



What is the First Torah Verse to Teach Ourselves and Our Children?

Torah Teachings with Mother's Milk

When each of our two sons were babies, I would sing to *them*, "[Torah, Torah Torah Torah Torah, Torah tzivah lanu Moshe! U'morasha Kehillat Ya'acov, Umorasha Kehillat Ya'acov, Torah tzivah lanu Moshe.](#)" ("Moshe taught us the Torah, it is an inheritance to the congregation of Ya'acov.") I wanted these words to be the very first words my children would hear, in order to instill within them a love of our Holy Torah – our spiritual inheritance as Jews. This, according to the advice of my teachers and mentors, was so that this Torah verse would be the very first verse of the Torah for young children to know by heart. I later learned that the words of my song are in fact the first "Torah" that we are supposed to teach our children. As it states, "From when is the father obligated to teach [his children] Torah? As soon as they begin to talk, he must teach them, "*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe...*" (Rambam, *Mishnah Torah, Laws of Talmud Torah* 1:6). I wanted to do more than required. Why wait until the baby begins to speak? – surely our children can listen to words of Torah even beforehand. Moreover, why should only fathers teach the babies Torah, when the mother spends much more time with her children, during their first formative years? So, I figured, just as Rabbi Yochanan's mother would send him, in his crib, to sit in the Beit Midrash and be exposed to the Torah learning there, I, too, would follow in her footsteps and expose my children as much as possible to Torah from their youngest age. Whereas, some Torah authorities (Rabbi Akiva Eiger, *Gilyon Hashas, Sukkah* 2b; Magen Avraham, *Orach Chaim* 343:1) exempt mothers from the responsibility to teach their children Torah, the Meiri holds that a mother is obligated to train her son, if there is no father. Rashi (*Chagiga* 2a) and Tosafot (*Eruvin* 82a) go even further to obligate the mother to teach her children Torah and mitzvot even if there is a father. This latter view seems to me to be substantiated by the wise words of King Solomon:

שְׁמַע בְּנִי מוֹסֵר אָבִיךָ וְאַל-תִּטַּשׁ תּוֹרַת אִמְךָ: (משלי פרק א פסוק ח)

"Listen, my son, to the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the Torah of your mother" (*Mishlei* 1:8).

Obligated or not, do we not bring blessings when doing more than required?!

Who Needs Commandments or Teachers?

The final portion of the Torah, *Parshat V'Zot Habracha* contains the very first verse that we teach our children:

דְּבָרִים פָּרַק לָג פְּסוּק ד תּוֹרָה צִוְיָה לָנוּ מֹשֶׁה מֹרְשָׁה קְהֵלֵת יִעֲקֹב:

"The Torah that Moses commanded us is a legacy for the congregation of Ya'acov" (*Devarim* 33:4).

Why is this specific verse chosen to be the very first Torah words we teach our children? Perhaps because our Torah verse teaches two fundamental lessons: 1. The concept of obligation *צוה/tzivah* – 'commanded' 2. The vital importance to learn from a teacher, Moshe.

In our time, the word, "commandment" is almost like an F (forbidden) word, which is not politically correct to mention even in passing. People don't want to be commanded from the 'outside.' They would rather choose to keep only the things which they connect with from within. Therefore, in certain liberal Jewish circles the word, 'mitzvah' is mistranslated as 'good deed.' Yet, human perception is limited, and many great people have been persuaded by charismatic demagogues to participate in heinous crimes, believing they were performing good deeds. Sometimes our own 'inner voice' may even tempt us to "...change darkness to light, and light to darkness; change bitter into

sweet, and sweet into bitter!" (*Yesha'yahu* 5:20). By contrast, Hashem's commandments, which Moshe, His faithful shepherd, instructed us, are not external commands imposed from the outside. Rather, they are divine laws conceived by none other than the ultimate Creator, Who desires our benefit and knows us inside and out: "For the soul of humanity is Hashem's candle, which searches out all the innermost parts" (*Mishlei* 20:27).

This leads us to the second point – the importance to learn from a teacher. Today there is so much information out there, which we can easily collect on our own, without the help of any teacher other than 'Rabbi Google.' Yet, in order to ensure that we understand the information in an integrated way, that will truly help us grow, we need a holy teacher to keep us on track. Otherwise, we could easily be tempted to cut and paste as we please and adapt the information – that we glean – to gratify the vile desires of our ego.

Embracing Our Torah Heritage with Utmost Toil and Devotion

The second half of our Torah verse gives rise to some questions. What exactly does מוֹרָשָׁה/*morasha* mean and why use the term יְעֻקֵב/יְעֻקֵב/יְעֻקֵב/יְעֻקֵב/*kehillat Ya'acov* rather than בֵּית יְעֻקֵב/*Beit Ya'acov* – 'the house of Ya'acov,' or זֶרַע יְעֻקֵב/*zera Ya'acov* – 'the seed of Ya'acov'? There are divergent opinions regarding מוֹרָשָׁה/*morasha*, which can imply an 'inheritance' which a person receives without any effort. According to HaEmek Davar, the unlearned Jews referred to by the phrase "*kehillat Ya'acov*," merit their portion in the Torah through the scholars who immerse themselves in Torah study. Since it is difficult to acquire Torah while being preoccupied with earning a living, it is possible to receive it as a "*morasha*" by merely ensuring that Torah learning is supported and upheld. Yet, Rambam understands "*morasha*" to mean a gift in which we need to invest in order that we may fully appreciate and take advantage of what we have received. Ramban answers our second question by explaining that *kehillat Ya'acov* alludes to the many gentiles who join Israel and thereby get an equal share in the heritage of the Torah. The Torah is an eternal inheritance for both Ya'acov (Jews by birth) and those who הִנְקִיחוּ/יְעֻקֵב/*hanikhalim* – 'join' the Children of Israel (Jews by choice). Together they are called יְעֻקֵב/יְעֻקֵב/יְעֻקֵב/יְעֻקֵב/*kehillat Ya'akov* (Ramban, *Devarim* 33:4). Perhaps, the effort and toil invested by those who enter the world of Torah from the outside is meant to inspire the natural heirs of the Torah who are born within its fold, teaching us that a mere born Jew can become a Jew by choice through embracing our Torah heritage with utmost toil and devotion.