

# TEACHERS

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

Teachers and education are in the forefront of the news here in Israel what with the long strike of secondary school teachers and the somewhat disappointing ranking of Israeli school children in certain subject ratings. Even though there is general consensus that money is the problem and the solution I feel that as important as money is, the heart of the problem lies in a far deeper matter and value.

In the current atmosphere of secular Israeli society, basic Jewish values are almost unknown let alone implemented or taught. Maimonides in his great code of Jewish law has an entire section devoted to teaching, teachers, students and the concept of knowledge and education. The basic value is that teachers are to be respected and given honor.

One should rise before one's teacher, speak respectfully to one's teacher, and treat one's teacher with greater probity than even one's parent. The Talmud pithily states that "parents bring a child into this world but a teacher can bring a child into the World to Come" - into a world of spirit, creativity, ideas and self-worth and ultimate immortality.

Thus teaching transcends even parenting, a concept that automatically produces respect and honor for the profession. Teaching has never been a very well paying profession in Jewish life. The tribe of Shimon, who were teachers and scribes, was viewed as the poorest, monetarily, of all of the tribes of Israel. But in a society that does not measure success or honor only in monetary coin, the highest compliment in Israel was that one was called a teacher.

In fact the Talmud itself attributes to God, so to speak, the attribute of being a teacher - "He Who teaches Torah to His people Israel." Even mortal teachers are viewed in Judaism as being engaged in holy work.

But the teacher-student relationship is reciprocal. Maimonides teaches us that in Judaism the teacher-student relationship is really a parent-child relationship. A teacher must not only respect one's students but must love them. Depending on circumstances, this love sometimes can be tough love and sometimes cuddly, fuzzy warmth.

But the student has to somehow be aware that the teacher loves him or her. In an atmosphere of love, much can be accomplished, even under less than ideal physical conditions. I am perplexed

why the correct demand of the teachers for smaller number of students in a given class was not buttressed by the opinion of the Talmud in Baba Batra that class size should be restricted to twenty-five for one teacher.

But I should not have been surprised by this for the Israeli secular school system has slowly been divested of any Jewish values and tradition over the decades. Excelling in mathematics and science may not be for everyone but being loved and guided correctly in traditional Jewish life values is for everyone.

Teaching our children that the Bible is somehow a collection of currently irrelevant myths, that the long experience of millennia of Jewish life in the Exile was essentially worthless and that the Jewish mission of being a light unto the nations is restricted to high-tech development and research is a certain recipe for poor educational results and for an eventual dysfunctional society.

The teachers are entitled to a decent salary and to proper physical working conditions. But again Judaism places a high value on personal dedication and preparation in teaching. Education is the 'labor of Heaven.' The Talmud tells us that there is no comparison between reviewing a lesson one hundred and one times than reviewing it only one hundred times. It is always the "extra" that counts most in knowledge, teaching and education generally.

According to Jewish law, halacha has always justified the right of teachers to strike for improvement in educational and financial circumstances. This is especially true in our society where the schools themselves do not control the purse strings and an all powerful central government decides on these issues. But ultimately the responsibility of all concerned is to the proper education of the children.

The bitter residue of the current dispute will not be easily dissipated even when all of the issues have been settled and decided upon. Again, the rabbis of the Talmud stated that "who is the wise person - one who sees in advance the consequences of one's actions and behavior." A little application of Talmudic wisdom and traditional Jewish educational values will go a long way to help raise our educational system to desired and excellent levels.

Shabat shalom.

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