



My Teacher, Rabbi Moshe Kahn z"l Rabba Sara Hurwitz

There's a beautiful Midrash (Midrash Rabba, Parasha 24) that explains that Adam ha'rishon, the first man, was given a preview of all the generations that were destined to descend from him:

God revealed to Adam each generation with its scholars, each generation and its wise men, each generation and its writers, each generation and its leaders.

אמר רבי יהודא בר סימון עד ש愧ם הראשו מפל גלם לפנִי מי שאמר והוא ה' העולם, קראה לו דור דור
ודורשׁו, דור דור ותיכמַיו, דור דור וסופריו, דור דור ומנהיגיו

A great scholar, writer, and leader of this generation has just passed away, and I wanted to dedicate these words to Rabbi Moshe Kahn, z"l. I am going to venture to guess that many of you here have never heard of Rabbi Kahn, and if you have, maybe it's from the outpouring of tributes that have been flowing in since his untimely death this past Wednesday when he succumbed to the cancer that had plagued him. You may not have heard of him, but I can guarantee you that even if you don't know him, Rabbi Kahn has indirectly influenced your life. You see, if in the past 40 years, you have ever learned with an American-born woman who has studied gemara, myself included, chances are that she learned with Rabbi Kahn or one of his students.

Rabbi Kahn was the rebbe who taught gemara to women at an advanced level. He taught me while I was a student at Drisha Institute from 2000-2003, where he was a rebbe for around 35 years, and he also taught at Stern College, and at its graduate program in Advanced Talmud, almost until the end of his life. What makes Rabbi Kahn so special, is that he has single-handedly educated and influenced an entire generation of women. It is no exaggeration to say that the level of scholarship, women's passion, and ability to learn, has been shaped by Rabbi Kahn. For the last 3 days, I have been immersed in my colleagues and friends and teachers reminiscing about the impact he has had on their lives. It's not uncommon to see people posting about rabbis who have died. But what's unique in this case is that the tributes are almost exclusively from women.

So how did he get this illustrious role of gemara Rebbe for women? When asked that question, Rabbi Kahn apparently simply said: "I went because my rebbe, the Rav, asked me to." In 1977, Rabbi Soleveitchik delivered that first momentous Talmud lecture to women at Stern College's Beit Midrash. Rabbi Willig took it over, and then a few years later, the Rav asked one of his talmidim, Moshe Kahn, to take over the shiur, which he taught until just a few months ago when his illness forced him to stop. Rav





Moshe heeded the call, and in doing so, humbly and consistently became a rebbe to thousands of talmidot.

I keep wondering what would have happened to the Jewish people if Moshe Rabbeinu had refused his call to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt to freedom. We know that he resisted-

לֹא-שָׁמַע אֵלִי וְאֵיךְ יִשְׁמַעַנִּי פְּרֻעָה וְאֵנִי עָרֵל שְׁפָתִים:

The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, me—who gets tongue-tied! “uncircumcised of lips,” (6:12)

and again, several verses later- (6:30)

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְפָנָי יְיָ הִנֵּה אֵנִי עָרֵל שְׁפָתִים וְאֵיךְ יִשְׁמַע אֵלִי פְּרֻעָה:

Moses appealed to God saying, “See, I get tongue-tied how then should Pharaoh heed me!”

Moshe was on the brink of refusing, but then the Torah provides a subtle reminder to us that shifts the narrative, and moves Moshe, with the help of his brother Aharon to become the mouthpiece of God, and ultimately becoming the vessel that helped God free bnei Yisrael. Between these two verses of resistance, the Torah interrupts the narrative with a list of genealogies.

אֶלֶה רָאשֵׁי בֵּית-אֲבָתֶם

The following are the heads of their respective clans. (6:14)

And then the Torah goes on for 12 more pasukim with a list of family members that go back to Yaakov aveinu.

Why?

I want to offer two reasons for this disruption. The first is that the genealogy is a connection to the past, to our Yichus. Moshe and Aharon were selected as leaders, but they were picked because of their connection to Ya'akov.

These are the heads of the various families, etc. explains the Orach Hayim- “The reason the family background of Moses is listed here is in accordance with the principle that only people whose genealogy can be traced back directly to Jacob are fit to be appointed as kings over Israel.”

Moshe was connected to his elite past, giving him the ability to impact the future. And therefore, explains Seforno:



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הם המדברים, they were fit to be the spokesmen to Pharaoh and to be listened to by him with respect

Rabbi Kahn was our connection to the past. He was a good teacher. He was kind and patient but always demanded excellence. On Thursday night, after the funeral, I pulled out one of my gemaras that I had learned with him - the 3rd perek of Baba Metzia and reviewed the well-worn pages - just a few that we got through during an entire year, as he demanded that we understood every word on the page and every tosefot and rishon. But, his impact went beyond his ability to teach and connect.

My colleague, Rabba Rachel Kohl Finegold explains that he was a link to the mesorah, connecting his students to a tradition of learning with the Elite in Eastern Europe. Rabbi Kahn gave us Yichis. He gave us access to the same texts that had been studied in male yeshivot for centuries. His style was to demand no less from us than from any male student. And in doing so, he commanded a cadre of women who imbibed the text with curiosity and seriousness on par with their male counterparts.

The second reason why genealogy interrupts our narrative is to generate the humility that often comes with remembering where you came from.

Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in a deeply psychologically astute commentary, explains that it is precisely when Moses and Aaron perform wondrous deeds that, “it became a real necessity to first of all establish their parentage and relationships *so that for all time their absolutely human origin and the absolutely ordinary human nature of their beings should be firmly established.*”

Perhaps Samson Raphael Hirsch had in mind his Christian neighbors of 19th-century Germany and the rising wave of anti-Semitism as he goes on to intimate that it is the most charismatic leaders who see themselves as godly, and demand to be honored and respected as a god would-- in life and in death. But, God lay down Moshe’s genealogical table, to establish the fact that on the day when God first spoke to him, people knew his parents and grandparents, his uncles and aunts, and all his cousins knew his origin. He was not godly, but entirely human.

Rabbi Kahn encapsulated what it means to be an anava, to be humble. My colleague Rabbanit Leah Sarna tries to explain how unique and unusual it was for Rabbi Kahn to teach women. She describes how one of the experiences of being a woman Torah learner is knowing that your teachers wish they weren’t teaching you. Usually, someone with Rav Kahn’s credentials- a student of the Rav, a YU musmach with many many years of learning in its Kollel– would ordinarily see the job of teaching women as a





stepping stone to a more prominent position of teaching men. But Rabbi Kahn never left, because he didn't care if anyone heard of him. He didn't travel around the world and lecture widely.

He didn't write books, and the articles he did write were often about human dignity and autonomy, especially for women. And he wrote them, not because he was ideological or passionate about a cause. He loved Torah and he believed in his students, who he just humbly and consistently taught for 40 years thereby changing the world of women's Torah learning forever.

Rabbi Moshe Kahn heeded the call to teach women. He was the right person to connect us to the past. And he was a person of tremendous humility. About a year ago, when it became public that he was sick, YU organized a zoom shiur in which he taught. At the end of the class, his students didn't shut off their zooms. They lingered and spontaneously started speaking, one after the other, about the impact he had had on their learning and their neshamas. Rabbi Kahn was stunned, responding that he had no idea that he played such a central role in literally thousands of women's lives.

A phrase that Rav Moshe would say to all of us during class when we were answering a question was, "say better." I would attempt to mumble an answer, and in an encouraging and kind way, he would demand that we peel away the layers of the gemara to reveal and revel in its beauty. He refused to accept that our gender was a handicap, that our lips were impeded עירל שפתיים or sealed in any way. By recognizing our tzelem elokim, our ability, and our potential, he nourished a generation of women past and future.

Right before Shabbat, rabbi Kahn's family announced a siyum in his memory. As you know, it is a common practice to learn all of mishanyot. But, in the spirit of rabbi Kahn, there will be a siyum on the entire Talmud. Every tractate. And my students and alumnae at Maharat, even those who have never learned directly with him but know that their teachers and peers have, are heeding the call to go above and beyond. That's what Rabbi Kahn would have expected.

When I think of Rabbi Kahn, I imagine him hunched over a Gemara in the Drisha beit midrash, surrounded by his Talmidot. That was his posture. Humbly modeling serious torah learning, connecting women to our mesorah, to our tradition, and inspiring thousands of his students to continue in his footsteps to do the same- to say better and do better.

And that is my commitment: To carry on his legacy by heeding the call to say yes; to humbly provide a space for another generation of women to learn Torah on a high level.



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Surely when God revealed the scholars and leaders of our generation to Adam Ha-rishon, Rabbi Moshe Kahn was amongst them. And because of Rabbi Kahn, now more women will be among the scholars and leaders as well.



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