

NOT JUST A HISTORY LESSON

by Rabbi Label Lam

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Joshua and Joshua to the Elders and the Elders to the Prophets and the Prophets gave it over to the Men of the Great Assembly and they said three things: 1) Be deliberate in making judgments 2) Stand up many students and 3) Make a fence for the Torah. (Avos 1:1)

Why does Pirke Avos begin with a seeming history lesson? Is it not a body of Rabbinic work dedicated entirely to ethics? Where in the "history lesson" is the ethical teaching? That question troubled me for years until I found the following true story.

A young man's father passed away. He wished to step into those vacant shoes and manage the family business to provide for his widowed mother. To competitors his naiveté spelled too big of an opportunity and by the time he figured out what should he have been doing it was too late. He had lost what his father had spent a lifetime building up. He sat in his office broken, not knowing how he would face his mother. A knock came at the door. A man entered and placed an envelope on the table. The young man counted there \$50,000.00. Tempted but still proud he pushed the envelope away. He would not accept charity. The man offered again claiming it was a loan, but once again the boy repelled the generous offer due to a lack of collateral to secure the loan. The man waived the need for collateral and the young man could no longer resist.

Having learned some hard won lessons he revived the business and within a short time it surpassed his wildest expectations. Now, with great ease he skimmed off \$50,000.00, placed it in an envelope and at the man's office proudly placed the envelope before him. The man refused to accept it even though he acknowledged that it was a loan.

The young fellow was completely confounded but the man explained: "Years ago I was running a major business. Many institutions and individuals were reliant upon its success. Foolishly, I made a hasty decision and stretched beyond my means and in one fell swoop I risked and fumbled my entire enterprise. At the moment of terrible realization I was so broken. Then a knock came on the door and a stranger entered. He offered me \$50,000.00. I told him that I was not a taker of charity. He told that it was a loan. I told him that I had no collateral. He said he was willing take the risk. Then he instructed me that when I could pay back the loan I should not return it to him but rather I should pass it on to someone else. The day I repaid my loan was the day I knocked on your door. Now, I'm asking you to do the same."

Now we can appreciate that what Moshe received, the Torah, was not for him alone. He taught the entire Jewish People for 40 years and passed it to Joshua who settled everyone in the Holy Land before handing it off to the next pair of responsible hands, the Elders, and they to the Prophets and then the Men of the Great Assembly who taught us how to preserve it and continue. 1) Be deliberate in making the big decisions that have far reaching consequences, like where you live - who you marry - and where you send your kids to school etc. 2) Have many students-children and as much influence as possible. Build up the family business! 3) Make a fence for the Torah. Pass on a -"Torah from Sinai"- gold standard, as it was received 3319 years ago undiluted. With compounding interest on sweat, blood, tears, and tuition over the course of 3319 years the Torah is inestimably greater than any mere \$50,000.00. To build up our family business and pass it on is our ethical obligation and not just a history lesson. Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and **Torah.org**.