

# **Pirkei Avot: A Women-Centered Approach**

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## Introduction

### My definition of feminism:

In this Capstone, I define feminism as the basis that women and men are created equal and should be treated as such, as what every individual has to offer is equally worthy. Gender is a biologically and socially constructed concept that changes depending on the time, culture and society.<sup>1</sup> Gender is not a hierarchical notion and does not define one's place in life. I am writing on the premise that gender does not exist on a two-point binary system but on a spectrum. Women and men both have an equal stake in theology and religion. Roles matter, language matters, and access to God and commandments matter. Rachel Adler writes in *Engendering Judaism* that:

“Engendering Judaism requires two tasks. The critical task is to demonstrate that historical understandings of gender affect all Jewish text and contexts and hence require the attention of all Jews. But this is only the first step. There is also an ethical task. That gender categories and distinctions have changed in the past tells us nothing about what sorts of changes we out to make in the future. These changes must be negotiated in conversations where participants invoke and reexamine the values and priorities enunciated in Jewish tradition in the light of the current needs, injuries, or aspirations demanding to be addressed.”<sup>2</sup>

I will work to balance the two tasks Adler suggests through my own feminist approach to reading both the text of Pirkei Avot and the commentaries. These texts include the stories and wisdom passed down from generations and detail of the origin of the Jewish people. It is my duty as a feminist and a rabbi to take those stories and understand them in contemporary times, with the values of complete and

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<sup>1</sup> Adler, Rachel. *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*. Beacon Press, 2005. Pp. xv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

unconditional gender equality. These texts paint the vibrant pictures in our imagination about how we became people, how we became a nation and how we should live as Jews. It is continuously important to find the silenced voices in the ancient text and allow them to take a fresh breath of 21<sup>st</sup> century air. Not every voice needs to represent our voice, but our voice deserves to be equally included. For this project, “our” means everyone and it is incumbent upon each person to ensure their inclusion in the broad spectrum of Jewish tradition.

### **My project:**

I am reading these texts in Pirkei Avot as a feminist, understanding that there are female voices missing from the text, and I believe the text should be read critically both in the context of the text, and in contemporary context. Elyse Goldstein writes in *Seek Her Out: A Textual Approach to the Study of Women and Judaism* about a feminist analysis of Torah:

“Such an analysis would begin with the notion that because of their life experiences, and from the simple fact of being women all their lives in a still male-dominated society, women see the text differently than do men, ask different questions, and bring different answers.”<sup>3</sup>

While Pirkei Avot includes Torah and encompasses the wider idea of Oral Torah, I am guided by this idea, as I bringing the voice and experiences of a women to the text and commentaries of Pirkei Avot. I will work to both critique the text as it is, based in the ancient and medieval commentaries, as well as rehabilitate it as a text from which a feminist can derive meaning. Pirkei Avot is written by men, with the societal understanding that they are speaking only to men. In order to understand

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<sup>3</sup> Goldstein, Elyse. *Seek Her Out: A Textual Approach to the Study of Women and Judaism*. UAHC Press, 2003. Pp. 7.

this in a modern context through a feminist lens, I will work to understand the place of Pirkei Avot in its own context, and work with the text to create a modern, wider-reaching context that speaks to any person, not just men. How does this text read if we expand the assumption that Pirkei Avot is speaking about men?

There are particular lines in Pirkei Avot that ask for a feminist commentary. I have chosen to explore most of the pieces of Pirkei Avot that mention women. I have also chosen the pieces that seem to specifically exclude women. There are a series of lines that do not overtly exclude women, but need expansion and additional understanding in order to give women a voice in the message. There are also lines where women are not only excluded, but viewed with a lens of negativity and a series of assumptions. I have researched the specific lines from Pirkei Avot, and I will be commenting on the following mishnayot: 1:1, 1:2, 1:5, 1:14, 2:5, 2:8, 3:13, 4:1, 4:20, 5:16, 5:24.

I explore the roles and portrayal of women in Pirkei Avot. I have looked at this both from a descriptive lens in terms of what are the roles of women and how are they being portrayed in the text. I offer a prescriptive reading of the text, in an attempt to understand the contemporary use and impact of the text for readers of the period in which Pirkei Avot was written, as well as the medieval period in which the mishnayot were expounded. I am reading and working with the text in the original, as well as the translation from Sefaria, though I discuss when the translation is problematic or where alternative translations are more prudent. I analyze the medieval commentators Rabbeinu Yonah, Bartenura, and Rambam, to try to understand how the text was interpreted in the medieval period, which also lends

itself to an exploration of how traditional Jews view and understand the texts today. I also examine these texts through a feminist lens to try to understand how gender plays a role in the world in which these commentators lived as well.

I also explore the modern commentators, Jacob Neusner, Shmuly Yanklowitz, and Eve Posner, to begin to understand how one reads these texts in the modern context. I use these as a starting point to expand areas that remain problematic for a feminist reading of Pirkei Avot as I look for times these modern commentators read the text and did not consider that women were left out or how the original language of these texts impact women both throughout Jewish history and today. Lastly, I will discuss their ideas of gender roles when necessary and work to find ways to use this text today, when gender roles and gender identity are fluid and more widely accepted.

### **Why Pirkei Avot?**

Immediately from the title, the reader encounters a blatant male-centered lens on Jewish ethics, passed down from men and named as such. The book is called “Pirkei Avot” which is usually translated as “Chapter of our Fathers” or for more of an interpretive translation that considers the wisdom passed down by generations of rabbis, “Ethics of our Sages.” It is easy to see why this interpretation of the title is widely accepted, considering that every sage mentioned in the book is male and the first definition in the Jastrow dictionary is “father.”<sup>4</sup> However, another possible translation of the word “avot,” considering the content is “principles or foundations”

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<sup>4</sup> Jastrow: const. אב, אבי [embracer], *father*

as that is what the book sets out to explain.<sup>5</sup> I believe this to be the best interpretation of the word “avot,” as the rabbis put together chapters based on principles that serve as the guide to living on the basis of Jewish foundational values.

As a rabbi, I will be working with and continuing to explore these texts. As a female rabbi, I wanted to encounter the places where women were mentioned and those places where they were specifically excluded. As inspiring as this question may be, this text as a whole is not aimed at women. However, women do belong in these texts. In fact, not just women, but every Jewish person should see themselves in these texts. That is why I am writing this commentary, to highlight where the texts are problematic, and try to understand Pirkei Avot both in its context, the way in which the Mishnayot are viewed through the medieval rabbis, and finally through a modern feminist lens. I will also expand the meaning of several verses that could and should be universal, while remembering the intended audience and expanding that audience to encompass all Jews today. Pirkei Avot is used as a source of wisdom and ethical teachings throughout the Jewish movements, but I will read the text as someone who uses these texts in the Reform movement.

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<sup>5</sup> Jastrow: Metaph. *principal, chief*

### Pirkei Avot 1:1

מֹשֶׁה הִקָּבַח בְּתוֹרַת הַמִּסִּינַי, וּמִסָּרָה לְהוֹשִׁיעַ, וְהוֹשִׁיעַ לְזִקְנִים, וְזִקְנֵי יִמְלֹכֵי אֵימָה, וְנָבִיאִים.  
מִסָּרָה לְאַנְשֵׁי כְּנֶסֶת הָגָל וְלָהֶם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים, הָווּ מִן הַוָּדָי, וְהַעֲמִידוּ.  
תַּלְמִידִים הִרְבֵּה, וַעֲשׂוּ סֵל גַּל וְנֶרָה:

**Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples and make a fence for the Torah.<sup>6</sup>**

This is the opening statement of a book of ancient Jewish ethics. It is immediately evident that the authors who wrote and compiled this text see themselves as part of the chain of tradition that links back to Moses from Sinai. This chain of tradition is exclusive, as the list only mentions particular men with power. While most of the people of Israel are omitted from this list, including many great leaders, women in particular are absent. This exclusivity, a list of who is in and who is out, also leads to the question of audience of Pirkei Avot. Rabbi Jacob Neusner answers this question based on the second part of the Mishnah:

*“They speak to judges, telling them to be prudent. They speak to masters, telling them to work at raising up disciples. So the sayings address men who have responsibilities as judges and administrators over Israel, the Jewish people, and who also teach disciples.”<sup>7</sup>*

Therefore, not only is the chain of passing down Torah exclusive to those mentioned in this list, but the audience of the Torah wisdom contained in this work is intentionally exclusive as well.

However, women are and have been a part of the chain of transmission of the Torah and its foundational wisdom, regardless of their absence in this text. While

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<sup>6</sup> All translations of rabbinic texts and commentaries are taken from sefaria.org unless otherwise noted.

<sup>7</sup> Neusner, Jacob. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirkei Avot*. Rossel Books, 1984. Pp. 24-25.

women's roles in society have changed, women were an active part of the tradition from the beginning. In fact, in the first covenant that God made with the ancestors of the Israelite nation, the names of both Abraham and Sarah changed.<sup>8</sup> In the book *Pirkei Imahot*, recognizing and reacting to the blatant erasure of the women's voice and role in the chain of Torah transmission throughout the generations, Eve Posner writes a parallel female version to this Mishnah:

*"Miriam received the tradition from God at Sinai. She transmitted it to Deborah, Deborah to her daughters. The chain of our tradition is passed from a mother to her children. Women, for centuries, were the links of tradition, passing on Jewish values and Jewish practices through home life. The world rests on the shoulders of women who have been the source of strength, spirit, and protection of our rituals and their homes. Women have played a central role as teachers throughout our history. It is this transmission that has sustained our people."*<sup>9</sup>

Posner's reimagining of Pirkei Avot 1:1 emphasizes the significance of women and their role not only in society as a whole, but in Jewish society specifically. Posner highlights the women who were traditionally raising children in the home and who helped to teach the children Jewish values throughout history.

While working with the original text, there is space for the women's voice, and all of the other voices that are missing from this elitist text. Only a few leaders are listed, yet the text shows something about the nature and meaning of what can be expected throughout these writings without explicitly telling the reader. Judaism and Jewish wisdom is passed down through people. Shmuly Yanklowitz explains this relational approach to Judaism in his social justice commentary:

*"The first mishnah does not state directly that God gave the Torah to the Jewish people. Instead, it begins with Moses receiving the Torah from 'Sinai,'*

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<sup>8</sup> Genesis 17:15-16

<sup>9</sup> Posner, Eve and Lois Sussman Shenker. *Pirkei Imahot: The Wisdom of Mothers, The Voices of Women*. Luminare Press, 2017. Pp. 10.



*rather than with the story of communal divine revelation. By beginning in this manner, mishnah 1:1 describes the Torah's primary focus on human relationships."*<sup>10</sup>

Since this message is implicit, it potentially offers modern readers the ability to see themselves in the text. While I am not trying to excuse the focus on male relationships, and the hierarchical system at play in this Mishnah, it is still possible to read the emphasis on relationships as those including women as well as the whole of society at large. This does not mean that women should not feel excluded by this Mishnah, as it is exclusive and women were excluded from receiving the tradition. However, as painful as this is, it is important that women today not allow this to be a reason they do not engage with the tradition, and instead see themselves as a crucial part of the tradition moving forward and how they can affect necessary change. The principles of the Torah here are based on this human interaction, these personal relationships, and women have just as much a part in this as men, as in any point in history, and these relations are key.

Not only are women part of relational Judaism, but women are part of the chain of transmission of the Torah. While the rabbis mentioned in the text might not have included their transmission, and perhaps may have even excluded such a thing, they did not control the future of the chain. Rabbeinu Yonah, 13th century rabbi from Spain, wrote in his commentary on this Mishnah:

*"And the men of the Great Assembly transmitted it to the men of their generation. And the sages [transmitted it] to their children after them in each and every generation... And that generation also transmitted it to the Geonim and the transmission was from one Gaon to another, one rabbi to another - until this day."*

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<sup>10</sup> Yanklowitz, Shmuly. *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2018. Pp. 3.

While even in his day, a thousand years after Pirkei Avot was written, women did not have significant access to Torah, he still understood every generation teaching it to their children until the present.<sup>11</sup> This idea widens the scope of the meaning of this Mishnah as well as Pirkei Avot in general. Today, women can be and are equal partners in the chain that links Judaism from its very beginning, and we have equal rights and access to knowing from where our tradition comes, and shaping its future potential. We- each Jewish person who wants access- are following in this mesorah (tradition), by understanding our place in the text and creating our vision based on the principles in order to teach it to the next generation.

#### **Pirkei Avot 1:2**

שֵׁם וְאֵל הַצַּדִּיק הַיְּמָשִׁירִי. כְּנֶסֶת הַגָּזְלָה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים.  
הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד, עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲוֹדָה וְעַל לְגִמּוּ לֹט חֲסָדִים

**Shimon the Righteous was from the remnants of the Great Assembly. He would say, "On three things the world stands: on the Torah, on the service and on acts of lovingkindness.**

The world stands on three things. Of all of the things in the whole world. What does it mean for the world to stand on three things, and whose is the text describing? As established in the first Mishnah, this book is laying out the foundational principles for those who receive and follow the Torah, the Jewish people. Therefore, the world here is the Jewish world. However, this is still not specific enough, as discussed in the first Mishnah, the vision for who dictates the Jewish world in Pirkei Avot is narrow, as the authors of this were learned males who had access to learning and text. While that is true for this text and much of Jewish history, that is not true for

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<sup>11</sup> Neusner's estimation of date of Pirkei Avot compilation  
Neusner, Jacob. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirkei Avot*. Rossel Books, 1984. Pp. 4.

today. The feminist reader can learn and understand these texts and work to expand the vision of the ideal world so that it encompasses all people.

“Torah” is the first of the list, which gives it added significance and weight. However, there is a question about how much access women had to Torah in the context Pirkei Avot was written, as well as according to the medieval sages.

Rambam understands Torah to be wisdom, though he does not continue this thought.<sup>12</sup> It appears to be a pleasant way to think of Torah, and one could imagine that women would surely have access to wisdom, but in Rambam’s cultural context, wisdom means halacha and philosophy and would presume literacy which were areas of thought withheld from women in the ancient and medieval world. The Bartenura speaks about the Torah as the reason for creation as a whole:

*“Had Israel not received Torah, the heavens and the earth would not have been created, as is written (Jeremiah 33:25), ‘Were it not for my covenant day and night, also the laws of the heavens and the earth I would not have set.’ (Shabbat 88a)”*

Again, this seems like an approach that women would have a place in, as stated earlier that women arguably do have a place in the covenant, though those born female do not participate in the sign of the covenant, circumcision.<sup>13</sup> It is Rabbeinu Yonah that specified what the others have essentially said:

*“The Lord created me at the beginning of God’s course, as the first of God’s works of old’ - I was created before the whole world and because of me, all of the creations were created - in order to observe me.”*

The key words come at the end of this commentary: observe me. This is speaking to the Torah law, the commandments. The medieval rabbis also universally understand

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<sup>12</sup> Rambam’s commentary on Pirkei Avot

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 17:2-14

these commandments as *halacha*, Jewish law, which is composed of Torah law and rabbinic law together. Women do not have access to all the *halacha*, as they are exempt from the positive time-bound commandments according to the rabbis in the Talmud.<sup>14</sup> Even in contemporary time, when egalitarian Judaism exists, and women's access to Torah by way of the commandments- even within the more traditional movements are expanding- is not guaranteed that women can fully participate in this profound practice, as one of the three most important features of the world.

The second in this list is "Avodah" which can be understood as Temple Service through the sacrifices.<sup>15</sup>

*"The service of the sacrifices. For such have we taught in tractate Taanit, ;Were it not for the groupings [involved in the sacrifices] the heavens and the earth would not have endured (Taanit 27b)."*

During the time of the first and second Temple, women had limited access to Temple service. All non-Kohanim- anyone not in the priestly class- had limited access to Temple service, around which the sacrifices were centered. In the hierarchy of the Temple, the woman's role was certainly at the bottom, especially in terms of leadership. That being said, women did go to the Temple and have a role.<sup>16</sup> Once the Second Temple was destroyed, the idea of Avodah took on a new meaning. It is interesting to note that while the original meaning of this second pillar was sacrifice, this writing was composed after the Temple was already destroyed, leaving it as wishful thinking at that point. By the 2nd and 3rd century, the rabbis had

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<sup>14</sup> Mishnah Kiddishun 1:7

<sup>15</sup> Bartenura's commentary on Pirkei Avot- translated on sefaria.org

<sup>16</sup> Marx, Dalia. *Tractates Tamid, Middot, and Qinnim. A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud*. Mohr Siebeck, 2013. Pp. VII.

successfully transferred the importance of the sacrifices to prayer.<sup>17</sup> Later, Rabbeinu Yonah summarizes this point:

“Then, due to our sins, the Temple was destroyed and the service was annulled. And prayer is now for us in its place, as the sages, may their memory be blessed, said (Taanit 2a), 'And to serve him with all your hearts' (Deuteronomy 11:13) - what service is there in the heart, one should say this is prayer.”

After the destruction of the Temple, when prayer replaced the sacrificial and cultic worship, women were still not equal participants. Though through Rabbeinu Yonah's citing of Deuteronomy, women can easily read themselves into that command, it is far more likely given Jewish history that the intent of the commentator was not that of an egalitarian minyan. Dalia Marx in explains this as a further limitation as she notes:

“Symbolically, any time Jews studied one of the rabbinic texts dealing with the Temple, they merited entering its gates; the literary pilgrimage, if you will, replaced the physical one. And while the actual pilgrim could enter the Temple only up to a certain point, depending on his purity level and the purpose of his visit, the literary pilgrim could even enter the Holy of Holies. With regard to women, however, development was inverted. The great democratic revolution from the physical Temple to the rabbinic-literary one meant less participation for women.”<sup>18</sup>

If one would like to imagine a medieval context for worship- or Jewish worship for most of Jewish history including a significant amount of Jewish communities today- women do not count in the prayer minyan, and therefore women are not seen as contributors to public prayer. This being the case, the second most important thing on which the world was founded has limited applicability for women. Much like Torah, there is no clear space for women from the time of Pirkei Avot throughout

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<sup>17</sup> B. Ber. 26a

<sup>18</sup> Marx, Dalia. *Tractates Tamid, Middot, and Qinnim. A Feminist Commentary on the Babylonian Talmud*. Mohr Siebeck, 2013. Pp. VII.

Jewish history- there is not an assumed place for women in either of the first two out of three most crucial elements that support the world.

The third thing on the list is “Gemilut Chasidim” or acts of lovingkindness. This concept can refer to acting kindly, doing good things for others, though it can be interpreted as a variety of ways, as there is no one particular interpretation or obvious meaning other than the translation of the words themselves. This idea can be understood as charity or as doing something for someone where one does not expect to be repaid for the good deed- a good deed for purely for the sake of others. Rabbeinu Yonah considers this a level of good deed above and beyond the monetary donations:

*“As the matter that they said (Sukkah 49b), “Acts of lovingkindness are greater than charity (tsedekah); since lovingkindness is both with the poor and with the wealthy but charity is only with the poor. Great is lovingkindness since it is both with one's body and with one's money, but charity is only with one's money.”*

To which Bartenura specifies the distinction with a common definition of examples that fall into the category of Gemilut Chasidim:

*“As it is written (Ps. 89:3), “The world is built up by your kindness.” And lovingkindness is to regale grooms and to comfort mourners, to visit the sick and inter the dead, and the like.”*

Women do have access to these categories, and are able to give of themselves in a way that fully satisfies both of these medieval rabbis' definition. Finally, they can be full and active participants in helping to establish at least one sector of the world according to this rabbinic text. If we are to assume the traditional categories Bartenura lists- visiting the bride, burying the dead- women are not just permitted, but needed, because these are gender specific. Note that while not moving far into

the topic of “tzniut” (modesty) or a gender binary system, the need for women in this case may be problematic in other ways. However, either definition, whether it’s performing the sacred acts of accompanying people throughout significant times or just a general act going above and beyond, women are unquestionably active participants. Their actions according to the intent of the text have meaning in this category. One of three where women are fully counted in the establishment of the world, but here is finally an entry point.

While not a perfectly equal role, there is precedence for women’s part in all three of these pillars. Women have access to Torah in Nehemia, when both women and men listen to Torah.<sup>19</sup> Women have access to certain sacrifices in the Temple, for example, when they give birth and must bring a certain animal or its equivalent to the Temple.<sup>20</sup> Women’s acts of lovingkindness have boundless potential.

Neusner expounds upon an alternative view on this list:

*“Torah means learning and reflection. But people fail to reflect, so they do things without thinking about them. Sacrifice means giving something up. But people tend to selfishness and think everything is coming to them and they take things for granted. Without acts of grace, people adhere to rules rather than understanding them. People tend to do what they must, rather than what they should. So the language seems to describe how things are. But it describes the opposite: why things are as bad as they are.”<sup>21</sup>*

According to Neusner’s commentary, it is possible that the Jewish tradition has been understanding this list as a way to reflect on society and notice the ways in which we need to improve. If that is the case, then certainly women have a role in this list, both in the urgency to improve the world and in the ways in which we aim to reach these

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<sup>19</sup> Nechemia 8:2

<sup>20</sup> Leviticus 12:6

<sup>21</sup> Neusner, Jacob. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirkei Avot*. Rossel Books, 1984. Pp. 26.

ideals, alongside men, as equals. Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Chasidim can include the essence of the traditional values that the rabbis may have held, however, it is our job to make them come true to reflect and perfect the system, and continue to do so, in order for the world to not only stand, but stand balanced. Each of these categories has tremendous value and can be pillars of what we want to see in the world, it our job now to make that happen.

### **Pirkei Avot 1:5**

אָסִי בֶן יוֹחָנָן אִישׁ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם. וְאָמַר, יֵהִי בֵיתְךָ פֶּתוּחַ לְרוּחָהּ, וְיִהְיוּ עֲנִיִּים בְּנֵי בֵיתְךָ, וְאַל תִּרְבֵּי שִׁיחָה עִם הָאִשָּׁה. בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ אָמְרוּ, קַל וְחֹמֶר בְּאִשְׁתְּ חֵבֵי וְ מִכָּאֵן אָמְרוּ חֲכָמִים, כָּל זֶמַּן נִשְׁאַדַּם מִמֶּרְבֵּה שִׁיחָה עִם הָאִשָּׁה, גֹּרָם רָע הִלְעָצְמוֹ, וּבֹאֵט לְמַדְבֵּר תּוֹרָה, וְ אִפֹּל יוֹרֵשׁ גֵּיהִנָּם.

**Yose ben Yochanan, man of Jerusalem, says, "May your home be open wide, may the poor be members of your household and do not increase conversation with a woman." They so stated with his wife; all the more so with the wife of his friend. From this, the sages said, "Any time that a man increases conversation with the woman, he causes evil to himself and neglects the words of Torah; and, in his end, he inherits Geihinam.**

The beginning of this Mishnah seems to come from a place of inclusivity, as it states that someone's house should be open wide. That would make it seem like the rest of the Mishnah would then promote ways in which to be inclusive. However, as the text moves forward, there is a direct exclusion of women. The context in which this was written is a gender-segregated society, where men and women have particular roles and norms. To note the difference in the roles would be one thing, however, this text projects a disdain toward women that is egregiously offensive and painful to feminist reader.

In context, if Torah study is the ultimate goal, it seems clear that the author is speaking of someone who does not study Torah, and therefore would prevent a



male from doing what he should. As we saw in Mishnah 1:2, Torah study is held in extraordinarily high regard. However, this is a problematic explanation, because several other people in their day did not study Torah, for example, children, slaves and non-Jews. It does not have to mention specific people at all in fact; it could just say that one should not engage in too much conversation with anyone who does not study Torah. However, it does not say that, it specifically mentions women, and points out the extreme, the result of Geihinam. This painful piece shows that the rabbis had something specifically against conversing too much with women, whether it comes from a place of fear, misogyny, illusion, or hate, it is ever present in this text.

It is plausible that the warning to avoid conversation with women would be explained in a way that could be less derogatory. An example of this appears in *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*:

*“It is inevitable that many readers will view this mishnah through a lens of misogyny. While not a defense, Rabbis Jonathan Sacks and Marc D. Angel interpret the reasoning behind the inclusion of the troubling language found in the verse: ‘The rabbis assumed, based on the reality of their time, that most women were not versed in Torah. Thus, a man who conversed with a woman was invariably wasting time that should have been spend on Torah Study.’”<sup>22</sup>*

This explanation is not good enough. This commentary believes the text at face value, though once again, the problem here does not seem to be strictly with a man not speaking to someone who is well versed in Torah. That is still not a convincing argument that the text has something against women in this statement and trying to

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<sup>22</sup> Yanklowitz, Shmuly. *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2018. Pp. 18.

explain that away does not do justice to the highly inflammatory and misogynistic nature of this piece of text.

The medieval commentators understand the concern to be about the women themselves, rather than their lack of Torah knowledge. Rabbeinu Yonah comments that a long conversation with a woman, while causing a man to neglect Torah, would also cause further sin.<sup>23</sup> One negative could likely lead to another. He then continues further insulting women by understanding the Mishnah through reference to the Talmud, which compares conversation with women to the cause of evil, and coming all too close to calling women evil:

*"[This] is to say, he causes the impulse that is called evil to overpower him, as we say (Kiddushin 30b), 'Great is the evil impulse, that its Creator calls it evil, as it is stated (Genesis 8:21), 'since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth.'" And this man caused evil to himself, as he gave it a place and an invitation to cling to himself, by way of conversation [with women]. And he went beyond the traits of other men, as the impulse sometimes overpowers them [also]; but without them doing something to cause [it], and it is not their own doing that brought the evil to begin with them."*

This read is even harder to swallow than the Mishnah itself, but yet, somehow his commentary becomes even more offensive when he comments on what the last part of the Mishnah, as it refers to Geihanim, when he writes:

*"... This means to say that death removes him from the world - from the small life of the world - but woman destroys his soul for ever and ever. Behold, 'she is more bitter than death.' 'She is all traps and snares': When a man observes a woman, he is caught in her net, which is her trap, and he cannot escape from her. As the man sees that which his heart desires and he does not see what will happen to him from her in the end of days. As the lyricist (R. Yehudah HaLevi) said, 'The seduced dove travels in the wilderness; it sees the grain but it does not see the trap.' 'Her heart is snares' - when she desires a man in her heart, even if he does not desire her and it is [just] the bad fortune of this man that caused her to desire him. 'Her hands are fetters' - because if she grabs him with her hands, he is already taken into the 'prison' and he no longer has a way to fix it. 'He who is pleasing to God escapes her,*

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<sup>23</sup> Rabbeinu Yonah's commentary on Pirkei Avot

*and he who is displeasing is caught by her" (Ecclesiastes 7:26) as the Holy One, blessed be He, protects the righteous and does not present them something through which they might stumble; but the sinner, who does not distance himself from evil paths and whose heart is not complete, chances upon a matter like this."*

This commentary shows a hint into the mind of the medieval rabbi, though I would argue it is not necessarily the original intent of the Mishnah. This is defamation of women, as he weaves together sources and paints a picture that implies that not only Judaism, but also God, have this bias against women. This allows the reader to learn from the context in which this rabbi was living and how commentaries such as these shaped and affected a woman's place in Jewish society.

While there is no reasoning with a text such as this, and trying to do so can often cause more damage, it is reassuring to see a commentary that is utterly outraged by it. Just erasing this piece of Jewish history would not benefit women either. It was said. It was- and potentially still is in certain communities- presumably believed. Pirkei Imahot deals with this reality:

*"In today's world, this viewpoint is unthinkable! When this passage was written, the Jewish world was a male-dominated society where the highest goal for a Jewish woman was marriage and all that entailed: bearing and raising children, creating and maintaining the home for her family, serving her husband's needs, and basically nothing else."<sup>24</sup>*

First, it is important to note that it is unfortunately possible that in today's world, not every Jewish person or community would necessarily find this text "unthinkable."

Second, this commentary shows that it is necessary to acknowledge the reality of the rabbis' worldview in context though it is also important to note that they could have said these ideas, and not have been so insulting to women. Sussman Shenker

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<sup>24</sup> Posen, Eve and Lois Sussman Shenker. *Pirkei Imahot: The Wisdom of Mothers, The Voices of Women*. Luminare Press, 2017. Pp. 16.

does not try to excuse the rabbis for this worldview or their words, though this commentary still does not go far enough to speak out against this inexcusable statement that shows unveiled what the rabbis thought about women. However, just because that was the way it was written and the way of society, does not mean we have to accept that as Jews today. Change can be affected today. Neusner's commentary speaks to this and urges the imperative that this text must teach:

*"We note, alas, an attitude we cannot wish away, namely, a low regard for women. It is indefensible. It is not one of the ornaments of this otherwise blameless text. It is there, part of its day, not ours- a reminder that we too have a contribution to make to the tradition of Judaism. In our day we can and shall attain full equality for women in the life of the Jewish religion and of the Jewish people."*<sup>25</sup>

It is our duty now to fight, and fight for all people, because all people deserve full and lasting equality.

This equality extends beyond a woman's place in the Jewish world. The situation is far more complex today than even full equality for women. This text lends itself to an issue of who constructs gender and who decides the gender role.

Yanklowitz begins to describe this in his commentary:

*"The fluidity of gender roles is a modern phenomenon, certainly one that the sages would never have considered in their lifetime. But now, with the deconstruction of which gender is suited for any particular activity, there is a Jewish imperative to think broadly about how we relate to one another."*<sup>26</sup>

This commentary calls for the reader to stretch one's mind about what this text implies. Perhaps we can look to the beginning of the Mishnah - "May your home be open wide, may the poor be members of your household" - where the value is to

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<sup>25</sup> Neusner, Jacob. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirkei Avot*. Rossel Books, 1984. Pp. 32-33.

<sup>26</sup> Yanklowitz, Shmuly. *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2018. Pp. 20.

open the house and let people in, even those one might not have thought to otherwise. This is the ideal to learn from the text, and the latter part of the Mishnah should stand as a warning to those who do not follow this version of welcoming and accepting. The narrow-mindedness does not serve the community. Opening the door wider and working to expand our own ideas as well as help to encourage and educate others to broaden their understanding will serve the community. In this includes gender and the construction of gender roles in society, as well as a whole host of other questions facing our world today.

#### **Pirkei Avot 1:14**

הוא הִיהָ אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי יִלִּי. וְכִשָּׂאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מֶה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עֲקָשִׁיו, אֵימָתִי:

**He [Rabbi Hillel] used to say: If I am not for me, who will be for me? And when I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, then when?**

I will speak to just the first question in this text: If I am not for me, who will be for me? This text can initially be read as a universal principle. A straightforward reading of the first part of the question, without addressing the commentaries, seems to be urging one to stand up for themselves. The second part of the question is essentially saying that if one does not stand up for themselves, it is possible no one will, or it could be saying that one should not wait around for someone else to stand up for them, and instead they should take the initiative.

However, the medieval commentaries seem to have a different take on Hillel's question. Bartenura reads, "If I am not for myself" as pertaining to merit:

*"If I am not for myself": If I do not acquire merit for myself, who will acquire merit for me?"* Merit in this sense likely means that Hillel is referring to something more specific- Bartenura could mean merit for following the commandments, studying

Torah, or anything related to doing good in the eyes of God. Though he does not specify, his addition of the word “merit” in context would lead one to think that this is something different- more specifically tied to Judaism- than standing up for oneself.

Rabbeinu Yonah confirms this as his understanding:

*“If I don’t rebuke myself to be assiduous about the commandments, who is there to rebuke me and make me assiduous? Since the prompting of others is [only] good on a temporary basis. But when the person motivates himself each and every day, he increases to think of thoughts in order to do the work of God.”*

This understanding would not necessarily exclude women, as they were also bound by certain commandments and they too could be self-motivated in their observance. It is also not obvious that this is what Hillel was saying in his context, as nothing in the question is a direct indicator unless one was reading this as the medievals, through a lens of *halacha*.

Therefore, I am not ready to throw away this text as I think that despite how the rabbis who wrote it may have wanted it interpreted, this question can speak directly to women. There is no exclusion embedded within this question, so there is no reason to only view it as excluding women. If the text and the tradition are not going to include women in an equal and fair way, then women must do it themselves and fight for women’s rights. This value can refer to Judaism, and finding women’s place in the texts and in the larger Jewish context. This also refers to the world at large, and reinterpreting a women’s role in society instead of accepting what has been determined throughout history. The modern voice in *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary* understands the essence of this question as an imperative to

do so: *“It sets up a remarkable tension between selfishness and selflessness. You cannot neglect your own needs.”*<sup>27</sup>

While it is a balance and it might not always be easy, this commentary highlights what the text prompts, that it is necessary to know what it is that you stand for- whoever you are- and be prepared to do what it takes to make your voice heard. The possibilities of positive outcomes from generations of women who make their voices heard and account for their needs have and will continue to trickle down into the new generations who will experience this role modeling and accept this as the norm, creating a power to women’s voices that the world has not yet heard.

#### **Pirkei Avot 2:5**

הוא הִיָּה אֹמֵר, אֵין בּוֹר יֵרָא חֹטָא, וְלֹא עִם הָאֶרֶץ חֹסִיד, וְלֹא הִבִּישָׁן לָמֵד, וְלֹא הִקְפִּדָּן.  
מְלִמֵּד, וְלֹא כָל הַמְרָבָה בֶּסֶךְ וְכָל הַמְחֻכִּים. וּבִמְקוֹם שְׂאִין אֲנָשִׁים, הִשְׁתַּדֵּל לִלְהוֹט אִישׁ:

**He was accustomed to say: A boor cannot fear sin. An ignorant person cannot be pious. A person prone to being ashamed cannot learn. An impatient person cannot teach. Not all who engage in a lot of business become wise. In a place where there is no man, strive to be a man.**

“In a place where there is no man, strive to be a man” is an idiomatic translation that is just one of the many possibilities for translating this last section of the Mishnah. The Hebrew word used is *“ish”* which is usually translated as “man,” but can also mean “husband,” “masculine,” “hero,” or “anybody.”<sup>28</sup> If the Mishnah does refer to “man” or even “hero,” the intention of what that means is still not apparent or obvious. While the word itself both is masculine and can literally mean masculine, there is a question as to how to read this as a women and if there is a possibility for reading women into the essence of the value statement. Even though

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<sup>27</sup> Neusner, Jacob. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirkei Avot*. Rossel Books, 1984. Pp. 37.

<sup>28</sup> Klein Dictionary from sefaria.org

the Hebrew language is gendered and defaults to a masculine word if the gender is unspecified, this does not necessarily have to be a gendered term. While the context of Pirkei Avot also defaults to the male, and is almost exclusively speaking to a male audience, the meaning for a line as vague as this can be more general, depending on the explanation. This line can be very powerful, and the interpretation of what this word “ish” means has the potential to entirely change the meaning of the charge.

The commentators who deal with this text do not agree on a definition, and therefore understand this Mishnah to have vastly different implications. Beginning with the medieval commentators, Bartenura seems to view this line as speaking of leadership: *“In a place where there is no man’: to sit at the head and to issue decisions.”* It is not clear that this is what the Mishnah is referring to, but within the context of Pirkei Avot, with its concern for leaders (teachers) who shape other leaders (disciples), Bartenura’s read is sound. The modern commentator Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz also understands this word to mean leader and expands the charge to mean that the entirety of the Mishnah is speaking to this point: *“The mishnah lays out the normative response- or, more accurately, what one shouldn’t do- to prepare for moments when our leadership is required.”*<sup>29</sup> His definition suggests that a leader is one who “goes against the grain” and speaks up for what they believe in, which is not the common response according to his read of the Mishnah. This is an applicable idea within the context of this particular Mishnah, because if the natural human response were to always act patiently, study hard and be secure in their actions, there would be no reason to speak out urging people to

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<sup>29</sup> Yanklowitz, Shmuly. *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2018. Pp. 77.



do so. The last line would not be necessary if everyone already lived ethically and righteously.

According to both the medieval and modern understanding of this Mishnah, there is nothing particularly against women. It is necessary to mention that the medieval commentators may not have thought of women when commenting on the Mishnah, but nothing Bartenura said here cannot also be applied to women. This Mishnah and the commentators (including Posen who interprets “*ish*” as “worthy person,”<sup>30</sup> and Jacob Neusner as “individual”<sup>31</sup>) while using different language, all seem to agree on the principle theme. This is a matter of ethics and leadership, and when necessary, one must stand up for what they believe to be just, even if they are the only ones standing. This particularly speaks to women’s issues, because regardless of how radical and new they might feel to society at large, we have an imperative to be leaders of the work, and continue to strive for our beliefs of gender equality and justice.

### **Pirkei Avot 2:8**

רבי י! ישע בן חנניה, אשר יולדתו

### **Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya--happy is the one who gave birth to him!**

This is an excerpt from a longer Mishnah that mentions several scholars, and the reasons each of them were to be praised, after mentioning that God is the only one to be praised because God is the creator. However, in regards to the praise of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya, his mother is mentioned, though not by name. This

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<sup>30</sup> Posen, Eve and Lois Sussman Shenker. *Pirkei Imahot: The Wisdom of Mothers, The Voices of Women*. Luminare Press, 2017. Pp. 32.

<sup>31</sup> Neusner, Jacob. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirkei Avot*. Rossel Books, 1984. Pp. 65.

leads to the question of the role women play in a society lead by men it. Biologically, women have a role in creating the men, and men were clearly leaders in the society, but what role do women have in raising them to be leaders, and what pride can they take in their accomplishments? Rabbeinu Yonah does not address the question of “the one who birthed him” and understands the way in which to read this as exclusively Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya’s reasons for praise: *“meaning to say he is happy with all of the happy traits - great in his wisdom and refined by his traits and in all of his affairs.”*

This gives none of the appreciation or acknowledgement to the mother, and makes the cause for praise as a direct result of the Rabbi’s wisdom and traits. This is in contrast to Bartenura’s comment about this piece of the Mishnah:

*“Rendered happy by good character traits is one who the whole world says about him, “happy is the one who gave birth to him.” And some say, because she caused him to be a sage. For she would go out to all of the study halls in her town and say to them, “I request from you that you should seek mercy (pray) for this embryo that is in my innards, that he should be a sage.” And from the day that he was born, she did not remove his crib from the study hall, so that only words of Torah would enter his ears.”*

Bartenura seems to be giving the credit almost entirely to the mother, which seems advanced for the context, but at least speaks to the affect women can have on society by raising a praiseworthy scholar. This is not to say that a comment like this is not limited, because it is. However, this is a rare mention of women in a positive light (though important to note it is merely a reference and the word “mother” is not actually written, but the word “yeldot,” the one who gave birth, is clearly a reference to a woman.) The impacts of the kernel of this statement could be expansive, as the hint of appreciation can be seen in the ancient texts. I believe this to be important to

add to the modern commentary as a woman, as it can allow for women to feel even a slight connection to a very male centered text.

### **Pirkei Avot 3:13**

רבי עקיבא אומר, שחוק וקלות ראש, מרגילין לערוה. מסך תסי גלתורה. מעט זות, סג לעשר. נדר ים, סג לפרישו תסי גלחכמה, שתיקה.

**Rabbi Akiva says: Joking and lightheartedness *accustom [a person] toward promiscuity. Tradition is a safeguarding fence around Torah. Tithes are a safeguarding fence around wealth. Vows are a safeguarding fence around abstinence. A safeguarding fence around wisdom is silence.***<sup>32</sup>

This Mishnah highlights the importance of metaphorical fences for spiritual and religious protection. However, the first line of the Mishnah speaks about promiscuity and warns that the joking and light conversations will lead to this problem. Based on the earlier texts that refer to women as only capable of light conversation because they do not study Torah, this Mishnah could be taken to mean once again, that conversations with women lead to promiscuity. It is important to note that possibility, while speaking to the larger issue in the Mishnah in regards to when we should build fences.

The fence in this case seems to be something to praise, something that has allowed the Torah and the tradition to continue throughout Jewish history. The fence acts as a guard to keep what is precious and valuable inside, while keeping what is feared out. Rabbeinu Yonah notes that while the specific warnings matter, the fence is what is at the center of this mishnah:

*“He wants to say that joking and words of idle conversation with lightheartedness acclimates to promiscuity. But seriousness and fear are a*

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<sup>32</sup> Translation from Sefaria with my edits in italics.

*safeguarding fence around sexual prohibitions - as this whole mishnah is talking about safeguarding fences.”*

The value placed on keeping what is valuable and key to the tradition safe, makes sense in the context of people living in a community that might be physically unsafe based on being Jewish. Especially after the destruction of the Temple, the thoughts and ideas of the rabbis needed to be safeguarded for them to feel they had control over their religion and their destiny.

However, this becomes problematic when the fences are built so high, and built so many generations ago, that it is no longer logically safe to stay inside just because one has been told. Yanklowitz writes to this point

*“We should not develop our minds in isolation. Rather, wisdom must be procured from life itself. No one can tell us where we out to put up our own “fences.” We must learn the boundaries that we need.”<sup>33</sup>*

This commentary urges people to break through fences that no longer keep us safe, but instead prevent us from experiencing the world. Boundaries are certainly important, but are also different for different people, as they can be personal and meaningful. Fences as imagined by the Mishnah can be oppressive to those excluded from mainstream religious roles, such as women. Those fences can serve as an act of oppression. Though the idea of boundaries can serve as liberation. People know their worth and their values, and therefore have a healthy set of boundaries by which they allow people to enter into their space. In today's society, rather than a fence to keep in the acceptable and keep out the unacceptable set by someone else's standards, reading into this Mishnah as valuing the standard of

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<sup>33</sup> Yanklowitz, Shmuly. *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*. Central Conference of American Rabbis: 2018. Pp. 167-168.

boundaries based in a set of guiding principles gives this maxim great relevance in contemporary times.

#### **Pirkei Avot 4:1**

בן זומא. וְאִיזְהוּ חָכָם, הַיּוֹמֵ דְמַכָּל אָדָם, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (תְּהִלִּים קיט) מִכָּל לִמְלָמְדִי.  
הַשְׂכֵּלְתִּי כִּי עֲדוּתִיךָ שִׁיחַ לִי.

**Ben Zoma says: Who is the wise one? He who learns from all men, as it says, "I have acquired understanding from all my teachers" (Psalms 119:99)**

The question of “who is wise” is part of a series of four questions, defining guiding values that appear throughout the rabbis’ conversations in Pirkei Avot Ben Zoma asks and answers these questions, and their universal and timeless answers allow for great contemplation throughout the ages. This first question is of particular interest to women, because there seems to be a narrow understanding of the word “teacher” throughout the writing from the rabbis in Pirkei Avot, and this answer widens that understanding tremendously. This answer actually breaks down the idea that there could be a limit to whom one could learn from. Except of course, the definition of “who learns from all men” again here, as in Mishnah 2:5 should be noted that this could be translated, as Sefaria does, as all “men” or as “anybody/each person.” For the sake of this particular commentary, I will note that possibility, and choose to translate as the latter. Though it is also important to note that the Hebrew word “ish” can refer to “anybody/each person” the word “adam” meaning “man/human” in the general sense is less gendered than “ish.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> My thanks to Dvora Weisberg for this point.

One of the medieval and modern commentators believe this answer- that one who learns from everyone else is in fact the wise one- to be surprising. The medieval commentator, Bartenura, notes that a wise person can even learn from someone of a different status:

*“And even though [that person that he learns from] is lesser than he. As since he is not concerned about his honor and learns from the lesser ones, [it shows] that his wisdom is for the sake of Heaven and not to boast and revel in.”*

He seems to be surprised by the fact that one can learn from someone “lesser than he.” While he does not explain exactly what that means, it is possible this is a difference of status in a position of a school- like a teacher to a student- or differentiated by age. But either way, he says what Ben Zoma says is true because then the wisdom is not for the person, rather for the sake of God, so there are no statuses when it comes to someone for the sake of God. While likely not in Bartenura’s context, the question whether women or children fit into this definition would be one to note. He does not specify otherwise, so there is no reason why a reader today could not read women to have an equal part in both the Mishnah and this medieval commentary as men.

In Jacob Neusner’s commentary, his surprise is less about the status from whom one learns, and more about the idea of the answer as a whole:

*“...Ben Zoma says that everything is the opposite of what it seems. Most people think a wise person is someone who knows everything. But, no, it is one who knows that there is something to learn from everybody. So a wise person knows his or her ignorance.”<sup>35</sup>*

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<sup>35</sup> Neusner, Jacob. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirkei Avot*. Rossel Books, 1984. Pp. 127.

He is struck by the idea that the wise person is not the one who has all the answers, rather the one who knows that they do not. Therefore, the wise person is willing to ask the right questions and open to learning from everyone to gain this wisdom. He also views the wise person as any gender, which again may or may not be what was the intent of the Mishnah, but the modern read allows for the broadest view, which is that of inclusivity. This text teaches one to be humble in addition to being wise, and therefore who is to tell someone else, no matter the status in society or the gender, who has the ability to be wise.

This idea that the text is used for inclusion is expounded upon in Pirkei Avot:

A Social Justice commentary:

*“Ben Zoma sets the stage for us to understand pluralism. While tolerance of diversity of belief is generally considered to be a post-Enlightenment phenomenon, we can see glimmers of it in Prophets:*

*“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Eternal, to the Temple of the God of Jacob. God will teach us godly ways, so that we may walk in godly paths, God will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide, Everyone will sit under their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the Eternal Almighty has spoken.”<sup>36</sup>*

Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz shows how this mishnah teaches that everyone has something to learn from everyone else, and people can exist within Judaism who think differently. Pirkei Avot, as part of the Mishnah in general, is proof that there is room for differing beliefs under the same auspices of Jewish values. This opens the door for the pluralism that Yanklowitz speaks of, that is demonstrated in this Mishnah and through the proof text in the Prophets. This allows for women to not only be read into this text, but for women to engage with all the texts. If this is true,

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<sup>36</sup> Yanklowitz, Shmuly. *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2018. Pp. 190.

that women have just as much the ability to gain wisdom and people have just as much ability to learn from women as men, then this shows that women do have solid ground on which to stand for both Torah learning and religious engagement. The tradition opens the door in this case, and women have the right to enter into it. In the era where the culture is open and accepting, it is only could have happened from women who knew this to be true, and were open themselves to making the way for the rest of us.

#### **Pirkei Avot 4:20**

אֵלִישֶׁע בֶּן אֲבוּיָהּ. אָמַר, הַ זֶּמֶד יֵל דְּלָמָה הוּא. וְאָמַר, לְדִיּוֹ. כְּתוּבָה עַל לִבֵּי חֲדָשׁ. וְהַ זֶמֶד זָקֵן נִלְמָה הוּא. וְאָמַר, לְדִיּוֹ. כְּתוּבָה עַל לִבֵּי רַמֵּי וּזְקֵן. רַבִּי יוֹסִי בֶר יְהוּדָה אִישׁ כֶּפֶר הַבְּבֵלִי. אָמַר, הַ זֶמֶד מִן הַקֶּטֶן יִסְלָמָה הוּא דּוֹמֶה לְאֹכֵל עֵנָבִי סֶקֶ וְזֶה יִנְמֵג וְהַ זֶמֶד מִן הַזָּקֵן יִסְלָמָה הוּא. וְאָמַר, לְאֹכֵל עֵנָבִים בְּשִׁלּוֹתֵי וְזֶה יִישֵׁן. רַבִּי. אָמַר, אֵת תִּסְתַּכֵּל בְּקִנְיָן, אֲלֵא בְּמַה שֶׁיֵּשׁ בּוֹ. שֶׁקִּנְיָן חֲדָד שֶׁמֶלֶא יִישֵׁן, וְיֵשׁ נִשְׁאָפְלוּ חֲדָשׁ אֵין בּוֹ.

**Elisha ben Abuya says: One who learns as a child is compared to what? To ink written on new parchment. And one who learns as an elder is compared to what? To ink written on scraped parchment. Rabbi Yose bar Yehuda, man of Kfar HaBavli, says: One who learns from young ones is compared to what? To one who eats unripe grapes and drinks wine from its press. And one who learns from elders is compared to what? To one who eats ripe grapes and drinks aged wine. Rabbi says: Do not look at the jug but rather at what is in it. For there are new jugs full of old, and old that do not have even new within them.**

The quote from Rabbi, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, at the end of this Mishnah seems to speak to all the sweeping generalizations that the other rabbis in the Mishnah seem to make. There are labels mentioned throughout this- children, young ones, elders- that use metaphors to make points about different ages and the education associated with those ages. However, Rabbi comes at this question from a different angle; he is concerned more with what people have inside than superficial



labels. This is a progressive and inspiring thought, and while in his context he still might have limited the “jugs” in judgement, his wisdom as it stands alone is timeless.

Rambam understands Rabbi’s point that one should not judge the interior of a person- namely their wisdom- based on their exterior:

*“But Rabbi says [that] you should not judge the wine by the jug. As there is a new jug with old wine in it and an old jug that is empty and has nothing in it. So [too], there are young men whose questions and wisdom are pure - there is no doubt mixed with them - like old wine, the sediments of which have been separated from it. And there are elders that have no wisdom at all, and there is no need to say that they do not have wisdom that is mixed and confused.”*

He takes it to another level, to the extreme of having an emptiness inside, and then expands his point to warn against the judgement of the purity of the wisdom, in that not all wisdom is positive. His comment is far more judgmental than the original comment, and he does specify that the “jug” is male. This judgement is in accordance with sentiment of the rest of the Mishnah, but limits the ways in which one could potentially understand Rabbi’s statement.

In Jacob Neusner’s commentary, he understands the meaning as a not having such preconceived notions of people, as getting to know people’s principles is much more of a focus:

*“Rabbi’s point is that we should not be deceived by appearances. In so stating, Rabbi of course puts into words precisely that mode of inquiry- looking beyond the surface- we have many times observed in Avot.”<sup>37</sup>*

Neusner expands the statement to acknowledge that one’s outward appearance, knowledge, or status is not always what it seems. This is highlighted in the rest of Pirkei Avot, for example, when Ben Zoma outlines the definition of wisdom as learning from everyone (4:1), and when it is clear that a person’s actions speak

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<sup>37</sup> Neusner, Jacob. *Torah from Our Sages: Pirkei Avot*. Rossel Books, 1984. Pp. 146.

about who they are more than their words (1:15). The ways in which to act on this important wisdom and further understand Rabbi's point is expounded upon in Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary (note: the version of Pirkei Avot that this commentary is working with understands Rabbi to be Rabbi Meir)<sup>38</sup>:

*"Just as Rabbi Meir taught not to be unfairly judgmental of ourselves (or, at least, our superficial outer selves), so too is he teaching here not to miss opportunities to engage with others' true selves. If we see others only in a transactional way (what can they give to me?), we miss potential for connection and meaningful relationship. Further, from a social change perspective, someone may be our opposition in one campaign but an ally in another. We should not simply label others as inside or outside our camp, but allow ourselves to see them more deeply."*<sup>39</sup>

Yanklowitz first sees this text as speaking both to the reader in not baselessly judging themselves, as well as speaking to the reader to not judge others. He speaks to the fact that while labeling might be human nature- or at least a tendency that was present both in the time of the Mishnah and today- people have to work hard to not judge and label people, especially based on aspects of their exterior lives, rather than getting to know who they are as people. This idea of viewing people as a means of transaction is certainly present in this Mishnah, and present in today's society. This ultimately stems from the issue of labeling and biases.

Women have been subjected to these labels and superficial judgments in Jewish texts throughout history. This is a broader issue that comes from a patriarchal system, and has not yet ended. If the wisdom in this Mishnah was used to its fullest potential, people would not judge others without getting to know them and developing relationships. While this is certainly an ideal, this can be actualized if

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<sup>38</sup> Yanklowitz, Shmuly. *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*. Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2018. Pp. 435.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* Pp. 273.

people make it a point to reject the judgmental labels that may come to mind and do the hard work of understanding their biases. This includes a great deal of self-reflection and introspective that is not easy, but extremely important work. This would create a society where not only women, but all socially marginalized groups can prosper and people can come together in many different capacities, building relationships and building a more open-minded society for the future.

### **Pirkei Avot 5:16**

כל אהב הנשהי אתלוייה בדבר, בטל דבר, בטלה אהבה. ושאין תלוייה בדבר, אינה בטל הל' ולם. איזו היא אהבה התלוייה בדבר, ואהבת אמ' ון ותמר. ושאין תלוייה בדבר, ואהבת דוד וי' ונתן.

**Any love that is dependent on something, when that thing perishes, the love perishes. But [a love] that is not dependent on something, does not ever perish. What's [an example of] a love that is dependent on something? That's the love of Amnon and Tamar. And [a love] that is not dependent on something? That's the love of David and Jonathan.**

This Mishnah is speaking about a hierarchy of love- the lowest being that of a conditional type and the highest form being a love not dependent on anything. It is first important to understand that the example of Amnon and Tamar is a problematic one, though the root “a-h-v” is the root used in the Tanakh for both of the examples the rabbis use, so there is a basis of parallelism for their comparison. However, in the Bible, Amnon had short-lived physical obsession with Tamar, which ended in his disposal of her after he raped her. This is not love. His fixation for her is explained by Bartentura’s comment:

*“The love of Amnon and Tamar: [which was] because of her beauty.”*

Regardless of the motive or his conditional love based on her looks, this is a story about a man who used his sister as a sexual object and it is indefensible.

The rabbis are also not in defense of this story; they are not calling it love in a consensual and interactive way. Instead, they are using it to show the negative relationship, and one could even read into this that they understand this is abusive, though this is not apparent in the Mishnah itself. This is the lowest type of relationship according to this Mishnah, but what is fascinating is their example of the ideal type, that is the love between David and Jonathan, two men. The text does not mean to say that David and Jonathan are in a romantic or sexual relationship, rather in a true unconditional friendship. One could imagine this could be compared to the type of companionship the rabbis had with their “*chevrutas*” (study partners) in the Beit Midrash. The world of the rabbis is so male-centric that they have constructed a world without women as their ideal. This is a mind-blowing concept, as it shows how much the rabbis did not care about their wives and how real their love was for each other. They clearly understood they needed their wives to procreate, and this was a commandment, but their real relationships were with one another.

The fact that this line, especially in conjunction with Pirkei Avot 1:5, proves difficult for the modern feminist reader. The concept that friendship and unconditional companionship are held as an ideal is a positive message and could certainly be a universal standard, but the way that the rabbis construct their ideal world leaves no room for women- or anyone that is not in their position. Therefore, it is important that we recognize this, and work to construct our world based on our ideals. Compassion is crucial, and it is on our generation to prove that our unconditional love is for humanity, inclusive of all.

#### **Pirkei Avot 5:24**

בן בג בג . וְאָמַר , הַפֶּךָ בָּהּ , וְהַפֶּךָ בָּהּ , דְּכָלֵּא בָּהּ . וְכִּי תִחַזְּרִי , וְסִיב וּבִלְהַ בָּהּ , וּמִנָּה לֹא .  
תִּזְדַּע , שְׂאִין לָךְ מִדָּה טוֹבָה הַיָּמָנָה :

**Ben Bag Bag says: Search in it and search in it, since everything is in it. And in it should you look, and grow old and be worn in it; and from it do not move, since there is no characteristic greater than it.**

Ben Bag Bag has an approach to Torah, that it is indeed timeless and all-encompassing it. He stresses the importance of not straying from it, as it is key- in the context of his rabbinic world of course, as well as the Jewish world at large. This is second to last Mishnah in Pirkei Avot, though there is a 6th chapter that was added on later. The last Mishnah speaks to this point, because it says that this will not always be easy, but the things that are not easy are worth doing. (Pirkei Avot 5:25) It is important, especially as modern Jews, not to stray away from these texts, even if in they say what we wish it did not, to throw them away is to dispose of opportunities to grow and learn, as we reflect on ourselves and our society as well.

Rambam understands this to mean that one must spend significant time with Torah: *“He said about the Torah that one should search in it and meditate upon it, as everything is in it.”* He has a fair point in his commentary, because one does need to take time to learn, and to sit with its teachings and to come back to the teachings one has already learned, as each time one returns the life experiences allow for a different perspective. Posen understands this to be Ben Bag-Bag’s point as well: *“Ben Bag-Bag recognizes that review is essential for growth, new understanding, and truly unlocking the magic of the world.”*<sup>40</sup> She notes that new understandings are part of the beauty of Torah, as coming back to it can allow the Torah to continuously

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<sup>40</sup> Posen, Eve and Lois Sussman Shenker. *Pirkei Imahot: The Wisdom of Mothers, The Voices of Women*. Luminare Press, 2017. Pp. 82.

speak throughout one's life. The more one learns and the more one returns to this learning, the greater the potential for growth and understanding. This is why the Jewish calendar is on a cycle and we come back to the texts year after year, but we come back with another year on earth and another year filled with more questions of which to ask the Torah.

This commentary is exactly for the reason of this read of Pirkei Avot. If we were to disregard this text written in a time of great inequality for women in Judaism, there would be no room for growth of the meaning of the text, and the potential for the growth of the Jewish people. Therefore, this text is central as the understanding of Torah, as the continuous endeavors of the Jewish people, must be open for reflection, review, and revision, in order to continue into the 21st century. Torah today must be one of openness and equality and reflect the values of those learning it, and as Ben Bag-Bag says, this is possible because everything is in it.

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