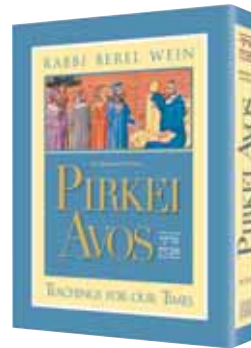




**Relevance: Pirkei Avot for the Twenty-First Century**  
By Rabbi Dan Roth  
Feldheim Publishers  
Jerusalem, 2007  
289 pages



**Pirkei Avot: Teachings for Our Times**  
By Rabbi Berel Wein  
Shaar Press  
Brooklyn, 2007  
279 pages

## Reviewed by Sholom Gold

In the preface to *Relevance: Pirkei Avot for the Twenty-First Century*, the author, Rabbi Dan Roth, notes that a librarian in the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem discovered that there was already a total of 1,128 books on *Pirkei Avot* and was surprised that he was thinking of writing yet another one.

I, for one, am glad that he did. Despite the plethora of books on the subject, the literature on *Pirkei Avot* has been greatly enriched by the books currently under review. Rabbi Roth, who lives in Jerusalem, has devoted the last few years to writing this commentary. True to the work's title, Rabbi Roth consistently tries to make *Pirkei Avot* relevant to the contemporary reader. In doing so, the author tells us that he was inspired by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who once wrote: "I intend to show that this full and authentic Judaism does not belong to an antiquated past but to the living pulsating present; nay, that the whole future with all its intellectual and social problems whose solution mankind expects of it, belongs to Judaism, the full and unabridged Judaism."

While Rabbi Berel Wein's *Teaching for Our Times* is a flowing commentary

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on all of *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Roth focuses his work on some two dozen of the 128 *mishnayot* in *Pirkei Avot*. Within the selected *mishnayot*, he chooses not to deal "with an entire Mishnah but rather only a line or a phrase ... which permits the reader to see for himself the profundity and wisdom that can be discovered even in a few choice mishnaic words."

For example, Rabbi Roth cites a *mishnah* in 5:3: "Rabbi Chanina ben Chachinai says, 'One who is awake at night or who travels alone on the road and turns his heart to idleness, bears guilt for his soul.'" Elaborating on the *mishnah*, Rabbi Roth notes a contemporary malaise: the inability to use private time for thought and introspection. To him, "one who is awake at night or is traveling alone" refers to those moments in life when there are no distractions, and one is afforded the opportunity to "reach new insights and understand things that never occurred to us before." Unfortunately, such insights rarely come to the contemporary individual, says Rabbi Roth, describing a familiar scenario.

*Today, this ideal has been almost entirely forgotten and whenever we find ourselves alone, we make frantic efforts to escape. When walking alone in the street after having been in a place where our cell phone had to be turned off, the first thing we do is switch it on. Upon entering our cars, we immediately feel the need to turn on the radio, play a tape, or phone a friend.*

*It rarely enters our minds to use these times for uninterrupted thought and self-reflection.*

*Many things society calls relaxing—novels, cinema, television, sports, and card games—are, in truth, nothing more than diversions.*

*To some, the thought of being alone with nothing to do is frightening. Having nothing to do, watch, read, listen to, or play with is a nightmare. They become very uncomfortable, for being alone with themselves means coming face-to-face with their own reality.*

Even seemingly innocuous technology, according to our author, can have a negative impact. The *mishnah* in 3:5 states: "Rabbi Akiva said ... 'Masoret is a protective fence around the Torah.'"

"Masoret" refers to the transmitted Oral Torah, which is passed from one generation to the next. Though ultimately the rabbis permitted the writing down of the Oral Law, the ideal way to preserve Torah is by maintaining the oral quality of the law. With his wonderful knack for translating Torah ideas into twenty-first-century terms, the author cautions against excessive reliance on DVDs, MP3s and computers, all of which are increasingly being used to record and retain Torah knowledge.

In our generation, Rabbi Roth warns, Rabbi Akiva's message is even more poignant.

*Technology has opened new ways to record information. For a small price, you can buy the whole Tanach, Midrash, and*

*Talmud, as well as every other sefer you are likely to need, on one compact disc. That so much Torah is available at our fingertips and can be accessed easily is a wonderful thing. But let us never allow this surge of information to prevent us from internalizing the Torah.*

*It is easy to fall into a false sense of security, feeling that one knows Torah when really it's the computer that "knows." G-d wants us, not our computers, to become living sifrei Torah. He wants us to think about Torah constantly, making it the center.*

Rabbi Roth goes on, expanding Rabbi Akiva's principle to include photography.

*When going to the Kosel, some tourists see everything through their viewfinders instead of focusing on the intensity of their prayers. Even when visiting tragic places such as Auschwitz and other death camps, one will find people busy taking photos instead of using the heartrending moment for deep thought and reflection.*

*On numerous occasions, Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe told his students who were about to go on an outing that photographing a scenic view comes at the expense of "living the experience." By turning every event into a photo op, we are becoming numb to what it means to be alive.*

Rabbi Roth footnotes his *sefer* extensively with a fascinating array of sources, which the reader is advised to study carefully. The sources run the gamut from *Michtav Me'Eliyahu* to *Shiurei Da'at*, from Betty Friedan to Erich Fromm.

A well-known author and lecturer, Rabbi Wein needs no introduction to *Jewish Action* readers. In his impressive-looking coffee-table book on *Pirkei Avot*, Rabbi Wein, like Rabbi Roth, uses anecdotes and personal experiences to effectively bring home a point.

Drawing upon his years in the rabbinate, Rabbi Wein elucidates the first *mishnah* in Chapter 4, which includes Ben Zoma's famous truism: "Who is rich? The one who is happy with his lot." While Ben Zoma's statement seems to be fairly straightforward, Rabbi Wein finds much to elaborate on, describing the unabated pursuit of wealth as "akin to drinking salt water that is never satis-

fying or slaking thirst." He then lets readers in on his own experience in encountering greed.

*Ben Zoma speaks of happiness in the World to Come. I have often felt that the greatest punishment that one can suffer in the eternal world is to witness what problems his wealth caused after his death. How many families have been destroyed by squabbles over the parents' estate! In my rabbinic career, I saw many instances when relatives, siblings, and whole families engaged in legal battles over the wealth of their parents or relatives. There is no greater pain for a parent than for such legal battles to take place. A wealthy man once told me that he was going to sue his father's estate because he felt that he was being shortchanged in the distribution of the assets, and he was ready to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal costs. I gently recommended to him that perhaps he should donate that amount of money to a worthy charity in memory of his father. He looked at me in amazement and said: "Rabbi, you just don't understand!" He was right, I did not and still do not understand.*

Throughout the book, Rabbi Wein also brings into focus the historical circumstances surrounding a particular *mishnah*. For example, he cites Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon in 3:3: "If two sit together and there are no words of Torah between them, it is a session of scorners.... But if two sit together and words of Torah are between them, the Divine Presence rests between them."

With Rabbi Wein's moving description of Rabbi Chanina's martyrdom, the *mishnah* takes on far greater meaning and poignancy.

*Rabbi Chanina was one of the martyrs tortured to death by the Romans in the aftermath of Bar Kochba's failed rebellion in the 2nd century CE. He was burned alive (c. 140 CE) while wrapped in a holy Torah scroll. The Romans placed wet sponges near his heart so that he would suffer longer. Rabbi Chanina's executioner asked if he would be Divinely rewarded for removing the sponges, and the righteous sage promised him eternal reward. The Roman did so and leaped into the flames. He was himself consumed in the roaring blaze and a voice proclaimed that Rabbi Chanina and his execu-*

*tioner had been admitted to Heaven's eternal rewards.*

*As befits Rabbi Chanina, who literally lived and died with the Torah, his statement in this mishnah regarding Torah study and its primacy and constancy is entirely understandable. Without Torah, the world becomes a place of mockers, scoffers, jesters, and spiritual emptiness.*

Rabbi Wein's commentary is thoughtful and easy to read. Though it can be read relatively quickly, I would caution the reader to take it slow so as not to miss his fine insights and incisive thoughts. I found his homiletic interpretation of the well-known *mishnah* in Chapter 5 (7) particularly interesting. The *mishnah* describes the ten miracles that took place every day in the Holy Temple. One of the miracles was that "the people stood crowded together yet prostrated themselves in ample space." Rabbi Wein writes:

*Miracles regarding human nature are so extraordinary as to command our attention and respect, if not our awe and wonderment. In addition to the physical miracle that space expands to accommodate the needs of the large crowds in Jerusalem, the commentators see a moral lesson in these miracles.*

*The Rabbis taught that if we stand erect and inflexible, insisting on our rights alone and not willing to compromise in deference to the needs of others, we will find ourselves in a very crowded and uncomfortable world. However, if we can bow to the rights of others and compromise our own personal interests in the interests of public harmony and a peaceful society, then we will find that life truly affords us a great deal of elbow room. But to get humans to behave in such a fashion is a truly miraculous feat. As the holiest national entity, the Temple allows for this type of miraculous human attitude to appear and flourish. Miracles are of little practical avail in this world if they do not lead to the improvement of human character and behavior.*

With these two works, Rabbi Roth and Rabbi Wein have contributed much to our understanding of and appreciation for the wisdom of our rabbis found in *Pirkei Avot*. ●