metsudah Publications, 1986). This is a modern English translation, which includes a compilation of Rabbinical commentaries over the centuries. On occasion, I may also be using Jacob Neusner's translation of the Mishnah (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).

In his introduction to the *Pirkei Avot*, Davis quotes from Isaiah 60:21, "And your people, all of them righteous, shall possess the land for all time; they are the shoot that I planted, My handiwork in which I glory" (NJPS). This verse summarizes and describes the goal that one should strive for by studying the Sayings of the Fathers. Additionally, it is usually read in synagogues before the readings from the *Pirkei Avot* are considered. Consequently, as a friendly reminder, I will begin each of our reflections with this quotation from the Prophet Isaiah. Certainly, no one who believes in the Holy Scriptures can question this statement from one of Israel's greatest Prophets.

I hope and pray that these short reflections will be used by the Holy One to help each of us better understand what it means to walk as Yeshua walked.

Until the restoration of all things...

Mark Huey

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DAY ONE

*And your people, all of them righteous, shall possess the land for all time; they are the shoot that I planted, My handiwork in which I glory
(Isaiah 60:21, NJPS).*

Moses received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua, and Joshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets handed it down to the Members of the Great Assembly. They [the latter] stated three principles: Be deliberate in judgment; educate many disciples; and set protective bounds for the Torah (m. *Avot* 1:1).²

As we begin our review of the *Pirkei Avot*, we are reminded that the long history of the Torah, from its reception at Mount Sinai to the members of the Great Assembly during the generation of Ezra was maintained throughout the history of Israel. First, it is noted that Moses was the initial recipient of the laws of our Creator:

“Now the LORD said to Moses, ‘Come up to Me on the mountain and remain there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the law and the commandment which I have written for their instruction’” (Exodus 24:12).

Next, we are reminded that Moses transmitted the Torah to Joshua, his faithful servant who never departed from the Tent of Meeting, when the Lord was speaking to Moses:

“Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent” (Exodus 33:11).

Apparently, the Father always intended the Torah, as received by Moses, to be passed down from generation to generation. Joshua, being the obedient disciple of Moses, was chosen to receive the precious contents of the Torah for his generation.

Accordingly, the generations that followed Joshua, specifically during the time of the Judges when elder-rule predominated, received the instructions and preserved them for future generations. The checkered history of Israel during the period of Judges finally culminates with the beginning of the prophetic era during the time of the priest Eli and the Prophet Samuel.

The Prophets from Samuel to the exiles of the Southern Kingdom were responsible for preserving the Torah for future generations. The *Pirkei Avot* indicates that the Torah was finally passed on to the “Great Assembly,” or the 120 sages who included notables such as Ezra, Nehemiah, Zerubbabel, and Mordecai. These men were partially responsible for the return of the Southern Kingdom exiles to the Land of Israel

² Rabbi Avrohom Davis, trans., *Pirkei Avos: The Wisdom of the Fathers* (New York: Metsudah Publications, 1986), 5.

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from exile in Babylon. It was these men who placed a great emphasis on returning to the Torah as a basis for reestablishing God's rule and prominence in the hearts of the people.

By the time of Ezra and the return to Jerusalem, the bodies of writings not only credited to Moses, but also many of the prophets, began being compiled into what would later be considered the canon of the Tanakh.³ These writings were the Holy Scriptures that were used during the times of Yeshua and the Apostles. The Apostle Paul writes Timothy that the Torah and ancillary writings, "all Scripture," were essential for living a life that is continually in God's service:

"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Next, the *Pirkei Avot* indicates that three maxims are considered to be instrumental in preserving the Torah's instruction from Moses to this very day: "(1) **Be prudent in judgment.** (2) **Raise up many disciples.** (3) **Make a fence for the Torah**" (m.*Avot* 1:1, Neusner).⁴ Interestingly, as you read these declarations, you discover that the First Century Apostles were very much influenced by these conclusions.

First, one is to be deliberate in judgment or not make rash decisions. Paul reiterates this concept in his letter to the Romans where he exhorts his readers to exercise "sound judgment," recognizing that Believers are all different, but nevertheless, part of one Body of Messiah:

"For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have **sound judgment**, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Messiah, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:3-5).

Likewise, the Apostle Peter uses the statement "sound judgment" to encourage his readers to let love cover a multitude of sins:

"The end of all things is near; therefore, be of **sound judgment** and sober *spirit* for the purpose of prayer. Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:7-8).

Obviously, these and a number of similar statements about making informed decisions, using discernment, and being wise, occur throughout the Apostolic Scriptures. They all indicate the necessity to maintain deliberate judgment in order to build up the Body of the Messiah while covering a multitude of transgressions.

The second axiom is the admonition to educate many disciples, which is one of the foundational building blocks of our faith. We should all remember that Yeshua's departing instructions included the strong admonition for His Disciples to continue the process of making more disciples throughout the world:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

³ Tanakh/Tanach (תנ"ך) is a Hebrew acronym for *Torah* (Law), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings).

⁴ Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 672.

One must make disciples in order to perpetuate one's faith or religious beliefs. Israel was commanded in the Torah to be a "light unto the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). By Israel keeping and following God's instructions, it could be blessed and thus be a testimony to other nations (Deuteronomy 4:4-9). Unless one makes disciples or *talmidim* (תלמידים), the understanding of Torah principles being spread to the world will not take place unless we each take on the responsibility of teaching those who are led into our folds. Is not Israel to be a vehicle that teaches the principles of the Torah to men and women from all nations, tongues, and tribes (Revelation 7:9), who certainly be obedient to it in the Kingdom to Come (Zechariah 14:16-17)?

Finally, the last injunction given is to set protective bounds for the Torah. How this has been applied throughout Jewish history is a matter of great discussion and debate in the emerging Messianic movement. Taken too extreme, this can mean making fences around Torah commandments—adding additional manmade commandments at the level of Scripture—in order to keep the natural tendencies of human beings from even thinking about violating the Torah. A major issue present in Messianic theology today is the role that tradition plays, and we will likely have no consensus on it until Yeshua returns.

Many of the Rabbis throughout Jewish history have taken this final encouragement to protect the integrity of the Torah beyond its straightforward meaning. Perhaps there can be some limited "fences," if you will, in the form of practical disciplines that will help prevent individuals from violating the Torah. Certainly, similar methods have been used in Christian history by Believers reflecting on parts of Scripture, disciplining themselves not to be distracted by food or drink during focused times of prayer or meditation, and becoming accountable to others when temptations of the flesh arise. But these techniques, even though manmade, have always been intended to enhance one's relationship with God. However, in Judaism, many extra-Biblical ordinances have arisen that have subtracted, if not negated, the straightforward meaning of some Torah commandments.

A significant example of how "fence building" can take one away from the more meaningful aspects of the Torah comes in Matthew 23, when Yeshua Himself confronts the Pharisaical leaders of His day about their propensity to follow some minute interpretations of the Torah, while disregarding the weightier tenants such as justice and mercy:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others" (Matthew 23:23).

Certainly, these leaders should have been more than fully conscious of the Torah's instructions on justice, mercy, and faithfulness, but for some reason ignored them to focus on the minutiae of their interpretations. In His remark about "You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin" (NIV), Yeshua could have been referring to "weeds" that grew wild in potted plants in the city of Jerusalem. Surely, if one is going to tithe from wild-growing plants—and is a religious leader—than principles such as justice and mercy *should not be forgotten*. These are aspects of the Torah that one should strive to inculcate in his or her heart and mind. In so doing, the very words and understood precepts of the Holy Writ will become ingrained into our character.

Like the previous generations who have handled the Torah, applied it to their lives and setting, and passed along its essence, will we be fulfilling its commandments? Will we employ sound judgment in our discipleship of others, while protecting the integrity of the Torah? If we do, not only will its reliability be

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preserved for us, but also for future generations. I would pray that we can leave a legacy so that the Torah's principles will continue to perpetuate a people who are molded and blessed by the Holy One of Israel.

Certainly, these are great things to ponder as we depart on our fifty-day journey through the *Pirkei Avot* on our way to celebrate the giving of the Torah on *Shavuot* in just a matter of seven weeks.

DAY TWO

*And your people, all of them righteous, shall possess the land for all time; they are the shoot that I planted, My handiwork in which I glory
(Isaiah 60:21, NJPS).*

Shimon the Righteous was one of the last survivors of the Great Assembly. He used to say: The world is based upon three principles: On the Torah; on serving God; and on acts of lovingkindness (m.Avot 1:2).⁵

As we turn to the *Pirkei Avot*, we are introduced to Simeon the Righteous, who is the high priest who followed Ezra and the last member of the Great Assembly discussed yesterday. Here once again, we see the tradition of passing down the instruction of the Torah to the next generation.

In m.*Avot* 1:2, we discover three essential principles that Simeon the Righteous claims establish the foundations of the world: the Torah, serving God, and acts of lovingkindness. These principles are consistent with what the Apostles teach in their writings, especially in light of Yeshua, the Word, becoming flesh and dwelling among us:

“In the beginning was the **Word**, and the **Word** was with God, and the **Word** was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. **In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.** The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it...And **the Word became flesh**, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-5, 14).

We first see a parallel between the members of the Great Assembly passing down God’s Instruction and the compilation of the Gospels. The tradition of carefully passing down God’s decrees for each successive generation may be likened to the accuracy of describing the life and times of Messiah Yeshua. The opening of the Gospel of Luke mentions that the good doctor thoroughly investigated the events before compiling them into a narrative:

“Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and **servants of the word**, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1-4).

Luke writes that he followed “the traditions handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and servants of the Gospel,” writing a “connected narrative” (NEB) for his Roman patron, Theophilus. While Luke’s Gospel is often considered to be the most thorough and detailed of the others, Luke did not do

⁵ Davis, 8.

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anything new, as he was consistently following a tradition of accurately portraying the events as would have been expected of any Jewish work of the period. Consequently, I believe we can have total faith and confidence in the Scriptures that have been passed down to us over the millennia.

Secondly, we need to understand that serving God is one of the reasons Israel has been called out as His chosen people. When you consider the number of times that Moses told Pharaoh about God's insistence that Israel serve Him, you can understand how Simeon the Righteous makes this one of the three foundations of the world:

"You shall say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you, saying, "Let My people go, **that they may serve Me** in the wilderness. But behold, you have not listened until now'" (Exodus 7:16).

Thirdly, acts of lovingkindness are mentioned as the final building block of the world. These are active works of not just charity or sympathy toward one's fellow humans, but also things such as bringing joy to a bride and bridegroom, comforting a mourner, visiting the sick, burying the dead, or lending money free of interest.

As we consider what the Rabbis have to say, we can conclude that the three pillars of the world are embodied in the wisdom of the Torah, serving God through observance of His commands, and exhibiting proper conduct among people by extending acts of lovingkindness. Perhaps today we should ask ourselves this question: If the Torah, serving God, and demonstrating acts of lovingkindness are indeed the three foundational building blocks of the world, **just how is my life clinging to them in order to be useful during my time here on Earth?** This is something that I would ask you to contemplate as we go before the Father during this year's Counting of the Omer.