

CHAPTER 2, LAW 4(C) - SCALING THE HEIGHTS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

A person should always accustom himself to keeping silent ...

So too regarding words of Torah and wisdom. The words of the scholar should be few and their content much. This is as the Sages instructed: 'One should always teach his student in a succinct manner' (Talmud Pesachim 3b). Conversely, many words of little content is foolishness. Regarding this the verse states, 'For the dream comes through an abundance of matters, and the voice of a fool is in many words' (Koheles 5:2).

For the past few weeks, we have been discussing the dangers of excessive speech. The Rambam told us to avoid speaking of extraneous matters to whatever degree possible. Today we are taught that even regarding Torah and wisdom one should apply judiciousness. We must take care not to go overboard even when discussing worthy topics. Just because something is worthwhile does not mean we have an open ticket to cram in as many words as we can get in edgewise. To the contrary, words which are truly precious should be treated with reverence. Rather than piling on words of wisdom making them cheap, we must select our words carefully, allowing the Torah's wisdom to speak for itself.

The Rambam illustrates this with the Talmudic principle that one should teach his student in a concise manner. The simplest reason for this is because too many words confuse the issue. The more verbiage and detail, the more the basic points are obscured and lost. Further, explaining a matter cheapens it. Words somehow lose all their aura when they become excessive. Rather, let the teaching speak for itself. Have the student pick up the thread and figure it out for himself. Ultimately, this is the best form of teaching.

(I used to do a lot of one-on-one tutoring in Talmud study years back. In so doing, I constantly test the fellows I study with, having them work through the ideas on their own, or seeing if they can anticipate the upcoming counter of the Talmud. One fellow several years ago basically paid me x dollars an hour to keep my mouth shut (not one of my better talents) ;-) so he could attempt to figure out the Talmud himself. Some of the mistakes he made were really laughable (not of course that I laughed...), but then again, that's the only real way to do it.)

There is an additional reason why the Torah should not be explained too well. The more we explain, the more we're conveying to our students our own take on the Torah's wisdom. And this limits our students unfairly. Each student must approach the Torah from his own angle; he must see things

from his own perspective.

Every one of us has his own personality and his own unique perspective on wisdom. We will each see something a little bit different in the Torah; it will carry a slightly different message for each of us. If we are given the freedom to apply our own creativity to our Torah study, we may just discern its message to us. We will see our own insights and appreciate the Torah's wisdom from our own perspective. If, however, someone else's lectures are spoon-fed to us to every last detail, our own growth will be stifled; our Torah study will not truly express our own individuality. For the true Torah student must see what the Torah means to **him**, not only what it means to his teacher.

There is an even more critical issue here. Our goal in Torah study is not simply to understand the Torah; it is to understand ourselves -- and ultimately to fashion ourselves in the Torah's image. And this is why it is so essential that we are given the freedom to fathom the Torah in our own way. If we can truly **connect** to the Torah's wisdom, we will understand what it all means to us -- and we will begin to change. When **we** understand the Torah, we will make its wisdom a part of ourselves. We will understand precisely how we relate to the Torah's wisdom, and we will begin to internalize it and integrate it into our psyches.

And this is the true goal of Torah study. It must be a very personal and intimate experience. Rather than sitting back and having someone else explain it to us, we ourselves must bridge the gap between the Torah's wisdom and our own souls. And this can only be achieved if we make our personal acquisition of the Torah: hearing its personalized message to us and rising to its calling.

A related thought is that if the teacher brings the Torah down entirely to our own level, we will never expend our own efforts to understand it. Torah study must be a growing experience. We must work and exert ourselves over it. We must raise ourselves up to the Torah's level, rather than expecting it to be explained down to us. One only truly understands that which he has worked to understand. What one peruses quickly and effortlessly makes very little impact. Thus, we must approach Torah study with the mindset that we must lift ourselves up to comprehend it. We must be prepared to make the effort: we will change ourselves and adapt to the Torah's eternal teachings, rather than sitting back expecting to remain who we are while the Torah is brought down to us.

As I often comment, the ideal form of Torah study is not receiving engaging and stimulating ready-made lectures over the Internet. One can read them all day and night -- and still be the same halfhearted servant of G-d he was all along. It's only when the reader starts pondering and applying that the Torah comes to life. I consider my own on-line classes worthwhile not primarily because of the x-thousand subscribers who passively receive and (hopefully) read it, but because of the very few whose returned comments make it clear to me they are taking it to heart.

(As an interesting footnote, our own R. Menken, when he first got his feet wet with the World Wide Web nearly 30 years ago (he was one of the first Torah educators to take the dive -- how else do you think he claimed the acronym "torah.org"?), he at first envisioned a kind of brokering service for

study partners, which would link up individuals, allowing them to study together one-on-one (whether on-line or in person). Ideally, we should be studying Torah on our own, attempting to make our own acquisition, rather than reading ready-made lectures prepared by others. However, for better or worse there was little market for this among the uninitiated. Very quickly Torah.org (then Project Genesis) began to assume the form it has acquired today.)

Incidentally, a good example of this principle is the study of Kabbalah, the hidden wisdom of the Torah. The Talmud (Chagigah 11b) writes that one may teach the secrets of G-d's "Chariot" ("Merkava") only one-on-one, and that even then the teacher may only provide the outline. The student must piece together the real meat of it himself.

I believe there are a number of reasons for this. One reason is simply because the vocabulary does not exist to explain such lofty concepts in human terms. Kabbalah is an understanding of the heavenly spheres, of G-d's interaction with the heavens and the world at large. It touches on concepts wholly outside the human experience, and as such, it cannot be expressed in terms and concepts familiar to mankind. You just have to understand them; there is no explaining them to you if you don't. (Frustrating, eh?)

I believe a big part of the idea, however, is what we wrote above. Having someone explain the Torah in every detail is **never** truly the ideal. The student must bridge the gap and internalize the Torah himself. But when it comes to Kabbalah, such would defeat the purpose entirely. Kabbalah is wisdom entirely spiritual. To fathom it, one must raise himself to its level. Only a person who has transformed himself into a being sufficiently spiritual can truly gain a connection to it. Conversely, explaining it down, attempting to lower it to the level of the uninitiated layman (unfortunately a common practice nowadays) will only cheapen Kabbalah beyond recognition. Kabbalah is the sort of discipline that if you cannot understand yourself, there is no use explaining to you. If you are prepared to scale its heights, to raise yourself up to its level, you are ready for the big leagues. If not, don't expect any short cuts. The heights can never be lowered to you.

Thus, to wrap up this week, Torah study and Kabbalah in particular are ideally for those prepared to transform themselves and grow into their teachings. And for this reason, the vast majority of books of serious Jewish scholarship (especially mystical scholarship) were never written with the uninitiated in mind. As I once heard R. Berel Wein put it, you open the first page of the Talmud and attempt to read it, and the way it throws around concepts, terminology and ideas the authors seem to just assume their audience basically knows the entire Talmud already. There are many reasons for this, but a great part of it is what we have been saying. The Torah must not be spelled out in every last detail. We must study and ponder for ourselves -- and as my student of years back, we may make many false starts until we truly understand. For only then will our Torah study truly become a part of ourselves and will we truly grow.

