

Yizkor Sermon
Shavuot 5779
Rabbi Mitchell Berkowitz
June 10, 2019

Pirkei Avot, an ancient source of Jewish wisdom, is customarily the object of our study in the weeks between Passover and Shavuot. With its six chapters, it is perfect for the six Shabbatot that lay between these two festivals. Like the counting of the *omer*, the study of Pirkei Avot is a way of connecting these two festivals one with the other. I never tire of reminding you that Passover and Shavuot are really one, continuous festival. On Passover we are redeemed, so that we are ready to receive the Torah at Sinai on Shavuot. Liberation is incomplete without revelation, and the Torah cannot be bestowed upon a people enslaved to an earthly master. Therefore, Shavuot is the culmination of an incredible amount of spiritual preparation, of soul-shaping to transform ourselves from liberated slaves on Passover, to willing recipients of a sacred tradition on Shavuot.

Last Sunday, as part of the Zemer Chai concert hosted here at B'nai Israel, I shared a few words about the introductory line of Pirkei Avot, and I want to build upon that message today. The tractate begins,

מִשָּׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי,

Moses received Torah from Sinai

וּמִסִּינַי לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ, וְיְהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים, וְזִקְנִים לְנָבִיאִים, וְנָבִיאִים מִסִּינַי לְאַנְשֵׁי בְנֵי בְנֵי הַגָּדוֹלָה.

And he transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly.

How very strange to say that Moses received the Torah “from Sinai.” We know that Moses received the Torah from *God*, so we would expect the mishnah to be worded differently. Yes,

we know that Moses was stationed *at* Sinai, but the Hebrew suggests that he received Torah *from* Sinai, anthropomorphizing the place, turning Sinai into a character or an individual, like Joshua and the prophets. I made two points about this peculiar wording then, and I'll reiterate them now.

First, suggesting that Moses received the Torah from Sinai, rather than from God, allows the Rabbis to bypass questions of theology. Did God dictate the words of Torah to Moses? Did God speak in audible tones? Was Moses a trustworthy scribe, able to write everything down accurately and as God intended it to be understood? For the ancient sages of Pirkei Avot, those questions held little relevance. Such theological questions were red herrings, mere distractions from what truly mattered—living a life dedicated to mitzvot.

Focus on the wisdom contained in the tradition, instead of worrying about the detail of from where it came. Acknowledge the power of Torah, its ability to transform your life in positive and meaningful ways, regardless of its origin. Suggesting that the Torah was received *from Sinai* is another of teaching us that Torah, and by extension, Jewish life overall, is not reserved for those who faithfully believe in a particular version of God. Jewish life is not only for those who relate to a personal God, or to an omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God. After all, Moses didn't receive the Torah from God! He received it *from Sinai*. All of us are inheritors of this tradition. Each one of us can participate fully in Jewish life regardless of our relationship (or, lack thereof) to the Divine.

The second important point about this mishnah is that Divine revelation happened here on earth, at a physical space that one could presumably visit (if we only knew where Sinai was). Moses did not ascend to the heavens, receive the Torah from God, and then return it to us in

the lowly earthly realm below. Rather, it was given here, on earth, in sight of the entire people of Israel. Revelation was a communal moment, not a personal one experienced in isolation.

I teach all of this by way of introducing the moment of reciting the Yizkor Memorial Prayers. As Reuven Hammer teaches in his commentary to the liturgy, Yizkor includes two core concepts: first, a plea for God to remember the souls of the departed, and second, that these remembered souls rest peacefully under the wings of the Divine Presence, guarded and safe. Like the moment of Divine revelation at Sinai, we imagine that the souls of our departed loved ones rest together, side-by-side. And like the mishnah about Moses and Sinai, we anthropomorphize God, and imagine that God's Divine Presence has immeasurably large protective wings, outstretched over the souls of all these individuals, guarding them in the afterlife, comforting them, and making sure that they are at peace.

When Moses received Torah *miSinai*, from Sinai, he did so with the Jewish people at his side. Revelation was a communal moment, just as Yizkor is a communal moment. We do not sit at home and recite these prayers alone. We come here to do so in context of community. Yizkor, like *ma'amad har Sinai*, standing at Sinai, is a sort of revelatory experience.

Just as the Israelites yearned to know what Moses was experiencing beneath the thick clouds which shielded him atop Sinai, so too we yearn to see through the thick cloud that separates this world from the World to Come, wondering what has come of the souls of our loved ones who have left this world.

Just as the Israelites trembled in fear when the thunder clapped and lighting struck, so too we tremble in fear when we contemplate the mortality of our dearest loved ones, and especially when we contemplate our own mortality.

Just as the Israelites stood shoulder-to-shoulder, crowded around the base of the mountain, relying on each other for protection and support, so too we stand in this sanctuary, shoulder-to-shoulder with our families and friends, surrounded by a supportive and loving community.

Just as the Israelites departed from that mountain in the wilderness transformed from a nation of liberated slaves to a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, *mamlekheth kohanim v'goy kadosh*, so too we will depart from this space transformed after pouring out our hearts and praying that God safeguard the souls of our loved ones.

And just as Israelites stood at Sinai with all Jews who ever were and all who ever would be part of the House of Israel, so too we stand in this space today, inviting into this sanctuary the countless departed souls of our people: those who died at a ripe old age and those who died all too young, those who died defending their people and those who died defending their faith, those we knew and those we never met.

For many of us, we stand once again to remember a loved one with the Yizkor prayers. And for others of us, we are about to stand and remember someone for the first time since they departed from this world. Each time we stand for Yizkor, there is a different feeling in the air. Today, on Shavuot, we recall the moment of divine revelation at Sinai. We think about how our people's interaction with God at that place was transformative, and that we too hope to experience a transformation today.

When the Israelites finally packed up and departed from Sinai to begin their wilderness travels, I like to imagine that they felt a sense of relief. The momentous occasion of Sinai had passed. They were now the inheritors of a sacred text and an awe-inspiring tradition.

Remember, they did not know that the Promised Land was still forty years away. Rather, they felt secure and confident, equipped with a tested leader and guarded by a faithful God.

After we recite the Yizkor prayers in a few moments, I hope that you too will depart from this space feeling that sense of relief. Of course, the moment of Yizkor can be emotionally trying—so was standing at Sinai. But by standing to remember the ones we loved, inviting their souls into this space, and praying on their behalf, I hope that you feel comforted by their presence and relieved to have had this chance to commune with them once again.

In a moment, we will rise. But first, take a few moments to invite your departed loved ones into this space. Don't worry—the seats won't fill up. The space will spiritually expand to hold as many souls as we need to invite in. Seat each of these precious *neshamot* around you. See their faces smiling at you as they take their seats, holding the same *siddur* that is in your hands, acknowledging your presence with a sense of comfort, grateful to you that you have come today to remember them.