

# Some Thoughts for Simchat Torah

## "Morasha Kehillat Yaakov"

One of the most famous pesukim in Parshat Vezot Habrachta is the passuk "Torah Tziva Lanu Moshe". It is a passuk that every child knows!

"Our Rabbis taught, when a child begins to speak, his father must teach him Torah and Keriat Shema. What is Torah? Rav Hamnuna says: *Torah Tziva lanu Moshe Morasha Kehillat Yaakov*" (Talmud Sukka 42a)

A child utters his first words, and immediately we are obligated to teach a verse that encapsulates "Torah" for the child. Rav Hamnuna suggests that this passuk of "Torah Tziva Lanu Moshe" is the most basic, fundamental passuk that in some manner contains all of Torah. By the way, this statement of Rav Hamnuna is not simply "aggadda!". This is a Halakha that is paskened by the Rambam, and the Shulchan Aruch!

What is there in this passuk that conveys the essence of Torah for us? {Take a second before you read on, to read the passuk a couple of times, and to think this over!}

### CHAIN OF TRADITION

For the Torah Temmima, the central principle is *Mesora*, continuity, the chain of tradition. Let us read the words of the Torah Temmima:

"This verse is the foundation of the principle of the acceptance of Torah from one person to the next all the way back to Moshe Rabbeinu, and hence it is an eternal inheritance (*yerusha*) ... and this is the reason that Rav Ami wrote this verse out four-hundred times and distributed it to children...(that Gemara is in Babba Batra 14a)"

Here, the Torah Temmima is focusing on the Morasha as "Yerusha" – an inheritance, an heirloom – that is handed dutifully from generation to generation, throughout time. This object - Torah - connects ancestor and descendent in an unbroken chain. The focus here, the point to be stressed to all our children - is upon the very transmission of Torah. It is none other than Torah that makes up the chain connecting all Jewish generations.

### ACCESSIBILITY OF TORAH

The Rambam in Hilchot Talmud Torah (3:1) has a different perspective.

"Israel was crowned with three crowns: The crown of Torah, the crown of the priesthood, and the crown of royalty. The crown of the

priest went to Aharon and his sons... the crown of royalty was won by David...The Crown of Torah stands before all Israel, open and ready, as it states: *Torah Tziva lanu Moshe morasha kehillat Yaakov* – anyone who wishes to take it may come along and take!"

So for the Rambam, this passuk is about the democracy of Torah, the accessibility of Torah, the openness of Torah and its ownership by all Israel. It is the MORESHET – the LEGACY of ALL JEWS – KEHILLAT YAAKOV – the entire COLLECTIVE of Yaakov. It belongs to all and everyone. We teach a child that Torah belongs to him as well!

### GIVING OR RECEIVING?

This concept of Morasha and Kehilla needs our contemplation. Let us think about this notion. Is Torah the "inheritance" in the sense of that which we **receive** from our forebears? Or alternatively, in the sense of that which we shall **bequeath** to our children?

Is it a "Morasha" in the sense of a legacy which we must live up to and fulfill in order to do justice to ourselves? Or is it the constitution and group-culture of a Community of Jacob, a cult of Seekers of God (*Zeh dor Dorshav Mevaksh Panecha Yaaakov Selah!*)?

"Rabbi Yehuda says: whoever denies the teaching of a Halakha from a student robs him of his ancestral inheritance as it says : *Torah Tziva Lanu Moshe etc.* – It is an inheritance for all Israel ever since the six days of creation!" (Sanhedrin 91b)

To further this point let me quote a quite incredible story from the Midrash (Vayikra Rabba 9:3)

"Rabbi Yannai was on a walk and met a man who looked very elegant. Yannai said, "Would you please accept my hospitality and come to my house?" The man replied, "Yes," and Yannai brought him into his home and gave him food and drink.

As they were eating and drinking together, Yannai tested the man in his knowledge of Talmud, and found that he had none. He tested him in Aggada, in Mishnah and Bible, and in all these areas the man knew nothing. Then Rabbi Yannai asked the man to recite grace after the meal, and the man answered, "Let Yannai recite grace in his own home."

Seeing that the man could not even recite a blessing, Yannai asked him, "Can you repeat what I say to you?" "Yes" answered the man. And Yannai said, "Repeat these words. 'A dog has eaten of Yannai's bread.' "

Offended, the man stood up, grabbed Rabbi Yannai and said, "You have my inheritance, which you are withholding from me!" Puzzled, Yannai asked, "What inheritance of yours do I have?"

The man replied, "Once I passed by a school, and heard the voices of the youngsters saying, 'Torah Tziva Lanu Moshe - Moses gave us the Torah, Morasha Kehillath Yaakov - the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob' (*Deuteronomy* 33:4). **It is not written 'the inheritance of the congregation of Yannai,' but the 'congregation of Jacob' -- which means all the Jewish people.**"

To this, Yannai said, "And what is your merit?" The man answered, "I have never in my life repeated gossip, nor have I ever seen two persons quarrelling without making peace between them." And Rabbi Yannai said, "Woe is me, that I should have called you dog, when you are such an ethical person!"

Yannai is one of the early Amoraim, a Talmid of Rabbi Yehuda Hanaasi and an aristocrat. He was a man who was apparently on the lookout for fellow scholars and seeing a well dressed gentleman in the street, he assumed that he was a Talmid Chacham. He probably wants to discuss the fine points of Torah with him, and sitting around the table engaging in scholars conversation, Yannai discovers to his dismay that the man is absolutely ignorant. It would appear that his dinner guest is not really a partner in conversation at all.

However the man proves to be more than a match for Yannai. Not only would he seem to be quite a Tzaddik in matters "*bein Adam Lechavero*," he teaches Yannai a vital lesson. This focuses back upon our passuk. After the man has been insulted and rejected by Yannai, he insists that Yannai has his "inheritance." After all, Yannai, the Talmid Chacham, has Torah, which rightfully "belongs" to every Jew. "How dare you" the man tells Yannai, "look down at me! You have a duty to restore my inheritance to me! If I am ignorant, then you should be teaching me, not distancing yourself from me nor mocking me!"

This takes the point made by the Rambam to a new level. For the Rambam, the Torah's "inheritance" status ALLOWED every Jew to study Torah. Torah is not limited to the intellectual elite, or to royalty. But in this Midrash, there is a sense that the Talmid Chacham is in some manner beholden to share his Torah, obligated to pass it on to others; certainly never to withhold it from another Jew.

The focus then of Morasha is the sense of ownership of Torah, by ALL Jews – Kehillat Yaakov - of all walks of life and all backgrounds and abilities. [1]

And maybe this is precisely the reason that we dance together with the Torah on Simchat Torah. We dance! You don't need to be a Talmid Chacham to dance. We dance in a circle. A circle never ends. Its end is its beginning, and then it starts again. With whom do we dance this unending circle? - With other Jews, and with the Sifrei Torah. This is a simple and concentrated image of our national identity card: Morasha and Kehilla. On Simchat Torah you know very simply that you are connected in an unending circle with Am Yisrael and with the Sefer Torah. This clarity is certainly cause for celebration.

Chag Sameach

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[1] The Ramban (Nachmanides) expands this notion even to non-Jews:

"... the verse does not state, "the inheritance of the House of Jacob," or "the Seed of Jacob." Instead it states: "the community of Jacob" indicating that many will commune, will convene and gather to them, and Torah will be the inheritance of Jacob and all who flock to it; these are the converts, the Gerim, who associate themselves with God and serve Him (Isaiah 56:6) and attach themselves to the House of Jacob and are all called His community." (Ramban on Devarim 33:5. See similar ideas based on this passuk in the Rambam Hilchot Melachim 8:10)