

The Gift That Keeps On Giving¹⁴

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In *Masechet Berachot* Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi makes a striking comment:

Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi says: Anyone who teaches his son Torah, it is as if he has received it from Har Chorev, as it says: "And you shall make them known to your children and to your grandchildren," and this is juxtaposed to [the verse], "The day that you stood before God at Chorev."

Berachot 21b

... אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: כל המלמד לבנו תורה - מעלה עליו הכתוב כאלו קבלה מהר חורב, שנאמר (דברים ד') והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך, וכתוב בתרייה: יום אשר עמדת לפני ה' אלהיך בחורב.
ברכות כא:

In *Masechet Kiddushin*, however, we find a different version of this statement:

Rabbi Yehoshua the son of Levi says: Anyone who teaches his grandson Torah, it is as if he has received it from Har Sinai, as it says: "And you shall make them known to your children and to your grandchildren," and this is juxtaposed to [the verse], "The day that you stood before God at Chorev."

Kiddushin 30a

אמר ריב"ל: כל המלמד את בן בנו תורה, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קבלה מהר סיני, שנאמר: והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך, וסמך ליה: יום אשר עמדת לפני ה' אלהיך בחורב.
קידושין ל.

Three questions jump out from these texts. First, to whom does the word עליו refer—the teacher (father or grandfather) or the student (son or grandson)? Is Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi saying that when the son or grandson learns it is as if the learner has received the Torah from Mount Sinai, or that when father or grandfather teaches it is as if the teacher has received the Torah from Mount Sinai? Second, according to the *girsah* in *Berachot*, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi asserts that teaching one's son replicates the Sinaitic experience, while according to the *girsah* in *Kiddushin* he states that teaching one's grandson replicates the experience of Revelation. What is the logic of each position? Third, if we are to consider these two *girsasot* mutually exclusive as do some Rishonim¹⁵, what is the difference between them? In particular, it would seem that the father is the primary educator of his child. What could the grandfather possibly contribute that the father cannot?

¹⁴ I would like to thank my husband Rabbi Tzvi Sinensky for his helpful comments and suggestions.

¹⁵ See the *Rif* and *Rosh* on *Kiddushin* who have the *girsah* of רבנן. See also the *Bach* to *Tur Y.D. 245:3*.

To answer our three questions, we must first understand the meaning of the phrase “*ke’ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*.” What about the Sinaitic Revelation is Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi pinpointing when he makes these statements? Let’s analyze the three other places in Tannaitic literature where this phrase appears in order to ascertain its meaning.

Anyone who desists from Torah study is as if he denies God, for the Torah was given to Israel to engage in it day and night, as it says, ‘And you should meditate upon it day and night etc.’, and it says, ‘for the Torah of God is his desire etc.’ And anyone who engages in Torah and keeps it, it is as if he has received it from Mount Sinai.

Midrash Tanchuma Re’eh 1

... כל מי שמתבטל מן התורה כאלו כופר בהקב"ה, שלא נתן תורה לישראל אלא כדי שיעסקו בה יומם ולילה שנאמר (יהושע א) והגית בו יומם ולילה וגו', וכתוב (תהלים א) כי אם בתורת ה' חפצו וגו', וכל העוסק בתורה ומקיימה כאלו קבלה מהר סיני.
מדרש תנחומא פרשת ראה סימן א

Any mitzvah that has been forgotten from Israel and a prophet or wise man comes and clarifies it anew, it as if he has received it from Mount Sinai.

Pesikta Zutra Matot 140b

וכן כל מצוה ומצוה שמשתכחת מישראל ובא נביא או חכם לחדשה על בוריה כאלו הוא קבלה מהר סיני ...
פסיקתא זוטרתא (לקח טוב) במדבר פרשת מטות דף קמ עמוד ב

And Rabbi Yehoshua son of Abba said in the name of Rav Gidel who said in the name of Rav, ‘One who grabs a Torah Scroll from the marketplace is as if he grabs a mitzvah from the marketplace; if he writes it, it is as if he has received it from Mount Sinai. Rav Sheshet says, ‘If he edits even one letter, it is as if he has written it.

Menachot 30a

וא"ר יהושע בר אבא אמר רב גידל אמר רב: הלוקח ס"ת מן השוק - כחוטף מצוה מן השוק, כתבו - מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו קיבלו מהר סיני. אמר רב ששת: אם הגיה אפי' אות אחת, מעלה עליו כאילו כתבו.
מנחות ל.

What is the common denominator between all these instances where the phrase “*ke’ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*” is used¹⁶?

All of the individuals about whom it says “*ke’ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*” —one who learns and keeps Torah, one who revives and clarifies a forgotten a *mitzvah*, and one who writes a *Sefer Torah*—have found personal meaning in the laws and values of the Torah, and as a result are involved in preserving Torah so that others can experience its relevance as well¹⁷. This understanding of the phrase “*ke’ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*” is beautifully supported by the striking similarity to the opening words of the first *Mishna* in *Avot*, “*Moshe kibel Torah mei-Sinai*.” Many of the commentators note that while it says “*Moshe kibel*,” it does not say, “*Yehoshua kibel*,” but rather “*Umesara l’Yehoshua!*” Why? The language of “*kibel*,” as we have demonstrated, is used to connote a personal encounter with Torah, as was surely experienced by

¹⁶ My analysis assumes that the phrase “*ke’ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*” means the same thing throughout Tannaitic literature. I believe that the examination of the sources makes this assumption quite compelling, although it is theoretically possible that in each context the phrase means something different.

¹⁷ The relationship between experiencing Torah as relevant and therefore sharing it with others is similar to Rambam’s understanding of the commandment to love God. In *Sefer HaMitzvoth* 1:3 Rambam states that part of the mitzvah of loving God is facilitating others to love God as well.

Moshe who himself received it from God. *Yehoshua's* encounter with Torah, however, was not as personal and therefore the language of "*kibel*" is utilized.

With this interpretation of "*ke'ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*" in mind we can return to each of the three sources where the phrase appears in order to fully appreciate its meaning.

According to the *Tanchuma*, when a person learns Torah and observes its precepts, he affirms that the Torah that was given to the Jewish people thousands of years ago is relevant to him and he is therefore driven to engage himself in its perpetuation through study and practice; if this were not the case, why would he learn and practice Torah in the first place!? The *Tanchuma's* proof texts, "*ki im beTorat Hashem cheftzo*" and "*vehigitah bo yomam valayla*" serve to underscore the passion for Torah that one feels when he experiences Torah as personally meaningful. When a person does not learn Torah, however, the *Tanchuma* says that it is as if he denies God. Why? Perhaps the *Tanchuma* maintains not that one is denying God's existence in the philosophical sense, but rather is contesting the fact that Torah, a primary expression of God in this world, has what to offer about the world today.

The *Pesikta* also utilizes the phrase "*ke'ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*" as a way of describing a person who perpetuates the existence of Torah because he understands its eternal nature. When the prophet or scholar clarifies to other Jews a *mitzvah* that has been forgotten, he essentially declares that all the *mitzvot* of the Torah are pertinent. Every single *mitzvah*, he claims, even a "*mitzvah shemishtakachat mi-Yisrael*"—a *mitzvah* that has been forgotten from Israel—is important for future generations and must be preserved! We may not, exclaims the scholar, leave this *mitzvah* to be buried in the annals of history. All *mitzvot* bear relevance to all generations! Therefore, the scholar takes upon himself the act of reviving this *mitzvah*.

Let us now address the *Gemara* in *Menachot*. The writing of a *Sefer Torah* is perhaps the most powerful way of communicating the timelessness of Torah. Ensuring the perpetuation of an ancient document makes the powerful statement that while it may have distant origins, it resonates with contemporary man as well. In the physical-historical realm, the Torah is ancient; in the spiritual realm, the Torah is brand new. But it is only one who writes or edits the *Sefer Torah* fulfills the dictum, "*ke'ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*." Why? Because he does not just *passively* acquire a Torah by employing someone else to write it; he is **actively** involved in crafting a Torah of his own. .

With this understanding of "*ke'ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*," we can now answer our original questions. Who is the referent of the word עֲלִי, the one who has "received it from Sinai"—the teacher or the student? In all three contexts where the phrase appears it clearly refers to the individual – the one studies and practices Torah, the prophet or scholar who clarifies a forgotten *mitzvah*, and the author of a *Sefer Torah* – who is actively engaged in communicating the eternal import of Torah. Based on how the phrase is used in these contexts, it would seem that in the

statements of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi as well, the one who has “received it from Sinai” must be the teacher—the father or grandfather¹⁸-- who is involved in this task as well.

The underlying logic of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s statements is now clear as well. Why does he say that when one teaches his son or grandson Torah it is as if he received it from Mount Sinai? For the father or grandfather, teaching Torah does not entail the mere communication of facts; it is a passionate gesture in which the teacher strives to communicate to his progeny that Torah is meaningful to *the teacher himself*, and therefore is pertinent to his children and grandchildren as well. Through the act of teaching¹⁹, the instructor becomes part of the material that he imparts, serving as a role model for what can happen when a person allows Torah to speak to him and penetrate his soul.

Let us finally address the conceptual difference between Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s two statements, in particular the unique contribution of the grandfather. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi would agree that both the parent and grandparent testify about the timeless nature of Torah by transmitting it to their progeny. I propose that when the *grandfather* is active in transmitting Torah to his grandson who is two generations beyond him, the grandfather essentially declares that Torah is truly eternal. It is not applicable just to him, and will not be relevant just to his son, but to *all* future generations; it is timeless. This is “*ke’ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*” par excellence.²⁰

As we celebrate the historical event of *Matan Torah* this Shavuot, let each and every one of us strive to be Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi’s hero: one who has sought out the relevance of Torah and is spurred to share with others this gift that keeps on giving. May it be said about us, “*ke’ilu kibalnu ha-Torah mei-Har Sinai*,” that “it is as if we ourselves have received the Torah from Har Sinai.”

¹⁸ One could offer a number of plausible explanations for the position that the referent is the student—the son or the grandson. However, based on the other contexts in which “*ke’ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*” is used, I believe that it is referring to the teacher—in this case, the father or grandfather.

¹⁹ In light of this analysis, it appears that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi would not say that it is “*ke’ilu kiblah mei-Har Sinai*” when one merely facilitates the transmission of Torah by hiring a teacher but rather only by teaching personally.

²⁰ For a moving development of this theme, see “The First Jewish Grandfather” in *Reflections of the Rav*, vol. 2.