

CHAPTER 1, MISHNA 1(A): WHO GAVE THE RABBIS THE RIGHT...

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it Joshua. Joshua transmitted it to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They [the Men of the Great Assembly] said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise many students, and make a protective fence for the Torah.

Welcome back everyone, first of all!

This is the first mishna of Pirkei Avos, the great ethical work of the Sages of the Mishna. We will first provide a bit of background to Pirkei Avos and the Mishna in general, and we'll then begin examining the text at hand.

The Mishna is an early rabbinic composition outlining all of Jewish law. It was edited and brought into its current form in the late 2nd Century C.E. It is a compilation of the teachings of the greatest scholars of the four centuries preceding that time -- from early in the period of the Second Temple till about 120 years after its destruction. It was authored in the Land of Israel. Shortly after its completion Jewish settlement in the Land experienced a slow but steady decline as a result of instability and persecution. (The center of Jewish life would then shift to Babylonia -- where hundreds of years later the Talmud would be composed.)

The Mishna is divided into six main volumes, each divided into smaller sections (or tractates). These sections deal with virtually all areas of Jewish law, such as holidays, Temple service, civil law, marriage and divorce, and agricultural laws. Pirkei Avos is the only section of the Mishna devoted entirely to ethics.

Pirkei Avos begins by charting the transmission of the Torah, in outline form, from Moses to the "Men of the Great Assembly" (more on them below) and the beginning of the period of the Mishna. Our mishna concludes with the advice of the Men of the Great Assembly. Most of the first chapter of Pirkei Avos introduces us to the great scholars of the early generations of the Mishna, as well as the primary messages they conveyed to their and to future generations.

The historical outline our mishna provides is hopelessly scant and was clearly not intended to provide us with any serious historical reference. Rather, it was meant to authenticate the Mishna, demonstrating that its teachings span from an unbroken tradition originating at Sinai itself.

Let us first briefly identify the eras mentioned. Joshua was the successor to Moses. He and the

Elders of his time led the nation into the Land of Israel and oversaw the conquest and division of the Land among the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

With the passing of the Elders began the period of the Prophets, the spiritual leaders of the nation until the time of the Mishna, approximately 1000 years later. G-d's hand was no longer openly revealed to every member of Israel as it had been during the Exodus and the miraculous conquest of the Land. Nevertheless, G-d still communicated openly with the great men and women of Israel through prophecy and Divine inspiration. The spiritual and often political leaders of Israel were individuals whose authority rested directly on the word of G-d.

Finally, as the last prophets died out at the beginning of the Second Temple era, the period of the Great Assembly began. This was a religious and primarily judicial body which consisted of 120 of Israel's greatest scholars. It was headed by a Nasi, literally 'elevated one' and usually translated as 'prince', who was assisted by an Av Beis Din, or court head. Throughout this chapter, we will be introduced to the leadership pairs of many generations of this council.

In two weeks, G-d willing, we will discuss the significance of the transition from prophet to high court -- as well as the significance of the periods described here altogether. As we will see, the Men of the Great Assembly recognized the significance of this transition and in our mishna advised the nation accordingly. This week, however, we address a more basic issue: What is this introduction doing at the start of Pirkei Avos -- rather than at the start of the entire Mishna?

This question is raised by R. Ovadiah of Bartenura, of 15th-16th Century Italy and later Israel, in his commentary to the Mishna. Our mishna's opening statement appears to be a historical introduction to the Mishna in general. (Note: When I write "Mishna" with a capital M, the intention is the entire six-volume work, of which Pirkei Avos is a small part. The term "mishna" in lowercase refers to a particular paragraph of the Mishna, such as the weekly mishna we study.)

The purpose of this introduction is presumably to verify the Mishna's authenticity. Although it was authored nearly 1500 years after the Revelation at Sinai -- and much of its content was preserved only orally until that time -- it followed a clear and uninterrupted transmission. It is as authentic as the Torah of Moses itself.

There is, however, one obvious difficulty with this. The Mishna is a six-volume work; Pirkei Avos appears towards the end of the fourth volume. Why is this introduction at the start of Pirkei Avos rather than at the start of the entire Mishna?

R. Ovadiah explains that the Rabbis felt it more necessary to place this preface here than at the start of the Mishna. Virtually all the other sections of the Mishna discuss Jewish law and custom. They are fairly logical and precise -- how does one observe the Sabbath, slaughter an animal, compose a marriage contract, bring a sin offering. For the most part, the Mishna discusses the how-to's of Judaism. What are the many details and fine points of Jewish law, when do and do they not apply, upon whom are they binding, and what if all sorts of difficulties arise during their fulfillment.

Now Jews never really had very much doubt as to the origins of such laws. These were practices and traditions every Jewish child observed in his or her parents' home. An entire nation, often spanning oceans and continents, was observing virtually the same law -- and had been doing so for the many centuries of their well-documented history. There was very little doubt to the believing Jew as to the origins of such laws; they were hardly self-imposed.

Further, Judaism bespoke an understanding of G-d and human nature which could hardly have been humanly inspired. Israel was practicing a just, merciful and rational religion far superior to any of the often savage practices the pagans of their time had managed to concoct. Their beliefs and practices were just and moral practically beyond the comprehension of primitive man. The world's other great religions-to-be would merely mimic and adopt Judaism's fundamental precepts; human beings on their own would never devise anything even remotely approximating. (The only possible exception is the religions of the Far East -- although there are those who suggest they stem from the descendants of Abraham's concubine -- whom Abraham sent to the East (Genesis 25:6).) Thus, Jews had no doubt as to the Divine origin of their Torah. From where else could such wisdom and beauty have originated?

This, however, was the case with Jewish law proper. Laws are definite and unwavering. They possess an exactitude which clearly must have originated somewhere. But what of the moral directives of the Sages? When the Sages tell us to greet everyone favorably (later, [1:15](#)) is that really a **law**? Perhaps it is sound advice, but let's say you just got up on the wrong side of the bed one morning. You don't **feel like** giving a cheerful "good morning" to the attendant at the local 7-11 who hands you your morning coffee or newspaper. Are you really **obligated** to do so anyway? Does such a law stem from Sinai?

To this our Sages answer: "Moses received the Torah from Sinai..." The laws we are about to study originated at Sinai -- just the same as "There are 39 forbidden labors on the Sabbath" (Mishna Shabbos 7:2). The Sages here speak with the same authority they do throughout the entire Mishna. Their statements here may seem just plain old good advice -- the same we may find in any other Dale Carnegie-type self-help book. But let us not for a moment think that the Sages of the Mishna are no longer bearers of a sacred tradition in this capacity. As we will see over the years as we study their words in depth, they are not just offering aphorisms or wise, pithy advice. They are speaking nothing less than the word of G-d.

There is a deeper aspect to this introduction. The "good advice" of the Sages is hardly as precise as most of what the Mishna concerns itself with. Pirkei Avos deals with inexact and sometimes relative statements of morality and proper behavior -- and this too makes it appear less authentic than the real meat and potatoes of Judaism. We will discuss this issue G-d willing next week.

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