

Transmitting Tora to One and All

R. Yaakov Bieler
Parshat Toldot, 5765

In Parshat Toldot, a Rabbinic interpretation of a curious verse describing Avraham's spiritual virtues precipitates a meditation on diverse learning styles, a theme appropriate to this month's focus upon sensitizing ourselves to the needs of members of the Jewish community in the Greater Washington area challenged by various forms of disabilities. Examples of active and passive learning mark the manner in which Divine Traditions are discovered by and revealed to the Jewish people at various points in their historical development.

During the course of His Reassuring Yitzchak that despite yet another famine in Canaan, there would be a future for his and Rivka's offspring, HaShem Attributes His Eternal Commitment to the family whose history begins at the end of Beraishit 11, to Avraham's exemplary spiritual strivings, whereby he (26:5) "...listened to My Voice, and he guarded My Guardings, My Commandments, My Statutes, and My Laws."

While the Divine Compliment being paid to Avraham with respect to his punctiliousness and comprehensiveness in carrying out God's Will is truly exceptional, it is difficult for traditional Biblical commentators to account for all of the particular categories of religious activities—"Mishmarti, Mitzvotai, Chukotai, Torotai"—that he is supposed to have fulfilled. After all, according to the Bible, how many Commandments had been given by this time to humanity in general and Avraham in particular that would justify describing Avraham's record of compliance in such a detailed manner?

According to a literal reading of the beginning of Beraishit, Adam is commanded positively (1:28) to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, (1) and negatively (2:17) to avoid eating from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Following the flood, once the mandate of reproducing and filling the earth was again ratified (9:1, 7), several additional Commandments are given to Noach, to the effect that a limb of an animal must not be eaten as long as the animal is still alive (9:4) and murder of human beings is prohibited (9:5)—there are interpretations of 9:5, 6 that would include suicide and abortion under the rubric of this latter prohibition.

In Sanhedrin 56a, the "Sheva Mitzvot Bnai Noach" (seven Commandments believed to be incumbent upon Noach's descendents, in effect

all humankind once the flood has wiped out everyone else) are expanded beyond “Shefichut Damim” (lit. the spilling of blood, murder) and “Ever Min HaChai” (consuming a limb from a living animal), to include five more elements: “Dinim” (law courts designed to enforce civil law), “Birchat HaShem” (blasphemy), (2) “Avoda Zora” (idolatry), “Gilui Arayot” (sexual promiscuity), and “Gezel” (thievery). While “Dinim”, “Gilui Arayot”, and “Gezel” could be understood as logical basic principles necessary for developing a moral and ethical society, with or without religious sanction—one can rationally and logically demonstrate why social interactions devoid of law, and rife with sexual impropriety and disrespect for one another’s property, will undermine the development of fairness, trust, and mutual assistance within a social structure—it is more difficult to rationally account for the imposition of the prohibitions of “Birkat HaShem” and “Avoda Zora” which appear to be nothing more than particularistic ritual manifestations of religious belief. While one may posit that monotheism, with its overarching sense of accountability, as in R. Yehuda HaNasi’s comment in Avot 2:1, “...Consider three things and you will not come to sin: that which is above you, i.e., a Seeing Eye, a Listening Ear, and all of your actions are recorded in a Book”, can significantly contribute to heightened levels of morality and fair play within a society, in the sense that evil doers may be deterred from lives of crime when they consider that even if they manage to escape human prosecution, a Divine Indictment will eventually catch up with them, it could be equally maintained that even atheists and agnostics are capable of high levels of morality and ethical behavior; furthermore, individuals ostensibly committed to forms of serious religious belief have unfortunately been known to perpetrate crimes against their fellow man by compartmentalizing their heartfelt devotions to God from their social sensibilities and interactions.

Perhaps due to the less than logical basis for at least some of the Noachide commandments, the Rabbis saw fit to derive them from the verse preceding the first Divine Prohibition was communicated to man, Beraishit 2:16, utilizing the hermeneutic principle “Gezeira Shava” (lit. a parallel formulation, i.e., when a similar word appears in two different contexts, it is presumed that this is not coincidental, but rather designed to link the two contexts with one another in order to demonstrate some commonality between them that otherwise may have been overlooked) (3) for the first five (a-e), and logical inference to account for the final two (f-g). (4)

(Sanhedrin 56b) From where do we derive these? R. Yochanan said: The Tora states: And the Lord God Commanded the man saying, from every tree of the garden you may freely eat.

- a) “And He COMMANDED” refers to “Dinim” as it is stated (18:19) “For I know him (Avraham) that he will COMMAND his children and his household after him and they shall keep the way of the Lord to do JUSTICE and JUDGEMENT.”
- b) “the LORD” refers to the prohibition against “Birkat HaShem” as it is stated (VaYikra 24:16) “And he that BLASPHEMES the name of the LORD shall surely be put to death.
- c) “GOD” refers to the prohibition against “Avoda Zora” as it is stated (Shemot 20:3) “And you shall have no other gods before me.” (5)
- d) “the MAN” refers to “Shefichut Damim” as it is stated, (Beraishit 9:6) “Whoever sheds MAN’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.”
- e) “Saying” refers to “Gilui Arayot” as it is stated, (Yirmiyahu 3:1) “They SAY if a man divorces his wife and she go from him and becomes the wife of another...” (6)
- f) “Of every tree of the garden” but not of robbery.
- g) “You may freely eat” but not from the flesh cut from a living animal.

In addition to the commandments imposed upon Adam in the Garden of Eden and Noach following the flood, other Divine Directives that Avraham is bidden to follow are: (Beraishit 12:1) leaving his homeland to travel to Canaan; (13:17) walking the length and breadth of Canaan; (15:9) obtaining and setting up the animals required for executing the “Covenant between the pieces”; (17:9 ff.) “walking before HaShem”, “being whole”, and practicing circumcision upon himself and all others in his household; (21:12) complying with Sara’s wishes regarding the expulsion of Hagar and Yishmael; (22:1 ff.) and offering Yitzchak as a sacrifice. Consequently the question regarding 26:5 is both quantitative and qualitative: are the things that Avraham does during the course of his life in accordance with God’s Wishes sufficiently numerous to qualify him as one who carried out “Mishmarti, Mitzvotai, Chukotai, Torotai”, and assuming that one could claim that they were, are the technical implications of these four Hebrew terms so specific that they per force must be referring to particularistic Jewish ritualistic laws rather than the more generic and personal acts that the Tora text reports that Avraham carried out?

RaShI, in light of 26:5, and taking his cue from Kiddushin 82a and Yoma 28b, asserts that Avraham in fact fulfilled all aspects of Tora law, including the most derivative and minutest details.

“Avraham listened to My Voice”—when I tested him. (7)

“And he guarded My Guardings”—Rabbinic legislation designed to prevent individuals from violating Tora laws, e.g., secondary relationships with regard to marriage in order to avoid violations against incest; Rabbinic prohibitions regarding Shabbat and Yom Tov observance designed to help people avoid violating the Toraitic aspects of the observance of these days.

“My Commandments”—Behaviors that even had they not been codified in the Tora, they were worthy of being codified, e.g., prohibitions against thievery and murder.

“My Statutes”—Behaviors that the Evil Inclination and the nations of the world challenge, e.g., the prohibition against the consumption of pork as well as the mixing of wool and linen fibers, laws that have no reason, (8) but rather are decrees and statutes of the King upon His servants.

“And My Laws (‘Torot’)”—to include the “Tora SheB’Al Peh” (the laws of the Oral Tradition, i.e., Midrash, Mishna, Talmud, etc.) as well as laws given to Moshe on Sinai which have no basis within the Biblical text.

Once we contend that Avraham in fact followed God’s Commandments not only in terms of the Noachide Mitzvot and the specific revelations that he received from God over the course of his lifetime, but also with respect to the entire corpus of Jewish law as we know it, we must account for the manner in which Avraham was able to ascertain that these additional behaviors were desirable to God, so many years prior to their being publicly revealed at Sinai. The Rabbis in the Midrash essentially offer two solutions to this problem:

(Midrash Tanchuma, Parshat VaYigash, #11)

...Until this point the Tora was not given, and yet it is written concerning Avraham, “... he listened to My Voice, and he guarded My Guardings, My Commandments, My Statutes, and My Laws”? From where did Avraham learn the Tora?

R. Shimon bar Yochai says: Avraham’s two kidneys acted like two pitchers of water which would pour out an unceasing flow of Tora, as it is said, (Tehillim 16:7) “I bless the Lord Who Gives me council; my kidneys also admonish me in the night seasons.”

R. Levi said: He learned by/from himself the requirements of the Tora, as it is said, (Mishlei 14:14), “A dissembler shall have enough of his own ways; but a good man shall find satisfaction in himself.”

It would appear that the difference between these two Rabbinic views is whether Avraham's deductions were fundamentally intuitive and reflected a unique sensitivity on Avraham's part to spirituality and God's Truths (R. Shimon bar Yochai), or whether they were arrived at logically via philosophical speculations and deductions (R. Levi). (9) What the two approaches have in common, is that Avraham, rather than guided from without regarding what to believe and how to manifest that belief by means of his personal lifestyle and behaviors, came to these conclusions independently. Short of saying that he was a contrarian, and reached these conclusions so that he could be different from everyone else, it would appear that Avraham was a proactive learner, who could think independently and courageously, even when no one else shared his beliefs. Indeed, Avraham could not have learned from a teacher, because it he lived at a time when there was no teacher who could present to him the truths that he came to believe. (10)

In contrast to the exercise in "Discovery Learning" modeled by Avraham, an approach to education that has been advocated by philosophers and psychologists such as Rousseau, Dewey and Piaget, (11) the revelation at Sinai would appear to have been the type of experience that is to be found at the extreme other end of the educational spectrum. Responding to redundancies in Shemot 24:12, a verse that parallels Beraishit 26:5 in structure and terminology, Reish Lakish in Berachot 5a understands that what was given to Moshe on Sinai was much more than the Ten Commandments.

"And HaShem said to Moshe: Come up to Me to the mountain and be there, and I will Give to you the tablets of stone, the Tora and the Mitzva that I have Written to teach them (the Jewish people)."

Said R. Shimon ben Lakish: ... "The tablets"—these are the Ten Commandments; "The Tora"—this is the written tradition (the five books of Moshe); "The Mitzva"—this is the Mishna; "That I have Written"—these are the books of the prophets and the writings (NaCh); "To teach them"—this is the Talmud; All of this is to teach that all of this material was given to Moshe on Sinai.

Once again, it appears that we are confronted with a Rabbinic dictum that confounds our historical understanding of the evolution of Jewish primary texts. Just as it is difficult to contemplate Avraham's fulfillment of Commandments that are first objectively codified thousands of years later, when Reish Lakish's commentary is taken at face value, it is difficult to imagine that the books of Yirmiyahu and Yona, let alone the R. Yehuda

HaNasi's Mishna and Ravina and Rav Ashi's Talmud were given in their entirety on Sinai. While Reish Lakish's contention regarding what God Gave Moshe during the latter's forty days and nights on the mountain is clearly intended to confound those who wish to draw distinctions between the levels of authority reflected in the contents of the texts that anchor our tradition, i.e., the commandments will all have HaShem's Imprimatur from Sinai and therefore ought to all be taken seriously, must this be done at the cost of suspending our historical sensibilities? R. Baruch HaLevi Epstein, in his commentary Tora Temima, suggests that the Talmudic passage is to be understood as advancing the notion that the principles and means for deriving laws throughout the generations, rather than the laws themselves, were what was revealed at Sinai—see Menachot 29b for an interesting Aggadic source that would appear to bear out such a contention. However, a hypothesis advanced by the Talmudic commentator Pnai Yehoshua, has more immediate relevance to the issue of learning styles that lies at the heart of this essay. Pnai Yehoshua writes that the term “Mishna” that is being cited, refers not to the compendium that is composed @ 135 CE by R. Yehuda HaNasi during a lull in the Roman persecutions of Jews and their observances, but rather to the term that initiates a passage appearing in Eiruvim 54b. (12)

Our Rabbis taught: What was the order of “MISHNA” (how were the interpretations and commentaries for the Written Law transmitted to the Jewish people during their travels in the desert)? (13) Moshe learned directly from HaShem (in the Tent of Meeting). (14) Then Aharon would enter and Moshe taught him the lesson... Thereupon Aharon's sons entered, and Moshe taught them the lesson... Then the elders entered, and Moshe taught them the lesson... and then the people entered, and Moshe taught them the lesson. Consequently, Aharon heard the lesson four times (from Moshe), his sons heard it three times, the elders twice and the people once. At this point, Moshe left, and Aharon taught the lesson. Then Aharon left, and his sons taught the lesson. The sons left and the elders taught the lesson. Consequently, everyone heard the lesson four times. From here R. Eliezer inferred: It is a person's duty to teach his/her pupil his/her lesson four times. For this is logically obvious: Aharon, who learned from Moshe, who in turn learned from HaShem, had to learn his lesson four times, how much more so when an ordinary student learns from an ordinary teacher.

It would appear that what took place at Sinai was hardly “discovery learning.” As part of the process to unite and impose discipline and an identity upon the

Jewish people, God was Intent upon standardizing Jewish practice and belief, and therefore developed a system whereby the lessons could be reviewed and reinforced repeatedly. While being called upon to teach another something that one has already learned, is an active rather than passive interaction, if the teacher is going to be faithful to the material, there are limits to the degree to which s/he can personalize and choose his/her own emphases when transmitting these teachings. Still, the idea that several of the groups of students would have the same lesson taught by different teachers was most likely not intended to prevent boredom and assure that those who would be expected to take a turn teaching would pay special attention to what those coming before them were presenting, but to also allow for the opportunity for some variation, in terms of examples provided, means by which clarifications are conveyed, the mere ability to feel comfortable asking questions—I would imagine that it was far less intimidating to ask Aharon’s sons questions than Moshe. The imposed rotation of teachers and concomitant pedagogical approaches allowed for a broader range of students to learn because learning styles and personalities vary. Chemistry between teacher and student is crucial, as are the qualities of empathy and shared life experience. I could even imagine an aspect of Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (15) being played out during these desert learning sessions were we to assume that the various teachers would be likely to appeal to different individual “intelligences” when their turn to teach the lesson came. Although the great numbers of people requiring becoming educated in the latest Divine Pronouncement precluded a truly personalized approach to the education of each individual—it is probably nevertheless fair to assume that even after the material was formally taught four times by the leading dignitaries of the Jewish community, individual review sessions would continue to be conducted privately until mastery was achieved—providing for a variety of teachers for the majority of students would probably at least somewhat satisfy the spirit of Mishlei 22:6, “Educate the young person in accordance with his/her path/ style, and then even when s/he becomes old, s/he will not abandon it.”

While Eirubin 54b unambiguously advocates the necessity to review repeatedly newly acquired material, ideally using different methods and strategies, the Talmud goes on to recognize that some students will need far more repetition and therefore patience and understanding on the parts of their teachers in order for them to learn.

R. Pereda has a pupil whom he taught his lesson four hundred times before the latter could master it. On a certain day, having been requested to attend to a religious matter, he taught him as usual, but the student was unable to master the material. The

teacher asked, “What is the matter today?” The student answered, “From the time that the master was told that he had to attend to a religious matter, I could not concentrate, for I kept thinking, ‘Now the teacher will get up’, ‘Now the teacher will get up.’” The teacher said, “I will teach you again,” and he taught him another four hundred times. A Bat Kol (voice from Heaven) issued forth and proclaimed, “Do you prefer four hundred years to be added to your life or that you and your generation will have a portion in the World to Come?” “I prefer that I and my generation have a portion in the World to Come.” “Give him both,” Said the Holy One, Blessed be He.

Whether or not “four hundred times” is an exaggeration—perhaps it only seemed like four hundred times—R. Pereda’s sacrifice and heroism, as well as his sense of responsibility, as demonstrated by his being prepared to go over the material yet another additional four hundred times, stands out in one’s mind. This particular student clearly had processing difficulties. His distraction regarding when his teacher might interrupt the lesson suggests that perhaps he was also suffering for Attention Deficit Disorder. But R. Pereda did not throw up his hands, did not castigate his student, did not bemoan his own fate for having to spend so much time going over the same thing, but rather confronted the challenge and was ready to start from scratch if necessary in order to assure that his student learned. It is notable that the choice of reward that he makes is not that he live on beyond his normal years, but rather that he and his generation gain entry into the World to Come. Clearly R. Pereda was not an individual who focused on himself, he was concerned with his generation just as he was concerned with his student, and everyone was the better for it. R. Pereda has a great deal to teach not only his student, but also us, those who read and reflect about him and his devotion to educating younger generations, whatever the learning difficulties by which they are affected. Let us learn from him to be similarly tolerant, compassionate, supportive, and devoted to those who truly need us.

Shabbat Shalom.

- (1) It could be argued that this verse is not so much a commandment as a blessing, i.e., that man will be given the capacity to successfully do these things, should s/he choose to do them. However, in most Halachic compendiums, the phrase “Be fruitful and multiply” is understood as a commandment to reproduce.
- (2) The literal translation of the term is “BLESSING HaShem”, the exact opposite of blasphemy. “Birkat HaShem” is therefore a euphemism, the actual concept being considered so reprehensible, that it is not to be directly referred to, even in passing.

(3) Resorting to textual derivations via most hermeneutic principles entails suspending rational judgment and simply accepting the tradition that is being promulgated. If something could be derived by means of the logical principles “Kal VeChomer” (reasoning from a lesser case to a greater one, e.g., if something is prohibited on a Yom Tov, then it will certainly be prohibited on Shabbat since the latter is considered more holy) or “Binyan Av” (a paradigm, e.g., if it is said regarding the Yom Tov of Pesach that certain activities prohibited on Shabbat are permitted, then this is true about other Yomim Tovim, such as Shavuot, Rosh HaShana, and Sukkot, as well), it would not be necessary to demonstrate how particular textual analyses could lead to the same conclusion. As soon as it is claimed that a certain law is a “Gezeirat HaKatuv” (lit. the decree of the Biblical text), discussion is closed down, and the question becomes one of accepting or rejecting the tradition that claims that this particular textual derivation is legitimate.

(4) While the final two interpretations—see e) and f) below—are based upon logical analysis—i.e., e) if God Tells Adam that he can eat from the trees of the Garden, his permission to do so derives from God’s Authorization to enjoy trees that are considered His due to His having Created them; consequently in order to enjoy anything in the world, a legitimate legal right to do so must be established prior to one’s partaking in something outside of himself and his possessions; f) God Informs man that he can eat certain things, suggesting that there are things that God will not allow man to eat, such as the limb from a living animal—nevertheless the logical process employed appears circular. When considering Beraishit 2:16, I might suspect that there are certain objects that man does not have permission to use, but to establish that the prohibited status of the objects being alluded to are due to their being owned by others (there were no “others” at the time of the Garden of Eden!) and that they are portions of animals that have not as yet died (animal flesh becomes permitted only AFTER the flood in 9:3; consequently for Adam, this entire concept was an anachronism!) is highly questionable.

(5) In this instance, the two connotations of “Elokim” are obviously not equal, i.e., when applied to the Jewish understanding of the deity, the word represents a true belief, in contrast to the beliefs of other idolatrous religions, where the same cannot be said from a Jewish perspective. Nevertheless, since the same word is used in both the verse in Beraishit as well as the verse in Shemot, it is assumed that one verse can inform the other with respect to Beraishit 2:16 at least alluding to the converse of “Elokim” which is the subject of Shemot 20:3, i.e., the idolatrous beliefs of others.

(6) The tenuousness of this homiletical interpretation comes to a head in this instance when the verb “Omer” (to say) is utilized. Whereas when a word has a relatively unique meaning, it is defensible that when the same word appears in different places, deliberate effort is being made to establish a connection between them, the word “Leimor” (saying) is so ubiquitous, that it can usually be found in connection with every commandment and prophecy between God and man. Consequently to insist that it should be linked to a specific prohibition, in this case sexual promiscuity, as opposed to any other would appear to be a difficult case to make.

(7) Avot 5:3 posits that Hashem tested Avraham ten times throughout the course of his life. Commentators present different lists of what constitute those ten tests. In fact, when one looks at all of the suggestions, it appears that Avraham was tested many more than ten times, and the number “ten” is chosen to indicate multiplicity, as well as to fit in with the other lists of ten that the beginning of this chapter in Avot gathers together, i.e., ten

statements by which the universe was created, ten generations from Adam to Noach, ten generations from Noach to Avraham, ten miracles done on behalf of the Jews during the Exodus from Egypt, ten miracles performed on their behalf at the Sea of Reeds, ten miracles that took place during the First Temple and ten things created just before the conclusion of the Creation of the Universe.

(8) Classical commentators who would disagree with such a contention are RaMBaN and RaMBaM—see RaMBaN on Devarim 22:6.

(9) These two approaches are similarly cited when it comes to the question of Avraham's first becoming aware of God's Existence in the midst of a world practicing idolatry. Beraishit Rabba 95:3 and Shir HaShirim Rabba 6 present two hypotheses as to at what age Avraham began to believe in HaShem: R. Chanina and R. Yochanan claim that he was 48 (other sources list 40 and 50 as additional possibilities) while Reish Lakish asserts that he was 3. Aside from the specific textual analyses used to arrive at these ages, it stands to reason that the type of knowledge that can be known by a person at a very young age will rely more on intuition and idiosyncratic personality predilections, in contrast to conclusions reached by an individual several decades older, based upon life experience and rigorous mental thought. Beraishit Rabba 39:1 which depicts Avraham reflecting upon the implications of comparing the world in which one finds him/herself to either a well-lit mansion or one that is burning down, similarly suggests someone who is older and thinking about the world around him as opposed to an individual endowed with spiritual awareness that gravitates towards monotheism as soon as he reaches mental cogency.

(10) Malki Tzedek, whom Avraham meets following his successful rescue of Lot (14:18-20), is described as a priest to "the God On High." Nedarim 32:2 suggests that Malki Tzedek is a descriptive name for Shem, the son of Noach (10:1; the son that receives the profoundly spiritual blessing from his father in 9:26-27), who left his native land to go to Yerushalayim (the city state of Shalem is considered to be the ancient name of Yerushalayim which is a composite of the words for "city of peace") in order to worship HaShem. And Avoda Zora 14b notes that Avraham studied a tractate dealing with the prohibition of idolatry that was 400 chapters long, language that might lead one to think that this study was carried out in the legendary house of study of Shem and Ever that according to Rabbinic tradition, both Yitzchak and Yaakov attended—see the essay for Parshat Noach, 5764 "Stealth Tora Teachers" (see <http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Noach.html>). However, each of these assumptions are at best conjecture, and that is probably why the Midrashim do not attempt to suggest that Avraham acquired his monotheistic beliefs via outside teaching.

(11) See e.g., <http://www.nwlig.com/~donclark/hrd/history/discovery.html>
<http://pf.channel.aol.com/?a=1>

(12) Pnai Yehoshua's basis for connecting Berachot 5a with Eiruvim 54b is the listing of "Mishna" BETWEEN "Mikra" and "NaCh". Since chronologically the Mishna of R. Yehuda HaNasi came into being long after the last book of TaNaCh was completed, an alternative reading of "Mishna" is in order, an understanding that would view "Mishna" as contemporaneous with the committing to writing of the Five Books of Moshe.

(13) The Talmud is assuming that at the same time that precise verses of Biblical text were dictated to Moshe, the accompanying explanations for how they were to be enacted were also revealed. E.g., While the Tora commands that Shabbat be observed in

numerous places—Shemot 20:9; 31:14-17; 35:2; VaYikra 23:2; Devarim 5:13—it does not define what the prohibition of not doing “Melacha” actually is. It would be difficult to imagine that each person is left to his/her own devices to come up with a personal definition of how this law is to be observed, leading to the conclusion that there had to be an authoritative oral definition that accompanied the written law.

(14) See Shemot 25:22.

(15) See e.g., http://www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple_intelligences.htm