

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

www.TorahLeadership.org

"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

TORAH LEADERSHIP AND TORAH KNOWLEDGE

Rabbi Aryeh Klapper, Dean

"In all of *Masekhet Avot*," writes Rabbi Shimshon ben Tzemakh Duran (1361-1444, North Africa) in his commentary to *Avot* 4:20, "there are no disputes – except in this *mishnah*." Rabbi Duran plainly has an interest in asserting that Jewish tradition reflects a consensus of values even as it records a plethora of halakhic disputes (cf. R. Eliyahu Dessler in the twentieth century, who claimed "there is no *machloket* in *aggadal*?"). His commentary on this *mishnah* as well ends up reconciling the apparently conflicting positions, saying that one deals with the majority of cases while the second makes sure that the existence of the minority is acknowledged.

What generates Rabbi Suran's initial concession is a literary sensibility, and I prefer his *hava amina* to his *maskono*. Let's read together - here is the text, with my translation.

אלישע בן אבויה אומר
הלומד ילד - למה הוא דומה?
לדיו כתובה על נייר חדש
והלומד זקן - למה הוא דומה?
לדיו כתובה על נייר מחוק.
רבי יוסי ברבי יהודה איש כפר הבבלי אומר
הלומד מן הקטנים - למה הוא דומה?
לאוכל ענבים קהות ושותה יין מגתו
והלומד מן הזקנים - למה הוא דומה?
לאוכל ענבים בשולות ושותה יין ישן
רבי (מאיר) אומר
אל תסתכל בקנקן, אלא במה שיש בו
יש קנקן חדש מלא ישן
וישן שאפילו חדש אין בו
Elisha ben Avnyah says:
One who learns as a child – to what is he similar?
To ink written on new paper;

One who learns as an elder – to what is he similar?

To ink written on erased parchment.

Rabbi Yose son of Rabbi Yebudah of Kfar haBavli says:

One who learns from the young – to what is he similar?

To one who eats sour grapes and drinks wine from the vat;

One who learns from the elders – to what is he similar?

To one who eats ripe grapes and drinks aged wine.

Rabbi (meaning Rabbi Yebudah the Nasi. But in some versions: Rabbi Meir) says:

Do not look at the barrel, rather at what is within –

There are new barrels full of aged wine

and old barrels that don't even contain new wine.

Rabbi Duran first reads Rabbi as sharply disagreeing with Rabbi Yose, who prefers the objective criterion of age to subjective evaluation. This reading is strengthened by the parallel text in *Avot d'Rabbi Natan* Version B Chapter 34:

ישן אפילו טיפה אין בו

אינו מלא אלא מימי רגלים

There are new barrels that contain not a drop

(or) that are full only of urine.

The last line seems too pungent for a friendly amendment. Another indication that this *mishnah* does not shy from controversy is its acknowledgement of the famed sage-turned heretic Elisha ben Avnyah as the author of its opening stanza. Elisha is not acknowledged by name anywhere else in *Mishnah*, and indeed Rabbi Duran records that

זאת המשנה דלגוה מסדורי תפלות משום 'שם רשעים ירקב'

[משלי י ז]

ונראה, כי קודם שיצא לתרבות רעה היתה שגורה בפי התלמידים

ואחר כך משנה זו 'לא זזה ממקומה'

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.

This Mishnah was edited out of (Maskehet Avot) in prayer books on account of “the name of the wicked should rot.”

But it seems that before Elisha went wrong this statement was fluent in the mouths of the students, and afterward the mishnah would not move from its place.

In the mode of academic *pilpul*, I might suggest that this *mishnah* coheres best if we accept Rabbi Meir as the author of the last section rather than Rabbi. Rabbi Meir was Elisha’s student, both before and after Elisha’s break, and never ceased trying to bring his teacher back into the rabbinic fold. It seems reasonable that his experience of Elisha served to insulate him against claims that increased age always yields deeper wisdom.

Reading the *mishnah* as a single literary unit opens the possibility that Rabbi Yose disagreed with Elisha, and Rabbi Meir’s response was intended to defend his rebbe. To wit: Elisha’s metaphor of new vs. erased parchment suggests that only the young retain new learning reliably and clearly. If young people are more capable of absorbing new information than elders, why would we rather learn from elders? Can teachers be effective when they have ceased being learners?

There is a sense in which, from deep and powerful personal experience, I disagree with this argument. I had the *zechut* of learning from Nechama Leibowitz z”l at the very end of her career, when one could surprise her with the same text week after week. But she was still the best classroom teacher I have ever seen, and fully capable of conveying her methodology, content, and passion. I also had the *zechut* of learning from Rav Aharon Soloveitchik z”l when he was no longer a creative Talmudist, but could recall and retell the creative leaps of his youth. Lifelong learning is a noble aspiration, but even when it fails, lifelong aspiration for learning makes for powerful role-modelling.

And Rabbi Meir himself refused to consider Elisha’s Torah as valueless. He had every opportunity to express his

bitterness and sense of betrayal by extending the metaphor and suggesting that some old barrels contain only wine vinegar, and some grapes are overripe. Instead, I believe, he critiques those who believe that age alone and inevitably is sufficient for the development of Torah wisdom from Torah learning.

In a biography of my grandfather’s rebbe R. Meir Shapiro, there is a chapter title that has long stayed with me: “From *Ilui* to *Gaon*.” To be an *ilui* (Talmudic prodigy) at age 20, one must have an impressive head; but to still be an *ilui* at 50, one must have insufficient heart. Physical maturity is no guarantee of Torah maturity, and some people are mature beyond their years. Perhaps there are even immature teachers who nonetheless produce mature Torah.

Here I want to attempt my own reconciliation of all the positions in the *mishnah*. My core argument is this: We need to challenge the equation of Torah knowledge with Torah leadership, for the benefit of both.

Torah leadership requires the ability to grow. Great sages who are locked into their pasts cannot properly apply their Torah to the present. History repeats itself, but each cycle may last many generations, and leaders must be capable of recognizing that something is new in their experience, even if nothing is truly new under the sun. (It should be self-evident that knowledge uninformed by deep human experience and intellectual breadth leads to grievous practical error.)

At the same time, Torah leaders should see great value in learning from those who have been leaders in the past and whose Torah has been kilned in the furnace of past Torah challenges, and also from those who faithfully transmit such Torah. In Torah leadership as everywhere else it is best not to reinvent the wheel, and to ensure that we are rooted but flexible reeds rather than untethered kites. *Shabbat Shalom!*

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.