A BRIDGE TO OUR TRADITION: PIRKEI AVOT

by
Nachama Skolnik Moskowitz

Illustrated by
Joseph Cooper

Project Editor
Faye Tillis Lewy

Overview to פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת (Pirkei Avot)

Jews have long been known as the People of the Book. The central or most "famous" Jewish book is the תּוֹרָה (Torah), which is filled with the stories, laws, and ethical standards that guide our actions and beliefs. According to Jewish tradition, at Mount Sinai God passed along to Moses both a specific, written Torah and an oral version.

- The **written** Torah is known as the Five Books of Moses and contains Genesis (*B'reishit*—בְּרֵאשִׁית), Exodus (*Sh'mot*—שְׁמוֹת), Leviticus (*Vayikra*—וַיִּקְרָא), Numbers (*B'midbar*—בְּמִדְבַּר), and Deuteronomy (*D'varim*—דְּבָרִים).
- The **oral** Torah comprises those laws and ideas that the Jewish people passed along verbally from generation to generation. Almost 1500 years after Mount Sinai, a rabbi named Judah HaNasi (Judah the Prince) is said to have organized what had been taught by word of mouth and written it down into a book we now call the Mishnah (מִשְׁנָה). Pirkei Avot (פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת), the book that forms the foundation of this worktext, is part of the מִשְׁנָה.*

Quick Facts

1. The Hebrew word פֶּרֶק (*perek*) means chapter.
2. There are six chapters, or פְּרָקִים (*p'rakim*), in פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת (Chapters of the Fathers).
3. "The fathers" refers to the men quoted in the book, all well-known rabbis who lived around 1,800–2,200 years ago.
4. Each chapter is divided into smaller sections, called מִשְׁנָה (*mishnah*). The plural is מִשְׁנָיוֹת (*mishnayot*).
5. פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת is found in most prayer books and is studied by Jews between Pesach and Shavuot, as well as at other times.

6. The words and ideas of פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת are so popular that their words are found in many youth group and synagogue songs today. Some examples are

אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי מִי לִי (*Im ein ani li, mi li*)

לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה לִגְמוֹר (*Lo alecha hamlachah ligmor*)

בְּמָקוֹם שֶׁאֵין אֲנָשִׁים (*B'makom she-ein anashim*)

עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים (*Al sh'loshah d'varim*)

* For further details on the background of Pirkei Avot, see the Forward and Introduction to *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics*, by Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky (NY: UAHC Press, 1993).

Introduction to This Book

Most books about פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת begin with chapter one and end with chapter six. However, in creating this book I decided to look for themes among the various sayings. I cut up all the מִשְׁנָיוֹת, sorted them, and then chose the three "Big Questions" I felt were most compelling for young adolescents:

- What are the character traits that help define who we are as individuals?
- What are the ways we can interact positively with others?
- What are our responsibilities to improve the world?

Even after cutting up and rearranging the text, however, I felt it important for students to see פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת in its entirety, the way it was organized by Judah HaNasi. Therefore, a full version of פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת is provided at the end of this book; after all, we are a People of the Book, not of the Workbook.

My own daughter taught me about the dangers of "adult blah-blah," by her definition the times when a teacher does a lot of talking, or a textbook is filled with words upon words of explanation. In writing this book, I tried hard not to "blah-blah," but rather to invite students to discover our Jewish tradition as full participants in an interactive community of learners. Rather than tell students what the rabbis had to say about ethical living, I offer opportunities for them to explore the rabbis' thoughts either alone or in small, cooperative groups.

Each chapter is similarly structured:

Text from פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת

The English follows the translation of Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky's book, *Pirke Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* (NY: UAHC Press, 1993), with some exceptions. In a few circumstances, when the English was a bit complex, I altered the translation. These shifts are noted in the Teacher's Guide.

The English and Hebrew are set up to mirror each other; students with some Hebrew

background may either use the English to help them access the translation or cover up the English and study just the Hebrew.

A Beginning Thought

All activities for each chapter either build out of, or lead back to, the Beginning Thought. In reality, this is the Big Idea that serves as the foundation of the chapter.

Activities

Each activity helps students better understand the text from פִּרְקֵי אָבוֹת. Most contain questions to be explored with one or more students in small, cooperative groupings. At times, students work with graphic organizers (charts, diagrams) or other texts that offer additional insights into the Big Idea.

An Ending Thought from You

Each chapter ends with an opportunity for students to apply the Big Idea to their own lives; this section is usually completed individually.

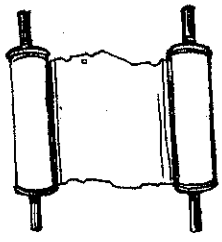
It is recommended that teachers refer to the accompanying Teacher's Guide for ideas, resources, and teaching suggestions.

THE WORLD STANDS ON THREE THINGS

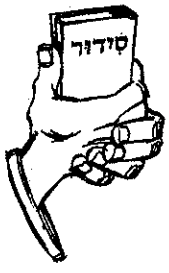
1:2

He [Rabbi Shimon HaTzadik] used to say,
הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר

"The world stands on three things:
עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְּבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד



on the Torah,
עַל הַתּוֹרָה



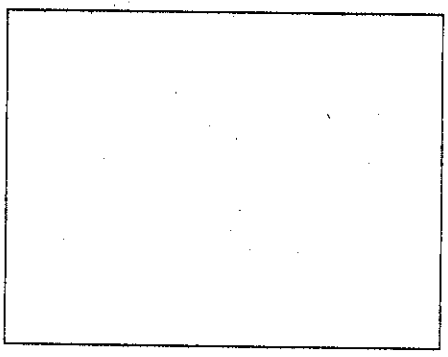
on worship,
וְעַל הָעֲבוֹדָה

and on acts of loving-kindness."
וְעַל גְּמִילוּת חֲסָדִים.

1:18

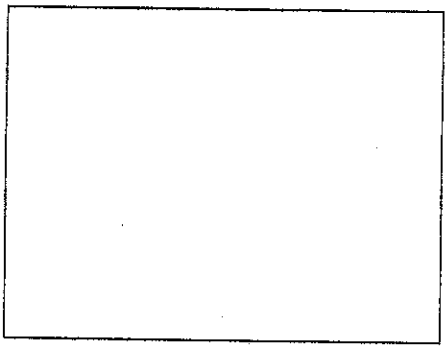
Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said,
"The world stands on three things:

רַבָּן שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר
עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם קַיָּם



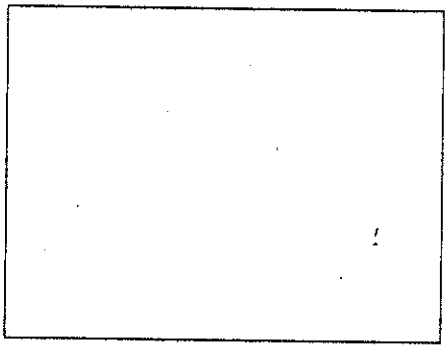
on truth,

עַל הָאֱמֶת



on justice,

וְעַל הַדִּין



and on peace."

וְעַל הַשָּׁלוֹם.

A Beginning Thought: Jewish tradition respects and allows different opinions.

But there are basic ideas about Judaism that are the foundation of our religion and that are respected by everyone.

There's an old joke that Jews tell about ourselves: If two Jews are having a discussion, a person listening carefully to their ideas can often hear at least three different opinions. Or you might have heard the expression, "Two Jews, three opinions." In the last lesson, we saw that Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah each had something to say about wisdom and taking action—but they had their own way of talking about the ideas. In this lesson, we have two rabbis each offering an opinion about the three most important things in the world!

What's Different?

Work with a partner.

- First take a look at the words of Rabbi Shimon HaTzadik on page 139 and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel on page 140.
- Then, examine the illustrations for Rabbi Shimon HaTzadik's idea.

1. Place a check next to the name of the rabbi whose words you think would be harder to illustrate.
   ☐ Rabbi Shimon HaTzadik (Torah, worship, and acts of loving-kindness)
   ☐ Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel (truth, justice, and peace)

2. Now go back and create your own illustrations for Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel.

What's the Same?

While "two Jews, three opinions" has some truth, the key ideas about Judaism are always the same. For example, while Jews talk about God in different ways, the key idea we all believe in is that there is one God.

Our two rabbis, Shimon HaTzadik and Shimon ben Gamliel, both say the world is based on three different things. But they have some key ideas that are similar.

With three other people, match up an idea of Shimon HaTzadik with an idea of Shimon ben Gamliel. Which seem to go together?

- _____ is similar to _____

  because _____

  _____.

- _____ is similar to _____

  because _____

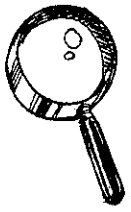
  _____.

- _____ is similar to _____

  because _____

  _____.

Focus on Rabbi Shimon HaTzadik's Top Three



Here's a chance to test your detective skills. Your job is to find out what Shimon HaTzadik meant when he said that the world stands on Torah, worship, and acts of loving-kindness.

Divide into three groups, with each group working on *one* of Shimon's top three. You will share your detective work when done.

Group 1: The World Stands on Torah עַל הַתּוֹרָה

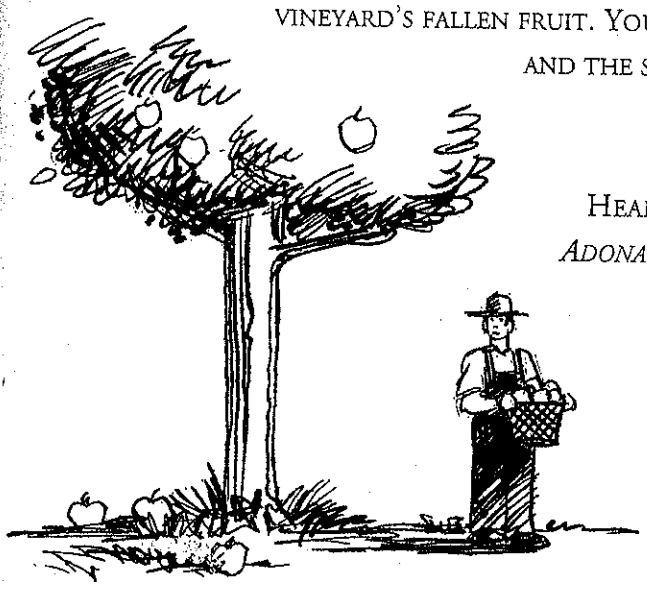
Use these quotes from the Torah to help you figure out why Shimon HaTzadik believes that Torah is one of the three things on which the world stands. Write your ideas in the chart.

DO NOT STEAL.

EXODUS 20:13

WHEN YOU HARVEST YOUR LAND'S HARVEST, DO NOT HARVEST ALL THE WAY TO THE EDGES OF THE FIELD, OR PICK UP THE PARTS OF YOUR HARVEST THAT FELL. YOU SHALL NOT PICK YOUR VINEYARD BARE OR HARVEST YOUR VINEYARD'S FALLEN FRUIT. YOU SHALL LEAVE THEM FOR THE POOR AND THE STRANGER. I AM *ADONAI* YOUR GOD.

LEVITICUS 19:9–10



HEAR, O ISRAEL, *ADONAI* IS OUR GOD, *ADONAI* IS ONE.

DEUTERONOMY 6:4

In each of the squares, below, write down *one* thought from the Torah that you think is important to the world.	Write down *why* you think each thought from the Torah is important to the world.	Give some *examples of what people would need to do* to make that thought from the Torah happen in today's world.

Group 2: The World Stands on Worship

עַל הָעֲבוֹדָה

More than 2,000 years ago, even before the time of Shimon HaTzadik, Jews prayed by sacrificing animals to God, saying prayers, and singing songs from the Bible. Today we use words of prayer to communicate with God. Use these prayers from the prayer book to help you figure out why Shimon HaTzadik believes that worship is one of the three things on which the world stands. Write your ideas in the chart.

For Health

Heal us, O God, and we shall be healed; save us, and we shall be saved; grant us a perfect healing for all our infirmities.
We praise You, O God,
Healer of the sick.

רְפָאֵנוּ יי וְנֵרָפֵא, הוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ
וְנִוָּשֵׁעָה, וְהַעֲלֵה רְפוּאָה שְׁלֵמָה
לְכָל־מַכּוֹתֵינוּ.
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, רוֹפֵא הַחוֹלִים.

For Abundance

Bless this year for us, Eternal God; may its produce bring us well-being. Bestow Your blessing on the earth, that all Your children may share its abundance in peace.
We praise You, O God, for You bless earth's seasons from year to year.

בָּרֵךְ עָלֵינוּ, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ,
אֶת־הַשָּׁנָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־כָּל־מִינֵי
תְבוּאָתָהּ לְטוֹבָה. וְתֵן בְּרָכָה
עַל־פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה, וְשַׂבְּעֵנוּ מִטּוּבֶךָ.
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, מְבָרֵךְ הַשָּׁנִים.

For Freedom

Sound the great shofar to proclaim freedom,
raise high the banner of liberation for the oppressed,
and let the song of liberty be heard in the four corners of the earth.
We praise You, O God, who loves righteousness and justice.

תְּקַע בְּשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל לְחֵרוּתֵנוּ,
וְשָׂא נֵס לְפִדּוֹת עֲשׁוּקֵינוּ, וְקוֹל
דְּרוֹר יִשָּׁמַע בְּאַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת
הָאָרֶץ.
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, פּוֹדֵה עֲשׁוּקִים.

In each of the squares below, write down *one* thought from the prayer book that you think is important to the world.	Write down *why* you think each thought from the prayer book is important to the world.	Give some *examples of what people would need to do* to make that thought from the prayer book happen in today's world.

Group 3: The World Stands on Acts of Loving-Kindness

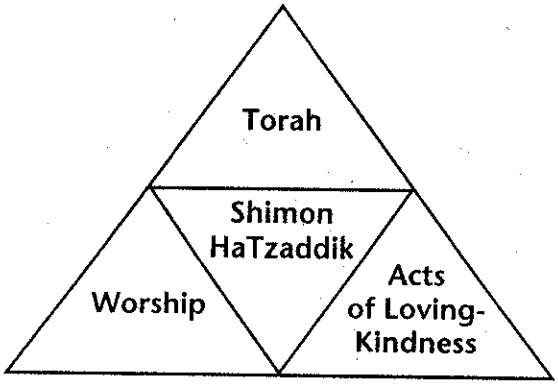
עַל גְּמִילוּת חֲסָדִים

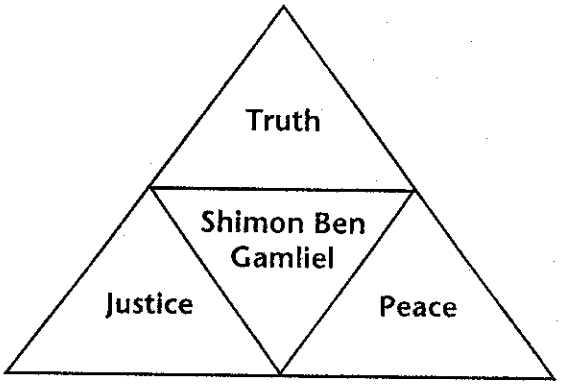
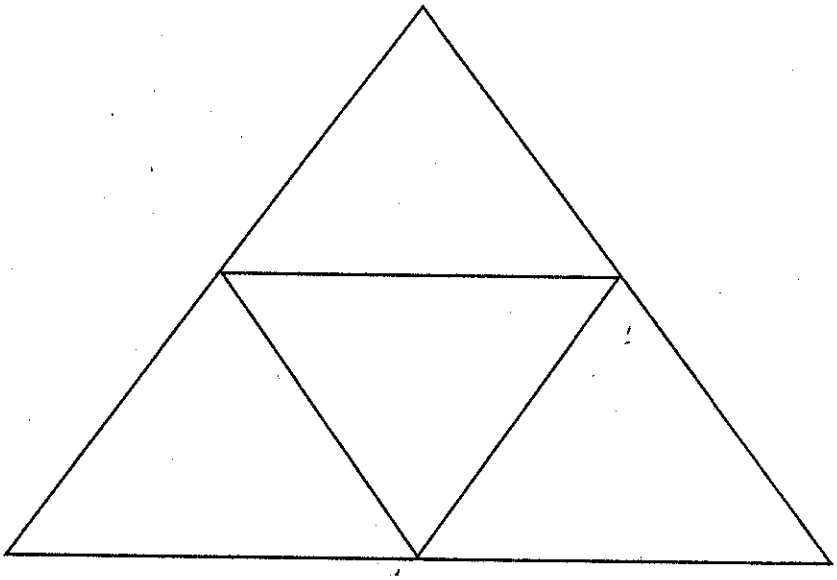
The third important thing that Shimon HaTzadik said the world stood upon are acts of loving-kindness. These are things that people do to help one another. Spend a few minutes looking through some current newspapers or magazines to find articles describing people who show עַל גְּמִילוּת חֲסָדִים. Hint: You might also get some ideas from reading the Torah and prayer texts that groups 1 and 2 are working with. Then fill in the chart below.

From your readings, make a list of the things that people do to help one another.	Brainstorm other kind things that people can do for one another.	Brainstorm a list of reasons why you think גְּמִילוּת חֲסָדִים is important to the world.

An Ending Thought from You

Shimon HaTzadik said that the world stood on three things: on Torah, on worship, and on acts of loving-kindness. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel offered three different ideas: truth, justice, and peace. We could write each of their ideas in a "Three Thoughts Triangle" that looks like this:





What would be in your "Three Thoughts Triangle"? Write your name in the middle and then put your three ideas in the corners.