Torah from Our Sages

Pirke Avot

Jacob Neusner

Rossel Books, 1984

PROLOGUE

WHY STUDY AVOT?

Pirke Avot—"the lessons of the founders"—finds a place in the program of synagogue and school alike. It is the one classical Judaic text, besides the Siddur (prayer book) and the Hebrew Bible, that most Jews are likely to confront. Scholars without number study it. Through most of Jewish history, Jews paid their tribute in devotional and even careful reading. Why does it attract sustained attention in our own day, as much as in the past?

It would be easier to tell you why people might neglect this little tractate of the Mishnah than to explain why they have loved it so. The sayings which comprise it are unadorned, not set into the context of stories that might give the lessons color and life. No dramatic events provide a setting for the founders themselves. We are not told who the authorities are or why we should listen to them. So the didactic lessons of the founders come to us in a stark way. The statements are each expressed in a few simple words. They give instruction. They do not attempt to persuade. They tell us what to be and do, pure and simple.

Perhaps the very absence of rich and well-told historical tales, the simplicity of the setting, the focus of all light solely on what is said—these are what give the lessons of the founders their timeless quality. For if we do not know where and when a saying first was uttered and what personality stands behind it other than a name among unfamiliar names, we are free to use our own imaginations. We create for the sages' sayings a world much like our own. We make the sages' wisdom immediately relevant—because the framer did not try. If the stage is dark but for a beam of light, in our minds we see the scenery ourselves. Not knowing more than a name, we invent the

character. Not hearing more than simple and universal truths, we create the context and impart our own detailed meanings.

Compare these timeless and eternally relevant sayings to other such collections, and the point is clear. Sayings of wisdom, whether deriving from ancient India or China or Israel or Mesopotamia or Egypt, have in common the power to come right to the point and to say only what urgently demands statement.

Some Historical Questions

At the outset, let us ask ourselves the necessary questions of authorship and context: Who wrote this book? How did it reach us?

The simple fact is that Pirke Avot does not contain the answers to these questions. We do not know the sources of the tractate, where the people who compiled the sayings got them, or how the sayings reached the final authorities who framed the tractate as we have it. We do not know where they did their work, though we assume it was in the Land of Israel. We do not know when they did it. The chronologically latest names to appear in the tractate generally are thought to have lived in the middle of the third century, about a generation beyond the publication of the Mishnah by Judah the Patriarch. Thus we may guess that the tractate was compiled some time afterwards, perhaps around 250–275 C.E.* But how did the people who composed the book know the sayings they put in it? And where did they get the names? We do not know the answers to these questions.

Nor are we the first to ask these questions. Indeed, others, for a long time, also answered them. The usual answer given is that there was a long process of tradition—handing down—that carried both the saying and the name of the person alleged to have spoken it from the beginning to the point at which, hundreds of years later, it was written down. This process of handing down through memorization and communication [called "oral tradition" since things were at first not written down] is certainly how the Mishnah of Judah the Patriarch was formulated and handed on for a while. But there is no conclusive evidence that the same way in which the completed

*Common Era: equivalent of Christian usage, A.D.

Mishnah was "published"—through oral formulation and oral transmission—is how everything prior to the formulation of the Mishnah also was preserved and handed on. We simply do not know anything at all about how things were formulated and placed into circulation. Writing was routine in Israelite culture for a long time, and the technology of writing goes back for more than 2,000 years before the time of the Mishnah. So people had to reject one form of long-term communication and take up another.

It seems clear they did so for a very special document, the Mishnah—until, in about 200 C.E., it was recorded. But how the framers of the Mishnah got their materials, including the sayings now collected and arranged in our tractate, we do not know. We cannot demonstrate from evidence that the picture of oral formulation and oral transmission drawn for Avot, and for the Mishnah of which it is part, is accurate for the period in which the sayings were made up and handed on. Rather than belabor the point, we have simply to admit we do not know how the people who compiled Avot knew the sayings they put into it, or where they got the names.

One fact is clear, as you will see in this book: The work of composition was done at the end. I mean, the labor of selecting and arranging sayings was not cumulative, carried on over a long time. Rather, the editorial authorship of the third-century masters imposed its ideas upon whatever material they had in hand. For the construction of chapters one, two and five of Avot shows that everything was put together in an artful way, with close attention to questions of form. Accumulations of wise sayings made over a long period of centuries do not magically fall into neat arrangements by threes, fives, twos, fours, sevens and the like. Since the sayings in these chapters do form patterns, we must conclude that we know much less about the origin and evolution of our tractate than we might like.

The Framers Avot

The tractate consists of sayings attributed to important authorities. Who chose these authorities? Clearly, the framers who composed the tractate as a whole believed these authorities comprised a chain of instruction that could be traced all the way back to Moses at Sinai. They say so in the opening

statement of Avot. The first authority cited is Simeon the Righteous who probably flourished in the third century B.C.E.* From his name onward, the list progresses in easy generations through the second century, the first century, B.C.E.; then the first, second, and early third centuries C.E. In chapter two, the figures are not arranged chronologically, for we have two stems of the ancient tradition.

The Authorities of the Mishnah

Judah the Patriarch, the Jewish authority universally credited with the publication of the Mishnah, and therefore also of Avot, was one of the two types of dominant Jewish leaders portrayed in our document, as you will see. Judah's title, "Patriarch," represents the Hebrew word nasi, *ruler of the Jewish nation. Judah flourished in the Land of Israel in the last part of the second century and the first part of the third. As patriarch and sage, he headed two establishments which were one.*

First, he was the ruler of the patriarchate the Romans set up for the Jews after the defeat of Bar Kokhba's messianic war, 132–135 C.E. The Romans' policy was to rule conquered peoples through cooperative native authorities, so far as that was convenient. In the case of the Jews, that policy extended back to the time of Herod, nearly two hundred years earlier, and onward for yet another two centuries. In the aftermath of the tragic war, the Romans recognized the government of the Jewish nation in the Land of Israel that had begun to function before the war and put that government, and the family that headed it, back into power. So Judah the Patriarch headed the governing family that led the autonomous Jewish government. Since we generally suppose that the Mishnah as we know it was brought to closure and published around 200 C.E., and since all documents of the time attribute to the Mishnah the authority of the patriarch, we assume the primacy of Judah the Patriarch in the sponsorship of the Mishnah.

Second, Judah headed the sages, the other type of leader. Judah did not do the work all by himself. He had at hand a considerable body of learned scribes, bureaucrats, and administrators of his government called sages (Hebrew: hakhamim*). They drew upon the long traditions of their profession, on how the Scriptures were to be interpreted and applied, and on how the Jewish community was to be run in accord with the laws of Torah.*

So, in all, the Mishnah derives from two sources: first, the political authority and power of the patriarch; second, the traditions of learning and proper administration of the sages. Early on, you will see how these two distinct, but cooperating, bodies combined their separate and distinct ways of seeing things into a single document. Chapters one and two of Avot in particular show us two lines of tradition traced back to a single source, that is, two sets of names, one of the patriarchal house, the other of the sages' group, extending backward to a single authority—Moses at Sinai. But I have moved far ahead of my story.

One is the stem represented by the name of Judah the Patriarch and his two sons, hence, late-second- and early-third-century C.E. authorities. Judah the Patriarch stands behind the Mishnah as a whole. So he was one principal figure.

The other stem lists Yohanan ben Zakkai and his disciples. Yohanan ben Zakkai bridged the abyss from the time in which the Temple stood to the aftermath of the Temple's destruction in 70 C.E. and the founding of the sages' movement and school at Yavneh.

So the purpose of chapter two was to link the two stems of authority upon which the Mishnah as a whole rested—the patriarch, on the one side; the sages, on the other. Chapters three and four roughly follow what we believe to be the chronological order of their named authorities. But this is only a surmise on our part. Chapter five for its part is not composed

* Before the Christian Era: equivalent of Christian usage, B.C.

of chains of names at all. It presents other kinds of constructions entirely. Accordingly, the several chapters are organized in diverse ways. The way in which a chapter is organized tells us the point important to the *framers* of the chapter. In due course, we shall explore in depth what that point was, case by case.

All of this explanation is meant to set Avot in context—and to explain why, in the end, we know less about even that context than we might wish. Yet that is a fact. It means that the framers did not want to give us history or biography. They composed Avot for some other purpose. When we ask historical questions—who were these named masters or sages of Avot? When did they live? What did they do?—we are asking inappropriate questions. But what questions do the framers of Avot address?

Generations of Jews knew. We may be sure of that fact, because generations of Jews have found the power to hear the framers of Avot, to grasp their questions, and to make those questions their own. Each generation must do this anew. The only facts are what the framers of Avot and the sayings they hand on to us have given us. Out of these facts, we have to locate other facts. By this I mean, from what people *do,* we have to investigate what they *intended.*

One of the things the framers of Avot do give us is the names of the authorities, even while they tell us little about who those people were, when they lived, what they did. Accordingly, we have to ask why the names were important, if the biographies and histories were not. The answer is that these names stand for something. They represent—as the framers will tell us—links in a chain of tradition extending from the time of the framers of the document in the middle of the third century C.E. backward to Sinai. Chapters one and two lay the foundations for this enormous allegation; and chapters three and four build that structure of authority that reaches to the time of the framers of Avot themselves. So each name was important not for itself, but for what it represented: a generation—the guarantee that each group, each age, had received from its teachers and handed on to its disciples precisely that Torah or teaching that had begun at Sinai.

What would you call this under other circumstances? If you were dealing with an aristocracy, you would call it genealogy—that which validates the claim of the present generation to its rightful place and position. In ancient Israel, it was the priests who validated their rights and privileges through genealogy. In our tractate's list of names, we have the method of the priests applied to the doctrines and beliefs of the sages—the scribes—of the Mishnah. In many ways, Avot thus captures in microcosm the trait of the Mishnah as a whole: the priests' interests and modes of thought, the scribes' methods and ways of interpreting and applying the law. Judaism as we know it in Avot combines the methods of the priests with the contents of the sages—hence, genealogy, but applied not to an aristocracy but to a spiritual family.

A Timeless Message

In fact, even though we do not know much about who made up these sayings and attached them to the names at hand, we know a great deal about the power of mind and imagination of the framers of the document. They were people with unusual powers of focusing upon the main theme. They chose with care and restraint to formulate and hand on accessible truths. They spoke in such a way that we, nearly eighteen hundred years later, wish to listen to them. So they had an extraordinary gift for insight into the ongoing and enduring condition of humanity. They wrote for all time, because they could transcend the cares and concerns of one time and place. If we can understand them, it is because they wrote in such a way as to make us want to understand them. They said things so as to make us able to enter into conversation with them. So in our hands is the work of sages of exceptional gifts of taste and judgment.

Still, if the traits of Avot as literature—simplicity and understatement of detail—win our admiration, as yet we do not know why we should listen to what the sages say, however well they say it. Let me list some reasons people study the words I translate in this book.

First, a work that is timeless always proves timely. What the founders say about the Torah applies also to their own writing: "Turn it over and over again, because everything is in it." You may not find every word equally suggestive for your life every moment of every day. But you are sure to find

something aimed straight at your circumstance of heart and mind. That is the power of the document.

Second, you are not the first Jew in the world, nor are you going to be the last. True, here and now you make the critical decisions—but only because people before you decided things, too. So you must find relevant to your own condition as a human being not only what speaks to your private circumstance. Pertinent also is what Avot tells you about your situation as a Jew. As individual Jews, we deal with a Judaism "out there," an ongoing set of viewpoints and concerns and convictions held by many other Jews. The issues facing the individual Jew derive not only from personal experience, mine or yours. We do not create ourselves as Jews. We have to learn what other Jews know and feel. Thus we encounter the Jewish situation, what it means to be a Jew over time. The Judaism "out there" is a tradition we do not invent every morning; it is a faith we share with others. We who are American, British, and Canadian Jews, morever, with our powerful national traditions of independence and self-reliance, need to be reminded of this fact. Judaism stands for continuity and cooperation, experience that is shared and handed on, wisdom that we only partially discover individually, truth that abides.

When, therefore, a book of wisdom such as Avot comes into our hands, it speaks to each of us as an individual. But it addresses us in the name of the people Israel.

When we find something relevant to ourselves in Avot, the tractate, by definition, tells us that we, individually and privately, are relevant to Israel, the Jewish people as a whole. What we think is our own turns out to be public and broadly shared. So a document of Israel's heritage serves as the link between the private person, who studies the words as if spoken to him or her in particular, and the entire community and people of Israel, all the Jews, together.

Accordingly, we turn to Avot to find what is relevant to our situation. That is our personal motivation. But we turn out to discover how *we* are relevant to the Jewish situation, collectively and nationally. That is Israel's motivation. So, when Avot speaks to us, it speaks in the name of the whole of Israel, the Jewish people. When, in the privacy of our hearts, we listen to Avot, we ourselves then speak, out of our private being, to the whole of Israel, the Jewish people.

But what of the message? I said before that even though we appreciate Avot for its artful style of expression, we still do not know why we should listen to what the founders say. Just now I argued that there are solid reasons for listening to these founders. Yet I have not said what I think they have to say to us. And I shall not do so in advance. I prefer to stand back and speak only after the founders have spoken.

Any other role would be presumptuous and intrusive. It would presume that I can read, but you cannot. It would intrude my voice over the voice of the founders themselves. Stating in advance what to look for—as distinct from *how* to see and *why* to look at all—would impose my judgment upon yours, my perspective and capacity to observe and hear upon those of my companion, you, the reader. That I will not do.

Let me explain my way of presenting the sayings that comprise the Torah of our sages. This method involves two distinct tasks: first, rendering the Hebrew into English; and, second, explaining what the saying means.

My translation is easy to explain. I translate as literally as possible. I claim in no way to innovate in the selection of a word in English to serve as the counterpart—the translation—of a word in Hebrew. If there are conventions on these matters of word choice, I generally follow them. I lay out the translation, however, in a way that will be unfamiliar. I try to allow each complete and autonomous thought, or unit of thought, to stand by itself. That is why I have broken up long columns of undifferentiated words not only into sentences, but also into visually distinct units.

In this way the reader immediately sees the way in which the sentences are composed and then made to form complete thoughts, fully exposed ideas. So, for one thing, the grouping of ideas into patterns—triplets, for example—and the provision of secondary explanation or amplification of a primary sentence always come into clear focus. You, therefore, should be able to see not only *what* the sages say, but also *how* they say it. If I can clarify how the language works, how the sentences convey meaning, I can show you something critical to Avot. The lessons come in fact as poetry, not prose. The ideas not only are stated, they are framed with exquisite care into phrases and sentences. Nothing is random. Everything is closely and reflectively balanced. When *how* things are said matters

as much as *what* is said, then you have poetry. And Avot is poetry.

The Individual and the Community

All of us come to study Judaism's great texts because something about ourselves, as individuals, makes us want to do so. We look for something relevant to our own lives, to the problems we have to work out, to the issues we confront from day to day. So we look in Avot for something to speak to our private concerns. But Avot addresses all Jews. If it tells you to do something, it tells the same thing to all of us—hence, by definition, Avot speaks to the Jews as a group, even though, to begin with, we come to Avot one by one, as individuals.

When Avot speaks to us as individuals, therefore, our capacity to hear and understand and appropriate that message signifies that we are not isolated individuals at all. The power to hear the message of Avot indicates that we share traits of heart and mind with the sages who speak through Avot. And that means we are not only radically isolated individuals, each with his or her own distinctive traits. We share in common traits as Jews. We hear a Jewish message because we have Jewish powers of understanding. Thus, whatever we find particular to ourselves—that is, meaningful to our own situation—turns out to define the least special characteristics about ourselves—that is, our Jewish traits, our sharing with other Jews the same concerns and the same values.

What seems to be individual turns out to mark us as part of a larger community of feeling and concern, caring and intellect. With that paradox in mind, what it means to take up and respond to a classic text of Judaism may be clearer.

My explanation ("commentary") of the Torah of our sages focuses upon groups of sayings. My perspective is upon what sayings mean when seen as a whole. What I believe I can tell you, which you may not have thought on your own, is how to see things from the angle of vision of the people who brought statements together and saw them whole. For the sayings one by one either speak to us directly and without need of mediation, or they fail. As I have stressed, their power is that they do not require much amplification or illustration. Short of preaching obvious sermons to you on the self-evident meanings the sages' sayings have for us, I can have no reason to tell you what you can see for yourself. But I can try to get at the perspective of those who framed the sayings into groups.

That is to say, I can try to explain what the person who put several sayings together in just this way accomplished. Why did an editor link opinion A with opinion B? Do these two opinions read differently when they are placed side by side from the way they read separately? Does the juxtaposition also present a contrast, for example? Or does it provide an emphasis somewhat different from the stress of a saying read all by itself? Does a set of five or ten sayings add up, when read all together, to something greater than the parts of the set seen one by one? This is what I mean by claiming to provide the perspective, the viewpoint, of the people who combined the sayings into the constructions now at hand. There is, then, the saying read all by itself. But there also is the saying seen in a larger context. The perspective of the one who took two or more sayings and grouped them as we now have them—that is the angle of vision I try to reveal.

This perspective on Avot will indicate what to me is Avot's surprising and radical character. For when we insist that we have more than merely random sayings, one thing after another, but a carefully crafted construction, we perceive a new dimension of meaning, a fresh message and judgment. Then we see the architecture of the document, the inner architectonics of its sustained argument.

Of course, no one can hope to say everything there is to be said about an enduring construction such as Avot. So let me be clear about that single contribution I hope to make to your understanding and appreciation of this amazing Mishnah tractate. The goal of my explanation is to show you that the whole of Judaism speaks out of this small but perfect part of the Mishnah, the oral Torah of Judaism.

The Mishnah

In context, the tractate of Avot finds its place in the Mishnah—the foundation of Judaism when joined with the Hebrew Bible, Tanakh. Avot is one of the sixty-three tractates (*massekhtot*) of the Mishnah. While we treat Avot as special, reading it by itself, to begin with, it serves a purpose in the larger document in which it is located. The Mishnah is a vast composition, in the form of laws or descriptions of how things are, in which an encompassing design for the life of Israel, the Jewish people, comes to full expression. The life of Israel, in the vision of the Mishnah, is lived in an orderly and stable world, in which the Temple stands at the center, and all things take up their proper positions in relationship to the Temple. That is why much of the Mishnah treats subjects important to the conduct of the life of service to God carried on by priests (*kohanim*) through the labor of the sacrifice of animals in the holy place in Jerusalem.

Of the Mishnah's six vast divisions (*sedarim*), no fewer than three treat subjects of principal interest to priests and deal with the sacrificial service to God. These are the first division, concerning the rations set aside from the yield of the Holy Land for the support of the priesthood; the fifth, concerning the everyday sacrificial service and the upkeep of the Temple; and the sixth, concerning the protection of the Temple and things pertaining to the cult from the dangers of uncleanliness described in Leviticus, chapters one through fifteen. In addition, the better part of the second division, concerning special seasons and appointed times, gives laws on what is done in the sacrificial service on extraordinary occasions, Yom Kippur and Passover, for example. (The remainder of that division concerns conduct in the home, analagous to what goes on in the cult, on those same days.) Only the third and fourth divisions—presenting laws pertaining to the family and women, on the one side, and to the conduct of civil life, institutions of government and justice and the laws for political, social, and commercial life, on the other—address that ordinary and practical world we know.

So the Mishnah as a whole covers the entire life of Israel, the Jewish people. But it is a strange picture. For the Mishnah portrays Judaism as if Israel were living in and around Jerusalem, or, if elsewhere, wholly in relationship to Jerusalem and the Temple. In fact, however, while materials or laws in the Mishnah may derive from earlier times, the document was fashioned by people who flourished in the second century C.E., after Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed by the Romans—indeed, after the failure of the Bar Kokhba war led the Romans to prohibit Jews from even entering Jerusalem. So, from the viewpoint of the world to which the Mishnah's framers spoke, the document presents a fantasy. Perhaps the Jews hoped that the Temple-centered world once more would come into being. But when the Mishnah came forth as the constitution and by-laws of Israel, the Jewish people, most of it turned out to be as irrelevant to realities then as it is today.

The question facing the people who received the Mishnah therefore is clear: what is this vast, strange document? Why should we listen to its laws and obey those that we can, that is, those that prove relevant even now?

Now among the sixty-three tractates of the Mishnah there is one totally unlike all the others, and that tractate presents answers to the question of the standing and status of the document as a whole. The tractate Avot, the one we learn together here, does not present laws, so it is different from the other sixty-two. Rather, it presents wise sayings. Moreover, it is not organized topically, as are the legal tractates. Rather, it is organized around the names of particular authorities. These are presented in chains, or sequences, and the sequence of names is meant to tell the whole story. That is a fact you will see most tellingly in chapter one, which leads from Sinai to the founders of the Mishnah itself.

We further notice that the authorities who appear in this tractate and also in the other sixty-two tractates of the Mishnah, here present sayings (or, are given sayings) without any relationship at all to opinions or general principles ascribed to them elsewhere. It is as if you study with a teacher in physics, but one day the teacher writes you a poem or sings you an aria. Such a thing is entirely possible, but it still presents a surprise. So too here, the same great minds who speak of rather remote and impractical laws elsewhere now tell us how we should live our lives. They express great principles to guide us in small things. In this way, too, Avot is different from all the rest of the Mishnah. Perhaps framed last, it was meant to stand at the head and introduce the system of the Mishnah as a whole. That is what I think Avot's framers had in mind in

making this remarkable tractate. It may be that they wanted to state in very general and accessible terms principles given elsewhere only in detail and therefore difficult to discern. You may think, then, that here are the generalizations, provided as particular exemplifications everywhere else. It is hard to know whether that is the fact. But it is a fact that the generalizations before us do exemplify attitudes and convictions that define Judaism as it comes to us.

It follows that some time after the Mishnah as a whole had reached pretty much the condition in which it now comes to us, the authorities of Judaism composed a further tractate for the Mishnah, one that would explain all the others. And that is the one at hand. Accordingly, in its context, in the Mishnah itself, Avot answers a set of enormously critical questions about the Mishnah. In our context, outside of the framework of the Mishnah and of the issues of Judaism of the third century, Avot answers equally central concerns of ours. The fact that we can and want to confront the tractate in its own terms serves as our tribute to the power of the framers of Avot. They turned backward, to speak of where the Mishnah came from and to pass on important sayings of sages who play significant parts in the Mishnah. In so doing, they turned forward, to the centuries stretching beyond the horizon of their imagination. Not many authors of the third or any century so framed words to an unknown future as did our sages of Avot.

The Task at Hand

The plan and program of our work to begin with depend on the task at hand. That task is to learn how to listen to people who lived long ago, in a world we scarcely can imagine. If, as I said before, we are able to hear what they say to a world they surely could never have imagined, that is our tribute to the power of what they said and how they said it. That tribute suffices.

So the hard work begins: the work of opening up these sayings and teaching ourselves how to make sense of them. What "making sense" must mean itself will become clear only in doing the work. It surely means framing a program of questions to be systematically addressed to the sayings in their groups.

Before we turn to the text of Avot, there is one further issue to raise: Who am I? And who do I imagine you to be? I am a teacher who writes in America, for North American Jews and for other Jews who read our American language. I imagine that you are a Jew, and that your native language is English. Why does that matter?

The reason is, first, that together we are trying to discover how to learn from a text written in a language other than our own. So we are engaged in a labor of moving from one culture to another, one world to another. The Jewish world, represented by Avot, speaks in Hebrew. As I have stressed, it addresses a long-ago time and place. Ours is a work of making this mode of address intelligible to ourselves.

Second, the fact that we are English-speaking matters in yet another way. We are used to reading a book in a given way, from beginning to end, for example, without moving from a text to a commentary and back to a text. We are used to smooth and uninterrupted discussion of a topic, start to finish, rather than episodic jumping back and forth. We expect sustained and reasoned discussion of things we can understand. We take for granted that our capacity for reasoning and critical judgment matters.

But the classical works of the Jewish religion take shape in quite a different world, in which people thought in other ways and expressed themselves in a manner different from our own. They would take an old text and study that—so indicating that they stood in a direct line with the past. At the same time, they took for granted that they too had something of worth to add to the tradition. They were no different from ourselves in thinking so. But they adopted a manner of discourse not familiar to us. It took the form of adding their ideas along the edges of the page, around the sides, at the bottom, in the manner of writing footnotes. Accordingly, the text, received of old, was the main thing, and whatever they had to say took the form of this secondary addition—new points here and there—called commentaries.

My discussion of Avot does not take the classical form of a commentary. The reason is that you are unused to learning through the bits and pieces in which commentaries to texts express ideas. That is to say, if you study a text first, and then the observations of the commentator, you have this brick and

that stone. Then you are supposed, on your own, to build the whole thing into a single construction, a building. That is not the way in which you ordinarily learn, so it is not the approach I take in this book. Rather, as I have indicated, I provide what I call an explanation—hence, not a commentary. I provide it by presenting, in a sustained way, at the end of a passage, whatever I have to say about that passage. My discussion is meant to be continuous, coherent, and comprehensible on its own, and so a complete statement. It is supposed to be something you can simply read.

In other words, I choose to talk to you in a way as close as possible to that in which most other books you read and study speak to you. I want to translate the text not merely into our shared language, but also into our shared American—and Western, modern—manner of learning, mode of thinking, method of speaking with one another. Let there be no point of difference, at the beginning, between the way you study a great Judaic text and how you would study great writing of any other kind.

Later on you may choose to master the modes of thought and expression that characterize classical Judaic discourse. I hope you do. That is all to the good. If this book of mine works for you, you will decide to learn more about Avot. You will turn to the many other books, including a large number in Hebrew, in which Avot is approached in a different way and so is made to say other things. So mine will have been a stage in your education in the literature of Torah. That is all I could ever hope it to be.

So here we draw near, through familiar means of learning, to an old and alien Jewish text. Later, you may come closer still to learn the ancient text in the time-honored way. Here the conversation starts.

Let us then learn how to look at and listen to the text. You now will find three things: first, an introduction to a chapter or a major segment of a chapter, telling you what to expect; second, a translation of the chapter or component thereof; and, third, a further reflection on what the chapter has said and what its sayings mean when seen all together.

Let me conclude with a brief personal confession. Until I undertook this sustained encounter with Avot, I kept my distance from it. The reason was that it had always seemed strange. My tastes in rabbinic literature had been shaped by the Mishnah. While appearing in the Mishnah, tractate Avot is profoundly "unMishnaic." The Mishnah's statements are expressed with great care, so that there are groups of sayings on a given problem. The contents of sayings in Avot, by contrast, bear no obvious relationship to a single sustained topical program. The Mishnah's language is restrained and exquisitely balanced, so that what one authority says relates in form as much as in substance to what stands nearby in the name of another authority. Avot's language, for its part, pays no mind to considerations of coherence, balance, contrast, and comparison. Above all, as I pointed out, the Mishnah treats legal subjects. Avot does not. The Mishnah tells us what to *do;* Avot tells us what we should *be.*

So to me the Mishnah tractate at hand contradicted the rest of the Mishnah tractates both in the things it chose to discuss, and in the manner in which it chose to discuss them. To offer an analogy out of music, if the Mishnah in general may be compared to Mozart's *Jupiter Symphony,* Avot calls to mind Stravinsky's *Rites of Spring.*

When, therefore, Seymour Rossel called me to work on this tractate, I found myself amazed and astonished by the freshness, the vitality, the daring, and the extreme points of insistence of Avot. Serving as the head and preface to the Mishnah, Avot turns out to complement the Mishnah precisely because it is so different in spirit, in substance, and in style. That is why I found myself charmed and enticed by the tractate: its alienness, its radical freshness, its power to surprise and always amaze. If in this account of the matter I can help you to see the tractate as I do, as extraordinary, I shall have attained my goal.