

## How Should We Translate *Pirkei Avot*? Why Does It Matter?

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A decade ago, shortly after the publication of the *Women's Torah Commentary*, I was privileged to invite one of its principal editors, Rabbi Dr. Andrea Weiss, as scholar-in-residence. Rabbi Weiss is now the Provost of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. She is the person who lays her hands on the heads of new rabbis to ordain them, a groundbreaking role for a woman in Reform Judaism.

Rabbi Weiss explained the translation in the *Women's Torah Commentary*, as well as the one utilized in the revised Plaut *Torah* that we use in the Chapel. She called those translations "gender-corrected." The concept was new to me at that time.

No, I was not new to ridding our liturgy and sacred texts of gender-based language – referring to God as "He," for example. However, I had always thought of that process as changing the language of sacred texts, which would be more intrusive than correcting an error of the past, which Rabbi Weiss's words seemed to indicate.

Rabbi Weiss explained that our new Torah translations would replace gendered language when the original text doesn't specifically refer to a person or persons of one particular gender. We don't de-gender Moses or Miriam, for example. God, on the other hand, is explicitly without gender in our Jewish tradition; and yet, the inherently gendered Hebrew language refers to God exclusively as "He."

Gender correction, done right, needn't be noticeable, let alone jarring. None of our prayer books refers to God with gendered language these days, or uses words like "mankind," as our previous prayer books did. Still, the English in our current prayer books flows seamlessly.

In tonight's Torah portion, we read about the special time of the year in which we find ourselves, counting the fifty days from Passover to Shavuot, from liberation in Egypt to revelation at Sinai. Different Jews embrace a variety of traditions during these seven weeks. Across all Jewish movements, we read *Pirkei Avot* at this season.

Many of us are familiar with *Pirkei Avot*, or at least some of its most famous aphorisms. For example: *Al Shloshah D'varim*, “The world stands on three things: Torah, worship, and acts of lovingkindness.”<sup>i</sup> Or: “Who is wise? Those who learn from everyone. Who is strong? Those who conquer their impulses. Who is rich? Those who are happy with their lot.”<sup>ii</sup> Other translations render that last one: “Who is the wise one? He who learns from all men,”<sup>iii</sup> and so forth. Clearly, though, the lesson is valuable for everyone, regardless of gender. Moreover, despite the gendered constraints of Hebrew language, there’s no reason to believe that even the ancient rabbis intended their teaching to refer only to men.

In his new book on *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz writes that the title of the book “[l]iterally ... means *The Chapters of the Fathers*” and that “some translate it, *Ethics of the Fathers*.”<sup>iv</sup> The word *avot* may indeed mean “fathers.” However, the way a gendered language works, *avot* can also mean “ancestors.”

Rabbi Yanklowitz writes that we might understand the word even more broadly: “The Hebrew word *avah* (of which *avot* is plural) is found in Proverbs 1:30, meaning, ‘to lead through advice.’ Therefore, another way to understand the title of this work is *The Chapters of Advice*.”<sup>v</sup> That latter title is descriptive of the book, chock full of Jewish wisdom but without *halachah*, which characterizes the larger work in which it’s found, the *Mishnah*, which was completed at the end of the Second Century.

As I have often taught, every translation is an interpretation. Since other options are available, those who translate the title “Ethics of the Fathers” are choosing to emphasize the gender of its authors. For my own part, I typically refer to *Pirkei Avot* as “Ethics of the Sages.”

Why does it matter?

First of all, honesty. All of *Pirkei Avot* is articulated in the names of rabbis – that is, men of a certain class and education. However, for all we know, *Pirkei Avot* is replete with mansplaining, that is, women’s ideas repeated by and credited to men. No generation is without its wise women and men, but women of the first century B.C.E. and the first two centuries, C.E., would not have been credited with their own ideas. Moreover, all the rabbis quoted in *Pirkei Avot* had mothers, and almost all had wives, who had doubtless imparted significant insight to them. We must shed any doubt that women’s words and ideas are included in *Pirkei Avot*. Therefore, the suggestion that the book includes only “Ethics of the Fathers” is simply false.

Second: Respect. In a patriarchal society, such as one that would give voice only to men, women are undervalued. We would be wrong to suggest that our own culture is as patriarchal as that of Second Century Palestine, but we would be equally wrongheaded to insist that we have entirely shed patriarchal influence. When we unnecessarily and inaccurately credit only men’s wisdom in the past, we imply that men are the exclusive source of insight, even today. When we translate, we should open up the possibility that a sage could be a person of any gender. Doing so, we indicate that every person’s wisdom is equally valuable.

Third: Inspiration. Women rabbis of my generation often speak of the first time they saw or even just heard about a female rabbi. Before that experience, they had never internalized the fact that they could become rabbis or religious authorities of any kind, even if they knew intellectually that regular ordination of women as rabbis had begun in 1972. While we cannot name women who were sages during the Mishnaic period, by translating *Pirkei Avot* as “Ethics of the Fathers,” we close the possibility that a woman could be a sage. Using an accurate English name of the book that isn’t gender-bound, young women and girls may see themselves as they should, fully included in the chain of Jewish tradition that stretches from Abraham and Sarah to Moses and Miriam to this very day.

When I was ordained, fully half of my classmates were women. However, at that time, only twenty-eight years ago this week, the Hebrew Union College faculty did not include even one tenured professor who wasn’t male. This month, new rabbis are being ordained by a long-tenured rabbinic scholar who is the College’s Provost, and she’s a woman. For the next generation of rabbis – and, more broadly, of the Jewish people, at least among those who are not Orthodox – the term “sage” may finally include women.

As we count the days from Egypt to Sinai, reading *Pirkei Avot* this year, let us assure that our language is honest, accurately reflecting the past rather than the way that the past presented itself. Let our words convey respect for every person, regardless of gender, as we continue to dismantle the patriarchy. And let us inspire every Jew, of every gender and of every coming generation, to lead us into a future filled with wisdom.

Amen.

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<sup>ii</sup> Avot 1.2.

<sup>ii</sup> Avot 4.1.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid., *Sefaria* translation.

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<sup>iv</sup> Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz, *Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2018, p. xi.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.