



# Pirkei Imahot

*“Forgiveness is the key to action and freedom.”*

**Hannah Arendt**

*Should any and everything be forgiven?*

*If so – what is the meaning of consequences?*

*If not, what is the meaning of compassion?*

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*“I want to visit Memory Lane, I don’t want to live there.”*

**Letty Cottin Pogrebin (*Deborah, Golda, and Me*, 1991)**

*What is the value to visiting Memory Lane? Is it comforting?*

*Why not live there?*

*How is this thought helpful to us in our personal lives? In our sisterhood?*

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# Pirkei Imahot

*“Big doesn’t necessarily mean better.*

*Sunflowers aren’t better than violets.”*

**Edna Ferber**

*How do we contend with – and survive – a society that values bigger and more above all else?*

*It is possible to express this value; but is it possible to embrace it as well?*

*How can we do that?*

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**The Wisdom of Our Mothers**  
2010-2011

## INTRODUCTION

**Jewish wisdom:** what image does this conjure up for you?

We think of the rabbis of *Pirkei Avot*. Rabban Gamliel taught: “The world rests on three things...” Rabbi Elazar taught: “Be diligent in the study of Torah...” Ben Zoma taught: “Who is wise?”

At Jewish gatherings we are offered words of wisdom – from the Bible, Talmud and midrash, from poetry and liturgy. Most are the formulations and utterances of men.

Only in modern times have Jewish women joined the ranks of those

**Edna Ferber** (1885-1968) was a Pulitzer-Prize winning American writer and playwright. Her novels often feature strong female protagonists and other characters who are forced to endure ethnic discrimination.

**Hannah Arendt** (1906-1975) was a German-born political theorist/philosopher. She fled Nazi Germany and moved to the United States where her work focused on the nature of power, authority and totalitarianism. One of her most widely read and quoted works is *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, published in 1963.

who impart wise insight and pithy aphorisms – urging praiseworthy thought and behavior, delivered in a contemporary idiom, often addressing the particular needs and concerns of women.

Imagine a *Pirkei Imahot: Sayings of the Mothers*. What might they say?

The enclosed quotes by Jewish women address a variety of contemporary issues that we confront daily as Jewish women – as mothers and daughters, colleagues and friends, as members of synagogues, sisterhoods, organizations, and boards.

Begin your meetings with these *divrei hokhmah* – words of wisdom – for 2010-2011 and be inspired by the words of the selected *imahot*. Use the quotes to spark a discussion among your members. Feel free to use the questions that are provided or create your own. Remember there are no right or wrong answers, only thoughtful and challenging ones. Your discussions will be energizing!

**Letty Cottin Pogrebin** (born 1939) is an American writer and journalist. She was an early Jewish feminist and a founding editor of Ms. Magazine and co-founder of the national Women's Political Caucus.



## Pirkei Imahot

*“There are well-dressed foolish ideas  
just as there are well-dressed fools.”*

**Diane Ackerman**

### **What are some well-dressed foolish ideas that come to mind?**

Possible answers: Prohibition; eugenics (the practice of selective breeding) and social Darwinism (survival of the fittest in human society); segregation; DES\*; x-raying children’s feet for shoes; university and immigration quotas; corsets; “the market will regulate itself”

\*Diethylstilbestrol (DES) was a synthetic estrogen given to pregnant women in the 1950s under the mistaken belief it would reduce the risk of pregnancy complications and losses. By 1971, DES was shown to cause a rare vaginal tumor in girls and young women who had been exposed to it in utero.

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## Pirkei Imahot

*“The problem that has no name – which is simply the fact that  
American women are kept from growing to their full human capacities  
– is taking a far greater toll on the physical and mental health of our  
country than any known disease.”*

**Betty Friedan** (*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963)

### **Questions:**

Was Friedan right, then (1963)?

Do you think that she is right, today?

What problems do women contend with now?

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## Pirkei Imahot

*“I’m going to stop punishing my children by saying,  
Never mind! I’ll do it myself.”*

**Erma Bombeck**

### **Questions:**

Who does Bombeck think is punished by this behavior? The children?  
The mother?

Can you relate to this personally?

Can this be applied to other areas of your life, as well? Work? Organizational  
life? The synagogue?

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## Pirkei Imahot

*“If you want to be listened to, you should put in time listening.”*

**Marge Piercy**

### **Questions:**

What is hearing? What is listening? Is there a difference?

How can we train ourselves to speak less and listen more?

In your experience, who is the **most** listened to at meetings?

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**Erma Bombeck** (1927-1996) was an American columnist whose humorous descriptions of suburban home life were widely read and quoted from the mid-1960s until the late 1990s. She was also a bestselling author, publishing 15 books.

**Marge Piercy** (born 1936) is an American poet, novelist and social activist. Her writings and poetry often reflect her concerns for feminism and social change.

**Diane Ackerman** (born 1948) is an American author, poet and naturalist, known best for her work *A Natural History of the Senses* (which inspired the five-part Nova miniseries *Mystery of the Senses*). Her most recent work, *The Zookeeper's Wife*, is the true story of how the keepers of the Warsaw Zoo saved hundreds of people from Nazi hands.

**Betty Friedan** (1921-2006) was an American writer, activist and feminist. Her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* is regarded as beginning second wave feminism. She was also the co-founder of the National Organization for Women in 1966.



## Pirkei Imahot

*“Mama’s philosophy and approach to life were succinct:  
If it’s good it’s not forever, and if it’s bad it’s not forever.”*

**Molly Picon**

**Questions:**

What are the benefits of this personal philosophy?

What are the pitfalls?

Is it possible to embrace this philosophy and be sympathetic? Joyful?

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## Pirkei Imahot

*“I’ve always thought that wombs of women form a secret,  
silent network of communication all over the world.”*

**Penina Adelman (Miriam’s Well, 1986)**

**Questions:**

Do you think that women share an unspoken language?

Does womanhood transcend cultural, social and political boundaries?

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## Pirkei Imahot

*“I do believe that women must open Torah wide and seize it  
for themselves, though they must know full well  
that the consequences may even be dangerous.”*

**Vanessa Ochs (Words on Fire, 1999)**

**Questions:**

To what kind consequence, or even danger, is Vanessa Ochs referring?

Why would an unswerving feminist, like Ochs, make such a statement?

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## Pirkei Imahot

*“It’s no accident many accuse me of conducting public affairs  
with my heart instead of my head. Well, what if I do?  
Those who don’t know how to weep with their whole heart  
don’t know how to laugh either.”*

**Golda Meir**

**Questions:**

Is this a sexist notion?

Is thinking with the heart empowering or does it feed into the idea that women don’t think like men?

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**Vanessa Ochs** is an associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. Her work focuses on the anthropology of Judaism, women in Judaism, material culture and the study of religions, new ritual, healing in Jewish tradition, and the literature of spiritual journeys. Her most recent book, *Inventing Jewish Ritual*, was the winner of the National Jewish Book Award in 2007.

**Golda Meir** (1898-1978) was Israel's first (and the world's third) woman prime minister, from 1969 to 1974. She was described as the "Iron Lady" of politics years before it was associated with Margaret Thatcher. David Ben Gurion used to call Meir "the best man in the government." She was often portrayed as the "strong-willed, straight-talking, grey-bunned grandmother of the Jewish people."

**Molly Picon** (1898-1992) was an American actress and lyricist. She began in Yiddish theater then later moved on to stage, screen and television. In her most famous film, *Yidl Mit'n Fidl* (1936), made on location in Poland, she wore male clothing through most of the film.

**Penina Adelman** is a writer and social worker whose work focuses on women and spirituality, women in the Bible, and women as mythmakers and creators of ritual. Her first book, *Miriam's Well*, helped launch the rosh chodesh (Jewish new moon festival) movement which today involves thousands of Jewish women.