



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Following the celebration of Pesach there is a custom to study a chapter of *Pirkei Avot* each Shabbat, completing all six chapters in advance of the festival of Shavuot. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik offered the following insights regarding the importance and purpose in learning this unique section of the Mishnah.

Pirkei Avot: Masorah of the Heart

Both in theme and style the *mishnayot* of Pirkei Avot stand in stark contrast to the halachic dictates which make up the majority of the Mishnah. The directives found in *Avot* advance an ethical system and recommend a course for character development. The Sages accentuated this idea when they stated: “Whoever wants to be a chasid, an ethical personality, must live in conformity with...the sayings incorporated into *Avot*” (*Bava Kamma* 30a)

With the aforementioned idea in mind Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik took note of the curious title of this beloved work, known simply as *Avot*. Usually, the name of a tractate denotes the subject matter with which it deals. *Me’iri* (1239-1310) explained the term *Avot* in a twofold way. First, the word

Avot suggests foundational principles; a similar term regarding the laws of Shabbat: *Avot melachot* - major categories of labor.

A second explanation why this title was chosen is that the term *Avot* means, literally, fathers. The *Meiri* states: “*Avot*, which teaches, that they are words that were issued from the fathers of the world, the pillars upon which the edifice of Torah rests” (Introduction to *Avot*, *Machon ha-Talmud ha-Yisraeli* edition, p.10). (Halachic Morality, p. 6)

Why does *Pirkei Avot* begin by elucidating the transmission of the *masorah*? It would seem to be more logical that the entire corpus of the mishnah would begin with a statement regarding the chain of Torah transmission?

The Rav beautifully suggested that the answer lies in the fact that there is a double aspect of the *masorah*. First we have the formal *halachic masorah*. This is technical teaching; we study texts and abstract methodology. Secondly, there is the intimate personal *masorah*. “The teaching in such a case is not consummated via formulated principles, via memorizing laws and texts, through the transmission of theoretical wisdom, but through life itself.” (Ibid. p. 8)

Pirkei Avot begins by delineating the chain of *masorah* in order to emphasize the indispensability of the second facet of the *masorah*; that which is transferred not through formal teaching but through

exposure to shining examples of goodness and righteousness.

A Jew is mandated to absorb the master's instructions and emulate his ways. The Rav cited the Talmudic teaching which describes Elisha's attachment to his teacher Eliyahu: "Attending to [those who study] Torah is greater than studying [Torah under them], as it is stated: "Here is Elisha the son of Shafat, who poured water on the hands of Eliyahu (2 Kings 3:11). [In describing the connection between Elisha and his teacher Eliyahu,] the verse does not say that he studied Torah under him; rather, the verse states that he poured water on his hands (*Berachot* 7b). (Ibid., p.8) The Rav added, "To learn, in the sense of masorah, means to try to merge with someone else - the master who unknowingly reveals himself to the student." (Ibid., p.9).

There is a striking phrase often employed throughout Pirkei Avot: *Hu Haya Omer* ('he would say'). The Rav cited the commentary of the Bartenura (1445-1515) who suggested this denotes that this was an aphorism that the Sage would often repeat. The Rav suggested that *Hu haya* means that he 'lived' his teaching, he modeled that particular behavior in his own life, and therefore, *omer*, he said it through his actions. His message was impactful because he lived his teaching. (Divrei HaRav, p.100-101)

The Torah repeatedly advises man to emulate God, "You shall walk in His ways"

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(Devarim 28:9) - as He is, so shall you be (Sota 14a). This notion, said the Rav, should be employed equally in the student-teacher relationship. "Man learns from God by imitating Him. The approach to God begins with *imitatio Dei* and ends with ecstatic yearning for closeness and attachment - *devekut*. The same is true of inter-human relationships at the *masorah-personal* level. The wellspring of the spoken word is not a philosophical exposition, but a living personality who sets up standards and abides by them" (Halachic Morality, p. 9).

The Rav elegantly described the exceptional nature of the *talmid - teacher* relationship: "Two pairs of glowing eyes, that of pupil and master, stare at each other and penetrate the veil of guarded privacy. Their mutual knowledge of one another,

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the desire on the part of the disciple to be near his master, to feel his noble spirit, to become like him, creates a community of existence, a deep-felt and experienced partnership” (Ibid).

Perhaps the most venerable example of this relationship is Moshe’s bond with his student Yehoshua. The Almighty commanded Moshe “to place some of his *hod* (majesty)” upon Yehoshua (Bamidbar 27:20). The term *hod* implies a quality which is seemingly unconnected to the intellectual realm. *Hod*, says the Rav, is that which Yehoshua experienced simply by being in the presence of an exalted persona. He was now to assimilate a bit of that majesty within his own character. Moshe placed two hands on the head of Yehoshua when conferring the blessing of leadership (Bamidbar 27:23). The Rav suggested that

each hand had a distinct symbolism. One hand represented conferring the wisdom of the Torah, the other hand, “the *masorah* of the heart” - the feeling and emotion towards Torah and the Almighty that one receives from a mentor (Chumash Mesorat HaRav, Parshat Pinchas).

The Rav held the above concept close to his heart. There were times he bemoaned the fact that he inadequately transmitted the “heart of the *Masorah*.” At other times he felt more confident: “When I teach my students, no matter how complicated the *sugya* is, I try to pass on to them more than just knowledge. I pass on to them not only knowledge, the abstractions and the concepts of the halacha, but also something that I experience, something personal, something intimate, a part of myself.” (The Rav, Rakeffet, Vol. 2, p.242) ■



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