

TALMUD TORAH 1:02

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

2. Just as a person is obligated to teach his son, similarly he is obligated to teach his grandson, as it says: "Inform them [what you saw at Sinai] to your children and to the children of your children" (Devarim [Deuteronomy] 4:9). Not only [is this said] regarding his son and his grandson, rather it is a Mitzvah upon each and every Sage in Israel to teach all of the students, even though they are not his children. As it says: "You shall teach your children" (Devarim 6:7); from our tradition we learned that "your children" refers to your students, since students are called "sons", as it says "the sons of the prophets went out" (Melakhim II [Kings II] 2:3). If so, why was he commanded regarding his son and his grandson? To place [the teaching of] his son before his grandson and [the teaching of] his grandson before the son of his neighbor.

Q1a: How many obligations are there here? We have to study, to teach our biological children; to teach our biological offspring (assuming that the obligation upon grandparents does not stop at a second generation) and to teach the students. We could claim that there are two: To study and to teach. There could be three: To study, to teach your children/descendants and to teach the students.

Q1b: Once we define how many obligations there are, are they functionally the same? Is my obligation towards my students the same as that towards my children, except that the children come first? Or is there another, more fundamental difference in what I am to teach, to what degree etc.?

YE (Yitz Etshalom):

It seems fairly clear from the Introduction that there is one Mitzvah - Lilmod (to study) Torah. It is equally clear that there are at least two distinct manifestations of that - the obligation to study (amounts are presented later in the text) and the obligation to teach - although there is an interweaving of them, as follows:

The underlying obligation is to continue the Mesorah - both by strengthening your own link, - through your own learning and through your relationship with your Rabbeim (hence, perhaps, the inclusion of the second Mitzvah - honoring sages - in these Halakhot)- and by producing and strengthening the next link - i.e. the next generation. Rambam seems to be equating (*K'shem* "just as") the obligation to teach children with that of grandchildren - and with teaching other students. By widening the scope in this way, Rambam raises the problems we discussed last time - and to which

Jay raised several key challenges. Let's approach from a statement in the middle of this Halakha, which may help us with the rest.

"You shall teach your children" - the tradition teaches us that "children" - *banekha* here are the students. (Rambam uses the proof presented in the Sifri). Perhaps Talmud Torah as a Mitzvah is really a universal - I am obligated to teach every potential member of the Mesorah community of Talmud Torah. I have a telescoping scale of priorities in this obligation - my own children, then other members of my family, then every Jew. The question then becomes - what is my obligation towards myself - am I the center of the telescopic range, or is my obligation to learn a fundamentally different one? One other question - if it is a different obligation, is it totally removed from my obligation to teach, or is it a necessary prerequisite?

Rambam's phrasing in 1:3 helps answer this: "If his father didn't teach him, he is obligated to _teach himself_"

So, we may present one obligation here: to teach every potential member of the Mesorah community. This should help us with the questions from the previous posting: We maintain that there is one obligation, such that you are first obligated to teach yourself, then to teach your children, then your other "descendants" and then others. This obviates question 1b.

Q2: From Rambam's language, it sounds as if the masoretic understanding of "banekha" - your children - is specifically students. Does that mean that we regard the straightforward meaning of the verse - the *pshat* as intending the students? Where does that leave children?

YE: Banekha does mean your students; as the Sifri indicates; however, there is a particular twist on this. Since the Torah wants us to give preference to our biological children in the matter of teaching, it phrases the obligation such that "children" is the explicit mention.

Q3: In the final clause, Rambam says: Why was he commanded regarding his son and his grandson...? Wouldn't it have been smoother in the text to say: Why was he commanded about his children before the grandchildren? [with the accent on before] - which then justifies the final order of preference given at the end?

YE: For the clincher: Once we were taught that this Mitzvah is a universal obligation, (not confined to family), we might have thought that preference is given to wisest student, or the one with the best background - or that there is no Halakhah of preference. Therefore, the Torah, in commanding us to maintain and transmit the events at Sinai, specifically mentions our children and grandchildren. Once there is any preference given to family, it is obvious that children come first - as in all obligations where there is any correlation between relationship and level of obligation (e.g. Tzedakah), children come first. Therefore, Rambam is only concerned that family members be mentioned at all, in order to indicate that this Halakhah, although it obligates us beyond the family, does follow a "Karov, karov kodem" - preference based on family closeness - model.

The final upshot is that this Mitzvah is, indeed, very much like Tzedakah. Our first obligation is to ourselves (which is why the Rabbanan in Usha established a Tzedakah-ceiling of 1/10 or 1/5 - BT Arachin 28a), then to our blood family (*Umibsarcha Lo Tit'alem* - you shall not ignore your flesh relations - Yeshaya [Isaiah] 58:7), then to the poor of your city, etc. Although the specific targets of this Mitzvah are not the same (because the community of Tzedakah-beneficiaries is not the same as the community of Mesorah-recipients), the concept is similar.

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