CHAPTER 1: MISHNA 1: PART 1

by Rabbi Shaya Kartinsky

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua; Yehoshua to the Elders; the Elders to the Prophets; and the Prophets transmitted it to the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah (Members of the Great Assembly). They made three statements (taught three things): Be deliberate (patient and restrained) in judgment; establish a large cadre of disciples; and construct a boundary around the Torah.

The following problems (textual and logical) exist in this Mishnah.

1. What is the relevance of the chain of Torah transmission to this tractate specifically? We don't find such an introduction in any other tractate. Ironically, this tractate appears to be simply instructions of ethical discipline, rather than an integral part of the Torah which was received at Sinai. Why is the chain of tradition enumerated specifically at the beginning of the tractate?

2. The Tanna should have written "Moshe received the Torah from the Almighty...". What is the meaning that he received it from Sinai?

3. The Mishna opens with Moshe receiving the Torah, and continues with Moshe transmitting the Torah (to Yeshoshua), and the Prophets transmitting the Torah. Why didn't the Mishnah continue with each subsequent link receiving it? And then from Mishnah 3, the Tanna reverts back to the language of receiving, when he lists Antignus Ish Socho, followed by the various pairs, each receiving for their predecessors.

4. The phrase "mesirah," transmitted, is mentioned from Moshe to Yeshoshua, but is not repeated with Yeshoshua's transmission to the Elders, nor the Elders to the Prophets. It then reappears for the Prophets transmission to the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah. What is the significance of that?

5. It is clear that the Elders to whom Yeshoshua transmitted the Torah weren't the same Elders who transmitted it to the Prophets, because the original Elders didn't live all the way to the time of Shmuel, the first Prophet. Rather the Elders who received it from Yeshoshua transmitted it to other Elders who eventually transmitted it to the Prophets. So the Mishna should have more precisely written "Yeshoshua (transmitted it) to the Elders, the Elders to Elders, and (those) Elders to the Prophets". Why was the transmission among the Elders not distinguished separately, yet a separate transmission to the Prophets was distinguished?

6. Moreover, since Torah knowledge is not a function of prophecy (but of wisdom and
scholarship), there should be no distinction between Prophets and Elders. Had the Elders who received it from Yehoshua been the ones to actually transmit to the Prophets, it would be justified to list the Prophets as a link in the chain of tradition. But since there were transmissions from one group of Elders to other Elders, and there were also transmissions from one group of Prophets to other Prophets until it was transmitted to the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah, all of these transmissions should have been listed as one transmission from Yehoshua to Elders, and then Elders to the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah. What is the significance of the two groups, Elders and Prophets, in the transmission process?

7. Why weren't the Kings, like David and Solomon, also considered a separate group, with the Elders transmitting it to the Kings?

8. Why don't we find any specific teachings mentioned from the transmissions to the Elders or the Prophets? Only from the transmission to the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah do we find that they taught three things.

The opening of this tractate with the chain of Torah transmission has to do with both the tractate's name, Avoth, and its topic, "Musar" (ethical discipline).

It is written in Mishle (1:8) "Hark my son to the discipline of your father, and don't abandon the teachings of your mother." Parents, who bring life to their children, are especially suited to discipline and educate them, due to their greater maturity and experience. The father plays the major role in the discipline. Since this tractate discusses ethical disciplines, it opens with the true "fathers", those who bring real life -- Torah -- to the world: Moshe, Yehoshua, the Elders, the Prophets, the Anshei Knesset HaGedola, and the Tana’im. As they are true fathers, it behooves us to accept moral disciplines from them. In fact, this is why the Tractate itself is called "Avoth" (literally "fathers").

Moshe's receiving of the Torah from G-d had a unique quality to it, due to its happening in a designated place, Sinai. A true "receiving" requires the full intention to give on the part of the giver, demonstrated by designating a place for the receiving. Emphasizing that Moshe received the Torah "from Sinai" (not even saying that he received it "from G-d at Sinai") shows how integral the place (Sinai) was in the process of Moshe receiving the Torah, making it completely premeditated.

Another reason why the Tanna didn't write "Moshe received the Torah from G-d..." is because that would have implied that G-d's ability to transmit the Torah was related to Moshe's ability to receive it, the way a teacher's ability to transmit Torah is related to the student's readiness and ability to receive it. On a human level, a true "Rav and Talmid" relationship does not happen easily, as not every student succeeds in learning from every teacher. (This is true, despite our desire to fulfill what we will learn in Ch. 4 Mishna 1, that a true wise man is one who learns from everyone. More when we get to it.) It requires a specific teacher who has the desire and ability
to teach, giving to a specific student who has the desire and ability to learn from this teacher. When this happens, a special relationship is created by this bilateral affinity, binding the two together in a unique way. This special relationship existed between Yehoshua and the Elders, where Yehoshua had the unique ability to teach Torah (specifically) to the Elders, and they had the unique ability to learn it (specifically) from Yehoshua. The additional chains of tradition had that same unique bilateral relationship. G-d, however, had no limitation in His ability to teach the Torah, and His educative powers didn't require Moshe or any specific student to enable Him to teach His Torah, as long as the student was worthy. In fact it is G-d who is enlightening all of us with Torah on an ongoing basis, as we pray every day "Vha'er eineinu b'toratecha." To have written that "Moshe received the Torah from G-d" would have implied that G-d's ability to transmit Torah was somehow limited specifically to Moshe as the receiver, something which certainly was not true.

Additionally, whenever a Rav teaches Torah to a Talmid, and a Talmid learns Torah from the Rav, this creates an ongoing bond between them. But saying that Moshe received the Torah from G-d would imply that Moshe was able to create this kind of ongoing bond with G-d, which is not respectful to the Almighty. Even though it does say in the Torah (Exodus 31) that G-d gave Moshe the Luchot HaEidut, the two "Tablets of Testimony," and in numerous places "And G-d spoke to Moshe to say...", these were specific communiques, and doesn't imply the ongoing bond of a Rav to a Talmid.

At Sinai, the process of communication was one where G-d appeared to be speaking "to Himself" and it was Moshe's responsibility to strive to receive the Torah. The perception was as if Moshe was receiving the Torah "from Sinai" since G-d was not required to interact with Moshe in the way a normal Rav must interact with his student.

The difference between "kibeil", which is the verb used to describe the process of Moshe's receiving the Torah, and "mesirah" which is the verb used for how the Torah was transmitted from him to Yehoshua and further, is as follows. "Moshe Kibeil" implies that the quality of what was received was completely dependent on Moshe, who received it to the maximum of human ability. The transmission process was perfect, as it was done by G-d, and any deficiency in what was received was due to Moshe limitations. Moshe was then able to transmit -- mesarah -- all he had received to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua was able to completely receive this and completely transmit all that he received to the Elders, who received it as it was transmitted to them, further transmitting it completely to the Prohets. But from the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah, which takes us in to the Second Temple Period, the quality of transmission deteriorated.

We have left a few elements hanging, which lead us in to the second half of the Mishna, with the three statements that are taught. We will pick this up next class.
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