

**Moses as a "Nursing Mother":  
On Rav Soloveitchik's Philosophy of Education**

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פרשת בהעלתך

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1.

**במדבר פרשת בהעלותך פרק יא**

א

וַיְהִי הָעֵם כְּמִתְאַנְנִים רַע בְּאַזְנֵי יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה וַיַּחַר אַפּוֹ וַתִּבְעַר בָּם אֵשׁ יְהוָה וַתֹּאכַל בְּקִצְצָהּ הַמִּטְהַרֵּה:

ב

וַיִּצְעַק הָעָם אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוָה וַתִּשְׁקַע הָאֵשׁ:

ג

וַיִּקְרָא שְׁם-הַמִּקְוֹם הַהוּא תִּבְעָרָה כִּי-בְעָרָה בָּם אֵשׁ יְהוָה:

ד

וְהַאֲסִפְסֵף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבּוֹ הַתְּאֵנִי תִּאָּגֵה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ וַיִּבְּכוּ גַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִי יֵאָכְלֵנוּ בְּשָׂר׃

ה

זָכַרְנוּ אֶת-הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר-נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חֲגֹם אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִיִּים וְאֶת הָאֲבִטְחִיִּים וְאֶת-הַחֲצִיר וְאֶת-הַבָּצְלִים וְאֶת-הַשּׁוּמִיִּים:

ו

וַעֲתָה נִפְשָׁנוּ יְבֹשָׁה אֵין כָּל בְּלִתֵּי אֶל-הַמָּן עֵינֵינוּ:

ז

וְהַמָּן כְּזֶרַע-גֹּד הוּא וְעֵינֵנו כְּעֵין הַבְּדֹלַח:

ח

שִׁטּוֹ הָעָם נִלְקָטוּ וְסָחֲנוּ בְּרִחִים אִו דָּכּוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר וּבְשִׁלּוֹ בְּפָרֹחַ וְעָשׂוּ אֹתוֹ עֲגוֹת וְהָיָה טַעְמוֹ כְּטַעַם לֶעֶד הַשָּׂמֶן:

ט

וַיִּבְרַדַּת הַטַּל עַל-הַמִּטְהַרֵּה לְיִלָּה יָרַד הַמָּן עָלֵינוּ:

י

וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם בֹּכָה לְמִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ אִישׁ לִפְתַּח אָהָלוֹ וַיַּחַר-אַף יְהוָה מְאֹד וַיְבַעֲרֵנִי מֹשֶׁה רַע:

יא

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-יְהוָה לְמָה הִרְעִיתָ לַעֲבָדְךָ נְלִמָּה לֹא-מִצְוֵי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְשׂוֹם אֶת-מִשְׁאָ כָּל-הָעָם הַזֶּה עָלַי:

יב

הַאֲנֹכִי הִרִיתִי אֶת כָּל-הָעָם הַזֶּה אִם-אֲנֹכִי יִלְדִתִּיהוּ כִּי-תֹאמַר אֵלַי שְׂאֵהוּ בְּחִיקוֹךָ כְּאֲשֶׁר יִשָּׂא הָאָמִן אֶת-הַיִּזְק עַל

הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאַבְרָהָם:

יג

מֵאִין לִי בְּשָׂר לַתּוֹת לְכָל-הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי-יִבְכוּ עָלַי לֵאמֹר תִּנְהַלְנוּ בְּשָׂר וְנֹאכְלָהּ:

יד

לֹא-אוּכַל אֲנֹכִי לְבַדִּי לְשַׂאת אֶת-כָּל-הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי כָבֵד מִמֶּנִּי:

טו

וְאִם-יִכְכֹּה אֶת-עֲשָׂה לִי הִרְגֵנִי נָא הִרְגֵנִי אִם-מִצְוֵי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ וְאֶל-אַרְצָה בְּרַעְתִּי:

2.

**"Teaching With Clarity and Empathy" (Moses Reluctantly Becomes a 'Nursing-Father') - Rabbi Joseph B. Solovitchik, *Reflections of the Rav* pp.150, 155-158, R. Abraham R. Besiden (Ed.) (1979)**

1974 RCA TALKS TO R. YISRAEL KLANAN

Teaching involves more than the transmission of knowledge and understanding. It requires an empathy between teacher and student, and a sharing of feelings, thoughts, and motives. There is an interaction of personalities, an exchange of values and insights.

Moses, as the teacher *par excellence*, became aware of this broader understanding of the teaching role after the *kivrot hata'avah* episode (Num. chap. 11), when he was called upon to become an *omen*, a "nursing-father," of the newly-founded people. We see this change reflected in Moses' different reactions to the two major sins of the children of Israel in the desert - the *egel hazahav* (Ex. chap. 32) and the *kivrot hata'avah*....

#### *The Changed Role of Moses*

...Moses had been chosen to be a *Rebbe* (teacher) of *Klal Yisrael*, while Aaron was to be the diplomat, the negotiator. When Moses asked, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?" (Ex. 3:11), he was doubting his qualifications to deal with protocol and royalty. God replied: Your primary role, Moses, is that of a spiritual and moral teacher, a pedagogue of Torah and *Halakah*, to prepare the people to receive and become committed to the Revelation. I can find negotiators elsewhere. You were chosen because the main purpose of the Exodus is not the attainment of political freedom but the conversion of a slave society into a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," *mamlechet kohanim vegoy kadosh*, and in that role you excel. You are a *Rebbe par excellence*. Moses understood this to be his responsibility and he accepted the mandate....

...A review of Moses' lament (Num. 11:11-15) indicates that the key words of his protest were "carry them in your bosom, as a nursing-father carries a suckling child" (11:12) - a role that Moses never wanted to assume, which he now found thrust upon him, as the people succumbed to childlike impulses of unrestrained wanting and plaintive wailing.

What is the difference between a teacher and a nursing-father (or mother)? A teacher instructs a child and a nursing mother also teaches a child. The latter, however, in addition to teaching, also carries the child in her bosom, *behekekha*; she submerges her identity in that of the child, making her own ambitions secondary or nullifying them completely. The needs of the child take precedence over her own life and she becomes one with the child and finds fulfillment through him. There is an emotional fusion of two identities. A teacher, however, retains his own identity and personality; his is an intellectual communication of specific knowledge.

Moses now became aware that being a teacher was not enough for a leader of Israel, a *manhig Yisrael*. The people, in its early formative years, needed him as a baby needs a nursing mother; they were temperamental, impulsive, filled with uncontrollable desires, relatively murmuring. Their complaints were primarily pretexts, *mevakeshim allah* (Rashi, *ibid.* v. 1). Moses doubted his capacity to become an *omen*; he knew that, in this role, he would be totally submerged in his work. He would not only have to teach and command, but also guide, train, and transform a people inclined to paganism into an *am segulah*. Besides teaching, he would have to reach out emotionally to the people, nurture them through their national infancy, with patient, sympathetic understanding and empathy, as a nursing-father would do....

...For this role of an *omen*, Moses felt unqualified, even as he realized that the paganism of *kivrot hata'avah* required this kind of painstaking nurturing; teaching was simply not enough.

...Our age is demonstrably pagan, without idol worship as such. It consists of uninhibited *peritzut* (Indulgence). The teaching role may have been sufficient in the past to counter the allurements of other religions, philosophies, and the pseudo-ideologies which still abound nowadays. We could teach and demonstrate the greater credibility of our own way of life; but the paganism of our day requires that elements of the *omen*, the nursing-father, be combined with the teaching role, particularly since the emotional and introspective element is so pronounced in contemporary human relationships. What we require is the warm embrace as much as the brilliant idea; sympathetic understanding, true befriending, and a human reaching-out; a suggestion to our modern *mitonenim* (restless, complaining ones) that "we care"; the teaching role is inadequate.

This is admittedly a demanding responsibility. We need not emulate Moses' total self-effacement, but aspects of the *omen* are necessary. We must have, in addition to teaching: *dedication*, personal commitment, for otherwise the burden is unbearable; *selflessness*, a readiness to subordinate personal career and egotistical ambitions; and *empathy*, an ability to teach with feeling, not only with clarity.

All this must be pursued with dignity and self-respect, rather than shallow sentimentality.

3.

"A Tribute to the Rebbetzen of Talne" pt. III - Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Tradition* journal: Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring 1978)

People are mistaken in thinking that there is only one Masorah and one Massorah community; the community of the fathers. It is not true. We have two massorot, two traditions, two communities, two *shalshalot ha-kabbalah* — the massorah community of the fathers and that of the mothers. "Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob (= the women) and tell the

children of Israel (= the men)" (Exodus 19:3), "Hear my son the instruction of thy father (*mussar avikha*) and forsake not the teaching of thy mother (*torat Imekha*)" (Proverbs 1:8), counseled the old king. What is the difference between those two *massorot*, traditions? What is the distinction between *mussar avikha* and *torat Imekha*? Let us explore what one learns from the father and what one learns from the mother.

One learns much from father: how to read a text — the Bible or the Talmud — how to comprehend, how to analyze, how to conceptualize, how to classify, how to infer, how to apply, etc. . . . One also learns from father what to do and what not to do, what is morally right and what is morally wrong. Father teaches the son the discipline of thought as well as the discipline of action. Father's tradition is an intellectual-moral one. That is why it is identified with *mussar*, which is the Biblical term for discipline.

\* \* \*

What is *torat Imekha*? What kind of a Torah does the mother pass on? I admit that I am not able to define precisely the masoretic role of the Jewish mother. Only by circumscription I hope to be able to explain it. Permit me to draw upon my own experiences. I used to have long conversations with my mother. In fact, it was a monologue rather than a dialogue. She talked and I "happened" to overhear. What did she talk about? I must use an halakhic term in order to answer this question: she talked *me-inyana de-yoma*. I used to watch her arranging the house in honor of a holiday. I used to see her recite prayers; I used to watch her recite the sidra every Friday night and I still remember the nostalgic tune. I learned from her very much.

Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*. I learned from her the most important thing in life — to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders. Without her teachings, which quite often were transmitted to me in silence, I would have grown up a soulless being, dry and insensitive.

The laws of Shabbat, for instance, were passed on to me by my father; they are a part of *mussar avikha*. The Shabbat as a living entity, as a queen, was revealed to me by my mother; it is a part of *torat Imekha*. The fathers *knew* much about the Shabbat; the mothers *lived* the Shabbat, experienced her presence, and perceived her beauty and splendor.

The fathers taught generations how to observe the Shabbat; mothers taught generations how to greet the Shabbat and how to enjoy her twenty-four hour presence.

\* \* \*

The Rebbitzin, as I mentioned before, was one of the few women to whom the maternal massorah, *torat Imekha*, was entrusted. She represented the Massorah community with great loyalty and dedication. She was a devoted, good keeper of the treasure which was put in escrow with her and she knew how to guard it and how to transmit it to another generation. She was an outstanding teacher, even though she was a woman of few words. She taught, like my mother, how to feel the presence of God. She taught to appreciate *mitzvot* and spiritual values, to enjoy

the warmth of a dedicated life. In a word, she taught everything which is included in the *torat imekha*.

4.

"The Community" pt. II:1 - Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Tradition* journal: Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring 1978)

How is the community formed? The answer is simple: two lonely individuals create a community in the manner that God created the world. What was God's instrument of creation? The word. The word is also the instrument with which man creates his own community. God, by saying יהי, which is identical with an act of recognition of the world, made it possible for a beside-Him existence to emerge, made it possible for finitude to co-exist with infinity, notwithstanding that, as a mathematical equation, finitude+infinity = infinity, or, in other words, that the co-existence of the infinite and the finite is an impossibility: God, in order to make "room" for the finite world, employed מדת הצמצום, the method of self-contraction or self-limitation, כביכול. He withdrew, and by engaging in a movement of recoil, כביכול, He precipitated "empty space" for the world. Otherwise the latter could not have come into existence, since it would have been "swallowed" by infinity. Thus, we may suggest the following equation: creation = recognition = withdrawal = an act of sacrifice.

The same is true of man. If lonely man is to rise from existential exclusiveness to existential all-inclusiveness, then the first thing he has to do is to recognize another existence. Of course this recognition is, *eo ipso*, a sacrificial act, since the mere admission that a thou exists in addition to the I, is tantamount to צמצום, self-limitation and self-contraction....

5.

*And From There You Shall Seek* - Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, pp. 142-143, 145-146 (2008)

...The act of a master teaching Torah to his students is a wondrous metaphysical act of the revelation of the influencing personality to the one influenced by it. This revelation is also the cleaving of teacher and student to each other. The student who understands a concept cleaves to the intellect that transmits the concept. If he grasps the teacher's logic, then he becomes joined to the teacher in the unity of the conceiving intellect (*maskil*) and the conceived ideas (*muska*).

Within this fundamental principle is hidden the secret of the Oral Torah, a Torah which by its nature and application can never be objectified, even after it has been written down. "Oral Torah" means a Torah that blends with the individual's personal uniqueness and becomes an inseparable part of man. When the person then transmits it to someone else, his personal essence

is transmitted along with it. Even the Written Torah, although given to Moses in a specific, fixed format, and even though there is a commandment to write it in black ink on parchment, adheres to those who study it and becomes one with them. When someone teaches Torah to another, the giver emits something of his essence to the receiver. One's Torah disciples are called one's children (*Sifrei 34* [to Deut. 6:7]) because the essence of their spiritual personality emanates, and is born, from the bosom of the teacher. The Torah therefore established stricter rules for honoring one's Torah teachers than for honoring one's parents, because whereas one's parents bring one into the life of the mundane world in that they cause one's bodily mental existence, one's Torah teachers bring one to the heights of a spiritual world that is much more sublime (*Bava Metzi'a 33a*).

The Torah teacher is always revealed from within the depths of his faithful disciple's soul. The prophets and sages of the Jewish people burst forth from the depths of the nation's historical consciousness. The souls of the first generations following the revelation have been transmitted in the course of the centuries until they are absorbed in the recesses of the historical reality of the Jewish community that yearns for redemption. The *Shekhinah* speaks out of the throat of the destitute, reviled, and abandoned "last generation" (Deut. 29:21). If this generation so wills it, the revelation is not a vague, ancient vision, but a fresh, living one, effervescent in its being and expressed in the consciousness of eternal awe and yearning. When the Halakhah discusses the transmission of the Torah, the receiving of the tradition (*masorah*), it is not dealing with an abstract idea, but with something real that urges, yearns, and impels the individuality to activity.

I would like to relate a personal experience to illustrate the idea of the *masorah* that we are discussing.

I remember myself as a child, a lonely, forlorn boy. I was afraid of the world. It seemed cold and alien. I felt as if everyone were mocking me. But I had one friend, and he was - please don't laugh at me - Maimonides, the Rambam. How did we become friends? We simply met!

... This experience belongs to my childhood. Still, it is not the golden fantasy of a little boy; the feeling in it is not mystical. It is a completely historical, psychological reality that is alive even now in the depths of my soul. When I sit down to learn Torah, I find myself immediately in the company of the sages of the *masorah*. The relations between us are personal. The Rambam is at my right, Rabbenu Tam at my left, Rashi sits up front and interprets, Rabbenu Tam disputes him; the Rambam issues a ruling, and the Rabad objects. They are all in my little room, sitting around my table. They look at me affectionately, enjoy arguing and studying the Talmud with me, encourage and support me the way a father does. Torah study is not solely an educational activity. It is not a merely formal, technical matter embodied in the discovery and exchange of facts. It is a powerful experience of becoming friends with many generations of Torah scholars, the joining of one spirit with another, the union of souls. Those who transmitted the Torah and those who received it come together in one historical way-station.

Thus, the Rambam remained my friend even after my childhood, and we are friends to this very day. Indeed, there is only one difference between my childhood experience and my present one. In my childhood, only the Rambam was my friend, while at present my study group has grown and includes many Torah scholars. All the sages of the tradition, from the days of Moses to the present, have become my friends! When I solve a problem in the Rambam's or Rabbenu Tam's writings, I see their glowing faces expressing their satisfaction. I always feel as if the Rambam and Rabbenu Tam are kissing me on the forehead and shaking my hand. This is not a fantasy. It is a very deep experience. It is the experience of the transmission of the Oral Torah.

The teaching and transmitting of Torah and transmitting the Torah glow with the attribute of *hesed*, lovingkindness, with which God created the world. Just as God acts with lovingkindness toward the world, so must the prophet act toward his fellow humans. If the prophet's mind has been "intertwined" with the Infinite and "connected" with the mind of the Creator, he must realize that he is the main conduit through which plenitude from the Eternal flows toward human beings. A man of God who has attained the level of a mental connection just below the divine throne and of cleaving to the living God, cannot remain alone with himself and live separately from society. This would be as if a rich miser, to whom God granted great wealth in order that he become a benefactor to the downtrodden and miserable members of his faith, had betrayed this trust and kept all the wealth for himself.