

Thoughts on Shavuot

Rabbi Bernie Fox

Shavuot 5781

Volume 6, Edition 27

The “Oral” in Oral Law

I. Introduction: The goals of education

I once attended a seminar on student-directed learning. In the presenter’s model, each student selects a subject that he or she would like to study and researches the area. The teacher is not expected to be knowledgeable in the variety of subjects selected. The teacher’s role is not to be the instructor. Rather, the teacher is the facilitator, mentoring the students and providing guidance in researching their subjects and designing their presentations. The presenter shared research projects completed by her students. These were impressive. Each project demonstrated that the student had researched his or her subject extensively and created a coherent and engaging multi-media report.

The seminar encouraged participants to consider modalities of learning. How do students learn best? Is instruction the best means of educating students? Should we provide students more opportunities to pursue their passions and direct their own learning? What is the best role for teachers; should a teacher be an instructor or a facilitator? These questions do not have absolute answers. Each group of students and individual student is unique. Teachers must consider this uniqueness in determining the model for his or her classroom. The best educators approach the classroom with a toolbox rather than a blueprint. These educators are not committed to a single classroom model but build the model to suit the students.

The discussion of these issues must take place within a framework. To evaluate classroom models and modalities of learning, we must first identify and prioritize the objectives of education. What is our highest priority? Is it to instill in the student a love of knowledge? Are we prioritizing mastery of the subject area? Our goals shape the conversation about models and modalities. One goal which is stressed by the Torah is often overlooked. What is this goal?

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua [transmitted it] to the Elders, and the Elders [transmitted it] to the Prophets... (Pirke Avot 1:1)

II. The Oral Torah and Written Torah

Shavuot celebrates Revelation and receiving the Torah. Moshe received two Torahs at Sinai. He received *Torah SheBiChtav* – the Written Law – and *Torah SheBeAl-Peh* – the Oral Law. The Written Law includes the five books of the Torah. The Oral Law includes all the interpretation and commentary. All our laws have a basis in the Written Law, but the specific details are provided by the Oral Law. Consider an example. The Written Law tells us to rest on Shabbat and refrain from *melachah* – work. What is specifically included in this prohibition? What is considered *melachah*? The thirty-nine general categories of *melachah* are provided by the Oral Law. To observe the commandments of the Written Law, we need the commentary of the Oral Law.

Moshe received the Oral Law at Sinai with the admonition to not record its contents. The Oral

Law was to be transmitted by the teacher to the student and not studied from a text. The Oral Law was transmitted by this method for thirty-four generations – from Moshe to Ribbi Yehudah. Ribbi Yehudah initiated the recording of the Oral Law. He created the Mishne. This began a process that continues to this day. The creating of the Mishne was followed by the redacting of the Talmud. Commentaries on the Mishne and Talmud were composed and printed. Today, new insights continue to be developed and published in journals and books.

Why did Ribbi depart from tradition and forsake the admonition against recording the Oral Law? He assessed the condition of the Jewish people and the state of scholarship. He concluded that the Oral Law would not be preserved if was completely dependent on oral transmission. A concession was necessary. The restriction was set aside to preserve the Oral Law.¹

Why was recording the Oral Law prohibited? Why were we required to transmit it from teacher to student? Why could it not be recorded and studied from books? There are multiple reasons. Let us consider one of these.²

And these are the descendants of Aharon and Moshe on the day that Hashem spoke to Moshe at Mount Sinai. (Sefer BeMidbar 3:1)

III. Teachers are parents

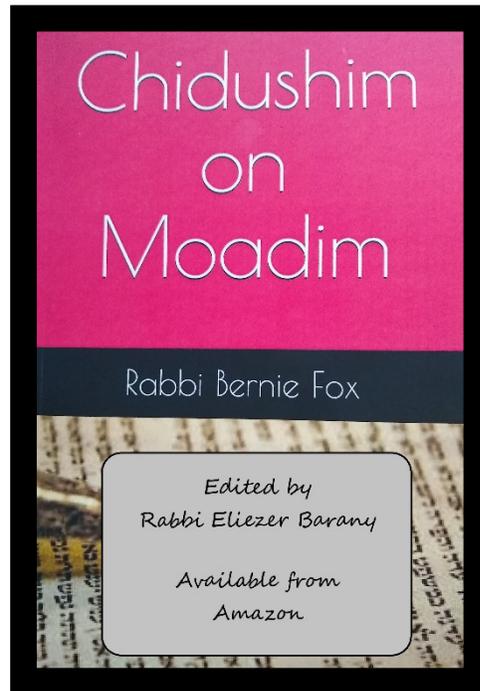
This passage introduces the Torah’s enumeration of Aharon’s sons. Oddly, the passage describes Aharon’s four sons as the descendants of Aharon and Moshe. Why is their parentage shared with Moshe? Rashi comments:

The [Torah] mentions only the sons of Aharon and they are called the descendants of Moshe. [This is]

because he taught them Torah. This teaches that anyone who teaches Torah to the son of his friend is regarded by the Torah as if he parented him.

Rashi explains that a teacher of Torah is regarded by the Torah as a parent of the students. Why is

the teacher a parent to the students? The answer lies in a fundamental truth of the Torah. Human beings are more than biological creatures. We each are endowed with a spiritual soul. Biological



parents are the source of the organic component of their children. The teacher gives life to the spiritual component. However, there is a deeper level to Rashi’s comments. To more fully understand Rashi, we must consider a difficult comment of the Talmud.

Ribbi said, “The reason I am sharper than my colleagues is that I saw Ribbi Meir from behind. And had I seen him from in front, I would be even sharper.” (Mesechet Eruvin 13b)

IV. Ribbi and Ribbi Meir

Ribbi was the preeminent scholar of his generation. He was recognized as the most ingenious and

¹ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Introduction.

² See Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Bais HaLeyve, Responsa*, Derush 18 for another explanation.

insightful. He attributed these qualities to his studies with Ribbi Meir.³ However, he explained that he saw his teacher only from behind. He did not see him from in front. He proclaimed that if he had seen Ribbi Meir from in front, he would have attained an even greater level of scholarship. What does Ribbi mean? Is he attributing his attainments to where he sat during Ribbi Meir's instruction? Is his contention that because he did not see his teacher's face but only his back, his development as a scholar was stunted?

And I will withdraw My palm. And you will see My back, and you will not see My face. (Sefer Shemot 33:23)

V. The meaning of "front" and "back"

Rav Yitzchak Volozhin in a note to his introduction to his father's work *Nefesh HaChayim* provides a key for interpreting Ribbi's statement. He notes that there is an instance in the Torah in which the same metaphor of seeing one's back and not face is used. Moshe asked Hashem to reveal to him His glory. He was seeking an understanding of Hashem. Hashem responded to Moshe that the knowledge he sought is inaccessible to mortals. However, He told Moshe that He would grant him a revelation. Moshe would see His back but not His face. In other words, seeing Hashem's face is a metaphor for a more complete or a deeper understanding of Hashem. Seeing Hashem's back is a metaphor for an understanding that is profound but not complete. Rav Yitzchak Volozhin suggests that Ribbi was employing the same metaphor to describe his understanding of Ribbi Meir's teachings. He gained much from his teacher, but his understanding was not complete.

Can we understand what Ribbi acquired from his teacher and what remained beyond his grasp? To answer this question, we must return to Moshe's encounter with Hashem. What knowledge was denied Moshe and what knowledge was granted? Rambam – Maimonides – explains that Moshe wished to understand Hashem's essential nature. He was granted knowledge of His ways. Hashem revealed to Moshe the secrets of creation – its nature and Hashem's governance of it.⁴

What does Rambam mean? An analogy will provide a working understanding of his comments. The study of computers can be divided into two general areas. Computer science is the study of software programs. It includes computer languages and programming. Computer engineering focuses on the hardware – the internal components of the computer. In other words, computer engineering deals with the question, "What is a computer? Of what is it made?" Computer science addresses the question, "What does a computer do?" Moshe wanted to know the answer to the question, "What is Hashem?" He was granted a response to the question, "What does Hashem do?" The response included insight into the structure and nature of the physical world and Hashem's governance of it. It did not include an understanding of the Divine Essence.

What did Ribbi acquire from Ribbi Meir? What knowledge eluded him? Let us apply Rambam's explanation of the metaphor. Ribbi attained an understanding of Ribbi Meir's teachings. He was not able to look inside his teacher and understand his methods and his manner of thinking. This more profound understanding of his teacher alluded him.⁵ Ribbi laments that he did not master his teacher's manner of thinking.

³ Rambam (*Mishne Torah*, Introduction) identifies the teachers from whom Ribbi received transmission of the Oral Law. He does not include among them Ribbi Meir. This suggests that Ribbi had limited exposure to Ribbi Meir.

⁴ Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Moreh Nevuchim*, volume 1, chapter 54.

⁵ Rav Yitzchak Volozhin explains Ribbi's metaphor using Kabbalistic terms. I cannot determine whether his explanation corresponds with that offered here or is an alternative explanation of the metaphor.

VI. The role of the teacher

An important insight into the role of the teacher emerges from this analysis. Ideally, the teacher not only transmits knowledge. The teacher provides students with a method of analysis and a way of thinking. Now, let us return to Rashi's comments about a teacher and student. We will begin with an analogy.

As a young man, my father was a cabinet and furniture maker. Before attaining the status of craftsman, he apprenticed for many years. Why was apprenticeship required and what did it accomplish? Fine furniture is not made by tools. It is made with tools. A craftsman with highly developed and refined skills uses the tools to create an exquisite product. Through his apprenticeship, the apprentice develops these necessary skills.

Our minds, our innate intelligence is a tool. It can penetrate mysteries, elucidate, replace the darkness of ignorance with the light of knowledge. But like every powerful tool, it can only be effective in the hands of a properly trained craftsman. This training is an important role of the teacher. The teacher must train students to think precisely, to distinguish between truth and falsehood, to recognize sophistry or the influence of a bias in one's thinking. This is certainly true of a Torah teacher. The role of this teacher is to impart knowledge and to develop and refine the students' thinking. This teacher is a parent. This teacher is engaged in forming and cultivating young minds.

VII. Preserving the teacher-student relationship

Why was the Oral Law intended to be transmitted from teacher to student? Why was it not immediately recorded? This discussion provides one response. It identifies an important aspect of oral transmission. Books cannot teach the student how to think. The development of a student's thinking takes place through the intimate work of

teacher and student. The Oral Law is not composed of a body of facts. It includes a manner of analysis and a highly developed method of thinking. These skills require collaboration between student and teacher. The Oral Law's transmission from teacher to student assured that each generation's scholars would be more than repositories for information. They would be trained in the methods of analysis and thinking.

Banner art: The Jewish people before Mount Sinai

Send comments or questions to thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com.

Subscribe or unsubscribe at thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com.

To sponsor an edition of Thoughts, please contact thoughtsonparasha@gmail.com.

An extensive archive of past issues of *Thoughts* is available at the following site:

<https://www.ou.org/torah/parsha-series/rabbi-fox-on-parsha/#?>