



**RABBI REUVEN**

**SPOLTER**

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# Reciting Pirkei Avot on Shabbat

*Thoughts gleaned from the Mishnah, studied as part of the global Mishnah Yomit program.*

*(This week's Mishnayot: Meilah 6:1 – Tamid 2:4)*

In most Siddurim you'll find a copy of Pirkei Avot – the Ethics of the Fathers – printed immediately after Shabbat Minchah. Why do the publishers print Pirkei Avot, and why specifically at that juncture in the Siddur?

The answer lies in an ancient Ashkenazic custom.

Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher, the author of the Arba Turim, writes that, “They have the custom in Ashkenaz to recite Pirkei Avot in the afternoon, and so instructed Rav Amram (Gaon), and in Sephardic (communities) they recite them in the morning.” (Tur Orach Chayyim 292)

Rabbi David Avudraham in his work of commentary on prayer called Sefer Avudraham, (Spain, 14th Century), writes

that the custom is to recite one chapter of Avot each week from Pesach until Shavuot. According to Machzor Vitry (a work of ancient Ashkenazic custom), Avot was read from Pesach to Rosh Hashanah. Why read Avot during these weeks? Avudraham offers two answers in the name of R' Yisrael ben Yisrael.

Because these are the days when we count towards the giving of the Torah, therefore we should count them like a lover waiting for his beloved to arrive from a journey, who counts the days and nights before his arrival, and most of the matters of this tractate relate to encouraging the reading of the Torah and performing the commandments.

In addition, this is the time of the harvest, which is ready and prepared to move the awakening aspect of the soul and rile it up towards physical desire and the seeking of pleasures. It is necessary to quiet [the soul] and improve it through the material in this tractate, from the admonitions of the prophets towards separation [from desire] and the subjugation and diminution of the life force in order to prevent it from seeking that which will harm it, in order to save it and improve the practice of those behaviors that will lead him on the proper and intelligent path. (see Avudraham, Keren R'em edition, vol. 2 p. 326)

The long, hot summer months present numerous opportunities to turn from the pleasant path of the Torah. For this reason, the recitation of Pirkei Avot offers an antidote which would counterbalance the temptations of summer and keep the faithful Jew on the proper path.

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I find it interesting that communities emphasized the recitation of Pirkei Avot – similar to the recitation of Tehillim. Did they understand what they were reciting, or simply reciting by rote? Sources indicate that the idea was to inculcate the values of Pirkei Avot in the hearts of those reciting the Mishnah. Yet, it seems that over time, the effectiveness of the practice was lost on many people.

Rema (on Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayyim 292:2) writes that “They had the custom not to schedule a talk between Minchah and Ma’ariv [on Shabbat afternoon], but [instead] they recited Pirkei Avot in the summer and [the fifteen chapters of Psalms which begin with] Shir Hama’alot in the winter.” On this the Mishnah Berurah (#9) notes that the Maharal of Prague did actually teach between Minchah and Ma’ariv several times, in contradistinction to the accepted custom. He writes that in his time people would stand in the study hall and engage

in idle chatter...”and therefore it would seem in our time that there is no reason to prevent [having a Torah address]” rather than simply reciting the Pirkei Avot.

Today, very few people simply recite Pirkei Avot during the summer months. In my community one or two unique individuals remain and maintain a centuries-old custom. I personally find text recitation challenging.

On the other hand, in many communities around the world, rather than **saying** Pirkei Avot, they **study** the words of the Sages. Many communities study “Perek in the Park”, or offer a weekly class before or after Minchah.

Our long summer Shabbat afternoons offer us the perfect opportunity to follow the Mishnah Berurah’s advice, and rather than recite Pirkei Avot by rote, study their timeless wisdom in depth. ■

*Rabbi Reuven Spolter is the Founder of the Mishnah Project which spreads the study of Mishnah around the world. You can join the Mishnah Yomit program by subscribing on WhatsApp at [bit.ly/dailymishnah](https://bit.ly/dailymishnah)*

In Loving Memory of Dr. Leonard I. Kranzler Z'L

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- 🗨️ TALKING DURING DAVENING IS A DIRECT VIOLATION OF THE SPIRIT OF PRAYER
- 🗨️ TALKING IS DISRESPECTFUL TO THE TORAH AND THE PERSON READING IT

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