

Torah Table Talk – *Pirke Avot*

What Does it mean to Call Moses *Rabbeinu*, “Our Teacher”

Parshat V'zot Ha-Berakhah, Deuteronomy 33:1- 34:12 Simchat Torah

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z”l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

This week’s *Torah Table Talk* marks a *siyyum* of sorts. For the past year we have been exploring passages from *Pirkei Avot* that are connected, in some way, to the weekly *Torah* portion. At times, the connection to the weekly parshah was transparent and obvious and other times the connection took a bit of creative interpretation. Drawing this connection, however, allowed us to explore one of the many faces of the Torah. It pointed to one of the ways in which the Torah can be a source of wisdom and guidance in our daily lives. There is no right way to interpret the Torah, and when shared with others both teacher and student are enriched. The purpose of *Torah Table Talk* has been to encourage its weekly readers to bring Torah to the table and share it with family, friends, coworkers, and even with strangers. Learning and living go together.

Parshat V'zot Ha-berakhah, the final parshah in the *Torah* is read on *Simchat Torah*. It tells the story of the death of Moses and contains the final will and testament of Moses for the tribes of Israel. Like *Parshah Va-yechi* in which Jacob offers a death bed blessing for his sons, *V'zot Ha-berakhah* marks a transition from a desert sojourn to the period of conquest and nation building. The *Torah* ends by saying, “Never again did there arise a prophet like Moses – whom *Adonai* singled out, face to face.” Moses’ unique place in Jewish life is reflected in his title, *Rabbeinu*, our teacher. One who shares and teaches Torah to others becomes teacher and life giver to others.

Pirke Avot 6:3 One who learns from his fellow a single chapter, or a single law, or a single verse, or a single word, or even a single letter must treat him with respect. For so we find with David, king of Israel, who did not learn anything from Achitofel except for two things alone, yet he called him his "master," his "guide" and his "intimate," as is stated (Psalms 55:14), "And you are a man of my worth, my guide and intimate friend." Surely we can infer *a fortiori*: if David, king of Israel, who only learned two things from Achitofel nevertheless referred to him as his master, guide and intimate, it certainly goes without saying that one who learns from his fellow a single chapter, a law, a verse, a saying, or even a single letter, is obligated to revere him. And there is no reverence but Torah, as is stated (Proverbs 3:35; 28:10), "The sages shall inherit honor" "and the integral shall inherit good;" and there is no good but Torah, as is stated (ibid. 4:2), "I have given you a good purchase; My Torah, do not forsake it."

Sources

Babylonian Talmud Baba Batra 15a

It is taught: "So Moses the servant of the Lord died there" (Deut. 34:5). Is it possible that Moses, while still alive, would have written, "So Moses . . . died"? The truth is, Scripture up to this passage was written by Moses; from this passage on, Scripture was written by Joshua son of Nun. Such is the opinion of R. Judah--some say, of R. Nehemiah. But R. Simeon said to R. Judah: Is it possible that the Torah scroll is short of even a single letter? If it were short, how could Moses have commanded, "Take this book of Torah" (Deut. 31:26)? Rather, the meaning is that, up to this passage, the Holy One dictated, and Moses repeated the words and wrote them down, but from this passage on, the Holy One dictated, and Moses [without repeating the words] wrote them down with tears in his eyes.

Sefer Aggadah, the Death of Moses

Moses said to the Holy One: Master of the universe, if I must die [to vacate my post] for Joshua, let me be his disciple [in my remaining hours]. The Holy One replied: If that is what you wish to do, go and do it. So Moses rose early to be at Joshua's doorway, where Joshua sat and interpreted Scripture. [In order to hide his identity] Moses stooped and put his hand over his heart [thus covering his face with the crook of his arm]. At the same time, Joshua's eyes were veiled [by God], making him unable to see Moses, so that Moses would be humiliated and come to be reconciled to his dying. In the meantime, when people came to Moses' doorway to study Torah and asked, "Where is our teacher Moses?" they were told, "He rose early and went to Joshua's doorway." They went and found him at Joshua's doorway--Joshua seated and Moses standing. They said to Joshua: What has

come over you, that you allow our teacher Moses to stand while you sit? When Joshua's eyes were again clear and he recognized Moses, he rent his garments, cried out, and wept: My master, my master! My father, my father! Then the people said to Moses, "Moshe Rabbeinu, teach us Torah." He replied, "I no longer have the authority." They: "We will not leave you." Then a divine voice came forth and commanded the people, "Be willing to learn from Joshua." With that, the people submitted to the command to sit and learn from Joshua's mouth.

Babylonian Talmud, Horayot 13b

Our masters taught: A sage takes precedence over a king of Israel, for when a sage dies, there is none to replace him, but when a king of Israel dies, all Israel are fit for kingship. A king takes precedence over a high priest, a high priest over a prophet, a prophet over the high priest anointed for service in war only, a high priest anointed for service in war only over a deputy high priest, a deputy high priest over a priest who has charge of the keys and vessels of the Temple, a priest who has such charge over a Temple treasurer, a Temple treasurer over the chief of the weekly watch of priests, a chief of the weekly watch of priests over the chief of the men of the daily watch, a chief of the men of the daily watch over a common priest, a priest over a Levite, a Levite over a lay Israelite, a lay Israelite over a *mamzer* (someone born of an illicit relationship)... When is this order of precedence to be followed? When they are all equal. If, however, a *mamzer* is a disciple of the wise and the high priest is an unlearned man, the learned *mamzer* takes precedence over the unlearned high priest.

Commentary

Moses holds a unique place in Jewish life: only he is referred to as *rabbeinu*, our teacher. As the conveyer of Torah, Moses was honored for serving as the great teacher of Israel. Anyone who learns Torah from another person owes that person as much honor as we accord to Moses in our tradition. The Rabbis offer the example of Achitofel who taught David very little but was accorded the great honor of being called 'teacher' by none other than the great king of Israel. Torah, then, is bi-directional we have the ability to teach and learn Torah from one another and, therefore, we should honor one another from the wisdom we gain from our teachers and even from our students.

We speak of the Pentateuch as *Torat Moshe*, or as the five books of Moses, despite the question of its authorship. The sages were already aware that the final verses of Torah could not have been written by Moses since they describe his death. In the *Talmud* the sages discuss this problem and offer two possible solutions: either Joshua wrote the final verses of the *Torah* or Moses wrote while divinely inspired. In either case, we honor Moses as the source of our teachings. Modern scholars continue to wrestle with the question of the Torah's authorship. Franz Rosenzweig, the twentieth century Jewish theologian, embraced modern biblical criticism but spoke with reverence of the biblical editor who is referred to as 'R,' the redactor, could just as well be called 'R' *Rabbeinu*. (Redactor is another word for editor.) Torah may come from God but it is communicated through the human instrument. And when Moses could no longer teach? *Pirkei Avot* begins, "Moses received Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly..." Note that it is not the Torah that was transmitted but Torah – we are the conveyors of a tradition that began at Sinai and which we continue to pass on from generation to generation.

Questions to Ponder

1. Who are your teachers and how do you honor them?
2. Another statement in *Pirkei Avot* tells us to "make a teacher for yourself." (*Avot* 1:6) How do we accomplish this task?
3. Does it matter whether the Torah was literally given at Mount Sinai or if Moses was the author of the Torah, or if he was simply the redactor or its mythical promulgator? What does the person of Moses teach us about the role of wisdom in our lives?
4. How does your answer to the last question change your relationship to the teachings of Torah?

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