

Authority, The First Step in the Redemption Process

For Parshas Shemos

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The story of redemption from Egypt occupies several Sidrohs, and stands at the very center of Torah and Judaism. "Commemorating the Exodus" forms the basis for the Three Festivals, and even Shabbos (Devorim 5:15), and a host of mitzvahs.

Particular significance is most certainly attached to the first act in Moshe's mission to redeem the Israelites. Intriguingly, that first act was to bestow honor upon Talmidei Chachomim (scholars). "Go and gather the elders of the children of Israel..." (Shemos 3:16). The "elders" here refers to the scholars, (Matnos Kehuna on Midrash Shemos 5:2). This is one of several places where honor was accorded to the elders (see Sifri Bamidbor 11:16). Before even uttering a word, Moshe was to demonstrate deference and reverence for scholars by choosing to speak to them first. From here, too, we learn that there were scholars in Egyptian exile, as there was also a Yeshiva (Talmud Yuma 28b).

The rabbis see in this precedence of conferring honor on scholars not as a logical and practical approach in attaining confidence, but as a basic ethical requirement. Moreover, it is part and parcel of Torah study. It is, therefore, characteristic of Moshe our teacher to bestow this honor, since he is not only our teacher of Torah itself but also the guide to the laws of study and methods of MESORAH (conveyance).

Interestingly, Maimonides begins his laws of Talmud Torah by stating: "There are two Mitzvos in this category, one to study Torah, and two, to honor its teachers and scholars." The first comprises the first four of the seven chapters; the second, the three remaining chapters. The Tur and Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah, on the other hand, change the order, enumerating first the laws of honor for scholars and teachers (ch.242-244), and then the laws of Torah study (ch.245-246). Perhaps the latter's procedure intends to follow the order of Moshe who accorded KOVOD to the elders before studying Torah.

The rabbis teach: "Who is honored? The one who confers honor upon others" (Avoth 4:1). By demonstrating respect for another's worth one enhances his own stature. Similarly when one honors a Talmid Chochom he manifests an appreciation for the Torah which he represents, and thus attests to his own good taste. By revering him he may be entitled to become his disciple and pursue Torah study.

Maseches "Avos", Ethics of the Fathers, is so called to emphasize the paramount role of the teacher, being likened to a father transmitting truths to his children. Like a father, a rebbe should be regarded an authority in a natural setting. The names of the teachers are mentioned in this tract together with the names of the disciples to whom the legacies are bequeathed. The concept of "Mesorah" (transmission) from teacher (authority) to student, is taught to Moshe, at the very beginning of being chosen as "Moshe our teacher".

Hashem says to Moshe "And this is your sign that I have sent you" (your authority comes from Me) when you take the people out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain." Both, redemption from Egypt and revelation at Sinai, are from the Almighty Himself, Moshe acting as an authorized messenger.

At Sinai, Hashem tells Moshe "the people will hear as I speak to you, and they will also believe in you forever" (Shemos 19:9). Moshe, the "exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth" (Bamidbar 12:3), did not need such faith in him in order to be honored. He needed that reassurance for the purpose of people recognizing authority, and thereby abiding by it for all generations to come.