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סדור

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לב שלם

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Siddur

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Lev Shalem

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לשבת ויום טוב

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FOR SHABBAT  
& FESTIVALS

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*Pirkei Avot*

By Tamar  
Elad-Applebaum

1:1. At the opening of Avot we find an ancient mythic picture of transmission, a portrait of a Jew in one generation or another, being handed a treasure made of words, foundational questions, and thoughts, and passing it on across time to generations that he or she will never meet; yet he or she feels close to, and responsible for.

This treasure, passed from one generation to another, always comprises two complementary components: a body and its clothing. The body is the written Torah—the sacred Scriptures assembled by the ancients. The clothing is the Oral Torah—the people’s responses echoing at the encounter with this Scripture. In that encounter the voice of every generation weaves itself into the fabric of conversation that came before it or is yet to come after. All of those generations are constantly at work deciphering the Holy One’s ongoing revelation to humankind.

This first teaching of Pirkei Avot provides us with a mythic picture of continuous transmission and participation. In this state of soul called Sinai we encounter a spiritual continent in search of meaning, inspiration, and purpose. This continent, where God and people meet, is called Torah.

*This passage is often read before each chapter of Pirkei Avot:*

All Israel have a portion in the world that is coming, as it is written: “Your people shall all be righteous, they shall possess the land forever; they are a shoot of My planting, the work of My hands in whom I shall be glorified” (Isaiah 60:21).

Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1

## CHAPTER I

1:1 Moses received Torah from God at Sinai. He transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, the Prophets to the members of the Great Assembly. They formulated three precepts: Be cautious in rendering a decision, rear many students, and build a fence to protect Torah.

1:2 Shimon HaTzadik was one of the last members of the Great Assembly. This was a favorite teaching of his: The world stands on three things: on Torah, on worship, and on good deeds.

1:3 Antigonus of Sokho received the tradition from Shimon HaTzaddik. This was a favorite teaching of his: Do not be like servants who serve their master expecting to receive a reward; be rather like servants who serve their master unconditionally, with no thought of reward. Also, let the fear of heaven determine your actions.

1:4 Yose ben Yoezer of Tzeredah and Yose ben Yoḥanan of Jerusalem received the tradition from him. Yose ben Yoezer of Tzeredah taught: Make your home a regular meeting place for the scholars; sit eagerly at their feet and thirstily drink their words.

By Gordon Tucker

1:1. What we see here at the beginning of Avot should be seen for what it is: a significant and far-reaching change in the very definition of religious truth. From the point of view of biblical Judaism, there is a truth that can be gotten through a prophet, or perhaps through the priestly breastplate. But here, each generation is assumed to have had one or more persons who were to be regarded as having authority, precisely because they were the recipients of authentic traditions from the previous generation.

The Men of the Great Assembly—who were they? The simple answer is that we don’t know. Reflecting this nebulosity is the fact that various traditions ascribe membership in this body to figures of such diverse temporal and geographic provenance as the prophet Zechariah, Daniel, Ezra, Mordecai, and Shimon the Righteous (see below, 1:2), not all of whom can themselves confidently be assigned an historical date, and who may have not have overlapped in their lifetimes.

*This passage is often read before each chapter of Pirkei Avot:*

כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשׁ לָהֶם חֵלֶק לְעוֹלָם הַבָּא, שְׁנֵי־אֲמָרִים:  
וְעֵמֶךָ בְּלֶם צְדִיקִים, לְעוֹלָם יִירָשׁוּ אֶרֶץ,  
בְּצֶרֶךְ מִטְעֵי מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי לְהַתְּפַאֵר (ישׁיעהוּ ס:כא).  
משנה סנהדרין י:א

## פרק א

א:א מִשָּׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינֵי, וּמִסְרָהּ לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ, וִיהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים, וְזִקְנִים לְנָבִיאִים, וְנָבִיאִים מִסְרוּהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים: הָיוּ מְתוּנִים בְּדִין, וְהִעֲמִידוּ תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה, וְעָשׂוּ סִיג לַתּוֹרָה.

א:ב שְׁמַעוֹן הַצְּדִיק הָיָה מְשִׁירֵי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר: עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵד – עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל גְּמִלוֹת הַסֻּדִים.

א:ג אֲנָטִיגְנוֹס אִישׁ סוֹכּוֹ קִבֵּל מִשְׁמַעוֹן הַצְּדִיק. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר: אַל תְּהִי כְּעֹבְדִים הַמְּשַׁמְשִׁין אֶת־הָרֵב עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס, אֲלֵא הָיוּ כְּעֹבְדִים הַמְּשַׁמְשִׁין אֶת־הָרֵב שְׁלֵא עַל מְנַת לְקַבֵּל פְּרָס, וִיהִי מוֹרָא שְׁמַיִם עֲלֵיכֶם.

א:ד יוֹסִי בֶן יוֹעֶזֶר אִישׁ צְרֵדָה וְיוֹסִי בֶן יוֹחָנָן אִישׁ יְרוּשָׁלַיִם קִבְּלוּ מֵהֶם. יוֹסִי בֶן יוֹעֶזֶר אִישׁ צְרֵדָה אוֹמֵר: יְהִי בֵיתְךָ בַּיִת וְעַד לְחֻכְמֵי, וְהָיוּ מִתְאַבְּקִים בְּעִפּוֹר רְגְלֵיהֶם, וְהָיוּ שׁוֹתֵה בַצָּמָא אֶת־דְּבָרֵיהֶם.

The most likely understanding of who *anshei k'nesset ha-g'dolah* were is that they are a mythic way of treating a period of significant transition. This very *mishnah* includes another of these nebulous figures—the *z'keanim*, or Elders—who effect a transition from the foundational generations of the exodus and conquest (represented by Moses and Joshua) to the time when the people Israel are settled in the Land and prophets arise, but who are not mentioned by that name in Scripture. Thus, the transition chronicled here from the immediacy of the biblical (prophetic) period to that of an ongoing, continuous oral tradition is marked by an otherwise unknown body. Its existence did not create the transition. Rather, consciousness of the transition created a mythic body.