

Fill Your Own Cup Year Two ***June Sessions – Mishna Avot – Ethics of our Ancestors***

<p><u>1) Ethics of our Ancestors – Mishna Avot 1:1</u> Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples and make a fence for the Torah.</p>	<p><u>משנה אבות א:א</u> משה קבל תורה מסיני, ומסרה ליהושע, ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים, ונביאים מסרה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה. הם אמרו שלשה דברים, הוו מתונים בדין, והעמידו תלמידים הרבה, ועשו סג לתורה:</p>
<p><u>2) Rav Ovadiah Bartenurah – Mishna Avot 1:1</u> Moshe received the Torah from Sinai: I say: Since this tractate is not founded on the exegesis of commandments from among the Torah's commandments, like the rest of the tractates which are in the Mishna, but is rather wholly morals and principles, and whereas the sages of the (other) nations of the world have also composed books according to the fabrication of their hearts, concerning moral paths, how a person should behave with his fellow; therefore, in this tractate the tanna began "Moshe received Torah from Sinai," to tell you that the principles and morals which are in this tractate were not fabricated by the hearts of the Mishna's sages; rather, they too were stated at Sinai.</p>	<p>משה קבל תורה מסיני. אומר אני, לפי שמסכת זו אינה מוסקת על פרוש מצנה ממצות התורה כשאר מסכתות שבמשנה, אלא כלה מוסרים ומדות, וחקמי אמות העולם גם כן חבירו ספרים כמו שפירו מלבם בדרך המוסר פיצד יתנהג האדם עם חברו, לפיכך התחיל התנא במסכת זו משה קבל תורה מסיני, לומר לה שהמדות והמוסרים שבו המסכתא לא בדי אותם חכמי המשנה מלבם, אלא אף אלו נאמרו בסיני:</p>
<p><u>3) Tosfot Yom Tov – Mishna Avot 1:1</u> <i>And the prophets passed it on to the men of the Great Assembly:</i> [Meaning] to say that even though not all of the Assembly were prophets, the entire Torah was passed on to them, etc. But afterwards - as the generations declined - not the entire thing was passed on. Rather everyone received it according to their capacity. And nonetheless, the portion of the Torah that was in one's hand was a transmission to them, that had been passed on one person to another going back to Moses from Sinai.</p>	<p><u>תוספתא יום טוב משנה אבות א:א</u> ונביאים מסרה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה - לומר שאע"פ שלא כל הכנסיה היו נביאים נמסרה להם התורה כולה כמו שנמסרה להקודמים להם אבל מכאן ואילך שנתמעטו הדורות לא נמסרה כולה. אבל קבל כל אחד כפי כחו. ומ"מ התורה שבידו קבלה היא אצלו איש מפי איש עד משה רבינו ע"ה מסיני:</p>
<p><u>4) Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, Sage Advice, pp. 11</u> <i>Raise up many students –</i> Educate the whole society. Do not let the Torah be the possession of a small, elite circle; it is meant to guide the lives of everyone. The Men of the Great Assembly started the process of bringing Torah education to the masses. In the wake of Hellenism (and later, in exile) the masses would not stay loyal unless they were educated and brought to full understanding of and identification with the Torah. Despite the great success of popular Torah education, some sages insisted that only a select few should be allowed to that only a select few should be allowed into the rabbinic study house to become teachers. This was Rabban Gamliel's view when he served as nasi (patriarch of the Jewish community and head of the Torah academy). Others held that much larger numbers of students should be admitted. Once, as a result of an inter-rabbinic controversy, Rabban Gamliel was temporarily demoted. On that day, at least four hundred new students were admitted to the academy. More generally, in the first century CE, before the Destruction of the Second Temple, the sages and their predecessors were a small group within the Jewish community. The majority of the Establishment was of aristocratic background and/or the priestly class. The Sadducees' sectarian worldview was particularly strong in these groups. The Pharisees and their successors, the sages, had to struggle for leadership of the post-Destruction community. They essentially won the competition by educating many, many students. Those students in turn won the battle for the minds and hearts of the Jews by teaching widely, by democratizing education, and by raising up many of their own students over the centuries</p>	

5) Rabbi Shmuly Yanklowitz, Pirkei Avot: A Social Justice Commentary

The entire Torah enterprise requires *relationship*. To embrace tradition, one does not hide away in the library or the sanctuary, but instead engages in face-to-face encounters.

To take part in such an intellectually rigorous tradition, the Maharal teaches that people must strengthen three components of the human intellect: *chochmah* (wisdom), *binah* (understanding), and *daat* (discernment), which he aligns with the three pieces of guidance that end this mishnah. He also aligns these teachings respectively with *mishpatim*, laws that enable society to function justly; *mitzvot*, religious mandates of the Torah; and *chukim*, laws that are less based on common sense and societal order and more on our character development and relationship to God. The Mishnah encourages us to be more careful with *din*, our judgment. Such lessons pertain to both our *dinei mamonot*, monetary decisions that affect others' property, and *dinei n'fashot*, decisions that affect others' lives.

To exercise this inherent intellect, every generation is responsible to render safe passage to the tradition. And to do so, each generation must transmit the teachings in such a way that they are stronger than when they were received. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook teaches that to do this is to "expand the palace of the Torah." Every generation has new insights based upon the changing times, and when we add those contributions to the wealth of the previous transmissions, we strengthen our heritage. We must embrace discomfort at times, challenge dogmas, and question outdated assumptions that no longer further the Torah enterprise nor the whole of the human enterprise.

Today, we see danger to the Torah enterprise from two places. There are those who want to distort the tradition so radically that our ancestors would no longer recognize its essence at all. On the other hand, there are those who seek to freeze the tradition, so that its relevance can scarcely be grasped by our contemporaries. The Sages of *Pirkei Avot* caution against both destructive approaches and seek new measured understanding. Consider the Talmud's story that imagines God showing Moses the teachings of Rabbi Akiva in the distant future. In this telling, Moses is at first distressed because those teachings do not resemble what he himself knows; but he is assured by the claim that this, too, is authentic Torah linked through an eternally continuous chain (BT *M'nachot* 29b). The sacred goal is not merely the survival of the tradition (as that would be quite a low bar).

Instead, tradition flourishes because each successive generation has sufficient independence to pursue the transformational interpretations of tradition, within the context of their own time and place.