



## Pinchas

### The Origins of Semicha

Semicha is the term we use for rabbinic ordination, but what does it actually mean? We learn the answer from the portion of Pinchas.

Before Moshe died, he was adamant that his successor would be crowned in his lifetime. Therefore, Yehoshua became the leader while Moshe was still alive. And how did Moshe confer that authority upon his successor? Hashem instructed him:

“וְסַמְכֵת אֶת־יָדְךָ עָלָיו”  
“Rest your hand upon his head.”

That's how the original rabbinic ordination took place. And ever since that time, that is how it has worked - you become a rabbi only if another rabbi makes you into a rabbi.

And originally there would be the conferring of ordination through the placing of a hand on the head. But over time, that particular action was lost.

Rav Moshe Feinstein shares a marvellous message here. He says that with regard to the original system, our focus should not be on the rabbi *giving* the Semicha but rather on the one *receiving* it. The person receiving the Semicha would need to bow his head in order for the one giving it to place his hand upon the head, and in so bowing, one is actually giving respect to the Rabbi giving Semicha.

And through that rabbi, one is paying one's respect to all previous rabbis over the generations, going all the way back to Moses at Mount Sinai. In Pirkei Avot, we are taught

“מֹשֶׁה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי”  
“Moses received the Torah at Mt Sinai”

Which is referring to the written and oral law.

“וּמִסֵּרָה לַיהוֹשֻׁעַ”  
“He passed it on to Joshua”

Moses passed it on to Joshua, Joshua passed in on to the elders, the elders to the prophets, the prophets, to the men of the Great Assembly, all the way through the generations until today.

And the message here is that when you are becoming a rabbi, it's not as if you're given a pile of bricks and told: “Build an edifice from scratch by yourself.” You're given a few bricks to add on to that great edifice, the foundations of which were laid at Sinai, and the building of which has taken place through the ages. It's what we call “מִסֵּרָה”, our authentic Torah tradition.

Through becoming a rabbi, one is entrusted with the responsibility of continuity - to guarantee the continuity of authentic Torah law. If you crossbreed a horse and a donkey, the result is a mule. Fascinatingly, a mule is stronger than both the horse and the donkey, but it is sterile. And so too when we crossbreed our מִסֵּרָה, our authentic Torah tradition, with everything which is fashionable within the time in which we live, the result is that while it can seem appealing at first, there is no future for it.

In order to guarantee the continuity of our Torah tradition, and this is indeed what has happened through the ages, we need to be true to our מִסֵּרָה.

So we bless Hashem for the enormous gift that is given to us. The authority placed in our hands to ensure that the law that he gave us is the same law as is practised and interpreted to this very day.

Shabbat Shalom.