# Review of Rabbi Marc Angel's New Commentary on Pirkei Avot

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Alan Jay Gerber writes "The Kosher Bookworm" column for the Long Island Jewish Star. This is his review of Rabbi Angel's new book,the Neuwirth Edition of The Koren Pirkei Avot.

The Kosher Bookworm
Pirkei Avot As An Intellectual Challenge
by Alan Jay Gerber

With Shavuot now behind up, we once again commence our learning of Pirkei Avot starting with the first chapter. Thus, it is most opportune to bring to your attention a new commentary by a former classmate of mine at Yeshiva University and the Director of The Institute For Jewish Ideas and Ideals, Rabbi Marc Angel. This commentary entitled, "The Koren Pirkei Avot" features a translation by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, and a publisher's preface by Matthew Miller. In this preface Miller asks and answers the following question:

"Why is Pirkei Avot so widely studied ? Of all the books of the Mishna, it is the one that directly touches scholars and lay people alike; it requires little background, yet it offers the collected wisdom of our sages in a manner more accessible than any other book."

This brief observation by Miller informs us right at the start of the historical importance of this work.

Rabbi Angel, in his introduction informs us of the following as background to his commentary:

"Pirkei Avot, popularly translated as Ethics of the Fathers, is a collection of rabbinic teachings, mainly from the Tannaitic period. It is included at the end of the Talmudic tractates dealing with business law and torts [Nezikin]. The first chapter presents teachings of the early sages in chronological order; the next four chapters provide assorted teachings; the sixth chapter is a later addition to the original. This final chapter, transferred to Pirkei Avot from the eighth chapter of the tractate Kalla, was added due to the widespread custom of studying one chapter of Pirkei Avot on each of the six Sabbaths between the festivals of Pesach and Shavuot."

In a most perceptive statement sent for publication for this week's essay, Rabbi Angel further extends to us his teaching as to the background and importance of Pirkei Avot to our faith.

"Many thinking people today are searching for authentic wisdom that can deepen their lives, and put their lives into a spiritual perspective. Over the centuries, the Jewish people have been able to draw on the wisdom of Pirkei Avot to contemplate basic ideas in faith and ethics. Each generation of Jews sees and experiences the world with different eyes, and our generation today represents the latest chapter in the Jewish adventure. While earlier commentaries on the Pirkei Avot were -- and continue to be -- highly important, each generation needs to study the ancient texts with contemporary eyes. We need to draw on the insights garnered from the past; but we also need to draw on insights derived from modern perspectives in literature, psychology, and philosophy. My commentary does not attempt to 'reinvent the wheel' by simply reciting what earlier commentaries have already stated. Rather, it attempts to confront the ancient texts with modern eyes, in a manner that will empower modern readers to find new insights and inspiration from the Pirkei Avot."

Throughout this work Rabbi Angel cites numerous citations, teachings and admonitions from "outside" sources that serve to buttress the teachings of our sages. Each citation is not a passing partial one sentence quote, but an extensive citation that will give you the full flavor of the author's intent and justification for its use together with the sacred text.

This work is different from others on Pirkei Avot. You will not be disappointed in the content, and the intellectual challenge will be a joy to experience.