

We Are All Select Individuals

Category: Bamidbar, Be'halos'cha

Should we teach Torah to all, or preserve it for a select few? As it turns out, this is an age-old debate.

The Debate

One of the most famous characters in Jewish history is Rashi, the classic commentator on the Bible and on the Talmud. However, not very much is known about Rashi's life; one of the things we do know is that Rashi taught his daughters Torah and they helped him write in his later years.

The fact that Rashi taught Torah to his daughters was a novelty in his day, not just in the Jewish world, but all over the world. Women in all cultures didn't study; there were no schools for girls and the idea of them learning was completely unrealistic. The widespread approach was that women didn't study and the men kept their knowledge to themselves. Even amongst the men—only a few spent their time in study, while most of the world remained uneducated.

What Happened to the Kohanim?

This debate—whether Torah study is for everyone or just for select individuals—has been ongoing in the Jewish world forever.

In these summer months, we learn the Pirkei Avos every Shabbos. The first mishna tells how the Torah was passed down from Moshe to the members of the Great Assembly. It says, "Moshe received the Torah at Sinai and passed it to Yehoshua and Yehoshua passed it to the Elders and the Elders to the Prophets and the Prophets passed it to the members of the Great Assembly."

A group is missing from this list, however, who the Torah gives explicit responsibility to teach and pass down the Torah to the people; they are the Kohanim, priests. It says clearly in the book of Bamidbar, "And Moshe wrote this Torah and gave it to the Kohanim, sons of Levi." They were the ones who were chosen to teach the Torah and therefore were relieved of all other responsibilities

in order that they be free to dedicate their time to the study and teaching of Torah. That was also why the Kohanim weren't given a portion in the land of Israel—so they could focus on this responsibility. Throughout the texts, we find the Kohanim involved in teaching Torah; Devarim says about the tribe of Levi, “They teach your laws to Jacob and your Torah to Israel.”

This is also the case in Navi; Yechezkel states, “But the priests, the Levites, the sons of Zadok... My people shall they teach the difference between holy and profane, and cause them to discern between the impure and the pure.” Malachi states, “For a Kohain's lips shall guard knowledge, and teaching should be sought from his mouth.”

If so, why are the Kohanim omitted from the names of those involved in passing down the traditions from generation to generation, listed in the first Chapter of Tractate Avos?

There are those who explain that the Kohanim held themselves apart from the rest of the nation, and kept the Torah behind closed doors. They didn't do this maliciously, but out of a deep understanding of the enormity of their responsibility. They taught the Torah to their sons, the Kohanim, but held it from the general population. They worried that the rest of the nation would not understand things properly and distort things at will, and it would therefore be better to keep it from them. Thus, they slowly created a rift between the Jews and the Torah.

This is why the Mishna leaves out the Kohanim—because not only did they not pass on the Torah to later generations, they did the opposite.

So, even in the days of Moses there were the two opinions as to whether the Torah should be taught to the public or reserved only for the elite.

Should Everyone be a Prophet?

In this week's Torah portion, we find a similar phenomenon. We read that after the Jews complained to Moshe about not having meat, Moshe turned to G-d and said, “I cannot carry this people alone; it is too hard for me.” G-d answered him, “Assemble for Me seventy men of the elders of Israel...and I will increase the spirit that is upon you and bestow it upon them. Then they will bear the burden of

the people with you so that you need not bear it alone.” Moshe did just that, “...and he assembled seventy men of the elders of the people, and stood them around the Tent” and G-d did rest His spirit on them.

This is where we get to the interesting part of the story. “Now two men remained in the camp; Eldad and Medad.” Eldad and Medad were important men. They were among the seventy chosen but felt they weren’t worthy of being leaders of the nation and so they didn’t go with Moshe to the Tent of Meeting but remained in the camp. But they suddenly had G-d’s spirit rest on them and began prophesizing in the middle of the camp. That’s when “The youth ran in and told to Moshe ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesizing in the camp’.” Moshe’s son, Gershom, had run in to tell Moshe the incredible news. “Joshua, Moses’ servant from his youth, answered and said, Moses, my master, imprison them! Moses said to him, ‘Are you zealous for my sake? If only all the L-rd’s people were prophets!’”

What happened here? What was the argument between Moshe and Yehoshua? Yehoshua maintained that prophesy was only for those who were appointed and were standing at the Tent of Meeting. Not everyone could be a prophet. Someone not of that elite group who was prophesizing needed to be stopped immediately; if not, there was the danger that everyone would turn into a leader and that would lead to a rebellion against the establishment. So Yehoshua, as the situation called for, demanded that Moshe imprison them.

Opposite him, Moshe stood up and said that, actually, it should be this way. Prophecy is not only for special, elite members of the nation. Moshe would have wanted everyone to become prophets. We have here, again, that same age-old argument: is prophesying for everyone or for the elite?

Hillel vs. Shamai

Throughout all the generations, people have argued for both sides.

Returning to the Pirkei Avos, we read in the second Mishna, “And they established many students.” Rabbi Natan brings an argument between the traditions of Hillel and the traditions of Shamai regarding this Mishna. “Shamai’s tradition teaches that one should only teach Torah to someone who is wise, humble, son of our forefathers and wealthy. Hillel’s tradition says that Torah should be taught to everyone as there were many sinners among the Jews and

they returned to Torah study and from them came righteous, upright people.”

Shamai contends that Torah is only for wise, humble people, specifically those who can pay teachers for what they are taught, while Hillel contends that Torah should be taught to everyone.

This argument has continued throughout the generations. The Talmud relates something about Rabban Gamliel, the leader after the destruction of the Second Temple. Although he stemmed from the family of Hillel, “He would proclaim, ‘Any student whose inside is not as his outside (i.e. is not sincere) should not enter the House of Study,’” and when he was removed from the position and replaced by Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria, the latter removed the guard of the key to the study hall and allowed all students to enter.

The Gemara continues and says, “That day were added.....700 benches; Rabban Gamliel was dispirited and said ‘perhaps I have withheld Torah from Israel.’” When he saw that so many students were added, he was worried that he would be punished for forbidding them from coming during his time as leader. Again, the same argument; once over prophesy, once over teaching Torah to women, once over the wealthy and poor—always the same age-old argument.

Even in the early days of the Chassidic movement, we find this argument between the Alter Rebbe and his peers, students of the Maggid of Mezritch, over how fitting it was to publicize the Chassidic philosophies. They maintained that it should be taught only to select individuals, but the Alter Rebbe taught Torah to Jews from all walks of life.

Bringing Judaism into the Public Domain

This is true of our generation, too. Judaism was always something kept inside, in one’s private home or in the synagogue. The furthest out was the sukkah alongside one’s house. Then the Rebbe sent out “Mitzva Tanks.” These were long vehicles, decorated with signs and equipped with microphones that would drive along main roads and remind Jews about their Jewishness and have them put on Tefillin out on the street. During Chanuka time, huge menorahs were lit in front of large crowds of people, and also on Sukkos with the Sukkah Mobiles. The Rebbe moved Judaism from private to public.

Many people did not like this style of operation. They claimed that it brought disrespect to the holiness and honor of Judaism. How can one put on Tefillin in the street? One must first wash his hands and have pure thoughts—there were all sorts of unusual complaints and responses. The main theme was that Torah needed to be kept at home, out of sight. This didn't faze the Rebbe, however, and in the end, just like in all previous generations, the opinion that Torah is for everyone won the day. The right thing is to spread as much Torah to as many as possible.

It's vital that we utilize every opportunity we get to share our Torah knowledge with others; don't bother yourself with thoughts such as, "This is not a good moment," or "the host will be offended," or, "a non-Jew will be insulted by what I say." On the contrary, when things are done pleasantly, people will not take only offense, but more often than not, they will tell you that you've given them true, authentic Judaism.