

A TIME FOR PRESERVATION, OR REIMAGINING?

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The opening chapter of *Pirkei Avot* is neatly framed by two similar but very distinct sayings. The first is from Simeon the Righteous, who said, **“The world stands on three things: on Torah, the worship of God, and deeds of kindness.”** The very last piece in the chapter presents us with a different triad. Simeon ben Gamliel taught: **“The world is sustained by three things: justice, truth, and peace.”**

They sound similar. So why do we need both of these three-pronged lists? And is the difference between them significant?

The first distinction is that you have to be Jewish to appreciate what Simeon the Righteous says: he talks about Israel’s Torah and the worship of Israel’s God. You don’t have to be Jewish to appreciate Simeon ben Gamliel’s message — he talks about justice, truth, and peace.

“The world stands on three things: on Torah, the worship of God, and deeds of kindness.”

The late Robert Cover pointed out that Rabbi Joseph Karo suggests what the contrasting formulation might indicate. He explains that each sage taught in the context of his own

times. Simeon the Righteous was one of the last remaining members of the Great Assembly, facing the transition to the culture of post-biblical Judaism. He lived in a time of rebuilding, a time of vision. The culture he and his colleagues were creating was based on collective acceptance of the teachings of the recently canonized Torah and ritual practices that would inculcate these teachings, which were grounded in the worship of Israel’s God and emphasized treating one another with kindness and generosity. It worked because it was accepted by members of that generation and subsequent generations as expressing the essence of who they were and who they aspired to be.

“The world is sustained by three things: justice, truth, and peace.”

Simeon ben Gamliel lived through the Roman wars and the profound Jewish losses that resulted. There was so little left that he couldn’t be concerned with laying the foundation of a rejuvenated religious culture; he sought instead to hold on to a weakened culture. **And so he enumerated the sorts of things that in truth sustain any culture at all — a justice system to enforce the truths already accepted by the culture, and the preservation of peace.**



“Will we look for conservative, guarded, preservation...Or can we believe and assert that the times call for bold initiatives, for revivification and reimagining of what a more perfect American union and what a more perfect vision of Zionism could be?”

In this way, the first chapter of *Pirkei Avot* presents us with two polar trends that recur throughout Jewish history. **There are times of hope and vision, times when the future needs to be met with bold formulations of a vision, ethos, and a set of guiding values.**

And there are times of fear — real or imagined — of dire threat of the reigning culture taking over. At such times, generally the dominant mood and agenda are deeply conservative ones. The result is an effort to *preserve* the existing order and institutions as much as possible. No new ideas are forthcoming; rather the premium is on justice, truth, and peace — on the already accepted truths and conventions. There’s no risking the discord that new conceptions might introduce into the fragile community.

And so, what are we to say today? What are we to say to citizens of this great but ailing republic? We, who are devotees of a Jewish state struggling with its own maladies — are we going to see our world as Simeon ben Gamliel did? Will we look for conservative, guarded, preservation that gets encapsulated in slogans such as law and order, return to normal, remember the past? Or can we see it the way Simeon the Righteous did, and believe and assert that the times call for bold initiatives, for revivification and reimagining of what a more perfect American union and what a more perfect vision of Zionism could be? The first chapter of *Pirkei Avot* doesn’t decide this for us. It merely lays out the choice.

