



THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

1 - 2 May, 2009

8 Iyar 5769

Parashat Acharei Mot – Kedoshim
(Leviticus 16:1–20:27)

Rabbi Stan Zamek
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

From the Rabbi's desk

After the TaNaKH itself, one of the most studied and best loved Jewish texts is the tractate of the Mishna known as Pirkei Avot, the Chapters of the Fathers. Pirkei Avot is an anthology of teachings by the great sages of the early Rabbinic period. Like the rest of the Mishna, it was first committed to writing around 200 CE. Beginning in the 9th century, customs developed to ensure that this collection of aphorisms and admonitions would be read frequently during the Jewish year. The six chapters of Pirkei Avot are traditionally studied sequentially on the six Shabbatot between Pesach and Shavuot and then reviewed again each Shabbat between Shavuot and Rosh HaShanah. These are teachings we are meant to know well.

Pirkei Avot is part of the weave of Jewish life. Even those who have never read it, know many of its teachings. Here are just a few of Pirkei Avot's "Greatest Hits":

*The world rests on three things: on Torah, on worship, and acts of loving-kindness.
If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And, if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?
Who is wise? The one who learns from everyone. . . Who is rich? One who is happy with what one has.
Turn it [the Torah] over and over again, for everything is in it. Reflect on it, grow old and gray in it. Do not turn from it, for nothing is better than it.*

Although Pirkei Avot is part of what is essentially a compendium of law, it is itself not a legal text. Rather, it is one of the world's first and best self-help books. Pirkei Avot is a manual on how to refine one's character and be a better Jew, which for the Rabbis amounts to the same thing. As an ancient text, some of its statements are puzzling for moderns and a few are even repugnant. On the whole, however, Pirkei Avot addresses itself to the central concerns of life in this or any age. It is old, but always feels new, which is why it has been reprinted thousands of times, commented on by all the great teachers of the tradition, and continuously studied.

So here is an invitation: Let's get together and read this accessible, yet deep text. If you have studied Pirkei Avot before, it is time to do so again with your friends from the UJC. "Turn it over, and over again." I guarantee you will find something new. If you have never experienced these teachings, there are some things that the Rabbis of Pirkei Avot need to tell you and that you need to hear. Although there will be time for discussion as we study, our aim will be to complete the text by mid- June . We will not make the Shavuot deadline, but you will get a jump on the Shavuot to Rosh HaShanah round. Come either on Tuesday nights at the UJC or Wednesdays at lunchtime at Jonathan Kriegel's office (see this issue of Shabbat Shalom for registration details). You are free to mix and match as you please.

Come and learn. Let's help each other to not just understand, but to live this important teaching of Pirkei Avot:

When two sit together and exchange words of Torah, the Divine Presence dwells among them.

All Blessings
Rabbi Z
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30th April, 2009