

**Some Basics about Pirkei Avot**  
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“Pirkei Avot”= literally “Chapters of the Fathers”; sometimes translated as “Ethics of the Fathers” An appealing translation is Jacob Neusner’s nice phrase “Lessons of the Founders.”

“Pirkei Avot” is the popular name for the tractate in the Mishnah called simply “Avot.” Originally, the work consisted of five relatively short chapters, but at some point perhaps in the early Middle ages, a sixth chapter—called in Kinyan Torah (“acquiring Torah”)—was added probably to facilitate the tradition of studying Avot on the *six* Shabbatot between Passover and Shavuot.

**What is the Mishnah?**

The word Mishnah derives from the Hebrew verb root *shanah*= “to repeat” or more generally “to learn.”

Mishnah is earliest foundational text of rabbinic Judaism. Written in Hebrew and put together around the year 220 CE.

Tradition attributes the editing of the Mishnah to Rabbi Judah the Patriarch (often translated as Judah the Prince; *Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi*), the leader of the Jewish community in Eretz Yisrael in the early third century CE.

Mishnah draws upon the traditions of the burgeoning “rabbinic movement” that preceded its composition, traditions that were passed along orally.

The Mishnah is organized into 63 small books which we call in English “tractates” and in Hebrew *masekhtot* (singular= *masekhet*), a word that means web or fabric. Each tractate has a title (like “Shabbat” or “Wedding contracts” [*Ketubot*]) indicating its content.

These 63 tractates are further organized into six thematic volumes, called in English “Orders” (*sedarim* in Hebrew)

Avot, surprisingly, appears toward the end of the “Order” called *Nezikin* (“Damages”). There are various theories about why it ended up there (since it has nothing to do with tort law). Those theories aren’t relevant to us at this time.

## Origins of the Mishnah

But where exactly did the Mishnah come from? Here scholars have hit a dead end. The Mishnah itself in the tractate Avot tells us an “origin story” in which it traces its traditions back to Moses at Sinai who handed “Torah” on to Joshua and Joshua hands it on to the “elders” who passed it on to the prophets and so forth and so forth until we get to precursors of “the rabbis” (like Hillel and Shammai) to the earliest rabbis and continuing on to the time of the sages in Rabbi Judah’s generation. But the actual historical origins of the Mishnah remain mysterious. There is for example a tradition told in the name of Rabbi Judah himself that Rabbi Akiva organized “the entire Torah into rings upon rings.” Some scholars see that as a hint about a kind of Ur-Mishnah predating our Mishnah by 100 years or more, but “this imaginary Mishnah of Rabbi Akiva” has never been discovered so perhaps this is only Rabbi Judah’s way of paying homage to an extraordinary predecessor.

## What exactly is the Mishnah?

The Mishnah is often called a “law code” but contemporary scholars find that to be an inadequate description. It does contain laws and alternative views on those laws—plenty of them—but it doesn’t always make it clear what actually *is* the law. It rather seems like the topic headings for the issues that the rabbis are going to be discussing in the study circles and its very elusive style would lead to generations of debate and discussion that culminated in the Jerusalem Talmud (c. 400 CE) and the much more expansive (and famous) Babylonian Talmud (c. 550 CE).

The Mishnah forms the basis of the Talmud. The Talmud is a kind of vast commentary on (most of) the tractates of the Mishnah. But in general the Mishnah itself differs in style from the Talmud. The long and complicated discussions that we tend to call “Talmudic discourse” pretty much do not appear in the Mishnah. Where the Mishnah is short, pithy, prescriptive and somewhat illusive as to its intentions; the Talmud is discursive, filled with argumentation, discussions of reasoning yet often inconclusive in its determination of the resolution of the issue at hand.

One of the great Talmud scholars of the past 50 years Prof. David Weiss Halivni has characterized this as the difference between an “apodictic” approach to law vs. a “justified” approach.

Apodictic= a straight out assertion (about a practice or law or behavior) that *doesn’t rely on a stated rationale or Scriptural quotation*

Justified= a statement that *gives a reason or quotes a verse to back up the practice or behavior*

Mishnah generally speaking is apodictic; statements in Gemara (Talmud) and Midrashim are usually “justified” by reasons or by the interpretation of biblical verses

Judaism, according to Halivni has tended to have a “predilection” toward “justified law.” Hence the popularity and status of Talmud study.

But for thousands of years Jews have also studied Mishnah on its own with an eye to exploring the *essence* of rabbinic views on a variety of practices—criminal law, property law, laws related to the Jewish holidays, etc. And because the Mishnah is written in a technical but clear Hebrew—as opposed to the Aramaic of the Talmud—the book is a good deal more accessible once one has mastered some of the basic terminology. Interestingly, large chunks of the Mishnah are not particularly relevant to us in a practical way because they deal with the sacrificial practices of the Temple, something that at the time of the final editing of the Mishnah had been made irrelevant (already for around 150 years) by the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE by the Romans.

### **The Pedagogic Challenges of Mishnah**

The very accessibility of the Mishnah—its pithy nature—presents in some ways its pedagogic challenge. First because the Mishnah contains very few “stories” (unlike the Talmud which has MANY stories) we don’t get to use the tools of literary analysis and discussion that students may find appealing. Occasionally we will find short cases or more to the point “anecdotes” telling us how one rabbi observed a law—dealt with a court case or offered prayers. But that is very different from the stories we encounter in the Talmud (which also has cases and anecdotes as well).

Second, we get a lot of “apodictic” pronouncements about the law without much room for exploring the reasoning behind the law. What makes the Talmud (the Gemara) hard work is also what makes it so stimulating—unpacking and understanding the reasoning behind the positions of the various rabbis on the topic at hand. And then in the Talmud we get the kinds of fascinating and ambiguous stories that we’ve been studying together at MTEI. And we also find some wonderful Midrashim interpreting biblical stories. The Mishnah gives us almost none of that.

### **Pirkei Avot and the Mishnah**

Avot is part of the Mishnah, true, but it is very different from pretty much anything else in the Mishnah in at least two ways.

First, unlike the rest of the Mishnah it is not organized by topics, rather it is organized by people—rabbis who are quoted, usually in various combinations. Sometimes these seem very well-organized and sometimes they seem a bit random. A whole group of sayings of Rabbi X appear and a group of sayings of another rabbi appear and the topics are not necessarily connected, though sometimes that happens.

Second, and more important for our purposes, the statements in Pirkei Avot have very little to do with matters of law and practice. Instead they are usually advice about how to live, about what constitutes proper behavior, what it means to live a holy life, ethical principles. For that reason Avot is the single most well known book of rabbinic literature aside from the Passover Haggadah. How many sermons have we all heard that quote Avot?!

For us as teachers and teachers of teachers this presents another challenge: how do we engage students in deep and meaningful conversations about the kind of pronouncements for proper living that sometimes can seem pretty straightforward and maybe a bit clichéd?

One of the things we want to explore is how to address that pedagogic challenge as we examine two texts from Avot and a curriculum that constructs a lesson exploring those texts.