

Kabbalat HaTorah: A Tribute to President Richard & Dr. Esther Joel

משה קבל תורה מסיני, ומסרה ליהושע,
ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים, ונביאים
מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה.

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua and Yehoshua to the elders and the elders to the prophets and the prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly.

Avot 1:1

The Mishnah focuses on the first stages of the transmission of the Torah. The Maharal (R. Judah Loew ben Bezalel), in his *Derech haChayim* commentary to this Mishnah (s.v. *Amnam*), asks: Why doesn't the Mishnah begin with the statement that Moshe received the Torah from Hashem? Isn't Divine transmission a critical component of our mesorah? Why is Har Sinai, the location, stressed instead of the role of the Divine?

The Maharal explains that the environment in which Torah study takes place is integral to the experience. Moshe receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai was not happenstance; the location was carefully chosen. The mountain's modest demeanor was a fitting place to share the word of God. The environment was choreographed to



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remind us that the study of Torah is not just about collecting data and knowledge; it is not an exercise in Googling information. Critical to the experience of *talmud Torah* is the environment in which the engagement with God occurs. The environment either enhances our *kabbalat haTorah* or detracts from its function and purpose.

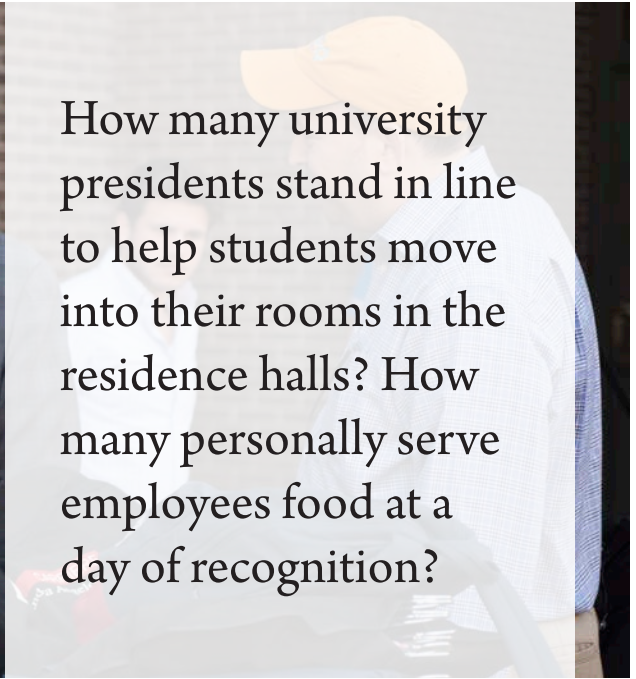
Furthermore, authentic Torah study should also create an environment that is modest and promotes the ideal of mutual respect. The experience of revelation on Mount Sinai is elaborated on in Shemot, Chap. 19–20, and continues in Chapter 24. Placed in the center of the description of the Sinai experience are chapters 21–24 of *Misphatim*. These are the laws that instruct us on how to create a just and civil society. They are sandwiched in the midst of the story of Divine revelation to remind us that the Torah demands of us that we create a society that values kindness, justice and caring.

President Richard Joel has always subscribed to this vision, together with his partner, Dr. Esther Joel. The Joel's home has always been warm and welcoming, filled with a love for Torah and its values. This is seen in the way they engage with family and in the steady stream of representatives from various organizations or people in need requesting *tzedakah* because the Joel home is known "on the street" as a home of *chesed*. All are welcomed with a smile and financial support. One would think that after a grueling schedule, day in and day out helming such an important institution, that Shabbat would be a well-deserved day of rest. Yet they have welcomed thousands of students for Shabbat over their tenure as leaders at Yeshiva University.

President Joel has also worked to communicate that if YU is a place of Torah it must also be a place that is welcoming, engaging, and respectful to all. How many university presidents stand in line to help



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How many university presidents stand in line to help students move into their rooms in the residence halls? How many personally serve employees food at a day of recognition?

students move into their rooms in the residence halls? How many personally serve employees food at a day of recognition? How many make time to meet not just with current undergraduates, but with prospective students — in high school and studying in Israel — throughout the year? It is President Joel who is constantly reminding us to engage “the other” on campus, those who may appear different than ourselves, to greet them with warmth and without judgment. President Joel would

remind students not to limit their friendships to those in their classes or shiur, those from the same high school, or from the same yeshiva or seminary in Israel.

For the past fourteen years, President Joel has been involved in all the challenges that university presidents deal with, but he has also worked to make Yeshiva University a friendlier and a more engaging place. In the process, he has made our campuses our Mount Sinai, where we can find and engage in meaningful spiritual

experiences, helping us to improve our individual and collective *kabbalat haTorah*.

My colleagues, Rabbi Dr. Hillel Davis, Rabbi Dr. Josh Joseph, Rabbi Menachem Penner, Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter, Rabbi Ezra Schwartz, and members of the family, Rabbi Dr. Avery Joel and Dr. Penny Joel have contributed additional thoughtful pieces related to Shavuot honoring the leadership of President Richard M. Joel.

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