Becoming Torahsmiths: Rabbis As Artisans

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I. What is a ray?

1. Mishnah Avot 1:6

Yehoshua ben Peraḥiah said: make for yourself a rav, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge all people favorably.

יָהוֹשֵּעַ בֶּן פָּרַחִיָה אוֹמֵר, עֲשֵׂה לְךָ רַב, וּקְנֵה לְךָ חָבֵר, וַהֲוֵי דָן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת

2. Babylonian Talmud 84a

When are iron weapons considered "complete" [and thus subject to ritual impurity]? Rabbi Yoḥanan said: after they are fired in a furnace. Resh Lakish said: from when it is quenched in water. [Rabbi Yoḥanan] said to him: a bandit knows his banditry. [Resh Lakish] said to him: what good have you done me? There they called me rav and here they call me rav.

ומאימתי גמר מלאכתן רבי יוחנן אמר משיצרפם בכבשן ריש לקיש אמר משיצחצחן במים א"ל לסטאה בלסטיותיה ידע אמר ליה ומאי אהנת לי התם רבי קרו לי הכא רבי קרו לי

3. Tosefta Horayot 2:5

If a person, their parent, and their *rav* are imprisoned, the person comes before their *rav* [in terms of who one redeems first], and their *rav* comes before their father, and their mother comes before everyone else. Who is "his *rav*?" His *rav* who teacher him Torah, not the one who teaches him crafts.

הוא ואביו ורבו עומדין בשבי הוא קודם לרבו ורבו קודם לאביו ואמו קודמת לכל אדם איזהו רבו רבו שלמדו תורה לא שלמדו אומנות...

4. Jeremiah 23:29

"Are not My words like fire," says the Lord? "And like a hammer that breaks rocks?"

ָהַלוֹא כה דָבָרִי כָּאֵשׁ נָאָם־יִקוָק וּכְפַטִּישׁ יִפּצֵץ סָלַע:

5. Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 88b

The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: "Like a hammer that breaks rock" (Jeremiah 23:29). Just as this hammer is divided into many fragments (*nitzotzot*)—so, too, every word that left the mouth of the Holy Blessed One was divided into 70 languages.

תָּנִי דְּבֵי רַבִּי יִשְׁמָעֵאל: ״וּכְפַטִּישׁ יְפֹּצֵץ סָלַע״, מָה פַּטִּישׁ זֶה נֶחֱלָק לְכַמָּה נִיצוֹצוֹת — אַף כָּל דִּיבּוּר וְדִיבּוּר שֶׁיָצָא מִפִּי הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא נֶחֱלַק לְשׁבָעִים לְשׁוֹנוֹת.

6. Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 34a

The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught: "Is not My word like as fire? says the Lord; and like a hammer that breaks rock" (Jeremiah 23:29). Just as this hammer divides into many fragments (*nitzotzot*), so, too, one verse can give forth many explanations.

דבי ר' ישמעאל תנא (ירמיהו כג, כט) וכפטיש יפוצץ סלע מה פטיש זה מתחלק לכמה ניצוצות אף מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים

7. Babylonian Talmud Bava Kamma 32b

But don't we learn in a *beraita*: if someone enters a blacksmith's workshop and sparks fly off and strike him in the face and he dies—[the blacksmith] is not liable, even if he enters with permission?

והתניא: הנכנס לחנותו של נפח, ונתזה ניצוצות וטפחה לו על פניו ומת - פטור, ואפילו נכנס ברשות!

8. Forging a Large Decorative Leaf (YouTube)

9. Mishna Avot 5:6

Ten things were created [by God] at twilight on Friday: the mouth of the earth; the mouth of the well; the mouth of the ass; the; the rainbow; manna; the staff; the *shamir*; the writing and the inscription; and the tablets. And some say: also destructive spirits and the graves of Moshe and Avraham our Father. And some say: also tongs, which are made from [other] tongs.

עשרה דברים נבראו בערב שבת בין השמשות ואלו הן פי הארץ ופי הבאר ופי האתון והקשת והמן והמטה והשמיר והכתב והמכתב והלוחות ויש אומרים אף המזיקין וקבורתו של משה ואילו של אברהם אבינו ויש אומרים אף צבת בצבת עשויה:

10. Tosefta Eruvin 8:23

The laws of Shabbat, festivals, and the rehabilitation of Temple property are like mounts hanging by a hair: little Scripture, but many laws which are not supported by anything.

Based on this, Rabbi Yehoshua said: tongs are made from tongs. The first pair—what was their origin? They were a creation [by God].

הלכות שבת חגיגות ומעילות כהררין התלוין בסערה מקרא מועט והלכות מרובות ואין להם על מי שיסמוכו מיכן אמ' ר' יהושע צבתה בצבתא מתעבדא צבתא קדמיתא מה הות הא לאיי בריה הות

III. What makes a good Torahsmith?

11. Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 13b

Rabbi Aḥa bar Ḥanina said: It is revealed and known before the One Who spoke and the world came into being that Rabbi Meir had no equal in his generation.

So why didn't the Sages establish the *halakha* in accordance with his opinion? Because his colleagues were unable to abide by his conclusions. He would call the pure impure and give an explanation, and he would call the impure pure and give an explanation... Rabbi Abbahu said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: Rabbi Meir had a disciple named Sumakhus who would give 48 reasons to support a ruling of impurity and 48 reasons to support a ruling of purity...

It was taught in a *baraita*: There was a distinguished student at Yavne who had 150 arguments in support of purifying vermin.

אָמֵר רַבִּי אַחָא בַּר חֲנִינָא: גָּלוּי וְיָדוּעַ לְפְנֵי מִי שֶׁאָמֵר וְהָיָה הָעוֹלָם שֶׁאֵין בְּדוֹרוֹ שֶׁל רַבִּי מֵאִיר כְּמוֹתוֹ, וּמִּכְּנֵי מָה לֹא קָבְעוּ הֲלָכָה כְּמוֹתוֹ? שֶׁלֹא יָכְלוּ חֲבֵירָיו לַעֲמוֹד עַל סוֹף דַּעְתּוֹ. שֶׁהוּא אוֹמֵר עַל טָמֵא טָהוֹר וּמַרְאֶה לוֹ פָּנִים, עַל טָהוֹר טָמֵא וּמַרְאֶה לוֹ פָּנִים... אָמֵר רַבִּי אֲבָהוּ אָמֵר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: תַּלְמִיד הָיָה לוֹ לְרַבִּי מֵאִיר וְסוֹמְכוֹס שְׁמוֹ, שֶׁהָיָה אוֹמֵר עַל כָּל דָּבָר וְדָבָר שֶׁל טוּמְאָה אַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁמוֹנֶה טַעֲמֵי טוּמְאָה, וְעַל כָּל דָּבָר וְדָבָר שֶׁל טְהֵרָה אַרְבָּעִים וּשְׁמוֹנֶה טַעֲמֵי טְהֶרָה... תָּנָא: תַּלְמִיד וְתִיק הָיָה בְּיַבְנֶה שֶׁהָיָה מְטַהֵּר אֶת הַשְּׁרֶץ בָּמֵאָה וַחֵמשִׁים טָעמִים.

12. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 28b

The Sages taught: Upon entering [the *beit midrash*], what does one say? May it be Your will, Lord my God, that no mishap transpires because of me, and that I not fail in any matter of *halakha*, and that my colleagues, will rejoice in me. And that I will neither declare pure that which is impure, nor impure that which is pure and that my colleagues will not fail in any matter of *halakha*, and that I will rejoice in them.

Upon exiting, what does one say? I give thanks before You, Lord my God, that You have placed my lot among those who sit in the study hall, and that you have not given me my portion among those who sit idly on street corners. I rise early, and they rise early. I rise early to pursue matters of Torah, and they rise early to pursue frivolous matters. I toil and they toil. I toil and receive a reward, and they toil and do not receive a reward. I run and they run. I run to the life of the World-to-Come and they run to the pit of destruction.

ּתָּנוּ רַבָּנַן: בְּכְנִיסָתוֹ מַהוּ אוֹמֵר? ״יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְפָנֶיךְ ה׳ אֱלֹהֵי שֶׁלֹא יֶאֱרַע דְּבַר תַּקָּלָה עַל יָדִי, וְלֹא אֶכָּשֵׁל בְּדָבָר הֲלָכָה, וְיִשְׂמְחוּ בִּי חֲבֵרַי, וְלֹא אוֹמֵר עַל טָמֵא טָהוֹר, וְלֹא עַל טָהוֹר טָמֵא. וְלֹא יִכָּשְׁלוּ חֲבֵרַי בִּדְבַר הַלַּכָה, וְאֵשְׁמַח בָּהֶם״.

בִּיצִיאָתוֹ מַהוּ אוֹמֵר? ״מוֹדֶה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךְ ה׳ אֱלֹהַי שֶׁשַּׁמְתָּ חֶלְקִי מִיּוֹשְׁבֵי בֵּית הַמִּדְרָשׁ וְלֹא שַׂמְתָּ חֶלְקִי מִיּוֹשְׁבֵי קְרָנוֹת. שֶׁאֲנִי מַשְׁכִּים, וְהֵם מַשְׁכִּימִים. אֲנִי מַשְׁכִּים לְדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה, וְהֵם מַשְׁכִּים לְדְבָרִים בְּטֵלִים. אֲנִי עָמֵל וְהֵם עָמֵלִים. אֲנִי עָמֵל וּמְקַבֵּל שָׂכָר, וְהֵם עָמֵלִים וְאֵינָם מְקַבְּלִים שָׂכָר. אֲנִי רָץ וְהֵם רָצִים. אֲנִי רָץ לְחֵיֵּי העוֹלם הַבּא וָהָם רִצִים לִבָּאֵר שַׁחַת״.

IV. Problems with the Model

13. Mishnah Avot 4:1

Ben Zoma used to say: ... Who is rich? One who is happy with their lot, as it says, "You shall enjoy the fruit of your labors, you shall be happy and you shall prosper" (Psalms 128:2). "You shall be happy" in this world, "and you shall prosper" in the world to come.

בֶּן זוֹמָא אוֹמֵר... אֵיזֶהוּ עָשִׁיר, הַשָּׁמֵחַ בְּחֶלְקוֹ שֶׁנֶּאֶמֵר (תהלים קכח) יְגִיעַ כַּפֶּיךְ כִּי תֹאכֵל אַשְׁרֶיךְ וְטוֹב לָךְ. אַשְׁרֶיךְ, בָּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה. וְטוֹב לָךְ, לַעוֹלָם הַבָּא.

14. Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 28a

When [Rabban Gamliel] arrived at [Rabbi Yehoshua's] house, he saw that its walls were black. He said to him, "From your walls it is clear that you are a blacksmith." [Rabbi Yehoshua] said to him, "Woe to the generation that has you as a leader, for you are unaware of the troubles of Torah scholars, with how they make a living and with how they eat."

ּכִּי מְטָא לְבֵיתֵיהּ, חֲזִינְהוּ לְאַשְׁיָתָא דְבֵיתֵיהּ דְּמַשְׁחֲרָן. אֲמַר לֵיהּ: מִכּוֹתְלֵי בֵיתְךְּ אַתָּה נִיכָּר שֶׁפֶּחָמִי אַתָּה. אָמַר לוֹ: אוֹי לוֹ לַדּוֹר שֶׁאַתָּה פַּרְנָסוֹ, שֶׁאִי אַתָּה יוֹדֵע בְּצַעְרָן שֶׁל תַּלְמִידֵי חֲכָמִים, בַּמֶּה הֵם מִתְפַּרְנְסִים וּבַמֵּה הֵם נְזּוֹנִים.

15. Raphael Aaron Ben Simeon (1847–1921), Umi-Tzur Devash, 1912, 23a

Answer: Friend, many times I have told you in confidence (lit. "from mouth to ear") how difficult it is for a teacher in these times to answer questions like this because of new inventions of this variety...each day there glimmer new inventions which our fathers and elders never imagined. It becomes difficult for the teacher to respond to his questioners something about the new inventions, [namely] whether it is permitted to use them on Shabbat and Yom Tov...and it is difficult to find examples in our holy Talmud, which are "wellsprings of life" (cf. Proverbs 4:23), with regards to instructing whether to permit or forbid. Only through great effort and a clear and quieted mind and time free from distracting responsibilities is it possible to compare one matter to another [in the manner of Pesaḥim 7b, which derives laws about the term] ""searching' from 'searching' [in a different biblical verse] and 'searching' from 'lamps' and 'lamps' from 'lamp,'" within that deep sea of our Talmud.

תשובה. ידיד הנפש. פעמים רבות השמעתיך מפה לאזן. כי כמה יקשה על המורה בזמה״ז להשיב על שאלות כאלה. יען ההמצאות החדשות ממינים אלה...ויום יום נוצצים המצאות חדשות אשר לא שערום אבותינו וזקנינו. ותכבד העבודה על המורה להשיב שואליו דבר על ההמצאות החדשות אם מותר להשתמש בהם בשבתות ויו״ט...וקשה למצוא דוגמתם בתלמודינו הקדוש אשר ממנו תוצאות חיים בדרכי ההוראה אם להתיר או לאסור. ורק ע״י טרחא רבתי. ומוח צלול ושקט. וזמן פנוי מעסקים הטורדים יתכן לדמות מילתא למילתא. בחיפוש מחיפוש, וחיפיש מנרות, ונרות מנר בים תלמודינו העמוק כולי האי.

16. C. Thi Nguyen, Games: Agency as Art (2022)

Games can be an existential balm for our practical unease with the world. In games, the problems can be right-sized for our capacities; our in-game selves can be right-sized for the problems; and the arrangement of self and world can make solving the problems pleasurable, satisfying, interesting, and beautiful. Even with our opponents, there is a harmony. In a good game, our opponent's attempts to harm us may, in the right circumstances, actually be channeled so as to create experiences we value. In ordinary life, social attacks and financial attacks are usually painful and unpleasant. They can be survived and gotten over, but rarely can they be enjoyed. But games are often designed such that your attacks on me are channeled into interesting obstacles for me to overcome.