

Sermon: Parshat Bamidbar
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The first full week of the month of May was Teacher Appreciation Week, a time during which teachers are recognized for their efforts in educating the next generation. This year, the teachers of our nation deserved a little extra appreciation. Like many Americans, they too had to learn how to work from home. But their unique role made this transition very complicated. It is true that some school districts were not well-prepared for this pandemic, as if any of us were, and some are still trying to figure out how best to operate under these new circumstances. But our nation's teachers are on the front lines of the fight to maintain a modicum of normalcy for our nation's schoolchildren during these uncertain times. They learned how to use new technologies. They adapted their pedagogy. They created classrooms in the virtual space. For all of their efforts, they deserved to be appreciated this year. I saw in my own home how my wife, Rebecca, worked all hours of the day, teaching live classes each morning and spending the rest of the day, staying up very late in the evening, week after week, building her virtual classroom to make learning come alive for her students. She is not alone in this endeavor. I know that many teachers are at home, doing their very best to manage their households and simultaneously recreate their classrooms to ensure that their students continue to learn and thrive even during a global pandemic. This week's *parsha*, Bamidbar, reminds us to show gratitude to our teachers, for it shows how a teacher is likened to a parent, for they too have invested in the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development of their students.

The third chapter of the Book of Numbers begins,

וְאֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדֹת אֶהְרֹן וּמִשֶּׁה

This is the line of Aaron **and Moses** at the time that Adonai spoke with Moses on Mount Sinai. These were the names of Aaron's sons: Nadab, the first-born, and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar."¹ The text continues to describe Aaron's family, but does not at all mention the names of Moses's sons, even though the Torah just announced that it would do so! This glaring omission from the narrative is for our Sages not a problem, but an opportunity for meaningful interpretation. In his commentary, Rashi cites a teaching from the Talmud: Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says that Rabbi Yonatan says: Anyone who teaches another person's child Torah, the Torah credits them as if they raised them.² Aaron may have been the father to his children, but he was not their only teacher. Their uncle, the leader of their people, Moses, served as a teacher to them, and therefore Moses is given credit for being like a parent to them. It is not that the Torah omits the names of Moses' sons, it is rather that the Torah includes Moses as an additional parent for the sons of Aaron, who he helped to train such that they could serve in their sacred role as priests of Israel, arbiters of the sacrificial rituals and intermediaries between the people and God. The Torah thus ascribes to him the merit of being parent because he was there teacher.

This theme of teacher as parent permeates other aspects of Jewish life. I am grateful to one of my teachers here in this community, Danny Siegel, for sharing with me an important piece of Torah. According to the Rambam, and later codified by other Jewish legalists:

כְּדֶרֶךְ שְׂקוּרַע אָדָם עַל אָבִיו וְעַל אִמּוֹ

Just as a person must tear their garments upon the death of their father or mother;

כִּן חַיֵּב לְקַרֵּעַ עַל רֵבּוֹ שְׁלֵמִדּוֹ תוֹרָה

¹ Numbers 3:1-2.

² Bavli Sanhedrin 19b.

so, too, they are obligated to tear their garments upon the death of one who taught them
Torah.³

One of the most significant markers of the mourner is the torn garment of clothing, often symbolized in our community by the torn black ribbon which rests over the heart of one who has suffered the loss of a parent. According to our tradition, we are also to perform the ritual of *kriyah* when we suffer the loss of a teacher. Once again, our tradition reinforces this notion of teacher as parent, ascribing to them the same honor that one demonstrates to their parents.

This past Thursday, the Rabbinical School at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America held its ordination ceremony. Unsurprisingly, it was all done over Zoom, with the rabbis, administrators, and teachers each in their own Zoom window, to be joined successively by the students about to be ordained as rabbis with their appointed mentor joining in to offer their *bracha*, their blessing. Watching this scene unfold, I look back with deepest appreciation that for me this ceremony took place in person. I could not have appreciated it at the time, but now I fondly remember my mentor, Rabbi Martin S. Cohen, placing his hands upon my shoulders as he recited his *bracha* for me, words that I remember to this very day. Along with my professors, rabbis, and other teachers at JTS, Rabbi Cohen was and still is to me a *rav*, a teacher, akin to a parent, for like a parent he was instrumental in shaping me into the person and the rabbi who I am today. To all of my teachers, from nursery school until now, I say thank you.

In the week ahead, we will celebrate Shavuot, which marks the moment at which God delivered the Torah to the Israelites encamped around the base of Sinai. It is customary to celebrate by staying up all night to study Torah with colleagues and friends, teachers and

³ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Avel 9:2.

students. This year, our celebration will certainly look and feel different. But it need not be any less meaningful. On the contrary, this is a time to make extra efforts to infuse our lives with the words of Torah shared by the numerous teachers who have prepared to share their wisdom with us. I encourage you all to consider the many opportunities for Torah study that will be available next week: an evening of learning with our Federation, a series of online videos recorded by our 10th Grade Confirmation class and by members of this congregation, and a night of learning on Shavuot itself with rabbis from our movement. More details will come in an email on Monday, and I implore you all to take advantage of these most unique offerings. Be for someone their student, and in so doing honor them as if they were your parent.

Teachers come in many different forms. Some work alongside children in classrooms (or in a neighboring Zoom window). Some sit a desk down the hall from your office, where you hope to soon return. Some stand alongside you on a basketball court. Some lead you in music and performance. Whoever has been for you a mentor, whoever has helped to guide you on a journey, they are your teacher. When you learn from them and especially when you put into practice the wisdom which they imparted to you, you demonstrate appreciation for them, and the teacher is thus honored as parent.

Let us not forget some of the greatest teachers of them all—our real parents. I am fortunate to have six, a mother and a stepdad, a dad and stepmom, a mother-in-law and father-in-law. Throughout my life they have been both parents and teachers. Often, I can't tell the difference between the two, and that is precisely the point. May we all merit the opportunity to be for someone their student, and in so doing honor them as both teacher and parent. Thank you to all of the teachers of our world.