

Rabbi's Reflections: How do we spend a summer?

*Pirquei Avot* (*The Ethics of the Sages*) holds quite a place in our tradition. Traditionally, one reads a chapter each Shabbat afternoon from Pesah to Shavuot. *Ashqenazim*, (most European Jews) also read a chapter each Shabbat afternoon from Shavuot to Rosh HaShanah. The Talmud says, "One who desires to be pious and virtuous must study and practice the maxims of Avot" (Bava Qama 30a).

Why did *Pirquei Avot* attract the sages and our ancestors? The sayings. Besides telling us to study, it also tells us to live life in a certain way. (Citations follow the prayer book; multiple ones state a similar theme but teach different lessons.) We must study, but words are insufficient; we must act on them (e.g 3:12, 4:6). Say little, do much (1:15). The shy cannot learn (so question) (2:6). If you don't keep increasing your knowledge, you actually decrease it (1:13). One good deed (*mitzvah*) leads to another, while one misdeed (*averah*) leads to another (4:2).

Pray for the welfare of the government, for if people did not fear it they would swallow each other alive (3:2). Be the first to greet someone (4:20) cheerfully (1:15, 3:16). Staying awake at night, and traveling alone and thinking about trivial matters endangers your life (recall this before you next drive) (3:5). Sleeping late, drinking alcohol midday, children's prattle (either spending time loafing with them or engaging in adult conversation similar to it), loafing in the meeting places of the vulgar, all will ruin a person's life (3:14), as will envy, lust, and pursuing honor (4:28). Don't judge others until you stand in their situation (2:4).

The reward is proportionate to the effort (2:21, 5:25). When love depends on achieving a certain goal, achieve that goal and love vanishes; but love that does not depend on a goal never vanishes (5:18). In a place where there are no *mentshen* (worthy people, i.e., decent, honest, trustworthy), strive to be one (2:6). You are not obliged to finish the task, neither are you free to neglect it (2:21).

This summer, study it and review it for you will find everything in it (5:24). You will treat others better, have a better relationship with God, and your life will have more meaning.