

Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary
 by Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz
 (New York: CCAR Press, 2018), 468 pp.

Pirkei Avot stands out among the sixty-three tractates of the Mishnah as a treatise devoted to ethical exhortation and guidance. Some scholars claim it was originally a manual directed at rabbi-judges. However, there is no question that its words have gained widespread popular currency. Traditional rabbinic commentaries from Simcha ben Samuel of Vitry in eleventh-century France and Moses Maimonides in twelfth-century Egypt through Jacob Emden of eighteenth-century Germany and Samson Raphael Hirsch of nineteenth-century Frankfurt testify to the central role this text has occupied for generations.

Its aphorisms and insights are quoted in countless contemporary contexts and precincts (not to mention sung in Jewish summer camps!) as well, and attention to *Pirkei Avot* has certainly garnered attention in modern Reform settings. The widely studied commentary of the prominent British Unitarian minister and famed scholar of Rabbinic Literature R. Travers Hereford, assisted by my beloved teacher of Talmud Rabbi John J. Tepfer from my rabbinic student days at HUC-JIR/NY, *Pirke Aboth, The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers*, was reissued in 1987. My teacher Rabbi Leonard Kravitz and my friend Rabbi Kerry Olitzky also co-edited and translated *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* through the UAH Press in 1993. In more recent years, Reform layman William Berkson published *Pirke Avot: Timeless Wisdom for Modern Life* (2011) with the Jewish Publication Society.

Pirkei Avot has also been the subject of intense study and contemporary comment in our sister denominational circles. Our Conservative colleagues Rabbis Tamar Elad-Appelbaum and Gordon Tucker published a compelling commentary on *Pirkei Avot, Teachings of the Sages*, in *Lev Shalem*, the new prayer book of the Conservative Movement. In accord with the Rabbinic tradition that assigns the six chapters of *Pirkei Avot* for study during *Sefirat Ha-Omer* (the Counting of the Omer) during the forty-nine days that lead from Passover to Shavuot, their commentary focuses on the ongoing nature of a received Jewish tradition and appears in the Shabbat afternoon sections of the Conservative siddur. Finally, I would note that the great Orthodox communal leader and

theologian Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg, has added his own insights on *Pirke Avot*, in his *Sage Advice*.

The CCAR Press now joins this august list of interpretations and provides novel wisdom on this classical text through the writing of Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, in his *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*. Ordained at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, Rabbi Yanklowitz received an M.A. in leadership and psychology at Harvard and another M.A. in Jewish philosophy from Yeshiva University. He earned his doctorate at Columbia University. After time in the pulpit and Hillel, Rabbi Yanklowitz came to Phoenix, where he has served as president and dean of the Valley Beit Midrash since 2013. In that capacity, Rabbi Yanklowitz has been overwhelmingly successful in bringing scholars and leaders of all types from every part of the Jewish world to teach in the Phoenix area.

Rabbi Yanklowitz is also one of the most dynamic and charismatic Jewish social activists of his generation. He founded Uri L'Tzedek, an Orthodox movement for social justice. Rabbi Yanklowitz has also established the Shamayim V'Aretz Institute, which is devoted to animal welfare, and Yatom, a network for Jewish adoption and foster care. Along with other rabbis like our own Rabbi Jonah Pesner of the Reform Religious Action Center and Rabbi Jill Jacobs of T'ruah, Rabbi Yanklowitz has become a powerful voice for social justice in our time and his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* is distinctive in its focus on this theme. Given the commitment of the Reform Movement to social justice, it is fitting that a commentary on this classical tractate be published under the aegis of the CCAR Press. In addition, the inclusive nature of the Reform Movement and the transdenominational reality of the American Jewish world is reflected in the Press's decision to publish the thoughts of this open Orthodox rabbi on this unique text.

Rabbi Yanklowitz has drawn on a breathtaking number of sources and persons as well as his own personal experiences in composing his commentary. Commentators ancient and modern, men and women, Jew and gentile, as well as insights and anecdotes drawn from his own life and a variety of academic disciplines are all in conversation with one another in this pathbreaking commentary on this traditional text. Rabbi Yanklowitz describes his own aims here by citing the words of his “teacher Rabbi Yitz Greenberg,” who states that *Pirkei Avot* should “serve as an inspiration and a challenge to our generation to follow in the footsteps

of the sages—to offer new wisdom, to uncover new revelation, to unite past, present, and future, and to help the Jewish people and all of humanity find their way through the next phase of the covenantal journey toward a perfected world” (pp. x–xi). *Pirkei Avot*, in the capable hands of Rabbi Yanklowitz, surely does this. Throughout, Rabbi Yanklowitz inspires.

Even more significantly, Rabbi Yanklowitz challenges his readers, as the title of his commentary suggests, to improve the world. He unflinchingly contends that these teachings of the ancient Sages clap “a moral yoke upon the Jewish people” (p. 11). In his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* 2:1, “Know what is above you,” he emphasizes what this “yoke” entails. There he cites the words of the S’fat Emet (Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, 1847–1905, of Poland), “Know that *what* is above you is from you,” on this mishnah. As Rabbi Yanklowitz explains, the Alter Rebbe believed that “the actions of heaven are affected by the behaviors that take place on earth” (p. 61). The message is clear: God is dependent upon the actions of men and women if God is to be manifest in the world.

Rabbi Yanklowitz also does not shy away from dealing with difficult passages that are at odds with a modern sensibility. For example, 1:5, which states, “Anyone who talks excessively with a woman causes evil . . . ,” is surely problematic for anyone who possesses a contemporary notion of gender equality. Here Rabbi Yanklowitz contextualizes the passage historically and then insists, quoting both Judith Plaskow and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, that we must move beyond the rigid and restricting gender roles imposed by an ancient social order. Instead, Judaism today “must be adamant about embracing feminism and women’s equality” (p. 19). Elsewhere, he writes that Judaism needs to foster “new models for peace, equity, and justice” (p. 30) and urges Jews and others to emulate “Hillel’s peacemaking and love sharing” (p. 41). On 1:14, “If I am not for myself,” Rabbi Yanklowitz acknowledges that it is challenging to find “the proper balance between religious self-preservation and self-sacrifice” (p. 44). Of course, this means that each of us must “embrace doubt and reflection.” Nevertheless, Rabbi Yanklowitz contends that “doubt and reflection” cannot allow humanity to surrender to “paralysis” (pp. 50ff.) and he points out over and over again throughout the pages of his commentary how the resources of Jewish tradition can provide guidance and direction for modern persons.

Such insights, buttressed by a wide variety of voices, fill the pages of *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary* and make it well worth study and reflection. As Rabbi Yanklowitz himself concluded, "If we have so much to do to repair a broken world, why study *Pirkei Avot*?" His answer, as demonstrated throughout this book, is that:

we can address the messy outer work of the world only if we address the messy inner work in our lives. Study, meditation, prayer, learning, debate, and spiritual journeying ensure that we remain open and evolving, and that we will challenge ourselves to achieve the unique potential within. If we truly seek to change the world, the Sages can stimulate us to do this in more nuanced and effective ways. These timeless teachings from the Rabbis are merely the start for endless discussions about our identities and values. May the teachings found within *Pirkei Avot* continue to inspire us to learn and to grow, to bring holy compassion to every facet of our lives. (p. 420).

For all of us who will have the privilege to read his commentary, we can only thank Rabbi Yanklowitz for the inspiration and uplift his book brings. The CCAR Press is to be applauded for providing this work to the public. It should become a staple text in synagogue and home, in classrooms and in community.

DAVID ELLENSON is chancellor emeritus and former president of HUC-JIR. He is also former director of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies and professor emeritus of Near Eastern and Judaic studies at Brandeis University.