

TALMUD TORAH 4:2

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

2: How do we teach? The teacher should sit at the head, and everybody should sit around him so that they will all be able to see him and hear his words. The teacher shouldn't sit on a chair while his students sit on the ground; either they all sit on the ground or they all sit on chairs. Originally, the teacher would sit and the students stand, but since before the destruction of the second Temple everyone followed the practice of teaching while both they and the students were seated.

Q0: (not a question - just an observation:) note how R shows concern with the visual AND auditory components of learning. Very much ahead of his times!

Q1: From the ideal set-up, it seems that there is an emphasis on "equality" - either everyone sits on chairs, or everyone is on the ground. If so, why was there an inequality in earlier times?

Q2: What caused the change during the first century? (see BT Megilla 21)

YE: Refer to the Yahrzeit shiur below.

**Special Yahrzeit Shiur in memory of
Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, of blessed memory.**

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

In MT, Hilkhos Talmud Torah 4:1, we are presented with the rule of not teaching a student whose behavior is inappropriate - and of not learning from a teacher whose behavior is unseemly. Each of these rulings seems to contradict Talmudic law: 1) (Berakhot 28a) We are taught that when R. Gamliel was ousted from the position of head of the "Sanhedrin" (Great Assembly), his successor, R. Elazar b. Azariah, opened the doors of the "Beit Midrash" (House of Study) and "on that day they got rid of the door-guard and permission was given to the students to enter; since R. Gamliel used to say that any student whose inside (motivation, character) is not like his outside (the way he presents himself) may not enter the Beit Midrash. On that day, more benches were brought in...some say 400 benches were added, others say 700 benches were added. R. Gamliel became depressed, saying 'have I kept [words of] Torah from Israel?' In a dream, he was shown white barrels, filled with ash - but that was not accurate, they only showed him that to restore his spirits" (i.e. - the dream indicated that all of these new students amounted to nothing; the truth was that they were competent students) Here, it is clear that R. Gamliel's position of moral scrutiny as a "tes t" before entering the Beit Midrash was rejected, both by the population and by heaven. Why does R seem to accept his

position?

2) (Hagiga 15b) R. Meir is recorded as having learned from Acher, the great teacher who had become an apostate. "How did R. Meir study Torah from the mouth of Acher? Didn't Rabbah b.b. Chana say in the name of R. Yohanan: 'What is the meaning of the verse: *For the Kohen's lips should keep knowledge and they will seek Torah from him, for he is a messenger of the Lord of Hosts*? - if the teacher resembles a messenger of the Lord of hosts, seek Torah from his mouth, and if not, do not seek Torah from his mouth' R. Lakish said: R. Meir found a verse and explained: *Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and let your heart lean towards My knowledge* - "their knowledge" is not stated, rather "My knowledge". (In other words, the verse encourages us to study God's word from the wise - not their words - such that we may distinguish between the tradition they pass on and their own behavior/input). Why does R reject R. Meir's justification?

3) A further question, on a more general plane - why should we be prevented from teaching Torah to students whose behavior is inappropriate? Wouldn't learning improve their behavior? (Isn't that what it's all about?) It also seems, from R's wording, that maintaining a student whose ways are unseemly is an inherently bad thing, besides any ramifications which may ensue from it. However, the Gemara (Makkot 10a) indicates that having an unseemly student is a bad idea because of the possible outcome:

"We learned, a student who is exiled (sent to a city of exile if he committed manslaughter), we exile his teacher with him, as it says: *He shall live* - set him up with a living. R. Ze'ira said, from here we learn that a person should not teach a student who is inappropriate. R. Yohanan said: [if] a teacher who is exiled, we exile his school with him." Here we see that avoiding a bad student is [apparently] in consideration of what it may cost the teacher - long-term exile!

In Halakha 2, we are presented with the set-up for the classroom. Here we need to ask: 4) If there is an inherent halakha in Talmud Torah, that the teacher and the students should be on "equal" footing (all standing, sitting or on the floor), then why, during the period preceding "before the destruction of the temple" did the teacher sit and the students stand? In addition, there are two oddities about R's language here. The source for the "sitting/standing" issue is the Gemara in Megilla 21a: The Rabbis taught, from the days of Moshe until Rabban Gamliel, they only studied Torah while standing. When R. Gamliel died, a weakness came into the world and they studied Torah while seated. This is the meaning of [the Mishna at the end of Sota, which states:] "When R. Gamliel died, the honor of Torah was gone."

5) Where does R get the picture of the teacher sitting while the students would stand? This is not mentioned in the Gemara.

6) The Gemara makes no mention of the destruction of the Temple in connection with this change. Why does R mention it?

7) Why does R ignore the issue of "the honor of Torah" in his formulation of this change in the

classroom set-up?

In order to answer these questions, we need to explore the nature of "interpersonal" Talmud Torah - anytime where there is a teacher and students. There are really two types of Talmud Torah - in Hebrew, we refer to them as "limud" - learning and "hora'ah" - instruction. Significantly, there are some crucial semantic differences. When studying, there is no noun to describe the activity which discriminates between teacher and student - the teacher is involved in "limud" as well as the student. Although they have different roles - "lomed" and "melamed" - they are sharing a common activity and a common pursuit - the pursuit of wisdom, of knowledge and of God's word. On the other hand, "hora'ah" point directly to the difference between the "moreh" - instructor and everyone else who is receiving instruction. In the Halakhic model, limud is confined to research, whereas hora'ah is the realm of practical instruction. When we study the Rambam's text together, trying to understand his intent, his sources etc., that is "limud". However, when we call or approach a "moreh hora'ah" like R. Elyashiv, or yibadel mechayim lechayim, R. Auerbach, and ask what to do about motion detectors in a hotel on Shabbat, or how to properly secure a loan from a Jewish bank without violating the laws of usury - the act of instruction is properly called "hora'ah." In such a case, the "moreh" and I are not sharing a pursuit, we are not engaged together in researching God's word - rather, I am coming to him for instruction and he is instructing me.

Although the notion of "hora'ah" still exists, the Talmud (Bava Metzia) notes that the end of the Talmudic era was the end of "hora'ah". The intent of that Gemara is probably pointed to national hora'ah - instruction which is binding upon the Jewish people as a whole. We can date the demise of that level of instruction even further back - the Talmud (Avodah Zara 8b, Shabbat 15a) indicates that forty years before the destruction of the Temple (c. 30 C.E. - 500 years before the time of R. Ashi and Ravina, the last of the sages of the Gemara) the Sanhedrin left its place on the Temple Mount and assembled elsewhere in Yerushalayim - and thus, ceased judging capital cases. The upshot of this is that the judicial component of Torah teaching was beginning to lose its impact even before the Temple was destroyed. When it comes to "limud" - the shared enterprise of Torah study, we see a tremendous level of mutual dependence between student and teacher. As we saw in the Gemara in Makkot, a student cannot live without his teacher - and a teacher has no life without his students!

(R codifies this law in an interesting fashion - in Hilkhos Rotzeach 7:1, he states "[I]f a student is exiled to the cities of refuge, we exile his teacher with him, as it says 'And he shall live' - [meaning] provide for him so that he can live, and the lives of the masters of wisdom and her seekers without study are considered like death; similarly, if the teacher is exiled, we exile his academy with him." The "masters of wisdom" likely refers to the teacher, whereas "her seekers" refers to students. This means that it is possible to have a student who seeks wisdom, yet is considered unseemly! Therefore, the "unseemliness" discussed must refer to moral character, not intellectual discipline.)

Since Talmud Torah is seen as a shared pursuit -and a holy one - we understand why both student and teacher must choose their partners carefully. Just as a judge may not share counsel with corrupt

judges, (Hilkhhot Sanhedrin 2:14) and a witness may not share testimony with a corrupt witness (Hilkhhot Edut 10:1) similarly, a Torah student may not partner up with someone whose character is unworthy of such a noble enterprise. Rabban Gamliel was so strict in this regard that he would have each potential student scrupulously checked to see if his motivation and character measured up. R. Elazar b. Azariah did not totally disagree - he just shifted the assumption in the student's favor. Instead of assuming poor character and needing to prove noble character, R. Elazar b. Azariah opened the doors to everyone - but, undoubtedly, would have prevented an immoral, corrupt student from entering. That is why R adds the phrase "or to a person whose behavior is unknown" - to include R. Elazar b. Azariah's more liberal approach. It is also clear that R. Meir did not see his study with Acher as a joint venture - he was merely trying to gain wisdom while weeding out Acher's heretical attitudes. This is clearly not the sort of relationship anyone wants to have with a teacher, but, if there is not choice, we must rely on this alternative. (Question: what if the greatest teacher around is an Acher, but there are other competent teachers who are righteous?)

Now we understand the stricture against teaching an unworthy student as recorded in Makkot - it is not merely a "look what it may lead to" - but why would you want to have your life so dependent upon this sort of fellow? If you teach an unworthy student, you will become close to him, and he and you will develop a mutual interdependence which will drag you into all of his troubles. Teaching the unworthy student is an inherently problematic situation, not just due to possible ramifications. As mentioned before, a primary function of study was "hora'ah" - therefore, the status of the Beit Midrash was that of a Beit Din - where the judges sit (they must sit) and the witnesses and litigants stand (the witnesses must stand, the litigants are advised to do so) - this is not on account of "k'vod Torah" - honor of the Torah, rather the format of "hora'ah." As the demise of Jewish self-determination advanced, which ultimately led to the destruction of the Temple, "hora'ah" began losing its central place in Torah study. It began with the exile of the Sanhedrin from the Temple Mount and ended with the end of hora'ah in the days of Rav Ashi and Ravina. At that point, the main focus of Talmud Torah became the "limud" in which teacher and student are partners in the search for God's word. Therefore, R makes no mention of "k'vod hatorah", dates this change to "before the destruction of the Temple" - and maintains that before the change, the teacher would sit while the students stood - the model of hora'ah: *Ki Mitziyyon Tetze Torah, ud'var Hashem Mi'Yrushalayim* - For Instruction will go forth from Tziyyon, and the word of God from Yerushalayim.

Rambam, Copyright (c) 1999 Project Genesis, Inc.