



Taste of Chavruta — 5772 — Authority

KEY QUESTIONS:

- *What sorts of authority are there in ancient and modern Judaism? What about in modern society?*
 - *What is the source of these authorities?*
- *How do we deal with conflicts between Jewish and secular authorities?*
- *How do we reconcile subservience to earthly authorities with acknowledging that God's authority is ultimate?*

7. Sages and kings

Babylonian Talmud, *Berachot* 58a

The Rabbis taught: 'On seeing sages of Israel one should say: "Blessed be the one who has imparted His wisdom to them that fear Him."

'[On seeing] sages of other nations, one says: "Blessed be the one who has given His wisdom to flesh and blood."

'On seeing kings of Israel, one says: "Blessed be the one who has imparted His glory to them that fear Him."

'[On seeing] kings of other nations, one says: "Blessed be the one who has given His glory to flesh and blood."

Translation: Based on Soncino

A ruler who governs his state by virtue is like the north polar star, which remains in its place while all the other stars revolve around it.

Confucius (551-479 BCE), *Analects*

'Then how,' [Adeimantus] asked, 'can you possibly say that society's troubles will never cease until it is ruled by philosophers, if you agree that they're useless members of society?'

'To answer that question,' I said, 'I must give you an illustration...

'Suppose the following to be the state of affairs on board a ship or ships. The captain is larger and stronger than any of the crew, but a bit deaf and short-sighted, and doesn't know much about navigation. The crew are all quarrelling with each other about how to navigate the ship, each thinking he ought to be at the helm; they know no navigation and cannot say that anyone ever taught it them, or that they spend any time studying it; indeed they say it can't be taught and are ready to murder anyone who says it can. They spend all their time milling round the captain and trying to get him to give them the wheel. If one faction is more successful than another, their rivals may kill them and throw them overboard, lay out the honest captain with drugs or drink, take control of the ship, help themselves to what's on board, and behave as if they were on a drunken pleasure-cruise. Finally, they reserve their admiration for the man who knows how to lend a hand in controlling the captain by force or fraud; they praise his seamanship and navigation and knowledge of the sea and condemn everyone else as useless. They have no idea that the true navigator must study the seasons of the year, the sky, the stars, the winds and other professional subjects, if he is to

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות נ"ח ע"א

תנו רבנן: הרוֹאֵה חֲכָמֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹמֵר: "בְּרוּךְ שְׁחָלַק מִחֲכָמָתוֹ לִירְאָיו".

חֲכָמֵי אוֹמוֹת הָעוֹלָם אוֹמֵר: "בְּרוּךְ שֶׁנָּתַן מִחֲכָמָתוֹ לְבָשָׂר וָדָם".

הרוֹאֵה מְלָכֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אוֹמֵר: "בְּרוּךְ שְׁחָלַק מִכְבוֹדוֹ לִירְאָיו".

מְלָכֵי אוֹמוֹת הָעוֹלָם אוֹמֵר: "בְּרוּךְ שֶׁנָּתַן מִכְבוֹדוֹ לְבָשָׂר וָדָם".



7. Sages and kings

be really fit to control a ship; and they think that it's quite impossible to acquire professional skill in navigation (quite apart from whether they want it exercised) and that there's no such thing as an art of navigation. In these circumstances, aren't the sailors on any such ship bound to regard the true navigator as a gossip and a star-gazer, of no use to them at all?'

'Yes, they are,' Adeimantus agreed.

'I think you probably understand, without any explanation, that my illustration is intended to show the present attitude of society towards the true philosopher.'

'Yes, I understand.'

'Then you must tell it to anyone who is surprised that society does not value its philosophers, and try, first, to convince him that it would be far more surprising if it did.'

'I will,' he said.

Plato (423-347 BCE), *The Republic*.

Translation: H. D. P. Lee

Points to consider

Why do you think sages and kings are singled out as recipients of God's favour?

What is the significance of having a blessing also for non-Jewish sages and kings? And what about the fact that this blessing is different to that of their Jewish equivalents? What does this say about the Rabbis' attitudes to non-Jewish authority?

What are the differences between the attitude to scholars and kings that Plato talks about and that given in Berachot 58a?