

## Pinchas

by Benjamin Gee - Wednesday, July 24, 2019

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How does one become a Rabbi?

Well, the answer is by receiving 'semicha' from another Rabbi because it's only a Rabbi who can create a new Rabbi. So, therefore, the obvious follow-up question is 'what is semicha?' The answer comes from parashat Pinchas. There we read how, immediately prior to his death, Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to ensure that his successor would be appointed within his lifetime - and that's exactly what happened. Yehoshua (Joshua) became the leader of the people in the presence of Moshe.

Hashem instructed Moshe to take Joshua "v'semachta et yadcha eilav" - 'and lean your hand upon his head'. So the term 'semicha' implies the resting of hands upon the head of an individual - and that's how semicha was originally given. We dispensed long ago with the placing of hands on the head of the recipient, but the term 'semicha' for rabbinic ordination still remains till this day, and I believe it is charged with enormous significance.

Rav Moshe Feinstein explains that when thinking of the semicha, we shouldn't primarily think of the person giving the semicha, placing his hands upon somebody's head but rather, of what the person receiving the semicha is doing, because he needs to bow his head.

In so doing, he is paying respect to the person who is giving him the semicha - and through that person to all previous people who have had semicha, going all the way back to Moshe Rabbeinu who received the Torah at Mount Sinai.

Therefore, when creating a new Rabbi, it's not as if we are giving the person a blank sheet of paper, inviting him to write the next chapter of laws and customs and practices of the Jewish people from scratch - no! It's as if we are giving him some very precious bricks for him to add on to the ongoing building of the edifice which is rooted in Sinai. And that's exactly what you Yehoshua was doing. As he bowed his head, he was paying respect to Moshe and to what had transpired at Mount Sinai. And in turn, as we learn in the first Mishna of Pirkei Avot, Joshua handed it down to the elders; and the elders to the prophets; and the prophets to the men of the Great Assembly; all the way through to us today.

Therefore when it comes to determining the Halacha for new situations which have never existed before, we interpret the Halacha on the basis of the foundations of our 'mesorah', passed down from generation to generation - and what applies within the realm of our rabbis and the 'paskining' of halacha applies within community life as well.

As a nation, we know that we can only know where we're going to if we know where we're coming from.

Shabbat Shalom

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