



Pirkei Avos begins with a tradition of the Torah transmission from Mattan Torah through the time of the early Sages – “Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua,” and so on. One of the many oddities of this first Mishna is that its origin point seems to be strange. We would expect it to state that Moshe received the Torah from G-d, but instead we read, Moshe received the Torah from Sinai (*MiSinai*). Why is a mountain, and not G-d, attributed as the first link in the chain of tradition?

There are close to a dozen explanations provided by the commentaries addressing this and related textual nuances, but the one with the most moving moral message is provided by Rabbi Israel Lipschitz in his commentary, *Tiferes Yisrael* (19th century, Germany). Weaving together various statements of the Sages, Rabbi Lipschitz suggests that there is a common thread between Moshe, Torah, and Sinai, and that is the trait of humility. Moshe, we are told, is the humblest of all people. Torah, we are told, is compared to water. Water symbolizes humility, as it abandons high positions and streams downwards until it collects in lowly places. Sinai, we are told, was the humblest of mountains. That is why it was chosen over all the bigger and more aesthetically beautiful mountains.

The fact that Moshe, Sinai, and Torah share the same trait may be enough to warrant this allusion to humility in the beginning of Pirkei Avos, but the message is deeper than just an association of nouns. Besides for the person, place, and thing, we are also give a verb – קבל – meaning, to receive. The only way Moshe was able to receive the Torah is through his trait of humility. The Mishna hides the name of G-d and highlights Sinai to reveal the necessity of humility in Torah learning and observance.

Why is humility such an essential trait for the acquisition of Torah? Besides for being an important spiritual trait, humility is also an essential virtue of intellect. Dr. Liz Mancuso from Pepperdine University conducts psychological research on the concept of intellectual humility. Intellectual humility is a more specific construct than regular humility as it pertains specifically to ideas, knowledge, beliefs and opinions, and not to global perceptions of self. Dr. Mancuso writes that people higher in intellectual humility tend to have higher general knowledge than those with more of an arrogant bent.

Her explanation as to why can serve as a commentary on the Mishna in Avos (4:1), “Who is wise? He who learns from everyone.” Dr. Mancuso explains that intellectual humility is associated with a love of learning, an openness to ideas, and an ability to learn with and from others. This includes listening and reflecting on other people’s opinions, disagreeing assertively when appropriate, without being aggressive or prematurely dismissive. Conversely, people who are arrogant tend to be so preoccupied with their desire to be seen as intelligent that there is little cognitive space remaining to focus on actual ideas. They are so distracted by egotistical concerns that there is no room to learn and understand the actual principles.

Humility is essential to learning because it allows us to focus on learning – not our egos. Acceptance and reception of Torah requires humility because it is a character trait that is essential for proper intellectual attainment. Moshe, the humblest of men, received the Torah, the humblest of objects, from Sinai, the humblest of mountains. May this serve as the paradigm for us and motivate us to strive for an intellectual humility which can facilitate our own personal and communal acceptance of the Torah this Shavuot.

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