

TALMUD TORAH 4:5

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

5. The student should not be embarrassed because his peers grasped [the lesson] after one or two times and he learned it only after many times. If he is embarrassed from this matter, he will end up coming in and going out of the Beit Midrash without learning anything. Therefore, the early sages said: "The shy one does not learn and the short-tempered one cannot teach" (Avot 2:5). When does this apply? If they didn't understand because of the depth of the Halakha or their limited abilities. However, if it became apparent to the teacher that they were not applying themselves to the words of Torah and were being lax about them - and therefore, they did not understand - , he is obligated to become angry with them and to shame them with words in order to sharpen them. In this context, the sages said: "Cast fear into the students." (BT Ketubot 103b). Therefore, it is inappropriate for the teacher to act in a silly fashion in front of the students. He should not amuse himself in their presence, nor eat and drink with them - [all of this is] in order that his fear be upon them and they will learn from him quickly.

Q1: Isn't it natural for the slower student not to be embarrassed? How can R expect him not to feel this way?

JB: I don't think this is addressing him so much as it is addressing the other students. It does not say a student should not be embarrassed because he learns more slowly than his friends; it says he should not be embarrassed by his friends etc. etc. In other words, he shouldn't feel bad because they should not be making him feel bad.

Q2: Why the odd language: "he will end up coming in and going out of the Beit Midrash without learning anything"?

YE: It points to the uselessness of his being there. The "coming in and going out" are possibly patterned after the prayer of R. Nehunia ben haKana (Berakhot 28b) "when he entered the *Beit haMidrash* and when he exited". Also, it effectively equates his going out with his coming in - just as when he came in, he knew nothing (or little) - so, when he leaves, he knows the same.

Q3: Why "shame them with words" - first of all, isn't that (as well as anger) generally prohibited? Also - why the added "with words" - how else would he shame them?

JB: He could shame them by making them recount things he had said, or by making them stand in the corner or by sending them out of the room. Simply shaming them into realizing that they are not

applying themselves or taking it seriously is his job. If R says you can hit a kids on his knuckles, you can certainly chide a student who is not paying attention. It is clear in R that it is only to get them back on track, not to embarrass them as punishment...

YE: This issue is part of a larger question. The general order of R's layout of Hilkhos Talmud Torah seems a bit strange:

Chapter 1: The general laws of TT

Chapter 2: Teaching

Chapter 3: Praise of TT

Chapter 4: Teaching

Chapter 5: Respect for one's rebbe

Chapter 6: Respect for Sages

Chapter 7: Excommunication of Scholars

The order makes sense except for Chapters 2&4, which should be together. However, once we look at them more carefully, it becomes clear. At the beginning of Ch. 1, R introduced us to the father's obligation to teach his child.

This is part of the fundamental Mitzva of TT, as we discussed there. R devotes the entire second chapter to an expanded discussion of this facet of TT - teaching small children. All students are accepted, as long as they are healthy and of age. The teacher is to use a bit of corporal punishment so that the students are "in awe of him". The teacher is clearly "teaching" and would not be angered by students' non-comprehension, because he wouldn't regard this learning session as one for his own intellectual growth.

After finishing the explanation of this Mitzva and its praise (Ch. 3), R begins to discuss the "Havura" - the assembly of scholars. This group consists of teachers and students who are joined together in a quest for knowledge (see the Yahrzeit shiur on TT 4:1-2). We are careful about who may join this peerage; the learning is a joint effort, so the teacher may no longer use his "whip", rather his tongue, to shame them for not learning (I believe that R's "obligation" of anger here means that it is a show of anger which must be totally external) - and that is why the teacher here would be more likely to become angry.

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