



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

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Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

Perek Alef, Mishnah Alef (Part 1)

1:1 Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and passed it on to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets passed it on to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things. Be deliberate in judgment, and teach many students, and make a fence around the Torah.

Avot

Moshe received the Five Books of the Torah, known as the Written Torah, from G-d on Mt. Sinai. However, this was not the entirety of G-d's Word; he received as well an equally binding Oral Torah, which we are to study and live by. No less than the Written Torah, the Oral Tradition was received by Moshe Rabbeinu from the mouth of the Al-mighty, and it has been carefully preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next ever since. Every word, even every letter, comes directly from Hashem, and we should relate to it as such; the Oral Torah is also the unaltered Word of G-d.

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai.

This is a fundamental and very important fact. However, the Bartenura asks, what connection does this *mishnah* have to the ethical teachings of *Avot*? It would have been more appropriately placed as the opening *mishnah* of *Berachot*, the first tractate of the *Mishnah*, rather than here, in the later Order of *Nezikin*, as the introduction to *Pirke Avot*.

He explains that this specific information is found here and not elsewhere for a definite reason. When we learn the other tractates, it is clear by their nature that they



deal with Divinely ordained laws and traditions. When we come to *Avot*, however, the material is somewhat different. It is not instruction concerning the commandments, but rather ethical teachings about social mores and proper conduct, recorded by the various Sages of the *Mishnah* in keeping with their own practices and perceptions. Such social teachings are not unique to the Jews. Other nations have their own cultural traditions, and the Greeks and Romans also had a code of etiquette and good manners.

There is one crucial difference: their manners and traditions, even if they are ancient, are manmade, while ours, no less than all the other laws outlined throughout the *Mishnah*, are G-d-given Torah. The morals and ethics of *Avot*, just as the complex laws of *Taharot*, were received as part of the Oral Tradition at Sinai. The *halachot* in the other tractates were clarified and explained in halachic works composed by great Torah authorities in subsequent generations. So too, the teachings in *Avot* are elaborated on and discussed in depth by the many works of Jewish ethics. *Pirke Avot* should be the subject of the same careful, analytical study as all other fields of Torah learning.

From Sinai

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai.

The Hidda asks a logical question. Why does the *Mishnah* say that Moshe received the Torah *from* Sinai? Hashem gave the Torah *at* Sinai. The mountain itself was not the giver of the Torah, it was merely the address.

We can answer this question by studying an earlier event in the life of Moshe Rabbeinu. At the Revelation at the Burning Bush, Hashem gave Moshe the momentous mission of ordering Pharaoh to release his valuable slave labor force, after which Moshe would go on to lead the Jewish nation out of Egypt to freedom (*Shmot* 3). There could hardly have been a more prestigious, potential-filled role, and yet, Moshe refused it; he said, "Please send by the hand of whomever You will send" (4:13). Rashi explains, "By the hand of the one You are accustomed to send, and that is Aharon."

Aharon, Moshe's older brother, had led the Jewish people and prophesied to them for eighty years (*Shmot Rabbah* 3:16). Why, Moshe said, should he not continue? He was more competent and experienced, as well as a more convincing speaker, while Moshe had a speech impediment. Above all, said Moshe, Aharon was more righteous, and as such, was surely more worthy.



The argument at the Burning Bush continued for seven full days (see Rashi on *Shmot* 4:10, 13)! In the end Moshe submitted to the Will of Hashem, but it did not happen easily, because Moshe was so incredibly humble that he refused perhaps the greatest opportunity for personal advancement ever offered to a mortal man. The Torah itself attests to Moshe's great humility: "And the man Moshe was very humble, more than any person on the face of the earth" (*Bamidbar* 12:3). It is worth noting that while much of the Torah deals with Moshe Rabbenu, the exceptional qualities of the Jewish people's greatest prophet and leader are not recorded; the sole praise the Torah grants Moshe is to say that he was humble.¹

Some time later, however, Hashem assigned Moshe another unequaled task: "And Hashem descended on Mt. Sinai to the head of the mountain, and Hashem called Moshe to the head of the mountain, and Moshe went up" (*Shmot* 19:20). This time, at Sinai, there was no argument – why? Was Moshe no longer humble? Was he no longer concerned for Aharon's feelings?

The answer lies in the fact that Moshe received the Torah specifically **from Sinai**. We know that Hashem could have given the Torah on a magnificent, towering peak. And yet, He chose Sinai. Compared to other, more impressive mountains, it was barely worthy of the name. But the Al-mighty descended to this modest hillock for the greatest Revelation known to mankind, precisely *because* it was simple and unassuming. Our Sages tell us, "The Holy One, blessed be He, passed over all the mountains and hills and rested His Presence on Mt. Sinai, and Mt. Sinai was not high and mighty" (*Sotah* 5a). These are the qualities Hashem values and wishes to teach His people: He despises pride, which is antithetical to Torah, and values humility.

The point was not wasted on Moshe Rabbenu. Reasoning that Hashem had chosen lowly and insignificant beings – like Sinai – as His vehicle for the Giving of the Torah, he assumed that he, simple and lowly as he deemed himself, was a perfect match for the humble site. "Hashem called Moshe to the head of the

¹ Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin writes that humility goes deeper than tolerating insults and humiliation. It means sincerely believing in our heart that we are truly nothing, even in comparison to the very lowliest of the low. We should realize that even if we do have some accomplishments to our credit, they are nothing compared to what we are capable of. The individual we perceive as lowly may have in fact exerted himself to the maximum of his personal capacities, making him more worthy than a gifted individual who has not fully utilized his gifts and potential. This was Moshe's attitude, expressed in the words, "Please send by the hand of whoever You will send" (*Shmot* 4:13). The Ramban explains that Moshe meant that *anyone* Hashem could possibly choose to send would be more worthy than him (*Ruah Hayyim* on *Avot* 4:1).



mountain and Moshe went up,” not because he considered himself important, but precisely because he was humble. This was the reason that Moshe so readily agreed to **receive the Torah from Sinai** (see the Hidda’s *Devarim Ahadim, Ahore Tar’a, Ot Chaf-he*, citing the *Kle Yakar*).

Receiving the Torah

With this in mind, we can also explain why the *mishnah* says that **Moshe received the Torah from Sinai, and passed it on to Yehoshua**. The term **received** is used only in regard to Moshe; after him, the Torah was always **passed on** (see commentary of *Tosfot Yom Tov*). Our Sages’ choice of words or phrases is never random, and as always, it teaches a profound lesson.

There is a difference between “receiving” and “passing on.” The term “receiving” relates to the recipient and his capacity for reception. That capacity is in proportion to the effort he has invested in preparing himself to be a worthy receptacle. “Passing on,” on the other hand, relates not to the capacities of the recipient, but to the giver. For his part, he gives in full. If the recipient is incapable of accepting all that he has to give, the fault lies with the recipient, rather than with the giver. Hashem is unlimited and unending, as is His Torah. In order for Him to give us the Torah in full, there had to be a recipient who could accept it in full. Moshe, the humblest of all men, was the only human being capable of this great task.

Only Moshe

Our Sages teach that humility is one of the forty-eight means by which Torah is acquired (*Avot* 6:6). To understand why humility in particular is a prerequisite for Torah, we need to understand the essence of Torah.

Torah is the sum of the Al-mighty’s teaching and instruction about how man can perfect and elevate himself spiritually, thus perfecting and elevating the world as well. However, we will only be receptive to instruction if we realize that we are not perfect. If we imagine that we are already all-knowing and have no shortcomings to speak of, what can anyone possibly teach us? Whatever they may say, we know better. This unfortunate attitude can include the eternal wisdom of the Sages, and even the wisdom of the Torah itself, G-d forbid. The more conceited we are, the less room we will have for Torah, and the less we will appreciate how much we need it.

What if Moshe had viewed himself as a paragon, with no flaws or weaknesses? What if he had thought that the world was fine exactly as it was? With this perspective, Moshe could never have received the vast body of Divine instruction



geared to improving and perfecting the defects of humanity and Creation. He would not have seen that there was anything to correct!

It took the unlimited humility of Moshe Rabbenu to grasp the unlimited lack of perfection in need of correction in the created world, and receive an unlimited Torah of G-dly wisdom on how to correct it. Because he understood both the deficiencies inherent in man and Creation, and the standards of perfection which Hashem requires of us, he realized how much Torah we need – and how desperately we need it.

Anyone less humble would have been incapable of receiving the Torah in its entirety, and at the hands of a lesser messenger, we would have received an incomplete Torah. Such a Torah would not have sufficed to bring mankind and the world to their ultimate perfection and rectification, so we needed Moshe, “the most humble of any person on the face of the earth” (*Bamidbar* 13:2) to be the one to **receive the Torah from Sinai**. Only he could receive and pass on in full to the Jewish people the Torah’s every word, every law, and every shade of meaning, in a manner which would span six thousand years of striving for perfection through the study and fulfillment of Torah.

While every individual must ready himself to receive the Torah by recognizing his shortcomings and working to correct them, it is no longer necessary for those who follow Moshe to be on his level of spiritual preparation. We do not have to start from scratch; we have only to go back to the original link, the Torah received by Moshe from the Al-mighty at Sinai.

Hashem gave Moshe the Torah not for himself alone, but for the entire Jewish nation, not only in his time, but for all generations to come. Moshe received six thousand years’ worth of Torah, enough for the entire Jewish people until the coming of *Mashiah*. We find this concept in the verse “Six hundred thousand foot soldiers, the nation whom I am among” (*Bamidbar* 11:21). Our Sages comment, “Moshe is equivalent to six hundred thousand Israelites” (see *Likute Torah, Beha’alotcha; Ruah Hayyim, Avot* 1:1). The *Mekubalim* explain that the Jewish people are comprised of six hundred thousand general, inclusive souls. Each of these souls has many, many separate particles. Moshe, although one person, corresponded to and encompassed the entire six hundred thousand, including all the innumerable particles. He received not only the Torah which related to him personally, but the Torah which relates to all of Israel throughout all generations. *Torat Moshe* has within it enough to teach everyone until the end of time how to achieve the lofty goal of perfecting himself and the world. In order to receive so much, one must be very humble indeed.



A teaching of the Arizal helps us understand Moshe Rabbenu's role in the study of Torah for all time. We find in the *Gemara* that when a Sage, regardless of his name, offered an especially good interpretation, his colleagues would say, "Moshe, you have spoken well" (*Shabbat* 101b et al).

Whatever the Sage's name actually was, his sound insight was derived from the spark of Moshe Rabbenu within him. As we explained, Moshe's soul corresponds to all the six hundred thousand souls of Israel and he received the Torah for all of Israel. He is the source of every Torah thought which will ever be developed by a Torah scholar, up to this day and into the future. The teachings of the Sages in question were already imparted to Moshe at Sinai, and he is their source even now. That is why the Sages would say, "Moshe, you have spoken well."

Humble Enough to Learn

Our Sages tell us that Torah is compared to water. Water does not flow up, it flows down. If we wish to acquire Torah, we must be lowly and humble. Just as water seeks ground level, so does Torah seek the modest and the humble. Arrogance drives it away, while humility attracts it (*Taanit* 7a). So too, in order to pour water from a full vessel into an empty one, the empty vessel must stand at a lower level. Positioned at the same height as the full vessel, it is incapable of receiving.

With this in mind, let us consider a teaching of our great teachers of Jewish ethics (see *Mishnat Rabbi Aharon*, vol. I, p. 65). One may think, they say, that he knows the entire Torah by heart and that it is his, literally ready and waiting "in his pocket" (*Ketubot* 50a). It's all there, and it's all his. But after his hundred and twenty, he will encounter the harsh realities of the World of Truth, where there are no delusions. The first question he will be asked is, "Did you learn Torah?"

His answer is yes; he has a nice stock of Torah right in his pocket, so to speak. The response to this claim is frightening: "Is that Torah really yours? Did you in fact acquire it?"

This question relates to the halachic concept of *kinyan*. Lawful possession is achieved by making a *kinyan*, a physical act which establishes ownership. For example, merchandise for sale is acquired through the payment of money. Some objects are acquired by being lifted, others by being pulled along from a stationary position. A woman becomes one's wife through a marriage contract (*ketubah*) and the transfer of an object of monetary value (see *Kiddushin* 2a, 25b, *Hoshen Mishpat* 195). The method of *kinyan* must be appropriate to the article being acquired; merely slipping an object into a pocket does not make it one's own.



Torah too must be acquired with the proper method of *kinyan*. We may know it all by heart – may have put it in our pocket – but that does not make it ours. We acquire it by means of the forty-eight *kinyanim* described by our Sages. Of critical importance on this list is humility, as we learn from this *mishnah*: **Moshe**, the most humble of all men, **received the Torah from Sinai**, the most humble of mountains.

Learning Torah means that we subjugate ourselves fully to Hashem's Will, as expressed in His Torah. Moshe Rabbeinu was capable of this, because he took the attitude of "*v'nachnu mah*" – what are we? (*Shmot* 16:8). Our Sages understood this as well, as we see from an incident related in the *Gemara*. The *Amora* Rav Hisda related a question that had arisen in the *bet midrash* to Rami bar Hama. The latter pointed out that the question was dealt with explicitly in a *mishnah*. Rav Hisda asked which *mishnah* his fellow *Amora* referred to. In answer, he said that if Rav Hisda would serve him in some way, he would tell him, and Rav Hisda promptly folded his colleague's garment for him (*Baba Kama* 20b). Folding his garment was symbolic of deference and submission to his authority.

It is not enough to listen to a Talmudic lecture and enjoy the intellectual challenge. To truly learn from a teacher we must recognize that his level surpasses our own, and submit ourselves to his greater knowledge and authority. Our Sages teach that "Serving a Torah scholar is greater than studying Torah" (*Berachot* 7b). Our perception of ourselves in relation to great Torah scholars should be that described by Yosse ben Yoezer (*Avot* 1:4): "Sit in the dust of their feet and drink in their words thirstily." This stance is an implied acknowledgement that we are not on their level, and have much to learn from them. If we are humble enough to accept this, we will in fact be able to learn.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.