

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Ki Tavoh)

In 2014, Op-Ed Columnist Thomas Friedman published an article in the New York Times regarding a Gallup poll exploring the linkages between education and long-term success in the work place. The research (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/10/opinion/thomas-friedman-it-takes-a-mentor.html>) questioned what types of College experiences were most likely to produce employees who were successfully engaged in a fulfilling career track.

“According to Brandon Busteed, the executive director of Gallup’s education division, two things stand out. Successful students had one or more teachers who were mentors and took a real interest in their aspirations, and they had an internship related to what they were learning in school.”

Apparently, there were no significant differences regarding the likelihood of employees being fulfilled in a career path of their choice based on **what type of institution** (private vs. public college, as an example) they attended. Rather the most significant difference was correlated with **how** a student received his or her College education.

“Graduates who told Gallup that they had a professor or professors “who cared about them as a person — or had a mentor who encouraged their goals and dreams ... were twice as likely to be engaged with their work and thriving in their overall well-being.”

Alas, though, only 22 percent of college grads surveyed said they had such a mentor ... less than a third were exposed to the things that mattered most.”

Interestingly, this is not a problem unique to the relationship between a College education and fulfillment in the work-place. One might suggest we are experiencing a similarly disconcerting reality in the relationship between our own Jewish educational experience, and Jewish engagement and fulfillment.

This week’s portion of *Ki Tavoh* begins with the mitzvah of *Bikkurim*, which obligates every Jew to take of the choicest first fruits of the harvest and bring them up in a basket literally on one’s shoulders to Jerusalem. It is clear from the verses (*Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 26: 1-11) that this mitzvah was all about gratitude and appreciation. Would we, years and generations after having been redeemed from Egypt, in our own homeland in Israel, still appreciate how blessed we are to be enjoying the fruits of the harvest?

There is an interesting detail regarding this ceremony that bears thought. The Torah tells us (ibid. v. 3) that we are meant to “*come to the Kohen (priest) that will be there in those days...*” and present him with the basket of first fruits. The obvious question is why the Torah needs to tell us to present the *Bikkurim* to the Kohein that will be there in that generation? Obviously, it will be a Kohein of that generation; what other Kohanim would there be?

Rashi notes that we might think the Kohen of our generation is not as worthy or on as high a level as those of previous generations, and so we are enjoined that the mitzvah applies even if the Kohen seems to be on a lesser level. But (as the **Ramban** notes) why would it matter what level the Kohen is on? After all this mitzvah is about gratitude and joy and the Kohen is simply the emissary receiving the basket of fruit; what difference does it make how great a scholar or how pious a person he might be?

One way to understand this is to note a strange phrase in the statement we make when presenting the first fruits to the Kohen:

“...say unto him (the Kohen): “*I declare today, to Hashem your G-d, I have come to the land...*” (ibid. v. 3); why does the person declare he has ‘come to **your** G-d’? Why not say **my** G-d?

Perhaps the reason we present the basket to the Kohen is because the Kohen is actually the spiritual leader through whom one can enhance one’s relationship with Hashem. And developing one’s relationship with the Kohen is part of how one connects to Hashem. As such, it was important for the Torah to stress that whatever level the Torah leadership of a generation is at, it is nonetheless important to develop a relationship with them, because that relationship is part of the method in which we develop a deeper connection with Hashem and with Judaism. And what we are looking for is to connect with a leader (the Kohen) because **his** relationship with G-d is on a higher level.

Today’s equivalent would be the value of developing a relationship with a rebbe. Indeed, the **Rambam** (Maimonides) in his *Hilchot Deot* (laws of character development 2: -2) teaches that one of the essential eleven mitzvot of character development is “*le’hidabek be’Yoadav*”: to cling to those who have a healthy relationship with Hashem. Such a person is called a *Chacham* by Maimonides and represents a person who is balanced and has achieved ethical excellence.

Indeed, the Rambam (Maimonides) suggests that we need to have such *Chachamim* (wise and balanced persons) in our lives and develop healthy relationships with them, precisely because when a person is off balance it often takes someone else with a more objective perspective to see this and help him or her get back on track .

Rav J.B. Soloveitchick, in an article reprinted in Rav Moshe Besdin’s *Reflections of the Rav*, notes that there are two primary educational models in Judaism: the **Rav** and the **Rebbe**.

The **Rav** is the monumental Torah Scholar who is accomplished in Jewish law and exegesis and who is the source of halachic questions of the law. He primarily addresses the mind and engages the student’s intellect, analyzing, clarifying and transmitting the details of halacha, the Jewish legal tradition.

The **Rebbe** focuses rather on the heart and engages the soul. He shares emotion and inspires passion.

Moshe was the Rav or teacher par excellence, Aaron on the other hand, was the Rebbe.

And whilst Moshe was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Torah from G-d, Aaron, the Kohen, was down below with the masses feeling their pain and hearing their fears.

When you need to know if the chicken is Kosher, or how to reconcile contradicting texts, you ask the Rav. When you want to heal a broken heart, you approach the Rebbe. Many Jews can find a Rav when they need one. But it is much harder to find a Rebbe.

Years ago, when interviewing students for Yeshivat Orayta (our Jewish studies and leadership development program in Jerusalem's Old City) we thought it would be valuable to find out who such potential students viewed as their Rebbe. (After all whom you emulate and are deeply connected with tells a lot about who you are...). At first students thought we meant their pulpit rabbi or their Gemara (Talmud) teacher. But when questioning further to see if they had a Rebbe, someone who knew them and understood them, a role model with whom they felt close and to whom they would turn if they were in pain, suffering a loss or struggling with a difficult decision, I was inevitably met with a blank stare.

As it turned out, after interviewing hundreds of kids over a period of years, while many could name a rabbi they could reach out to if they weren't sure a candy bar was Kosher, almost none had a real rebbe in the sense of a role model who could help guide them through difficult life journeys and dilemmas.

And as much as the goal of bringing one's first fruits to the temple was the value of experiencing gratitude and appreciation, it was also an opportunity to connect with a spiritual role model as represented by the Kohen.

There is a dearth of leadership in today's world and the Jewish community is far from immune to this challenge. Orayta was never just about having 80 students sitting and learning and growing in Jerusalem's Old City; it has always been, and remains, about cultivating leaders. And while there is certainly a need for students attending top Colleges to amass knowledge and prepare for their professions we need as well to be sure we are cultivating the next generation of leaders who can feel people's pain and inspire their Jewish passion.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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