

**Torah Tziva Lanu Moshe - The Torah Belongs to All of Us**

Rabbi Eliot Malomet A Simchat Torah Message October 18, 2022 23 Tishrei 5783

**תּוֹרָה צִוְיָה לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה מִרִּשְׁתָּה קִהַלְתָּ יַעֲקֹב:**

**Moses charged us with the Teaching as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob. Deut. 33:4**

Maimonides<sup>2</sup> lists it as one of the first verses that a child should learn even before being able to read. Why would this verse be so important that it would be the first verse that you should teach your child? There are lots of reasons for this. **First**, it gives the child the third word of their vocabulary after *Mama* and *Dadda* or *Abba* and *Ima*, namely, *Torah*. The child will be able to point to the most important object in the public space and identify it. The sense of mastery and relationship will become so deeply embedded in the child, that it will shape his or her life. **Second**, it initiates the child into an understanding of *us*, that is to say, that as soon as the child knows how to talk, the child will have the beginnings of the idea that he or she belongs to a community. **Third**, this verse teaches the child that the Torah is something that belongs to them. We all know that the "mine" stage comes very early in childhood, somewhere around 2 years. As the child begins to navigate the world, this verse functions as the initial bond to his or her tradition. It is the bedrock explanation of identity. Embedded in this verse is the concept that we have a relationship with the Torah because the Torah is our birthright, our inheritance. It belongs to each and every one of us, the elite and the ordinary; the scholar and the layperson, those who consider themselves "wise," and those "who do not know how to ask." Now, read this story on the right. It is about a rabbi who encountered a man of wealth who was illiterate.

**We know this verse** from the song we sometimes sing during the moments when the Torah is being tied and covered after the Hagba. A simple melody, it entered the popular Jewish repertoire as a children's song, sometime in the late 70's.<sup>1</sup> That it is a children's song should not come as a surprise since

מֵאַיִמִּי אָבִיו חַיֵּב לְלַמְדוֹ תּוֹרָה. מִשְׁתַּחֲוֵי לְדַבֵּר מִלְּמַדוֹ (דְּבָרִים ל"ג ד)  
"תּוֹרָה צִוְיָה לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה" ו"שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל" (דְּבָרִים ו' ד), וְאַחַר כֵּן מִלְּמַדוֹ  
מֵעֵט מֵעֵט פְּסוּקִים פְּסוּקִים עַד שִׁיחֵיהָ בֶן שָׁשׁ אֹ בֶן שֶׁבַע הַכֹּל לְפִי בְרִיו.  
וּמוֹלִיכּוֹ אֶצֶל מְלַמֵּד הַתִּינוּקוֹת: הֲלֵי תִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה א:ו

**At what age is a father obligated to teach [his son] Torah? When he begins to speak, he should teach him Torah tzivah lanu Moshe... (Deuteronomy 33:4) and Shema Yisrael... (ibid. 6:4). Afterwards, he should teach him [selected verses], little by little, verse by verse, until he is six or seven - depending on his health - [at which time] he should take him to a teacher of young children. Torah Study 1:6**

Rabbi Yannai was once walking along the road and saw a man who was extremely well dressed. Rabbi Yannai said to him, "Would you like to come over to my house?" The man replied. "Sure." Rabbi Yannai brought him into his home and gave him food and drink. As they were eating and drinking together, he examined him in his knowledge of Bible, and found out that he had none. He examined his knowledge of Mishnah and realized that he had none. His knowledge of legends and saw that he had none. His knowledge of Talmud and saw he had none. Rabbi Yannai then instructed him, "Take the cup and recite grace." The guest replied, "Let Yannai recite grace in his own home." Seeing that his guest could not even recite a blessing, Yannai asked him derisively, "Can you at least repeat what I say?" He answered, "Sure." Rabbi Yannai then said, "Repeat the following: 'A dog. Has. Eaten. Yannai's. Bread!'" Offended, the man stood up, and grabbed Rabbi Yannai by the coat. He then exclaimed, "My inheritance is with you, and you are withholding it from me!" Rabbi Yannai replied with curiosity, "What inheritance of yours is there with me?" The man answered, "Once I passed by a school, and I heard the voices of the little children saying: **Moses gave us the Torah, the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.** They did not say **the inheritance of the congregation of Yannai**, but the **congregation of Jacob!** Having been rebuked Rabbi Yannai then asked him, "How then are you worthy to eat at my table?" The guest replied, "Never have I heard an evil word spoken against me and returned to argue with the person who spoke it. Never have I seen two people arguing without making peace between them." Rabbi Yannai then said, with remorse, "You have so much Derech Eretz and I called you a dog."

<sup>1</sup> The tune was written by (?) and certainly popularized by Toronto born, Moshe Tanenbaum, more popularly known as, "Uncle Moishy" - the well-known children's entertainer for the past 45 years.

<sup>2</sup> This is based on a text in the Talmud (Sukka 43a) אָבִיו מִלְּמַדוֹ תּוֹרָה וּקְרִיאַת שְׁמַע — אָבִיו מִלְּמַדוֹ לְדַבֵּר — *once a child can speak, his father teaches him Torah and the Reading of the Shema*. The Talmud clarifies that **Torah** refers to this verse *Torah tziva lanu...* and *Shema* is a reference to *Sh'ma Yisrael...*

**Commentary:** Yannai, student of Judah the Prince, (1st gen. Amora, 3rd cent.) was an important and wealthy scholar. **Rabbi Yannai was once walking along the road and saw a man who was extremely well dressed.** A curious opening. **מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרַבִּי יַנַּאי שֶׁהָיָה מְהַלֵּךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ וְרָאָה מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרַבִּי יַנַּאי שֶׁהָיָה מְשֻׁפָּע בְּיָתוֹר אָדָם אֶחָד.** The storyteller highlights an unusual feature of this strange man: his beautiful clothing. Clothing is wealth, and Yannai reacts to that with curiosity. What does that say about Yannai? Is he interested only in this man's wealth? His connections? Might they know people in common? Forge a possible relationship? **Rabbi Yannai said to him, "Would you like to come over to my house?" The man replied. "Sure."** There is no exchange of pleasantries. No small talk, no introductions. The invitation is both private and public. Private in the sense that he wants to engage this person and impress him with his own wealth and learning, public in the sense that others would have witnessed the invitation since it was **on the road** (ie. in public) when he met him, and they would have been equally curious. Who's that man going over to Yannai's house? Spiffy! **Rabbi Yannai brought him into his home and gave him food and drink.** Okay. Nothing unusual there. **As they were eating and drinking together, he examined him in his knowledge of Bible, and found out that he had none.** **בְּדָקוֹ בְּמִקְרָא וְלֹא מִצְאוֹ** **He examined his knowledge of Mishnah and realized that he had none. His knowledge of legends and saw that he had none. His knowledge of Talmud and saw he had none.** This is very unusual. Why is Yannai **examining** him? What is the purpose of these tests? It's a kind of jousting, a competition to ascertain who possesses more learning and authority. The kind of thing that scholars do all the time to assert superiority. It signals insecurity but also arrogance. How do you "test" the knowledge of another person? He may have just asked him for a word of Torah, or a teaching from a sage. By peppering his guest with these tests, he establishes his place in the hierarchy of learning and humiliates him. The contrast between the two is clear. While they are both wealthy, one has learning, the other, humility. Why doesn't the guest get up and leave? Because he still hopes to learn from him. **Rabbi Yannai then instructed him, "Take the cup and recite grace."** The invitation to lead the *birkat hamazon* is an order. Yannai feels he has wasted his time with this man and wants to get the meal over with, giving his guest one last chance to prove himself. The guest declines, possibly out of embarrassment, and defers to Yannai. **The guest replied, "Let Yannai recite grace in his own home." (Seeing that his guest could not even recite a blessing, Yannai asked him derisively), "Can you at least repeat what I say?" He answered, "Sure."** The man of lofty Torah knowledge - but no Torah ethics - momentarily inverts the essence of Torah by making one of the gravest transgressions: humiliating another human

being. **Rabbi Yannai then said, "Repeat after me: 'A dog. Has. Eaten. Yannai's. Bread!'"** There is a double irony here. Having ascertained that his guest is illiterate in Torah, Yannai is setting him up as if he is going to teach him an important verse or proverb through repetition. Instead, he tricks the guest into mocking himself. **Offended, the man stood up, and grabbed him.** The anger is palpable. But he does not strike him. Grabbing him (or his garment) is a plaintive act. He doesn't throw a punch. In anguish **he then exclaimed, "My inheritance is with you, and you are withholding it from me!"** This stuns Yannai. At first, he is confused. Like anyone who uses the word 'inheritance' he assumes for a split second that this man is contesting a piece of property. **Rabbi Yannai replied with curiosity, "What inheritance of yours is there with me?"** The scholar can't understand the illiterate guest's use of the metaphor! **The man answered, "Once I passed by a school, and I heard the voices of the little children saying: Moses gave us the Torah, the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.** Note the irony! The illiterate guest is teaching the great scholar the essence of the most elementary verse in the entire Torah! When Yannai was testing him, he concealed this verse because it is a child's verse and he didn't want to embarrass himself. But now comes the punch line: **They did not say the inheritance of the congregation of Yannai, but the congregation of Jacob!** Wow! What a line! The guest "out-rabbis" the rabbi! The Torah uses the explicit term, *congregation of Jacob* to prove that it is not the sole possession of any one single individual or scholar. **(Having been rebuked) Rabbi Yannai then asked him, "How then are you worthy to eat at my table?"** In other words, what's so good about you anyway? **The guest replied, "Never have I heard an evil word spoken against me and returned to argue with the person who spoke it. Never have I seen two people arguing without making peace between them."** And in this instant an evil word was spoken against him, by Yannai, and he was trying to bring peace between two people: Yannai and himself. **Rabbi Yannai then said, with remorse, "You have so much Derech Eretz and I called you a dog."** An admission and a comeuppance. The wealthy guest, through his graciousness and respect (*derech eretz*), emerges as the more authentic Torah teacher than the great scholar and affirms that no single person is above another when it comes to our shared inheritance of Torah. **What is the takeaway?** The most basic verse of the Torah, a verse so important that it is taught to children even before they are capable of speech, underscores the right that everyone has, to add his or her own voice to Torah. What makes the Torah great, is that it belongs to all of us. Every one of us can take possession of it as if it were given to us personally. Every one of us, no matter how literate, can add our voice to the eternal Torah conversation.

