

1

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua and Yehoshua to the elders and the elders to the prophets and the prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, create many students, and make a fence for the Torah.

MISHNAH 1

Consider the following questions:¹⁵

1. In describing how the Torah was transmitted from Moshe to future generations, the Mishnah speaks of each generation “transmitting” it to the next, giver to recipient. Moshe gave it to Yehoshua, Yehoshua to the elders, etc. Why, then, does the Mishnah not speak in similar terms in its opening clause and say, “Hashem gave (or, transmitted) the Torah to Moshe” (giver to recipient) rather than stating, *Moshe received the Torah*?
2. Even if there is a good reason for the structure of the Mishnah’s opening clause, it should have stated, “Moshe received the Torah from Hashem” rather than *Moshe received the Torah from Sinai*. After all, the mountain did not give Moshe the Torah!
3. Our Mishnah first uses the term *received* (קָבַל) and then switches to *transmitted* (מָסַר). The next Mishnah that describes the transmission process (Mishnah 3) reverts back to using the word *received*: *Antignos Ish*

15. The Alshich explains this Mishnah in his commentary to *Vayikra* 9:5–6.



מֹשֶׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי, וּמִסֵּרָה לְיֵהוֹשֻׁעַ, וְיֵהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים, וְזִקְנִים לְנָבִיאִים, וְנָבִיאִים מִסֵּרוּהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי כְּנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים: הָיוּ מִתּוֹנִים בְּדִין, וְהֶעֱמִידוּ תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה, וְעָשׂוּ סֵיג לַתּוֹרָה.

Socho received (קבל) the Torah from Shimon HaTzaddik. What is the reason for this?

4. The Mishnah states that Moshe transmitted the Torah to Yehoshua. Why doesn't the Mishnah continue and say, "... and Yehoshua transmitted it to the elders [and the elders transmitted it to the prophets]," instead of stating merely, *and Yehoshua to the elders [and the elders to the prophets]*? If you answer that it is unnecessary because it is understood from the context, why then does the Mishnah revert to using this expression when it says, *And the prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly*?
5. Why is the word "they" added in the clause, *They said (הם אמרו) three things*? It would have sufficed to state: *ואמרו*, since that word alone already means "they said."
6. Why does it have to tell us the number of things (three) that they said?¹⁶
7. The fact that the Mishnah cites only these three teachings of the Men of the Great Assembly, and so concisely,

16. If the Mishnah were citing a large number of sayings, then it would be appropriate to tell us how many there are. To state that there are "three" when it immediately tells us what those sayings are seems unnecessary.

suggests that these teachings were selected (from among what was certainly a vast number) because these specific teachings are in some way connected to the transmission of Torah discussed just prior in the Mishnah. But this does not seem to be the case.

8. Finally, why does the Mishnah use the expression הַעֲמִידוּ תַלְמִידֵי הַרְבֵּה, *create* (literally, cause to stand) *many students*, instead of saying, לְמַדּוּ תַלְמִידֵי הַרְבֵּה, “teach many students”?

≡ *Transmission vs. Reception* ≡

A FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION may be asked regarding the fact that this Mishnah records the chain of transmission of the Oral Law.¹⁷ Why is this written here? Doesn't this introductory lesson belong at the very beginning of the Six Orders of the Mishnah — the written record of the Oral Law — i.e., before the first tractate in *Seder Zera'im*? Certainly the phrase *Moshe received the Torah* is referring to all six orders of the Mishnah!

An answer to this question may be as follows: The Sages teach (*Bava Kamma* 30a): “Anyone who wishes to be devout should fulfill the directives of [*Pirkei*] *Avos*.”¹⁸ But a person might say: “Who can fulfill all these directives? There are so

17. It is obvious that the Mishnah is discussing the Oral Law and not the Written Law, for the latter was written in *Sifrei Torah*; it did not have to be “transmitted” from Moshe to Yehoshua, etc.

18. Accordingly, the development of the *middos* (character traits and attributes) delineated in *Pirkei Avos* are of prime and critical importance to being a pious Jew.

many!”¹⁹ To address this, the Torah says: “I will place them all before you, and each one, relative to his abilities, will ‘receive’ as much as he can, whether it is a lot or a little.”²⁰

That this is the proper attitude may be learned from the nature of the transmission of the Oral Law. Our Mishnah does not say Hashem *gave* the Torah to Moshe, for that would have suggested that God *gave* it to him alone, when in fact He gave it to each individual Jew. Every Jew heard the Ten Commandments at Sinai. And not only those commandments, but all 613 commandments that are contained within the Ten Commandments²¹ — including the entire Oral Torah, all of which is connected to the self-same Ten Commandments. As it states in *Vayikra Rabbah* 22:1: “Every novel Torah insight that would ever be expounded by a veteran student [of Torah] was stated at Sinai.”²² However, not every Jew received the Torah to the same extent; each received it according to his individual spiritual level. Thus, only Moshe

19. That is, the person might despair of being pious and might give up his quest to be a truly religious Jew.

20. The Alshich is not suggesting that people can choose which mitzvos to keep, but that they should learn and fulfill the Torah to the best of their abilities; God does not ask for more. (See also the introductory Mishnah to *Pirkei Avos* above, footnote 6.)

21. See Rashi, *Shemos* 24:12, citing R’ Saadia Gaon. Indeed, the Ramban wrote an entire work, *Taryag Mitzvos Ha’yotzim Me’Aseres HaDibros*, explaining how the Ten Commandments include all 613 mitzvos of the Torah (see Chavel, *Kisvei Ramban*, Vol. II, p. 521ff).

22. It may be noted that the complete text of *Vayikra Rabbah* states: “... all were stated to Moshe at Sinai.” The Alshich, however, assumes that all of Israel heard the Oral Torah at Sinai as did Moshe — albeit with one important difference, as the Alshich goes on to say.

received the entire Torah; only he truly “got” it.²³ Indeed, this is why our Mishnah says, *Moshe received the Torah* — because while Hashem gave the Torah to all the Jews, each Jew “received” it according to his level of spiritual preparedness.²⁴ [This answers Question 1.]

This is the answer to the person who says, “Who can fulfill all these directives?” Just as with respect to the Oral Law as a whole, everyone received it to a different extent — and this was perfectly fine — the same is the case with respect to the supremely important directives of *Pirkei Avos*: Everyone will “receive” as much as he can, and will fulfill to the best of his abilities what he is able to absorb. Hashem expects no more of us (and no less).²⁵

In fact, even regarding Moshe himself, the Mishnah is careful not to say that Hashem *transmitted* (מָסַר) the Torah to Moshe [see Question 1]. For this term implies that the

23. Thus, the Alshich notes, the Midrash (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 1:2, section 4) tells us that the rest of Israel would quickly forget the Torah that they heard. Likewise, according to the view that their souls flew out of their bodies when they heard Hashem speaking (*Shabbos* 88b), the result was the same: When they temporarily died, they lost the Torah they had heard.

24. Cf. *Shemos Rabbah* 34:1: אַתָּה מוֹצֵא כְּשֶׁנִּתְּנוּ הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת הַתּוֹרָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל: לֹא בָּא עֲלֵיהֶם אֱלֹא לְפִי כַחֵם ... לְפִי כַחוּ שֶׁל כֹּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד.

25. While the Alshich does not say anything further at this point, it seems from his comments below that the reason the chain of the transmission of Torah was written in the opening Mishnah of *Pirkei Avos*, and not in the opening Mishnah of the Six Orders of the Mishnah, is as follows: Since *Pirkei Avos* is so central, it is important that the message that accompanies the record of the transmission of Torah — namely, that not everyone will be capable of “receiving” it fully — should appear here in *Pirkei Avos*, so that people will not despair of becoming truly pious (see footnote 18).

recipient received *all of* what the giver had to offer. This term would thus not be appropriate in the present context, for as great as Moshe was, he was still mortal and finite. It would be impossible for him to comprehend the Torah as fully as Hashem does. The term *received* (קָבַל) used by the Mishnah, on the other hand, suggests only that the recipient received whatever he was capable of receiving.

Furthermore, even the word *received* would be inappropriate here if the Mishnah were to say, “Moshe received the Torah *from God*,” for that would imply that Moshe was a student receiving instruction from his teacher — which is ultimately a difference only in degree but not in kind — when in fact the difference between Moshe and God was unfathomably large. That is why the Mishnah says that *Moshe received the Torah from Sinai* — as if to make the point that he did not receive it directly from God but rather indirectly, via the mountain. [This answers Question 2.]²⁶

Answer to
question 2

Nevertheless, Moshe was on the highest spiritual level any human being could attain; he was able to “receive” the complete Torah.

On the second-highest level is Yehoshua, who is described in the Torah (*Shemos* 33:11) as Moshe’s constant and loyal servant, who would not *depart from within the Tent*. Having invested his whole life in his spiritual growth, Yehoshua was able to receive in its entirety all the Torah that Moshe had received

26. The Alshich actually presents no fewer than three other answers to Question 2. However, it is the approach presented in the text above that he says will enable us to answer the other questions.

from Hashem. The Mishnah tells us this by using the phrase *and he transmitted it* (וּמְסָרָהּ) to Yehoshua (for as explained above, the root מסר connotes a **complete** transfer of knowledge).

The generations that followed (elders and prophets) were all on this second level as well, and were thus able to learn the Torah from the previous generation, as well as comprehensively “transmit” the Torah to someone in the next generation. Nevertheless, the Mishnah has no need to use the root מסר in stating that Yehoshua transmitted the Torah to the elders, or the elders to the prophets, as it relies on the earlier use of the verb וּמְסָרָהּ. However, during the era of the Great Assembly, the difference between the spiritual level of one generation and the next became more pronounced. As the Gemara (*Sotah* 48b) says: “When Chaggai, Zechariah, and Malachi died,²⁷ *Ru’ach HaKodesh* departed from Israel.”²⁸ The Mishnah **does** use the term one more time, though, in recording how “the prophets transmitted it (מְסָרֵיהֶם) to the Men of the

27. Chaggai, Zechariah, and Malachi were the last prophets (*Sanhedrin* 11a), and they were members of the first generation of the Great Assembly, the legislative and judicial body created upon the return of the Jewish people from the Babylonian exile. The Gemara in *Megillah* 15a identifies Malachi with Ezra, who led the return to the Land of Israel in the beginning of the Second Temple era.

28. We have diverged slightly from the Alshich’s text here, which had instead quoted *Sotah* 48b as stating: “When Chaggai, Zechariah, and Malachi died, white glass [an expensive commodity; see *Berachos* 31a] departed from Israel.” The text in our Gemara, however, links the loss of this special glass not to the deaths of Chaggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, but to the destruction of the First Temple. At any rate, the Alshich’s intent is clear: The spiritual level of humanity declined when Chaggai, Zechariah, and Malachi died.

Great Assembly” — in order to emphasize that this was the point in history where the process of “transmission” (i.e., in its entirety) ended. [This answers Question 4.]

Answer to
question 4

When describing the chain of Torah transmission after the period of the Men of the Great Assembly (Mishnah 1:3; see also 2:8), the Mishnah does not use the term “transmitted,” for the men of those generations were not able to pass all they had received to the next generation.²⁹ Therefore the word *received* (קָבַל) is used instead, for as we have learned, this term does not suggest a complete transfer from one person to another, but rather that the recipient “received” in accordance with his ability. [This answers Question 3.]

Answer to
question 3

In summation: Our Mishnah’s discussion of the transmission of Torah teaches us that we are not obligated to do that which is beyond us, namely to “receive” the entire Torah. The same applies to the ethical directives that comprise the rest of *Pirkei Avos*. Our task is to receive and practice them to the best of our abilities.

✧ *Protecting the Torah for the Future* ✧

THE MEN OF the Great Assembly realized that after them it would be impossible to “transmit” the Torah comprehensively to future generations. They also understood that there were three factors that could now prevent the Torah from being fulfilled properly,

29. The Alshich adds that the later generations were not to be faulted for this; spiritual levels had simply declined. (This concept is known as *yeridas hadoros*. See *Shabbos* 112b: “If the earlier [scholars] were sons of angels, we are sons of men; and if the earlier [scholars] were sons of men, we are like asses...”)

given that Man's spiritual and intellectual capacities had diminished.

Two of these factors applied to those who would be **teaching** the Torah, and one to the masses who would be **learning** the Torah. There were two problems regarding the teachers: that they would forget the Torah that they had learned, and that they would lack the intellectual capacity to learn the Torah in its entirety in the first place. In either event, they would be unable to pass on a complete version of the Torah. Regarding the masses, the problem was that being on a lower spiritual level, they would inevitably make mistakes in understanding and retaining the many and varied details of the mitzvos. As a result, they would fall short in their performance of the commandments and inadvertently come to transgress the Torah.

It is to address these three specific problems that the Men of the Great Assembly taught three specific things: (1) *Be deliberate in judgment.*³⁰ (2) *Raise up many students.* If you cannot find an individual who can master every aspect of the Torah, many students together will function as a team, with one student mastering what the other cannot, and as a **group** they will encompass and be able to teach the entire Torah. (3) *Make a fence for the Torah,*³¹ to protect

30. By this the Alshich appears to mean: Be careful not to forget what you have learned; review all relevant Torah information before deciding on a matter of Jewish law.

31. I.e., enact Rabbinic laws (*gezeiros*) that will make it much more difficult to violate the Biblical ones. The *gezeiros*, as a rule, prohibit us from doing things that may lead to Biblical prohibitions.

the masses from violating the Torah inadvertently. [This answers Question 7.]

Answer to question 7

The Sages in the generations that preceded the Men of the Great Assembly did not have these concerns, as they knew that the next generation would produce suitable individuals to whom it would be possible to transmit everything they knew. It was only in the time of the Men of the Great Assembly that the Sages saw that this would no longer be the case. The Mishnah therefore states that it was **they** — and not those who came before them — who taught these three things. [This answers Question 5.] And lest one think that any **one** of these three things would suffice, the Mishnah emphasizes the number three. All three will be necessary in order to address the problems that now exist regarding the transmission and observance of Torah in the coming generations. [This answers Question 6.]

Answer to question 5

Answer to question 6

Finally, why does the Mishnah use the expression *הַעֲמִידוּ הַרְבֵּה תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה*, *create* (literally, *cause to stand*) *many students*, instead of saying, *לְמַדּוּ תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה*, *teach many students*? The Gemara in *Nedarim* 81a tells us: *Take heed with the sons of the poor [to teach them specifically], for from them Torah will go forth.*³² The word *הַעֲמִידוּ* alludes to this idea, for it is the poor who require help to stand, i.e., to be placed on their feet. The Mishnah is thus instructing us to concentrate our teaching efforts on the poor, for our efforts will thus bear the most fruit. [This answers question 8.]

Answer to question 8

32. The Ran there explains that the poor have no other occupation (and thus they will concentrate completely on their learning); and because of their poverty they tend to be humble (a necessary attribute for growth in Torah).