

Knowledge and Power: Teaching the Awesomeness

By Yossi Ives

After discussing the counting of the Tribes of Israel, the Torah turns to the Tribe of Levi, which was not included in the count.

The chapter about the Levites begins:

“These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses on the day that the L-rd spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai.”¹

Yet, in reality, only Aaron’s children are mentioned in the subsequent verses. Nothing at all is said about Moses’ children (of which we know he had two).

Rashi, as one would expect, addresses this problem.

Citing the words from the first half of the verse, “These are the descendants of Moses and Aaron,” Rashi comments:

“Yet only the sons of Aaron are mentioned [and not those of Moses]?! However, [the children of Aaron] are considered as if they were descendants of Moses because he taught them Torah. This teaches us that whoever teaches Torah to the son of his fellow man, Scripture regards it as if he had begotten him.”

This means that the sons of Aaron mentioned in the following verse are also regarded as belonging to Moses, because in the eyes of the Torah Moses was their “spiritual parent.”

Rashi then cites the second half of the aforementioned verse, “on the day that the L-rd spoke to Moses,” and comments:

“They became his descendants, because he taught them what he had learned from the Almighty [literally, ‘from the mouth of the Mighty One’].”

The obvious question arises: Isn’t Rashi’s second comment simply a repetition of his first?

Not only does Rashi seem to repeat himself, but his two comments seem to display a significant discrepancy. In the first comment, we are told that the sons of Aaron are “*considered as if* they were descendants of Moses,”

whereas the second response tells us, “they *became* his descendants.”

Now, saying that something is “considered as if” suggests that the thing in question is not really that way, but we are willing to treat it as such. On the other hand, saying it “became” something, implies that it is actually so. Which is it here: only “as if” or it actually “became”?

There is a second striking difference between Rashi’s two comments. In the first, he uses clearer language to explain why Aaron’s sons were described as Moses’ descendants: “because he taught them **Torah**.” Could not be clearer.

In the second comment, however, Rashi instead adopts an elongated and euphemistic phrase: “because he taught them **what he had learned from the Almighty**.” We may presume this refers to the Torah, for what else did Moses learn from the Almighty? If it was fine to use the word Torah in the first comment, why not stick with that word throughout?

It seems that the second comment is twice as long, yet half as clear.

Characteristically, the Rebbe widens our viewfinder to see the broader context. In doing so, not only do we arrive at a satisfying understanding of the verse and Rashi’s comments, but we also develop a far deeper understanding of the subject matter.

The key here, the Rebbe explains, is in the second half of the verse, “These are the descendants of Aaron and Moses *on the day that the L-rd spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai*.” What do those words even mean? Why are we being told who Aaron’s children were on one particular day?

Rashi’s second comment is intended to address *this* question. The Torah mentions “on the day that the L-rd spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai” to add an important detail, explains Rashi.

The first half simply allows us to consider Aaron’s sons as if they were also the children of Moses. The second half, however, makes it clear that in the view of the Torah, they indeed “became his descendants.”

How could this happen? Rashi resolves that by stating that Moses “taught them **what he had learned from the Almighty**.”

Moses was unique in all of history in that he communed with G-d on Sinai for 40 days and nights, during which time he not only received the laws and teachings of the Torah, but also acquired its holiness and sacred spiritual content.

Teaching someone by imparting knowledge is a form of parenting. Rashi returns to this theme several times. For example, in the Shema we are enjoined, “You shall teach it to your children.”² To this, Rashi comments, “‘These’ [your children] refers to students. We find in all places that students are called children.”

The first half of our verse, says Rashi, is following this widespread notion that a teacher is a kind of parent, because the teacher provides vital spiritual sustenance. Moses taught Aaron’s sons all the Torah they knew and was rightly given the honorific title of parent.

The second half of the verse, however, goes much further. It recognizes that beyond the Torah knowledge Moses shared, he was the **only** person who could also impart “what he had learned from the Almighty.”

Hence, Rashi uses the title “Almighty,” denoting that Moses conveyed to Aaron’s sons something of the awesomeness and spiritual power that he had experienced. From Moses they received much more than information and knowledge; they became the recipients of a first-hand account of the inner dynamics of Divine revelation.

Being taught this extraordinary insight by Moses himself led them to be truly reborn. Hence, Rashi says, from the Torah learning (addressed in the first comment) it was *as if* he was their parent, but due to the transformative effect of sharing what he learned “that the L-rd spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai” Moses actually *became* their parent.

There is a powerful lesson here for all of us. When we teach people words of Torah, we are giving them spiritual sustenance of such importance that the Torah considers us to have parented them. If we reveal to others the inner sacredness of Judaism such that they are transformed by it, the Torah credits us with their actual rebirth. The first Torah commandment to “be fruitful and multiply”³ refers also to the rejuvenating impact we can have through spiritual renewal.

Adapted from Likkutei Sichot, vol. 23, Parshat Bamidbar II.

FOOTNOTES

1. Numbers 3:1.
2. Deuteronomy 6:7.
3. Genesis 1:28.

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