

In Pursuit of the Art of Living (September 2005)

It should come as no surprise that whenever I enter a bookstore I find myself headed first towards the “Religion” section. And unless there’s something specific I’m looking for, I usually scan the shelves first for new books, then books with catchy titles, but finally and almost always I end up looking for anthologies. Collections of stories and short teachings. You know, those sayings and anecdotes that make people stop and think or laugh or cry. The stuff that sermons are made of.

To be sure, these days there is no shortage of such books; indeed there are more in print than ever before. (The Jack Canfield “Chicken Soup for the...” series is at the top of the list.) Yet invariably I find myself leaving the store empty-handed. The books I do find in this category are either trite, or exceedingly esoteric, or incomprehensibly Buddhist, or so Jewish that only a Hasid would find it meaningful. Alas my quest for the holy grail of homiletic perfection—that one book filled with wisdom and insight and short lessons in the art of living that can be assimilated while standing on the platform waiting for the New York train—goes on.

Yet might it be that the very reason I always go away empty-handed is because I already own it? Because I have multiple copies of it? Because I’ve read it from cover to cover so many times, quoted it in sermons and Bar Mitzvah speeches so often, because I first read it so long ago that it’s power of new-ness and thus its value has waned over the years? What is more—and for me as a rabbi—what is better, is that it’s not a new book written with contemporary wit or self-conscious style but rather—dare I say it and thus scare you away—a “traditional” sacred text.

Pirkei Avot (literally translated as “Chapters of the Fathers”) is arguably the finest, most powerful collection of teachings in ethics we have in Judaism. While some of its content is dated or politically incorrect, its appeal for nearly two millennia has been universal. To old and young, the sayings of Hillel and Tarfon and Ben Zoma remain as applicable as they are accessible. They have meaning and relevance. Still.

This small tractate of the Mishnah became so popular over the generations that hardly a siddur (prayerbook) would ever be printed without including the full text of Avot. Outside of the weekly scriptural readings, Avot is the only traditional text the study of which is permitted on Shabbat. (All the others are considered “work”.) But to read and discuss the ideas of Avot is hardly labor; on the contrary it sates the palate of the heart.

This year, 5766, Temple Ner Tamid has chosen to study Pirkei Avot as its congregation-wide study theme. From examining a different teaching each week in Religious School's Ten Minutes of Torah, to Sisterhood's Wednesday morning Study Class where we will read the book in its entirety, to Adult Education's Lunch With the Rabbi where we will study Moses Maimonides' extraordinary commentary on Avot and his search for the perfection of the soul, we will bring the insights of this resilient tome and its authors into our daily lives. Such was the purpose of its compilation.

Chances are you already have a version of it on your bookshelf (in that old prayerbook your grandmother gave to you), but if not we will help you get it. The newly re-designed Ner Tamid website <www.nertamid.org> will have a downloadable copy of Pirkei Avot (in both Hebrew and English) in PDF format. Or, if you want a bound text with insightful commentary, our gift shop will have copies available for purchase. In any event, I commend to you all: Get yourself Pirkei Avot and read it. Discuss it. Argue about it. Make it part of your life in both word and deed. As Hillel so eloquently taught: "If not now, when? (Avot 1:14)