

TALMUD TORAH 4:6

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

6. [Students] should not ask questions of the teacher when he enters the House of Study until he gathers his powers of concentration. And the student should not ask until he (the student) is seated and at rest. Two should not ask at the same time. The teacher should not be asked a question on a subject which is different [from the one which he is teaching], but one should ask only on the relevant subject, in order that he won't be embarrassed. The teacher may mislead his students with his questions and actions which he does in their presence in order to sharpen their wits and to see whether they remember what they had learnt or not. Needless to say, he may ask them about a different subject, which they are not presently involved with, in order to spur them on.

Q1: Why shouldn't the student ask until he is sitting? What if the student thought of this question beforehand?

YE (Yitz Etshalom): Three possibilities: a) the student may ask hastily; b) the student needs to settle in to see if his question is appropriate and relevant; asking a question is not a student-centered activity - it depends upon the entire environs (other students and especially the teacher) c) as noted in the Yahrzeit shiur (posted with TT 4:1-2), the endeavor of Talmud Torah is a joint process and therefore the student must be in the same stance as the teacher.

Q2: If the students can only ask about "relevant" questions, how and when do they ever address other questions?

YE: This Halakha only applies to a session of the *Beit Midrash* (House of study); as to what happens when students approach their teachers privately, that is not discussed here. It seems clear from the gemara that students would approach their teachers to ask other questions - but, in the session of the Beit Midrash, the teacher sets the subject and the course of discussion.

Q3: Why is the teacher allowed to ask them about a different subject? How does this "spur them on"?

YE: If they know that they could be asked about anything they learned with that teacher, even in previous sessions and on previous topics, they will be careful to always review their material. In the setting R is describing, (see TT 4:5 at the end and 2:2) the students are in awe of their teacher and afraid of "not having the answer".

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