

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

Portion of Shemini

From Rav Binny Freedman

How important is it that we listen to our rabbis and teachers? On the one hand, there is something beautiful about a leadership that encourages its students to think for themselves, rather than relying completely on their rabbis and teachers' opinions. As an example, I distinctly recall my Roshei Yeshiva, Rav Lichtenstein & Rav Amital's strong reaction to students in the yeshiva who opposed their political views; stating unequivocally that such opposition was healthy, especially as they both felt Halacha (Jewish law) did not mandate a specific political opinion. In fact, this seemed so refreshingly different from the 'Chareidi' world whose rabbinic leaders seemed to regularly demand fealty to every political and administrative decision.

And yet, the Torah nonetheless clearly commands us to follow our Torah leaders' rulings as stated clearly in the Torah:

"You shall do according to what they tell you...and keep it according to all which they teach you. According to the Torah they will teach you ... you may not deviate from that which they tell you, to the right or the left." (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 17: 10-11)

So how does one balance the value of healthy questioning and diverse opinions, with the danger of undermining rabbinic authority?

This week, in the portion of Shemini, we read one of the most tragic episodes in the entire Torah: the untimely and devastating deaths of *Nadav* and *Avihu*, the elder sons of Aaron, on the very day they are all anointed for the first time as *Kohanim* in the newly dedicated *Mishkan*.

There are many different opinions as to what transgression these two young leaders committed that necessitated their deaths before G-d. Did they bring a fire that was not commanded getting caught up in the passion of the moment? Did they enter the holy space of the tabernacle drunk? Were they arrogant?

Rashi (Vayikra (Leviticus) 10:2) quotes the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer in the Talmud (Tractate *Eiruv* 63) that they died because they issued a halachic ruling in front of their rebbe (teacher). They should have asked Moshe before bringing the 'strange (not commanded?) fire they decided to bring. But why would such a seemingly mild mistake require such a severe response? What was so terrible that warranted such a severe punishment?

Interestingly, the Talmud there notes that the same Rabbi Eliezer had a student who once issued a ruling in Rabbi Eliezer's presence, whereupon R. Eliezer declared that the student would not live out the year and indeed the student died less than a year later!

Obviously, there is a larger issue at stake here. Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz in his *Sichos Mussar*, suggests that the undermining of rabbinic Torah leadership is a much bigger issue than just disrespecting a teacher. Judaism itself as a viable ongoing tradition, depends on whether and how we respect the rabbis who teach us Torah.

Indeed, one can find this question in one of the most magnificent events in Jewish History as well as one of its most infamous moments.

When the Jewish people leave Egypt headed for Canaan, Moshe suddenly instructs them to turn around and head *back* towards Egypt (*Shemot* (Exodus) 14:2). Incredibly the Jews simply listen to Moshe and turn around; there is not a word of protest. It's almost as though Hashem has designed this moment to demonstrate that we need to listen to our leaders unfailingly!

But the Sin of the Golden Calf begins essentially because the Jewish people do *not* respect their elders. They did not consult with Aharon and Chur whom Moshe had left in charge, even murdering Chur for his attempt to defy the mob.

Jewish tradition can only exist if we are committed to a leadership that we are prepared to follow without hesitation. (Though a teacher who wishes to forgo his honor may do so (Rambam *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 5:11).

So how do we differentiate between the value of different opinions and the obedience true respect for Torah demands?

Perhaps we need to start with the question of what a Rav and particularly a Moreh Halacha is, before we struggle with when to listen to such an authority. In fact, one might suggest, that if we are struggling with whether to adhere to the halachic rulings of a Rav, then he is not obviously not really our true teacher.

I recently found an interesting point, attributed to the great *Posek Ha'Dor* (Great Halachic Arbiter of the last generation) Rav Moshe Feinstein, Z"tzl. Noting that the book of Vayikra (Leviticus) is also known as *Torat Kohanim* (the book of the laws pertaining to Kohanim, the priests), Rav Moshe finds it peculiar that Moshe only first commands the Kohanim in the beginning of the second portion (*Tzav*). In the beginning of *VaYikra* Moshe is exhorted to speak to the entire Jewish people. Why does the Torah first speak to the entire Jewish people and only later to the Kohanim?

In order to choose educated leaders perhaps we must first be educated ourselves. It is not an accident that the greatest Torah leaders belong to the communities of the most Torah educated Jews...

A true leadership begins with trust; we have to be willing to accept what our rabbis teach us even when we find it difficult, otherwise they are no longer really our teachers.

And a Judaism without rabbinic leadership is an Orphaned Judaism; it cannot survive.

A rabbi can forgo his honor, and he can encourage divergence of opinion in matters of politics and daily living; but he cannot compromise his Torah principles.

We owe it to our children to become educated enough to appoint and choose a Torah leadership well versed in Jewish tradition and Torah knowledge. And we owe them, just as much, to find a Jewish rabbinic leadership whose halachic decisions we can accept without hesitation; even when we find such decisions difficult to understand. As Rabbi Eliezer intuited, and the Torah teaches through the tragic story of Nadav and Avihu, a Judaism which disrespects or disavow our teachers, simply because we do not like their halachic rulings, cannot survive.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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