



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

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Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

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1:4 Yosse ben Yoezer of Tzeredah and Yosse ben Yohanan of Jerusalem received from them. Yosse ben Yoezer said, let your home be a meeting place for scholars, and sit in the dust at their feet, and drink in their words thirstily.

By Observation

Yosse ben Yoezer of Tzeredah and Yosse ben Yohanan of Jerusalem received from them.

The *Mishnah* often refers to Sages by the names of their hometowns. The simple reason for this practice is to differentiate between two scholars with the same name. Mentioning the Sage's hometown is also an indirect way of praising the location which produced a great Torah scholar.

Yosse ben Yoezer of Tzeredah and Yosse ben Yohanan of Jerusalem received the Oral Tradition from Shimon HaTzaddik and Antigonus of Socho. They began the era of the *Zugot* (Pairs), when two distinguished scholars, the *Nasi* (Prince) and the *Av Bet Din* (Head of the Rabbinical Court) together led the people. The eleventh blessing in *Shemoneh Esre* may be a reference to this leadership structure. With the words "Restore our judges as of yore and our advisers as in the beginning," we pray for the time when our people will once again be led by Torah scholars of the caliber of the *Av Bet Din* and the *Nasi*, the nation's judges and advisors.

Yosse ben Yoezer said, let your home be a meeting place for scholars, and sit in the dust at their feet, and drink in their words thirstily. This is an extremely valuable and important piece of advice. Personal association with a great Torah



scholar is a tremendous opportunity for spiritual growth. Our Sages teach us that “serving Torah is greater than its study” (*Berachot* 7b). “Serving Torah” in this context means being close to a Torah scholar, with all it implies: learning from him, observing his customs, behavior, and responses, and also extending practical assistance, large and small.

Coming close to Torah scholars is a Torah-ordained commandment. Our Sages cite the verses, “To love Hashem your G-d and to cleave to him’ (*Devarim* 30:20) and, ‘And you who cleave to Hashem your G-d are all alive today (*Devarim* 4:4).’ Is it possible to cleave to the Divine Presence? It is written, ‘For Hashem your G-d is a consuming fire’ (*Devarim* 4:24). Rather, one who marries his daughter to a Torah scholar and makes business for Torah scholars and benefits Torah scholars from his property, Scripture considers it as if he cleaves to the Divine Presence” (*Ketubot* 111b).

Let your home be a meeting place for scholars, and sit in the dust at their feet, and drink in their words thirstily.

The Vilna Gaon provides an interesting insight into this teaching of our Sages. Let us say that a student learns a Talmudic topic in depth, working to achieve clear understanding of the practical halachic application of our Sages’ words. This challenge calls for tremendous knowledge, and tremendous effort. He must study all the Talmudic sources, the writings and rulings of the Early Authorities and the responsa of the Later Authorities, and only then can he hope to arrive at a clear halachic ruling. However, if this same student has access to a great Torah scholar, he need only observe him carefully. He will see what his teacher does and how he relates to any given halachic problem, based on *his* extensive scholarship and study, and can follow his example. In fact, this type of learning-by-observation may well be more accurate than anything the student could have put together through independent study (*Hiddushe HaGra, Imre Noam, Berachot* 7b).

Section Five

Issuing halachic rulings is complex. A halachic authority must be fluent in all four sections of the *Shulhan Aruch*, but sometimes the proverbial fifth section – a special, practical inner wisdom – is even more important. This profound, intuitive perception is the intangible quality that we call *daat Torah*.

Our Sages make a rather startling statement: “A Torah scholar who has no *daat*, a carcass is better than him” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 1:15). If he has knowledge but lacks the common sense required to apply it to the case at hand, even a carcass is better than him, and a carcass is all but delicately scented. They also say, “If you have



reason, what do you lack? If you lack reason, what do you have?” (*Vayikra Rabbah* 1:6). We may know the entire Torah in depth and develop magnificent novellae. But if we lack the common sense to put our knowledge to proper use in actual practice, we have nothing. This is why “serving Torah is greater than its study.” A great Torah scholar has *daat Torah*. If we are close to him and can observe him and learn from him, we will have the invaluable advantage of his exceptional *daat Torah*, which can be the most important factor of all.

However, a true, accurate halachic ruling calls for another intangible asset as well: *siyata diShmaya* (Divine assistance). I can personally testify that great Torah scholars are granted this assistance. On one occasion, I presented a question to a truly eminent halachic authority. I watched as he flipped a volume of the *Shulhan Aruch* open to the back, and immediately pointed to the relevant paragraph in the *Pri Megadim*, a classic commentary on the *Shulhan Aruch*. As soon as he opened the book, he had the answer he needed.

He smiled.

I asked him, “Why is the *Rav* smiling?”

“You know that I am also a *rosh yeshivah*,” he told me, “and I spend the bulk of my learning time on abstract analysis not necessarily related to applied *halachah*. When I check a specific reference concerning an abstract topic I never find it right away, as I did now with your question. I always have to search for it. But when I need to look up a reference for an actual halachic ruling, I am able to pinpoint the exact paragraph and subsection I need immediately, even in a detailed work like the *Pri Megadim*. When it comes to rendering a ruling, there is *siyata diShmaya*.”

With this amazing story in mind, we can see why the Gaon says that a greater degree of clarity in *halachah* can be achieved by attending on a great scholar than through independent study.

Answering the Questioner

There is another important factor to consider in issuing halachic rulings. Let us say that we are asked a question and we know enough about *halachah* to give a correct answer. However, who exactly is asking the question?

This information can be critical when arriving at a ruling. Is our “right answer” right for the particular individual involved? For who and what he is, is our ruling too strict? Does he need a more lenient, yet still halachically acceptable ruling?



Or perhaps we answer a question in keeping with the norms and standards of a certain community, while the current questioner can handle different, higher standards. Is this the right ruling for him? A simple layman needs one answer while a Torah scholar may need another, and both must be halachically correct. Some halachic authorities will in fact ask a few pertinent questions of those who consult them by phone on certain topics, in order to reach an appropriate ruling. This applied combination of information plus intelligent understanding is *daat Torah*. Possibly, it is *Ruah HaKodesh* (Divine inspiration). Bottom line, we may call it common sense, or more accurately, Torah-based common sense. This precious resource can only be acquired by close association with great Torah scholars.

Taking a Seat

Sit at the dust of their feet.

We appreciate Yosse ben Yoezer's advice to **let your home be a meeting place for scholars, and sit in the dust at their feet, and drink in their words thirstily**. For our part, we are eager to be close to great rabbis. Practically speaking, though, how are we to go about it? The precious time of our Torah scholars is fully occupied with their primary calling: learning Torah. In most cases, they are not freely accessible to us for friendship, discussion, and shared study. Perhaps a student in *yeshivah* can have occasion for some personal contact with his *rosh yeshivah*, but what of the rest of us?

There is another option which may be open to us. We can **let our home be a meeting place for scholars**, offering it as the site of their conferences on community and other matters. This proximity provides an excellent opportunity for us to learn from them.

However, Yosse ben Yoezer goes on to offer a note of caution. Certainly, **let your home be a meeting place for scholars**. It is a great honor to have distinguished Torah scholars visit our homes, and it is nice to feel that we are fulfilling the *mitzvah* of welcoming guests in such a prestigious fashion. But this approach is geared to status seeking, and is not what our Sages had in mind. If we truly wish to gain from our connection with Torah scholars, we must **sit in the dust at their feet**, or in other words, we must be humble in their presence. Frequent close contact carries with it the risk of excessive, disrespectful familiarity. If we are to gain from the relationship, we must have a realistic understanding of where we stand as compared to our rabbis and teachers (see commentary of *Nahlat Avot*). The greater our degree of respect and submission, the more we will be able to learn.



In former times, a teacher sat on a chair with his students gathered at his feet. The message was too obvious to miss. We too should perceive ourselves as humble students with due respect for our great scholars' Torah, even as we welcome them as our guests. In fact, we can understand the words **sit in the dust at their feet** in their plainest sense. In an era when cushions and pillows were used for seating, Yosse ben Yoezer understood that the host should have the scholars visiting his home sit on the cushions, while he took up a humbler position on the floor. Sitting **at their feet**, with his clothing quite literally **in the dust**, would surely not be conducive to pride, making him much more receptive to listening and learning from his distinguished guests.

If we feel that we are on equal footing with our Torah teachers, we will not relate to their words with the respect they deserve. A heart that is humble can learn (see *Baba Kama* 20a). This can be a particularly important point to remember for parents who send their sons to learn in *yeshivot*. Unfortunately, a parent may feel free to openly voice his criticisms of his son's *rosh yeshivah*, in the presence of the son who is now his student. Even if the criticism should be justified – after all, no human being could possibly be perfect – it is still a mistake to discuss it in front of his son. Proper deference for one's teacher is a prerequisite for Torah study, and if the *rosh yeshivah* is criticized at home, there is little point in the student attending his *yeshivah*.

Their Words

Drink in their words thirstily

With these words, Yosse ben Yoezer warns us that simply being in the same room as Torah scholars is no guarantee that we will acquire anything of their wisdom. Hosting Torah scholars is important, but contributing our dining room plus coffee is not enough. We come close to them in the hope that the relationship will help us grow and develop in wisdom. This will only happen if we **drink in their words thirstily**, listening to and internalizing what they say the way a parched man eagerly gulps down precious, lifesaving water. It will do us no harm to sit quietly and pay attention to those who are wiser!

At the end of this chapter Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says, "All my life I grew up among the Sages and I found nothing better for the body than silence" (1:17). Silence is very beneficial. If we can manage to stop talking and just listen, we will gain the other party's wisdom. Unfortunately, not everyone who is fortunate enough to spend time in the company of a great Torah scholar understands this. Instead of listening and absorbing, they prefer to air their own thoughts and ideas, which they



hope the scholarly rabbi will appreciate and commend. This is a foolish waste of a priceless opportunity.

We should instead learn to **drink in their words thirstily** and with due humility, so that even if we personally are not great Torah scholars, we will improve by association.

Thirst

The *Tanna's* choice of words teaches us about the proper attitude to Torah study. A thirsty man who reaches a water source is focused on one entity alone: the water and its power to quench his searing thirst. As far as he is concerned, the water at his lips is the only water in the world. It is all there is, and it is all he wants.

This should be our attitude to Torah study. We should learn as if we will never have another opportunity; the *bet midrash* where we sit, the volume in front of us, and the teacher lecturing, are all we have. There is no other place to learn, no other book to learn from, no other teacher to teach us. If we adopt this single-minded attitude, we will acquire wisdom from the sources accessible to us.

We find this concept in the verse, "Wisdom lies before an understanding person, but a fool's eyes stare at the ends of the earth" (*Mishle* 17:24). The commentators explain that one who is wise concentrates on what he has in front of him, which enables him to learn. If the Al-mighty put him in a particular *bet midrash* with a particular teacher, and he does his part by doing his best to derive the maximum benefit from what is available to him, he will succeed in his learning. A fool, in contrast, is convinced that wisdom is only to be had elsewhere, in some remote, inaccessible location. He is focused only on what he does *not* have. He "stares to the ends of the earth": if only he could study in some other *yeshivah*, under some other rabbi, then he would accomplish. As it is, though, he tells himself, it is hardly worth making the effort. His dreaming gets him nowhere. It will not take him where he thinks he wants to be; it will only lead him to waste the opportunities close at hand (see commentaries of *Metzudat David* and *Ralbag*).

This is why Yosse ben Yoezer tells us to **drink in their words thirstily**. We should relate to the Torah within reach as if it is the only fountain available to the victim of dehydration. If this is all we have to quench our thirst, we will drink it to the very last drop and be sated.

This was the approach of our Sages to Torah learning. The *Zohar* records that the very greatest of Sages rejoiced over every new insight concerning their learning. No matter how minor it was, and even if a younger student had presented it, they



would literally stand up and kiss the originator of the idea (*Zohar*, vol. I, p. 72b). The Sages were always eager to hear about what their colleagues had said in their lectures. They would ask, “Whose Shabbat was this?” (*Hagigah* 3a). They wanted to know which Sage had lectured that Shabbat, and what he had taught. In this way, they **drank in ... words** of Torah **thirstily**.

Close to Moshe

The company we keep is crucial to our development. “He who walks with the wise will grow wise, and he who is the companion of fools will be shattered” (*Mishle* 13:20). It is our nature to be molded by our friends. We observe their behavior, the way they walk, talk, sit, and relate to a variety of situations. If our chosen companions are fools, their influence and example will turn us into even bigger fools. We will absorb their attitude that Torah is not all that serious, and that a little benign neglect in *mitzvot* never hurt anyone, G-d forbid. In contrast, if we stay close to Torah scholars, we will pick up positive messages and habits. Every move a Torah scholar makes is *halachah*, and we will learn and grow from spending time with him, and even just from observing him.

We can understand this concept by studying a teaching of our Sages concerning fear of Heaven. The Torah tells us, “And now, Israel, what does Hashem your G-d ask of you? Only to fear Hashem your G-d, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve Hashem your G-d with all your heart and all your soul, and to keep the *mitzvot* of Hashem and His statutes which I command you today, so that it will be good for you” (*Devarim* 10:12-13). Rashi comments, “Our Sages derived from here that everything is in the hands of Heaven, with the exception of the fear of Heaven.” Hashem makes all our decisions for us – except for this, the most difficult and crucial one of all.

“Only to fear G-d...” Leaving aside the rest of the list, can we classify even just this one requirement as an “only”? Fear of G-d is an enormous, lifelong task. How can the Torah refer to it as “only”? It is a fundamental test which repeats itself every minute of every day and every night, again and again, in countless variations. We must make the right decisions. It is up to us alone, and no matter who we are, it is not easy. If we do succeed in basing our actions on fear of Heaven rather than on impulse and desire, we will merit an eternity of bliss in the World to Come. Considering the spectacular nature of the reward, can we possibly say that fear of Heaven is a simple, insignificant matter?

Our Sages, citing the verse, in fact ask this question: “Is fear of Heaven a small thing?” They answer, *lyn legabe Moshe, milta zutreta hi*: “Yes, for Moshe, it is a small thing” (*Berachot* 33b). For this saintly, unparalleled Man of G-d, the greatest



prophet of all time, who alone spoke to the Al-mighty “Mouth to mouth” (*Bamidbar* 12:8), fear of Heaven was indeed “a small thing.” Knowing what he knew, how could it have been otherwise?

However, the Torah is not addressing one specific, incomparably pious individual. It speaks to all of us, and unfortunately, we are far from Moshe Rabbenu’s level of total awareness of G-d. Why tell us that *legabe Moshe*, for Moshe, fear of Heaven is indeed a small thing?

The answer lies in the word “*legabe*.” As used in the *Gemara*, *legabe* also means “close.” In other words, *legabe Moshe*, for one who is *close to* Moshe Rabbenu, fear of Heaven is a small thing. Moshe is no longer alive, but as we explained earlier, the great Torah scholars of every generation have within them a spark of Moshe Rabbenu.¹ If we make the attempt to come close to them and learn from their care and caution in living life and observing *mitzvot*, then *legabe Moshe*, for those of us who are close to the Moshe Rabbenu of the times, fear of Heaven will come that much easier.

Blessings at Home

Yosse ben Yoezer’s advice, then, has great spiritual merit. **Let your home be a meeting place for scholars, and sit in the dust at their feet, and drink in their words thirstily.** However, not only do we gain wisdom and fear of Heaven from the contact and the experience, there is practical benefit as well. Our Sages teach that the presence of a Torah scholar in one’s home is a source of blessing, as we learn from Yosef’s stay in the house of Potiphar: “And Hashem blessed the house of the Egyptian because of Yosef” (*Bereshit* 39:5). Our Sages derive from this verse that “Immediately with a Torah scholar, [comes] blessing” (*Tanna Dve Eliyahu*, Chapter 20, citing *Berachot* 42a). Rashi comments, “One who brings [a Torah scholar] close to him and hosts him in his home... brings blessing into his home.” Close contact with scholars is a source of both material and spiritual blessing.

There is another aspect to be considered as well. If one’s home is a **meeting place for scholars**, it follows that it will not be a hangout for loafers and other less than desirable characters. We will be spared their idle conversation, which may often slide into the forbidden. Our children will be influenced by the positive atmosphere, a very great blessing indeed!

¹ See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:1 for a fuller discussion of this topic.