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Learning About Leadership, Trust and Benevolence from Ethics of the Fathers (Avot)

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LEARNING ABOUT LEADERSHIP, TRUST AND BENEVOLENCE FROM *ETHICS OF THE FATHERS (AVOT)*

"The world stands on three things: On *Torah*, on service, and on kindness to others" (*Avot* 1:2)

"On three things does the world stand: On justice, truth, and peace." (*Avot* 1:18)

"Action on behalf of justice, and participation in the transformation of the world, are integral elements in the preaching of the gospel."

–Synod of Bishops, 1971, Justice in the World in MS LX III (1971) 924¹

INTRODUCTION

RELEVANCE OF *AVOT* FOR CONTEMPORARY BUSINESS LEADERS

In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, the public has lost much of its trust in business and political leaders. According to the Gallup Organization, the only professionals who score lower than business and political leaders are used-car salesmen and lawyers.² The Harvard Center for Public Leadership's National Leadership Index similarly ranks Congress and Wall Street at the bottom when it comes to public regard for their leadership.³

¹ Patricia Nava and Robert P. Maloney, "Systemic Change. The Theme of the Vincentian Family for the Upcoming Two Years," *Vincentiana* (January-April, 2008), 69-80, http://cmglobal.org/vincentiana-novus-en/files/downloads/2008_1_2/vt_2008_01_13_en.pdf (accessed February 20, 2014).

² Frank Newport, "Congress retains low honesty ratings," *Gallup Politics*, December 3, 2012, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/159035/congress-retains-low-honesty-rating.aspx> (accessed February 20, 2014).

³ Seth A. Rosenthal, *National Leadership Index 2012: A National Study of Confidence in Leadership* (Cambridge: Center for Public Leadership, Harvard Kennedy School, 2012), http://www.centerforpublicleadership.org/images/pdf/NLI/cpl_nli_2012.pdf (accessed February 20, 2014).

Avot can provide leaders with lessons on how to strengthen ethical standards and increase public trust that comes with consistent adherence to those standards. Although the lessons of *Avot* apply to leaders in all areas, we focus on business leaders. The financial crisis of the last decade was primarily a failure of business leadership.

When we talk about failure of business leadership, we do not refer only to fraud or gross negligence of the type that brought down Enron, AIG, Lehman Brothers, and Bear Stearns. We also refer to a skewed sense of corporate mission vis-à-vis society. As a case in point, Al Gore relates the following incident at an oil conference where the CEO of Exxon was asked by an executive from another company to consider building additional U.S. refinery capacity for security against possible supply disruptions. Exxon's CEO replied, "I'm not a U.S. company and I don't make decisions based on what's good for the U.S."⁴

The theme of this paper is that *Avot* can provide renewed perspective about what is important in leadership and in life. Our paper relates to secular scholarship on organizational trust, which identifies three elements crucial for trust: ability, benevolence, and integrity. There is no doubt that Exxon's leaders are highly *able* in the areas that Exxon considers important. We even grant them the benefit-of-the-doubt as far as *integrity* goes. But as the preceding anecdote illustrates, they can certainly benefit from learning about the *benevolence* aspect of organizational trust. *Avot* can provide some of those lessons.

WHAT IS AVOT?

Ethics of the Fathers (also known as *Pirkei Avot* or *Chapters of the Fathers*; or simply *Avot*) is part of the *Mishnah* – one of 63 volumes – the ancient oral tradition that explains the written law of the Hebrew Bible.⁵ The *Mishnah* was compiled by Rebbi (Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi), a seventh-generation descendant of

20, 2014).

⁴ Al Gore, *The Future: Six Drivers of Global Change* (New York: Random House, 2013), 113-114.

⁵ Technically, the term *Pirkei Avot* or *Chapters of Avot*, refers to a later publication which added an additional chapter to the original five chapters. This study focuses on the five original chapters, as opposed to the sixth chapter, which is known as *Kinyan Torah* or *Acquisition of Torah*. We thank a reviewer for bringing this technical matter to our attention. The *Mishnah*, of which the first five chapters of *Avot* are a part of, ultimately became the foundation for the *Talmud*, which forms the basis for Jewish religious scholarship for the last two thousand years. For example, the greatest Jewish scholar since the Talmud, twelfth century's Maimonides, systematized and organized the teachings of the *Mishnah* and *Talmud*.

Hillel and a *Nasi* (President of the Sanhedrin), in approximately 200 CE.⁶

Avot consists of sayings, including anonymous sayings, of Jewish sages who lived from 300 BCE to 200 CE. It contains neither *halacha* (Jewish law) nor *aggadah* (homiletics) yet is of great status and importance as the only tractate that is part of the *siddur* (Jewish prayer book). Many of the sages quoted in *Avot* had leadership positions in the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of ancient Israel. The presiding officer of the Sanhedrin was the *Nasi* (President), but there was also an *Av Beth Din* (literally, father of the court of law, the next in importance after the *Nasi*). The *Chacham* (literally, wise man) may have been a third leader. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 ACE, the Sanhedrin had limited powers and functioned more like an academy and was mainly involved in interpreting religious law.

One of the first sayings in *Avot* dates back to Simon the Just, who was High Priest from approximately 300 BCE to 270 BCE. He said: “The world stands on three things: on the Torah, on *avodah* [service of God], and on *gemiluth chasadim* [deeds of loving-kindness]” (*Avot* 1: 2). Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808 – 1888), a distinguished German rabbi, wrote a commentary on *Avot*, and had this to say about this maxim:

Torah implies the *knowledge* of the *truth* and the *will of God* with regard to every aspect of our lives, personal and public, individual and social. *Avodah* [service of God] denotes *dutiful obedience*, serving God by fulfilling His will in every phase of our lives, personal and public, individual and social. *Gemiluth chasadim* [deeds of loving-kindness] signifies selfless, active loving-kindness to promote the welfare of our fellow-men... If he omits *gemiluth chasadim* he will be without that characteristic which is the very first trait of godliness. Instead of being god-like in acting as a creator of happiness and prosperity for his fellow-men, he will harden his heart in callous selfishness, and mankind will lack that bond of brotherhood and loving-kindness within which alone all

⁶ Hillel was one of the earliest figures of the Rabbinic/Pharisee era. As will be discussed later, he was legendary for his patience and forbearance, which contrasted with the stern manner of Shammai, Hillel’s colleague and fellow leader. Ultimately, the schools of Shammai and Hillel had many differences in religious practice. The former were usually stricter, but the latter prevailed as the ultimate bearers of mainstream rabbinic Judaism.

happiness and joy of life can prosper.⁷

The world does indeed stand on those three pillars. Every leader has to understand that the world stands on the pillars of ethics/morality, justice, and compassion for others. As able as a leader may be in technical areas, effective leadership requires trust, which in turn rests on the aforementioned pillars.

PRIOR LITERATURE

DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership has become an important subject in numerous disciplines ranging from business to education to religion. If an organization or even a country is going to prosper, it needs effective leadership. There are many ways to define and classify leadership.⁸ Drucker provided one of the more interesting observations about it:

Leadership is not magnetic personality--that can just as well be a glib tongue. It is not 'making friends and influencing people'--that is flattery. Leadership is lifting a person's vision to higher sights, the raising of a person's performance to a higher standard, the building of a personality beyond its normal limitations.⁹

ANCIENT LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP

According to Laufer, the Bible is the ultimate resource for anyone who wishes to enhance his or her leadership skills.¹⁰ The ancient stories of such biblical

⁷ Neil Harris, "Rav Hirsch on 'What the World Stands On...'," posted on Uberdox on April 22, 2009, <http://uberdox.aishdas.org/2009/04/rav-hirsch-on-what-the-world-stands-on> (accessed February 20, 2014).

⁸ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2013); Eric Shaver, "The many definitions of leadership," *The Human Factor Advocate* (July 26, 2012), <http://www.thehumanfactorblog.com/2012/07/26/the-many-definitions-of-leadership/> (accessed on February 20, 2014).

⁹ Peter F. Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices* (New York: Harper & Row, 1993), 463.

¹⁰ Nathan Laufer, *The Genesis of Leadership: What the Bible Teaches Us about Visions, Values*

personages such as Abraham, Jacob, and Moses provide profound lessons about leadership successes and failures. The sages cited in *Avot* were experts in the Hebrew Bible and studied its words carefully. Other scholars have also used the Bible as a leadership book for executives.¹¹

At least three types of leadership have their roots in the Bible: servant leadership, spiritual leadership, and covenantal leadership. The attributes of a servant leader include: vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment.¹² The attributes of spiritual leadership include a *vision* which reflects high ideals and establishes a standard of excellence; *altruistic love* which comprises integrity, trust, humility, kindness, courage and compassion; and *hope/faith* which encompasses perseverance and endurance.¹³ The covenantal leader bases his leadership approach on the biblical covenant. The leader provides leadership with meaning and is respectful of humanity. The organization is defined by *chesed* (deeds of loving-kindness) and its leader is an individual of integrity and compassion.¹⁴

This study extends the literature which draws on ancient wisdom for contemporary leadership lessons. *Avot* focuses on the virtues of humility, love of people, wisdom/learning, integrity, courage, and industriousness. We will draw on *Avot* for lessons on how leaders can apply these virtues to achieve the three components of organizational trust – ability, integrity, and benevolence. Throughout, we will integrate the lessons from *Avot* into the leadership challenges faced by modern business organizations and society.

and *Leading Change* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2006).

¹¹ Larry Burkett, *Business by the book: The complete guide of Biblical principles for business men and women* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990); Richard Chewning, ed., *Biblical Principles and Business: The Foundations* (Colorado Springs, NavPress, 1989); Lorin Woolfe, *The Bible on Leadership: From Moses to Matthew -- Management Lessons for Contemporary Leader* (New York: AMACOM, 2002); Gregory K. Morris, *In Pursuit of Leadership: Principles and Practices from the Life of Moses* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2006).

¹² Robert F. Russell and A. Gregory Stone, "A review of servant leadership attributes: Developing a practical model," *Leadership & Organization Development Journal* 23, no. 3 (2002), 145-157; Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

¹³ Louis W. Fry, "Toward a theory of spiritual leadership," *Leadership Quarterly* 14 (2003), 693-727.

¹⁴ Moses Pava, *Leading with meaning: Using covenantal leadership to build a better organization* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST AND LEADERSHIP

The literature on organizational trust has identified three components leading to trust in leaders – ability, integrity, and benevolence.¹⁵ While religion has much to contribute to modern leaders' understanding of all three components, it is the area of benevolence that appears most neglected by business leaders and most in need of the perspective of religious wisdom. For example, Dose emphasizes the importance of civility in communication as an aspect of benevolence.¹⁶ The Bible, especially Psalms, places much importance on civil communication and abstinence from gossip.¹⁷

CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP ON AVOT

Because of its universal values and lessons, *Avot* has attracted disproportionate attention from Christian scholars throughout the ages. Herford, a Protestant Christian scholar, composed one of the most lucid translations and commentaries on *Avot*. In his introduction, he cites many Christian texts that contain references to *Avot*, including *Pugio Fedei* by Raymund Martini (circa 1278, translated by De Voisin in 1651) and *De Arcanis Catholicae Veritatis*, by Petrus Galatinus (circa 1516). In 1541 Paul Fagius published *Capitula Patrum*, a translation of *Avot*.¹⁸

AVOT LESSONS FOR RESTORING TRUST: ABILITY, INTEGRITY, BENEVOLENCE

We draw lessons from *Avot* on the three elements that contribute to organizational trust: ability, integrity and benevolence, with a particular emphasis on benevolence. To facilitate the flow of discussion, we do not strictly adhere to the order of the three components. We discuss *Avot* teachings on the role of honor

¹⁵ Roger C. Mayer et al., "An integrative model of organizational trust," *Academy of Management Review* 20 (1995), 709-734.

¹⁶ Jennifer J. Dose, "Proverbs: Ancient Wisdom for Contemporary Organizations," *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2012), 8-27.

¹⁷ cf. *Psalms* 34:13, 101:5

¹⁸ R. Travers Herford, *Pirke Aboth, The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers -- Text, Complete Translation, and Commentaries*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1945).

and fame (*benevolence*); humility (*benevolence*); attitude towards wealth (*integrity*); love of people (*benevolence*); wisdom and learning (*ability*); and moral strength, courage, and industriousness (*integrity*).

BENEVOLENCE: ROLE OF HONOR AND FAME

Many leaders are concerned about honor and fame. They want adulation for what they have done. *Avot* has a great deal to say about the way to achieve fame.

He used to say: One who seeks fame loses his reputation (Hillel, *Avot* 1:13-14).

Ben Zoma says: ... Who is honored? One who honors others... (*Avot* 4:1).

Rabbi Yehuda stated: Which is the proper course that a person should choose for himself? Whatever is honorable to him who does it and honorable in the eyes of mankind... (*Avot* 2:1).

Rabbi Eliezer said: Let the honor of your fellowman be as dear to you as your own and do not be easily angered (*Avot* 2:10).

Rabbi Eliezer ben Shamua said: Let the honor of your student be as precious to you as your own; and the honor of your colleague, be like the reverence for your teacher; and the reverence for your teacher be like the reverence for Heaven (*Avot* 4:12).

Shemayah says: Love work; hate lordship; and do not become overly intimate with the ruling powers (*Avot* 1:10).

Rabbi Elazar HaKapar (*Avot* 4:21): “Envy, lust, and vainglory drive a person out of the world.”

The above sayings show that the ancient sages felt that the only true honor comes from caring and honoring others. Paradoxically, the best way to achieve fame is by honoring others. Even a teacher must give honor to his students. Shemayah felt that lordship, i.e., power, was to be shunned. The *Talmud* included this need

for power among the things that shorten a person's life; "vainglory" is listed as one of the traits that drive a person out of the world.¹⁹ The reason is quite simple. A benevolent person is focused on benefiting others, while a vain person cannot devote his attention to others.

BENEVOLENCE: HUMILITY

The sages believed that true honor comes from respecting others. They felt rather strongly that a person has to strive for humility. People with humility are less likely to get into arguments over supposed slights. Hillel, cited above, was known for never losing his temper and for his great humility. The *Talmud* relates a story of a person who bet his friend 400 *zuz* that he could make Hillel lose his temper. He pestered Hillel one Friday afternoon when Hillel was preparing for the Sabbath with the most inane questions (e.g., "Why do the Babylonians have round heads?" Hillel was from Babylonia). He could not make Hillel lose his temper.²⁰

Two important biblical leaders, Abraham and Moses, were known for their great humility. In the *Torah*, Abraham tells God: "Behold now, I have undertaken to speak to my Lord, although I am but dust and ashes."²¹ Moses is described as an "exceedingly humble" man, "more than any person on the face of the earth."²²

Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh used to say: Be exceedingly humble, for the hope of man is the worm (*Avot* 4:4).

Rabbi Yishmael said: Be submissive to a superior, pleasant to the young, and receive every person cheerfully (*Avot* 3:12).

Rabbi Meir says: Reduce your business activities and occupy yourself with the Torah instead, and be of a humble spirit before everyone... (*Avot* 4:10).

¹⁹ *Babylonian Talmud*, Berachot 55a.

²⁰ *Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbos 30b-31a.

²¹ *Genesis* 18:27.

²² *Numbers* 11:3.

Arrogance is an ugly trait. The way to dispel feelings of arrogance is to remember that we all become worm food in the grave so there is little to be arrogant about. Rabi Levitas was actually quoting the words of Ben Sira in *Ecclesiasticus*.²³ Rebbi, the compiler of *Avot*, felt that humility was so important a trait that he did not want to leave out this quotation. Rebbi himself was known for his extraordinary humility; and the *Talmud* notes that when he died [the trait] humility ceased.²⁴ Rabbi Meir's advice is perfect for the CEO: Increase the time and attention spent on ethics and social responsibility, and spend less time on figuring out ways to make more money.

INTEGRITY: ATTITUDE TOWARDS WEALTH

Ben Zoma says: Who is wealthy? One who rejoices with his portion (*Avot* 4:1).

Ask a typical CEO "Who is wealthy?", and he might name Bill Gates, Warren Buffet or someone else on the Forbes list of billionaires. Many leaders become obsessed with making money. Wealth is meaningless if it does not come along with joy and a feeling of contentment. Many bankers took huge risks in order to increase their bonuses and eventually destroyed their companies. Leaders can find happiness by building a successful company and providing good jobs for thousands of people. Indeed, the vast literature on happiness supports the view that money does not bring happiness.²⁵ People who crave after money are never satisfied; the craving eventually becomes unquenchable and leads to a hedonic treadmill.

BENEVOLENCE: LOVE OF PEOPLE

A successful leader must care about people. Misanthropes do not make good leaders.

²³ *Ecclesiasticus* 7:17.

²⁴ *Babylonian Talmud*, Sotah 49a.

²⁵ Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton, "High income improves evaluation of life but not emotional well-being," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States* (August 4, 2010), <http://www.pnas.org/content/early/2010/08/27/1011492107.full.pdf+html> (accessed February 20, 2014).

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachya says: Provide yourself with a teacher, acquire a companion, and judge all people favorably (*Avot* 1: 6).

Hillel said: Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace; be one who loves people and draws them closer to the Torah (*Avot* 1: 13-14).

Shammai says: Say little but do much and receive every person with a cheerful countenance (*Avot* 1:15).

Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not judge your fellow human being until you have been in his place (Hillel, *Avot* 2:4).

Rabbi Yehoshua said: The evil eye [envy, ill will toward others], the evil inclination [lust], and hatred of humankind (*beriyyoth*) drive a person out of the world (*Avot* 2:11).

He used to say: If the spirit of one's fellows is pleased with him, then God is pleased with him; but if the spirit of one's fellows is not pleased with him, then God is not pleased with him (Chanina ben Dosa, *Avot* 3: 10)

He used to say: Do not despise any person and do not be disdainful of anything, for there is no a person that does not have his hour and there is no thing that does not have its place (Ben Azzai, *Avot* 4:3).

Rabbi Matyah ben Charash says: Be the first in greeting every person... (*Avot* 4:15).

Shmuel HaKatan (the Little) quotes (*Proverbs* 24: 17-18): "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and turn away His anger from him to you" (*Avot* 4:19).

Whoever possesses the following three traits is of the followers of Abraham; whoever possesses the opposite three traits is of the followers of Balaam. A good eye [a generous disposition], a humble spirit, and an undemanding soul are the characteristics of the followers

of Abraham; an evil eye, a haughty spirit, and a greedy soul [for wealth and physical pleasures] are of the disciples of Balaam (*Avot* 5:19).

Leaders who only care about their own needs will not only be unsuccessful but will also shorten their lives. Leaders, especially, should have a positive outlook, be generous, and show compassion for others. Followers of Abraham possess a generous disposition, humility, and simple needs.

Balaam represents one of the most enigmatic figures of the Old Testament. Balaam was spiritually gifted but also greedy and arrogant. The King of Moab hired him to curse the Israelites who have recently settled in the vicinity of Moab. Balaam seemed to have remarkable powers of prophecy, yet he used them for evil purposes as a “hired gun.” He allowed countries to hire him to curse other nations.²⁶ When God prohibited him from cursing the Israelites, he advised the leaders of Moab to use their women to seduce the Israelites into lewd idol-worship and thereby to enrage God.²⁷ It is strange that a prophet with the ability to speak to God would advise others, for the sake of money, to engage in lewd behavior to enrage the Lord. Perhaps Balaam’s behavior was not that strange. After all, the Great Recession of 2008 showed us how wealthy and talented CEOs were willing to destroy their companies for the sake of additional money.

Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa provides a simple test to see if one is liked by God: find out whether the individual is liked by people. This is a good test for a leader of an organization. Abraham defines the servant leader and is indeed described by God as his servant.²⁸ Note the importance Ben Azzai places on treating everyone with respect. Every object has a purpose and every human being has value. By treating everyone with respect, one can learn a great deal and become an extremely effective leader. Wisdom can come from the most unexpected sources. Hillel started out as an extremely poor woodchopper with very little education. Ben Azzai’s teacher, Rabbi Akiva, started out as a shepherd and did not start his education until he was 40.

It is surprising that Rebbi included the favorite saying of Shmuel HaKatan (Shmuel the Little), a direct quote from *Proverbs*.²⁹ Shmuel was a sage known for his great humility; he was a disciple of Hillel. This verse from *Proverbs* was

²⁶ *Numbers* 22-25.

²⁷ *Numbers* 25:1-9; *Numbers* 31:16.

²⁸ *Genesis* 26:24

²⁹ *Proverbs* 24:17.

his mantra and he repeated it all the time. He felt that one should not rejoice even at the defeat of an enemy. What he believed is that one should rejoice when an enemy is transformed into a friend. There is a saying in the *Talmud*: “Who is mighty? One who turns his enemy into a friend.”³⁰ That is the mark of a great leader, bringing people together to enable compromise. When Shmuel HaKatan died, they lamented: “Alas! The pious man; Alas! The humble man; the disciple of Hillel [is no more]”.³¹

The research on productivity and success shows that the most successful people are “givers”.³² Givers are individuals who love helping others without requiring or expecting reciprocity. A giver helps others with no strings attached; the giver loves people and achieves happiness by helping others. It is true that some givers get exploited by others, yet many become quite successful.³³

Leadership built on hatred of people can only result in moral degradation and destruction. The Nazis justified the killing of certain people based on the theoretical work by two “distinguished professors” which condoned the destruction of “unworthy life”.³⁴ The Nazis started with the mandatory sterilization of people classified as “hereditarily sick”; and doctors sterilized as many as 350,000 people. The justification for this was that this was “life unworthy of life” (*lebensunwertes leben*). Soon after, the German medical establishment was killing “impaired” children, starting with newborns then moving on to young children and then to older ones. Eventually, “impaired” adults became victims of the “euthanasia” project. The slaughter, as we know, continued and eventually most of humankind was seen as belonging to an inferior race fit for either being slaves or corpses.

³⁰ *Avot D’Rabbi Nathan* 23:1.

³¹ *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 11a.

³² Adam M. Grant, *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*, (New York: Penguin, 2013).

³³ Susan Dominus, “Is Giving the Secret to Getting Ahead?” *New York Times Magazine* (March 27, 2013), MM20 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/31/magazine/is-giving-the-secret-to-getting-ahead.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed February 20, 2014).

³⁴ Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche, *Permitting the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Living (Die Freigabe der Vernichtung Lebensunwerten Lebens)* (1920), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/44565/44565-h/44565-h.htm> (accessed on February 20, 2014).

The Nazis venerated a master race of supermen (*ubermensch*), the so called Aryans. The term *untermensch* (subhuman) was used by Nietzsche to describe the *common* man. *Avot* teaches us to be suspicious of any leader who is arrogant and despises any part of humanity.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., proclaimed the following:

We can no longer afford to worship the God of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate. Love is the key to the solution of the problems of the world.³⁵

The sages of *Avot* would undoubtedly agree with him. Leaders must love people if they wish to be successful.

ABILITY: WISDOM AND LEARNING

The sages believed in the importance of learning, not just for the elite but for everyone. To them, studying Torah which connects humankind with the divine, was paramount. Rabban Gamliel was Hillel's grandson and President of the Sanhedrin. The apostle Paul was one of his disciples.³⁶ In the Talmud, Rabban Gamliel used his position of leadership to enact laws that would help people using the principle of *tikkun olam* (repair the world—i.e., make the world a better place for all, especially the weak and helpless).³⁷ He also insisted that he be buried in the most inexpensive flax garment so that this would become the standard way of burial, which would make life easier for the poor who could not afford expensive shrouds.³⁸ This is what Rabban Gamliel and the other sages had to say about learning and wisdom.

³⁵ Martin L. King, Jr., "1964 Nobel Lecture," *Nobel Lectures, Peace 1951-1970*, Frederick W. Haberman, ed. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1972), http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-lecture.html (accessed on February 20, 2014).

³⁶ *Acts* 22:3.

³⁷ *Babylonian Talmud*, Gittin 32a, 34b; Yebamos 122a.

³⁸ *Babylonian Talmud*, Moed Katan 27b.

Rabban Gamliel said: Provide yourself with a teacher and avoid doubt. (*Avot* 1: 16).

Yosi ben Yoezer said: Let your house be a meeting place for scholars; sit at their feet in the dust, and drink in their words with thirst (*Avot* 1:4).

He used to say: ...One who does not increase his knowledge decreases it... (Hillel, *Avot* 1: 13-14).

The more schooling, the more wisdom; the more counsel, the more understanding; the more righteousness, the more peace (Hillel, *Avot* 2:7).

One whose deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom shall endure; but one whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, his wisdom shall not endure (Chanina ben Dosa, *Avot* 3:9).

Ben Zoma says: Who is wise? One who learns from every person... (*Avot* 4:1).

Rabbi Matyah ben Charash says: Be the first in greeting every person; and be a tail unto lions and not a head unto foxes (*Avot* 4:15).

Elisha ben Avuyah says: One who studies as a child, what is he like? Like ink written on new paper; one who studies as an old person, what is he like? Like ink written on blotted paper (*Avot* 4:20).

Rabbi Meir says: Do not look at the vessel, but at what it contains. There may be a new vessel filled with old wine and an old vessel that does not even contain new wine (*Avot* 4:20).

Seven things characterize a boor, and seven characterize a wise man. A wise man does not speak before one who is greater than him in wisdom. He does not interrupt the words of his fellowman. He does not hasten to reply. His questions are relevant to the subject and his answers accurately. He responds to the first point first and to the last point last. Concerning what he did not hear, he says "I have not heard." He acknowledges the truth. The reverse

of all these is the mark of the boor. (*Avot* 5:7).

There are four types among those who sit before the sages: A sponge, a funnel, a strainer, and a sieve. A sponge absorbs everything; a funnel receives at one end and lets out at the other; a strainer lets out the wine and retains the dregs; a sieve lets out the coarse meal and retains the fine flour (*Avot* 5:15).

The secret of becoming wise is provided in *Avot* – learn from everyone. By surrounding yourself with wise people — even if it means becoming a “tail unto lions” — one ensures that s/he will grow in wisdom and eventually become a lion. Theoretical wisdom is of no value; one has to apply what one has learned. When it comes to ethics, one must be a role model and “walk the talk.” One who wants to learn should not be concerned about winning arguments; what matters is determining the truth.

One of the surprises in *Avot* is that a saying of Elisha ben Avuyah was included. He was a well-known heretic. There are several theories in the Talmud as to why he became a heretic. Rabbi Meir, one of the great scholars, studied with him and the Talmud notes that Rabbi Meir “ate the date but discarded the pit”.³⁹ Rabbi Meir’s example shows that one can learn even from a heretic if one knows what to discard. Rabbi, the compiler of *Avot*, evidently felt that Elisha’s saying was of great value and included it. Educators today would probably agree that the learning done when one is young is easier to retain than learning as an older person. Elisha’s disciple, Rabbi Meir, considered one of the great geniuses of the Talmud, believed that, just as one does not judge the quality of wine by its container, one should not judge the value of a person’s wisdom by his age or other externalities. The perfect student does not absorb everything. S/he knows how to distinguish between different types of information and only retains the essential and crucial ideas. Modern leaders can increase the ability in all areas by heeding these *Avot* lessons on selective, continuous learning from a wide variety sources.

INTEGRITY: MORAL STRENGTH, COURAGE, AND INDUSTRIOUSNESS

A great leader possesses moral strength and is not afraid of hard work. It goes without saying that leaders should not be afraid to lead and “be a man.” A leader who procrastinates, regardless of good intentions, will not achieve success. The

³⁹ *Babylonian Talmud*, Chagigah 15b.

following famous statement of Hillel —“If I am not for myself...” — could and should be in every organization’s mission statement. A company may have an obligation to make profit for its shareholders but also has a responsibility to all stakeholders, including society. The property of others – even competitors – should not be treated lightly. A company can make a healthy profit and not have to deride the products of competing firms. Hillel’s aphorism should also be part of every human being’s philosophy of life. We have to take care of ourselves, but life has no meaning if we are too self-absorbed.

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I care only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?
(Hillel, *Avot* 1: 13-14).

In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man
(Hillel, *Avot* 2:5).

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said: On three things the world stands: on justice, truth, and peace, as it is said (Zechariah 8:16), “You shall execute truth, justice, and peace in your gates” (*Avot* 1: 18).

Rabbi Yose said: Let the property of your fellowman be as dear to you as your own (*Avot* 2:12).

Ben Zoma says: ... Who is strong? One who subdues his passions... (*Avot* 4:1).

Rabbi Tarfon says: The day is short, the task is great, the laborers are lazy, the wage is high, and the Master of the house is insistent. It is not incumbent on you to complete the work, yet you are not free to desist from it... (*Avot* 2:15).

Yehudah ben Tema said: Be bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and mighty as a lion, to do the will of your Father who is in heaven (*Avot* 5: 20).

Ben He He says: According to the exertion is the reward (*Avot* 5: 23).

True strength is about overcoming desires and/or standing up for one’s principles. Life is short and every person has a great deal to accomplish. God demands that every human being, especially leaders, not waste their time in this world on

nonsense such as honor and fame, but devote it to meaningful activities. We have to be energetic and help others with enthusiasm. People who work hard and make great sacrifices for the good of society will be rewarded. There are many excuses used to evade responsibility; the authors hint that apathy can come from fear, lack of courage, or the excuse that there is too much to do. The sages assure us that the rewards are commensurate with the effort made.

CONCLUSION

One of the interesting questions hinted at in *Avot* is the question of the ideal economic system. Millions of people have died in the name of the ideal economic system. At one time, many people thought that Marxism provided the best answer. *Avot* says the following on sharing:

There are four types of human characters: (a) One who says: “What is mine is mine, and what is yours is yours” is the average type, though some say this is a characteristic of Sodom; (b) One who says: “What is mine is yours, and what is yours is mine” is an ignoramus; (c) One who says: “What is mine is yours and what is yours is yours” is pious; (d) One who says: “What is yours is mine, and what is mine is mine” is wicked (*Avot* 5: 10).

Every country (and organization) has to be concerned about truth, justice, and peace (there can be no everlasting peace without justice). It is clear that the ideal way to act is with extreme generosity as though “what is mine is yours and what is yours is yours.” The sages did not respect people who were so obsessed with property rights that they were indifferent to charity. Those who were so against private property and declared “what is mine is yours and what is yours is mine” also were not respected and were considered ignoramuses. The sages realized two thousand years ago that an economic system based on communes that disdained private property would be ineffective and only a fool would suggest it. The system they preferred would allow private property but would stress morality, honesty, generosity, and compassion for others.

The latest happiness ratings for countries can be seen at the Forbes.com website. This year, the United States has moved down to 12th place in the

rankings of the world's happiest countries.⁴⁰ This is probably due to the large number of unemployed and underemployed people; unemployment, as noted above, is a happiness destroyer. The United States now has the highest rate of youth non-employment (different from unemployment since it includes those who have given up looking for work; it is currently 26.6%) among six rich countries.⁴¹

Another indicator of the weakening of the social fabric is the increased suicide rate. From 1999 to 2009 the suicide rate for men in their 50's has increased by almost 50 percent to a rate of 30 per 100,000. While the increase in this age group has been most pronounced, other age groups have experienced increases as well. In 2009, the number of suicides surpassed the number of deaths by auto accidents for the first time. According to the deputy director of the Center for Disease Control (CDC), "The increase [in suicide rates] does coincide with a decrease in financial standing for a lot of families over the same time period".⁴²

Jeffrey Skilling, former President of Enron, is a good example of a leader who could have benefited from *Avot*. His favorite book was Dawkins' *Selfish Gene*, which seemingly condoned selfish behavior.⁴³ Skilling misunderstood what Dawkins said and became a believer in the "survival of the fittest" form of social Darwinism, i.e., cutthroat competition. He set up a Peer Review Committee that was known in Enron as "rank and yank." Employees were ranked on a 1 to 5 scale and 20% of those ranked 5 were fired. Rankings were posted on the company's website so that employees would also be humiliated. It is not surprising that all this resulted in an environment where people engaged in unethical behavior to get better ratings. What Skilling accomplished was one of the largest bankruptcies in American history and a 24-year jail term (it has recently been reduced) for himself for fraud and insider trading. Thanks to Skilling's arrogance, dishonesty, and greed, 5,000 employees lost their jobs and

⁴⁰ Christopher Helman, "The Happiest (And Saddest) Countries In The World," *Forbes* (January 9, 2013), <http://www.forbes.com/sites/christopherhelman/2013/01/09/the-worlds-happiest-and-saddest-countries-2/> (accessed on February 20, 2014).

⁴¹ David Leonhardt, "The Idled Young Americans," *New York Times* (May 3, 2013, Sunday Review), <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/sunday-review/the-idled-young-americans.html> (accessed on February 20, 2014).

⁴² Tara Parker-Pope, "Suicide rates rise sharply in the U.S.," *New York Times* (May 2, 2013, A1), <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/health/suicide-rate-rises-sharply-in-us.html>, (accessed on February 20, 2014).

⁴³ Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2009), 39; Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

approximately \$1 billion in employee retirement funds were lost.⁴⁴

In *Avot*, on the other hand, the ideal leader is morally strong, has great humility, and honors others. He or she is always learning from everyone and does not despise anyone. She is a person who achieves happiness not by wealth but by helping others. Rabbi Akiva used to say: “Beloved is man [i.e., humankind], in that he was created in the image [of God]; greater love was demonstrated to him in that it was made known to him that he was created in God’s image, as it is written: ‘For in the image of God made He man’⁴⁵.”⁴⁶ The truly superior individual understands that all of God’s creations must be loved and that there is no place for intolerance anywhere, especially not in the workplace. This leader strives to provide opportunities for self-actualization to as many people as possible.

The Great Recession of 2008, which nearly destroyed the world economy, demonstrated quite vividly what happens when the world stands on the pillars of greed, selfishness, and self-interest. The mantra of the corporate world should not be “maximization of shareholder value,” which has been called the “dumbest idea in the world” by Jack Welch.⁴⁷ Martin avers that, ironically, the goal of “maximization of shareholder value” does not maximize shareholder value in the long run.⁴⁸ Here is what it actually does:

Thus a focus on maximizing shareholder value leads the firm to do things that detract from maximizing long-term shareholder value, such as favoring cost-cutting over innovation that adds value to customers and builds the

⁴⁴ Michael Shermer, “Evolution, compassion, and the corporation,” *In Character* (Spring 2008), 22-27, <http://incharacter.org/archives/compassion/evolution-compassion-and-the-corporation-gordon-gekkos-greed-speech-got-it-all-wrong/> (accessed on February 20, 2014); Paul M. Barrett, “Enron’s Jeffrey Skilling will get rough justice,” *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* (May 9, 2013), <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-05-09/enrons-jeffrey-skilling-will-get-rough-justice> (accessed on February 20, 2014).

⁴⁵ *Genesis* 9:6.

⁴⁶ *Avot* 3:14

⁴⁷ Steve Denning, “The dumbest idea in the world: Maximizing shareholder value,” *Forbes.com* (November 28, 2011), <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2011/11/28/maximizing-shareholder-value-the-dumbest-idea-in-the-world/> (accessed on February 20, 2014).

⁴⁸ Roger L. Martin, *Fixing the Game: Bubbles, Crashes, and What Capitalism Can Learn from the NFL*, (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011).

brand, pursuing “bad profits” that destroy brand equity, and excessive C-suite compensation. The net result can be seen in the disastrously declining ROA [return on Assets] and ROIC [Return on Investment Capital] over the last four decades in large US firms as documented by Deloitte’s Shift Index. Shareholder value has many other drawbacks. It encourages hierarchical bureaucracy. It destroys employee morale: only one in five workers is fully engaged in his or her work. The sole focus on profit is anti-social in nature and has given business a bad reputation. It cripples job growth: according to a study by the Kauffman Foundation, large firms have created zero net new jobs over recent decades.⁴⁹

This paper joins a stream of literature in corporate governance, ethics, and leadership that seek to establish a meaningful alternative to the idol of shareholder value. One long-lasting theme that has gained new-found popularity is the notion of organizational trust.⁵⁰ The sayings of *Avot* provide important lessons for achieving organizational trust, and particularly its last component –benevolence.

As a pragmatic tool, the lessons of *Avot* can be used to improve internal controls in business organizations. In the recently released update to its internal controls framework, the Committee of Sponsoring Organizations (COSO) highlighted the importance of leaders setting a “tone at the top” of ethics and integrity in the very first principle of internal controls.⁵¹ To restore trust, leaders can start by living up to the standards of *Avot*, particularly as it relates to benevolence towards others.

⁴⁹ Steve Denning, “Can the dumbest idea in the world be saved?” *Forbes.com* (November 27, 2011), <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevedenning/2012/11/27/can-the-shareholder-value-theory-be-mended/> (accessed on February 22, 2014).

⁵⁰ Colin Mayer, *Firm Commitment: Why the Corporation is Failing Us and How to Restore Trust in It* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵¹ Committee of Sponsoring Organizations of the Treadway Commission “COSO”, *Internal Control – Integrated Framework* (2013), http://www.coso.org/documents/990025P_Executive_Summary_final_may20_e.pdf (executive summary accessed on February 20, 2014).