

## Stealth Tora Teachers

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Parshat Noach

The Yeshiva and/or Beit Midrash has been the institution in which Tora has been formally transmitted from teacher to student, from generation to generation, as well as the context in which students of Tora have conducted their religious studies for time immemorial. While it is both plausible and understandable to find historical and literary evidence of Tora study centers once the Tora has been given, the Rabbis surprisingly posit that similar educational settings existed prior to even the Revelation on Sinai. The most legendary of such “Yeshivot” was the school headed by Shem, one of Noach’s three sons (Beraishit 6:10), and Ever, Shem’s grandson (Ibid., 10:24.)

### ***An example of a literary problem that is solved according to some commentators by assuming the existence of an ancient Tora academy:***

Aside from the myriad central religious questions raised by the story of the binding of Isaac,<sup>1</sup> an issue that appears essentially textual in nature concerns Beraishit 22:19. If in fact Avraham heeded the last-minute Divine Instruction not to harm his son Yitzchak (v. 12), why do we read that only Avraham returned to the youths waiting at the foot of the mountain? Where was Yitzchak? Furthermore, Yitzchak is disconcertingly absent during the mourning for and burial of his beloved mother Sara (23:1-20). Only in Chapter 24 do we read about Avraham’s orchestrating a search for a wife for his son, and Yitzchak’s finally coming out to meet Rivka upon her and Eliezer’s return from Aram Naharaim (v. 63 ff.) Where had Yitzchak been for all this time? Even if one would accept the contention of Ibn Ezra on 22:19 that because Yitzchak is being directed by his father in all matters, it is not necessary to mention him coming down Har HaMoriah, the son’s not publicly mourning for his mother—we read in 24:67 that he was not comforted regarding her death until he married Rivka—would appear to suggest that he had gone elsewhere and was no longer physically with his father. A hypothesis intended to account for Yitzchak’s disappearance, is cited in Beraishit Rabba 56:11:

R. Berechya in the name of the Rabbis explained that Avraham sent Yitzchak to Shem<sup>2</sup> (one of Noach’s three sons—see e.g., Beraishit 10:1) in order to study

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., If human sacrifice is prohibited according to Jewish law, how could God Command Avraham to sacrifice his son? Why did Avraham not challenge this Commandment in light of the promise that Yitzchak was to be his heir? If God is Omniscient, why is it necessary to “test” anyone, let alone Avraham who is believed to have done a great deal already to demonstrate his belief in God?

<sup>2</sup> The reason why Shem is identified as the source of Tora teaching is probably based upon the particular blessing that Noach bestows upon Shem, following the sordid account of the father’s drunkenness and his being discovered by Cham in a state of undress:

Beraishit 9:26-7

And he said, “Blessed is God, the God of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant.

And God will Enlarge Yefet, and He will Dwell in the tents of Shem, and Canaan shall be his servant.

In addition to a close association between God and Shem (this is also probably the basis of the tradition that MalkiTzedek, referred to in Beraishit 14:18 as a “Priest to the God on High,” is Shem [see RaShI on this verse, based upon Nedarim 32b,] carrying the title that comes with being the king of the city state

Tora. A parable: This is like a woman who became wealthy as a result of the skilled use of a spindle, and therefore said, 'Since from this spindle I have been successful, I shall forever keep it with me.' Similarly Avraham said, "All that I have is the result of my delving into Tora and Mitzvot."<sup>3</sup> Therefore he never wished that this learning depart from his offspring.<sup>4</sup>

***The Midrashic solution for what happened to Yitzchak, in turn generates a new assumption regarding Avraham's formative years of which extremely little is known:***<sup>5</sup>

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"Shalem,") the invocation of the term "tents" also generates the image of places of study, as stated by RaShI on the verse describing the young Yaakov's distinguishing characteristic:

Beraishit 25:27 "...and Yaakov, a simple man, dweller of tents."

RaShI "Dweller of tents"—the tent of Shem and the tent of Ever.

as well as the Talmud:

Berachot 63b

Said Reish Lakish: From where do we know that the words of Tora will not be preserved/remembered except by one who "kills" himself over them? (BaMidbar 19:14) "This is the law—A person who dies in the tent..."

Whereas the tent is a typical shelter for those leading nomadic existences, and serves as a dwelling only when the individual spending his time primarily out of doors needs a place to sleep or eat, the Rabbinic tradition assumes that there were those like Shem, Ever and Yaakov whose most significant hours were spent inside the "tent," studying and contemplating God and God's Word.

<sup>3</sup> Although this entire train of thought could be dismissed as an acute anachronism, since how could "Tora" be studied before it was Revealed by God to man, there is a Rabbinic tradition that the seven Noachide laws, particularly in light of RaMBaN's comment on Beraishit 34:13 where the commentator states that "Dinim" (lit. laws) represents the requirement that even non-Jewish societies establish an entire civil and criminal code, were sufficiently complex that they required intense study in order to allow for their implementation. Furthermore, according to Sanhedrin 56b, the Noachide Commandments originate in the Garden of Eden, in effect the beginning of human civilization. Consequently, such a system of law believed in by monotheists has been extant long before the Tora was Given on Sinai.

<sup>4</sup> The assumption that Avraham is not only concerned about Yitzchak marrying and having children, but also his son's becoming proficient in the tradition of Tora and Mitzvot, is consistent with HaShem's evaluation of Avraham's distinctive quality that contributed to his Being Chosen to found the Jewish people:

Beraishit 18:18-9

Avraham will certainly be a great and mighty nation and all the nations of the earth will bless using them as the model of success.

Because I know him that he will command his offspring and his household to follow his example, and they will observe the Way of God to do righteousness and justice in order for God to Bring about all that He Spoke to him.

Just as contemporary Jewish parents, despite their having the obligation to educate their children, appoint as surrogates Rabbis and teachers to teach their children Tora, why should Avraham not have done the same vis-à-vis Yitzchak?

<sup>5</sup> It is extremely curious that there are no explicit references in the biblical text to Avraham's qualifications for God's Choosing him to be the founder of the Jewish people, other than the verse cited above in fn. 4, which emphasizes God's Knowing what Avraham was capable of, rather than what he actually achieved. Examples of Rabbinic literature that attribute to Avraham great heroism and faith regarding his commitment to monotheism can be found in my article, "Abraham: Pioneer Religious Educator, Paradigm for Contemporary Teachers of Judaism," fn. 37, in ed. Rafael Medoff, Rav Chesed; Essays in Honor of Rabbi Doctor Haskel Lookstein, vol. 1, Ktav, Jersey City, 2009, pp.49-51.

The Midrash cited above not only posits that Yitzchak became a student of Shem during the period when he ostensibly disappears from the text between the Akeida and his marriage, but that Avraham himself had also studied within such a context. It is for this reason that Avraham had all along intended for his son Yitzchak at some point to replicate the important experience that he himself had undergone. Just as Yitzchak's near death as a sacrifice might have precipitated Avraham's realization that he must now find a wife for his son,<sup>6</sup> so too he could have been galvanized to decide that no more time should be allowed to pass before Yitzchak obtain a proper spiritual education by attending Avraham's alma mater. Avoda Zara 14b suggests that at least the quantity, if not also the quality, of the subject matter that Avraham, the literal and figurative iconoclast of his time, mastered during his education, differs from our contemporary texts.

R. Chisda said to Avimi: There is a tradition that the tractate Avoda Zora of our father Avraham consisted of four hundred chapters...<sup>7</sup>

It is not unreasonable that an individual who is described by the Midrash as a literal iconoclast,<sup>8</sup> and who, according to RaMBaM<sup>9</sup> engaged in public debates with idolaters in order to attempt to advance his concept of monotheism, would have invested significant time to learn all that he could regarding issues of belief. While at least one Rabbinic tradition assumes that Avraham was an autodidact in terms of his religious development,<sup>10</sup> it would make sense that at least some of his quest for knowledge and understanding, probably following his epiphany of realizing that there was a single God (see Berashit Rabba 39:1) would take place under the tutelage of others.

***Once Avraham and Yitzchak are assumed to have attended this Tora academy, the assertion that Yaakov spent time there is hardly surprising:***

A second temporary disappearance that is attributed to time spent in study at the Yeshiva of Shem and his great grandson Ever (see Beraishit 10:21-24) is discussed by RaShI on 28:9. The commentator calculates the years of Yishmael, the amounts of time that Yaakov spends with Lavan, and Yaakov's age when he first meets Pharoah, and concludes that 14 years are missing. RaShI asserts that the years between the time that he obtains Yitzchak's blessings and when he finally arrives in Charan were spent in the very same "Yeshiva of Ever." The chain of information from Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov is then passed to Yosef, Yaakov's (37:3) "Ben Zekunim" (child of wisdom.) According to Beraishit Rabba 84:8.

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<sup>6</sup> See RaShI on Beraishit 22:20.

<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Tractate Avoda Zora as we have it in the Babylonian Talmud, is comprised of only five chapters. R. Chisda cites Avraham's example in awe, and continues, "...We have only five chapters, and we still do not understand the material."

<sup>8</sup> See Beraishit Rabba 38:13 for the stories in which Avraham engages in idol smashing.

<sup>9</sup> Mishna Tora, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim, 1:3.

<sup>10</sup> Beraishit Rabba 95:3 "...Until this point the Tora has not been given, and yet it is written (Beraishit 26:5) '...and he guarded My Guardings...' From where did Avraham learn My Tora? R. Shimon said: His two kidneys functioned like two pitchers of water and they would pour out water unceasingly...R. Levi said: He learned Tora from himself...R. Yonatan Sar HaBira said: Avraham even fulfilled the rules of Eiruv Tavshilin...And how old was Avraham when he recognized his Creator? He was 48. Reish Lakish said: He was 3...

R. Nechemia said: All of the laws that Shem and Ever taught Yaakov, were given to him (Yosef).<sup>11</sup> He also made for him a coat of many colors...

***The Yeshiva is similarly invoked to account for Rivka's curiosity and reception of prophecy regarding her difficult pregnancy:***

Even our foremothers were associated with this institution, when RaShI (25:22) explains that the "struggle" between the twin fetuses within Rivka was exacerbated by Yaakov's trying to exit her womb when "she would pass in front of the doorways of Tora of Shem and Ever." Furthermore, the manner in which "she went to inquire of HaShem" as to why she was having all of these difficulties, was, according to Rabbinic tradition by

Yalkut Shimoni Toldot 110,  
Going to the House of Study of Shem and Ever, which comes to teach that whomever seeks out the presence of a Tora scholar is equivalent to one seeking out the Divine Presence Itself.

***Why might Shem and Ever have been singled out as the leaders of this Tora academy?***

The significance attributed to these two individuals, Shem and Ever, would seem to beg the question as to their accomplishments and how they rose to such prominence and fame. Yet the Tora is remarkably silent when it comes to relating virtually anything about these two individuals. On the one hand, Shem, Noach's son, in contrast to his sibling Cham, shows respect to his naked, drunken father, when he backs into his father's tent and covers his nakedness (9:23). Noach repays him by bestowing upon him a blessing (v. 26-27) that suggests that of all of the earth's civilizations, the descendants of Shem (Semites) will enjoy HaShem's Presence most immanently and immediately. Yet, despite his brother Yefet's equal assistance in order to cover their father, the latter's blessing pales in comparison to the one given by Noach to Shem. We have no indication that Shem did anything additionally that would set him so much apart from Yefet.<sup>12</sup>

As for Ever, no action at all is attributed to him. The Tora does appear to draw attention to Ever in 10:21, when it identifies Shem as "the father of all of the children of Ever..." However, commentators like RaShI and RaMBaN understand this to mean that Shem was the forefather of the "Ivrim", those who "came from the other 'Ever' (side) of the river." Just as Avraham was not indigenous to Canaan, but came from the Northeast, the other side of Ever HaYarden (bank of the Jordan River), and therefore he is referred to as Avraham the Ivri (14:13), so too will his descendents be known as Ivri'im. It is only Sephorno who claims that the appellation for the

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<sup>11</sup> Perhaps the assumption that Yosef was the repository of the collection of wisdom that began with Avraham's studying at the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever was an additional reason why Yaakov went into deep depression when he is told that Yosef had been killed by a wild animal. How was the tradition going to be passed on to the ensuing generations when its possessor had been eliminated?

<sup>12</sup> It might be contended from the order in which Noach's sons are listed in the Tora that Shem was the oldest, and hence the Bechor. (If this were true, then it would also be a singular departure from the Tora's apparent anti-primogeniture stand discussed in the Dvar Tora for Beraishit 5764 [see [www.kmsynagogue.org/Rabbi.html](http://www.kmsynagogue.org/Rabbi.html) .) However Sanhedrin 69b demonstrates textually that in fact Shem was the youngest, and the order in which they are listed "is in order of their wisdom."

people does not stem from a geographical detail, but rather from the ancestor Ever who was dedicated to understand and teach the concepts of God's Existence, His Omniscience, and His Omnipotence. A more subtle claim made for Ever's exceptional spirituality appears in RaShI on 10:25. Reacting to the Tora's explaining the name of one of Ever's sons, Peleg, "because during his lifetime the peoples of the world were dispersed"—the addition of this information is unique in terms of the other names appearing in Chapter 10—RaShI suggests that by Ever naming his son Peleg, we conclude that he was a prophet, since the name was given many years prior to the event of the destruction of the Tower of Babel and the dispersing of its inhabitants (11:8-9).

***Developing a hypothesis for the role of the Yeshiva of Shem and Ever within the Rabbinic view of biblical history.***

It is possible that because the Tora assumes the opposite of the anthropological account for the development of religion,<sup>13</sup> i.e., that Adam, Eve, Kayin, Hevel, Sheth and Enosh, all were monotheists, as was Noach, that rather than attributing to Avraham the complete discovery of this manner of belief, ChaZaL thought it preferable to assume that there were always monotheists and prophets around; at times their presence was more prominent while at other times less people were aware of them throughout the early days of Biblical history. The identification of MalkiTzedek (14:18-20) with Shem by RaShI (see fn. 2 above,) precludes an alternative possibility that perhaps more than one individual had developed monotheistic beliefs, but rather that Avraham had had fellow travelers in the world, sharing at least some of his theological sophistication and the tradition that he studied and inherited. Yet RaMBaM<sup>14</sup> understands that a sea change took place with regard to Avraham compared to these other believers, if not in substance, then at least in style.

"Not one of the prophets, such as the Patriarchs, Shem, Ever, Noach, Metushelach and Chanoch, who came before Moshe our Teacher has ever said to a class of people: God has sent me to you and has commanded me to say to you such and such things...He who received a great overflow, as for instance Avraham, assembled the people and called them by way of teaching and instruction to adhere to the truth that he had grasped...But he (too) never said: God has sent me to you and given me commandments and prohibitions..."

While RaMBaM emphasizes that prior to Moshe none of our prophets were law givers, nevertheless, they were all, with the exception of Avraham, interested in maintaining a relatively low profile, and were satisfied to develop their own thinking, and that of anyone who would choose to come to them, rather than go out to the masses and try to get them to change their ways and their beliefs. Perhaps this is why there are no descriptions of the acts of Shem, Ever, Metushelach and Chanoch, because there were no public acts to describe. In effect, they were keepers of the flame, waiting until someone would come along and carry that flame throughout the Middle East and ultimately the entire world. If we are to be truly the students of Avraham,<sup>15</sup> then we must not only assure our own personal spirituality and that of our immediate families, but also do our best to assist others in reaching their maximum Kedusha potentials as well.

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<sup>13</sup> The reigning wisdom among those who study the development of religion among ancient man posit a linear development from polytheism to monotheism. The Tora appears to claim that man was originally and then episodically monotheistic, lapsing time and again into long periods of idolatry.

<sup>14</sup> Guide for the Perplexed, II 39.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g., Avot 5:19.

