

The Never Changing, Ever Changing Torah

The relevance and adaptability of Torah to each and every generation

Before I began writing my book on *Pirkei Avos*, I visited the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem, which contains the largest collection of Jewish books in the world, in order to find out which other *sefarim* had been written on *Pirkei Avos*. The on duty librarian explained that I could only access a particular *sefer* by first finding its call number on the computer database. She typed in “Pirkei Avos” to bring up a list of all available books on the topic. The result? 1,128.

The look of disbelief on her face was unmistakable. Restrained by etiquette, she could not express her unspoken question: “And you want to write another one?”

And my unspoken response was, “Why, yes, I do.”

Each generation has its own challenges and its own unique set of circumstances, and as such needs its own commentary. The *nisyonos* of the Jews in France in the eleventh century were not the same as those of the Jews in Poland in the eighteenth century, and neither are the same as those we face today. Internet, drugs, assimilation, consumerism, the loosening of moral constraints — the *yetzer hara* has many faces and appears in many forms, unhindered by the passage of time.

Thankfully, we have the lessons of our Sages to guide us. The teachings of *Pirkei Avos* are timeless; they contain answers to the moral challenges of every generation. However, the particular application of those messages to the needs of each generation changes according to the times.

When interviewed in 1967, as many as two thirds of American college students said that “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” was “very important” to them, while fewer than one third said the same about “making a lot of money.” By 1997, those figures were reversed.¹

The above illustrates the fact that since outside influences constantly mutate our perception of reality, every generation needs to delve anew into the words of Chazal and rediscover how to apply the eternal truths of Torah to the challenges of the day. Our bookstores are filled with “how-to” books, but *Pirkei Avos* is the classic “how-to” book: how to live, how to grow old, how to be satisfied, how to treat other people, how to love and be beloved; how to live a life of contentment, peace and fulfillment.

My goal in writing on *Avos* was to show how the *Mishnaiyos* are as applicable today as they were throughout the millennia and that, far from being an outdated 2,000-year-old document, its teachings are ever vibrant and relevant, containing lessons and ethics that far surpass the wisdom of modern thinkers.

In undertaking this task, I was inspired by the words of the great Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch:

“I intended to show that this full and authentic Judaism — תורת ה' תמימה — 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.”²

The *nisyanos* and moral challenges faced by each successive generation are not the only things that change with time. Because the listeners have been altered by their environment, both the language in which truth must be expressed and the manner in which Torah values must be presented have also to be renewed so that eyes will be found to see and ears to listen.

Rabbi Noach Orlowek says in the name of his teacher, Rabbi Simcha Wasserman, that since the Torah was given in seventy languages, it must be taught in the language that is best understood by the student. Today, commented Rabbi Orlowek, one of the foremost languages is "when they see it live before their eyes." (see [Rabbi Noach Orlowek on Torah Live](#))

The idea that each generation should use the language that suits it best — the metamorphic nature of language as opposed to the eternal truth of Torah — is hinted at in the vessels of the *beis hamikdash*. Each of these was made to last forever with the exception of the *chatutzros* (trumpets), which meant to be used only by Moshe Rabbeinu. Following generations had to make new ones. The reason this particular vessel had to be remade was, perhaps, because of the function that it played: the *chatutzros* were used to call the people to assemble for prayer and to serve Hashem. Each new generation needs a different call to wake it up.

Drowned in the chaos of constant communication and deafening street noises, our generation has become inattentive to what our forefathers found an insistent and irrefutable intonation of truth in their ears. Standing at Har Sinai, the voice of Hashem was so all pervading that the Torah tells us that they perceived sound as though it were concrete and easily visible.³

Though what we at Torah Live are endeavoring to do is certainly pale by comparison, perhaps it will serve as a wake up call for this and בע"ה for the next generation. It may be, as Rabbi Orlowek kindly suggests, that our presentations and those that we encourage others to build will breathe life into dry bones and that our students, their parents and even their children's children will respond as Jews have always done "when they see it live before their eyes."

¹ *Affluenze* p. 57.

² Yeshurun [1861], quoted by Dayan Grunfeld in the Introduction to his translation of *Horeb*, lxxxv.

שמות כ, טו: וכל העם רואים את הקולות וגו'.