

TALMUD TORAH 5:11

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

11.0 If the outstanding teacher wants to *Mochel* [forgo] the honor due him, regarding any of these [abovementioned] things - or any one of them; [whether he is *Mochel*] towards all of his students or to one of them, he has that right. In spite of the fact that he was *Mochel* [his honor], the student is obligated to show him some deference, even at the time he is *Mochel* [his honor].

Q1: Isn't it obvious that he can be *Mochel* his honor?

HH ([HH](#)):

It is not so obvious. The point is not that he can forgo it, but that he has the moral right to do so. If a teacher told his students to call him by his first name, wouldn't some people think it improper? IMHO, Rambam states that it isn't.

AW ([Art Werschulz](#)):

I seem to recall that a king cannot show *mechilah* in this respect. Since a king can't, it might then be the case that a teacher can't either.

YE ([Yitz Etshalom](#)):

The essential question, as presented in the Gemara (BT Kiddushin 32a-b), is whether the honor due the sage is his own (like the father's), or if it is the *K'vod haTorah* (Honor of the Torah), which he embodies. The Gemara posits that even though the father (and, presumably, the mother), may be *Mochel* the honor due him, the teacher may not. A challenge is brought from the fact that God Himself was "*Mochel*" His Honor, by "walking" in front of the camp of Bnei Yisrael in the desert (inappropriate for one due honor) - and God is seen here as the model for the teacher. The Gemara defeats this challenge by distinguishing - it is God's world and it is God's honor - if He wishes to be *Mochel* - that is "up to Him". But the scholar isn't just representing his own self; it is the God's Torah which is the source of his honor. The Gemara refutes this distinction by pointing to an alternate reading of the first verse of Psalms, which indicates that after learning Torah, the Torah becomes the "property" of the student/scholar. That is the final result of the *sugya* (section) in the Gemara.

As Art pointed out, the Gemara continues to inquire about other people due honor and whether they may forgo it - and the final result is that the only one who may not is the king.

Interesting side note: The entire concept of *Mechila* is sourced in civil/monetary law. If Reuven

owes Shimon \$100, Shimon has the right to be *Mochel* the debt and, thereupon, Reuven's obligation to pay is dissolved. This concept seems to have been "borrowed" into the arena of "Kavod".

Q2: Is it a good idea to discriminate among students?

HH: Usually it isn't (remember the section on making the meturgeman call the students[TT 4:3]). However, he can discriminate if the students are enrolled in different classes and, thus, are unaware of the discrimination. For example, somebody who teaches one course in elementary school and another one at college is expected to treat the two types of students differently.

YE: The Gemara (Bava Bathra 21a and 22a) uses the term: *Kin'at Soferim Tarbeh Hokhmah* - jealousy among scribes increases wisdom - which seems to promote not only competition among teachers (in that context), but also "favoring" one person over another - not out of a pure sense of favoritism, but rather as a "motivational technique" to inspire the "weaker" student to push himself further. Those of us who have merited studying with the brightest lights of the generation know how coveted the position of being part of their inner circle of students and how much that motivates us to strengthen our own study habits.

However, when discrimination is clearly perceived by the students - (and is in reality) a function of "favoritism"; where one student (or several) are the "teacher's pets" - especially if this is not an "earned" position and is unattainable to the others - this is probably destructive and negative.

Q3: Why does the student have to show him some deference (*Hiddur*) if his teacher has been *Mochel* the honor due him?

HH: Honor, in Rambam's standards, is at a very high level. A teacher may forgo the right to have the students be like serfs to him (most teachers nowadays forgo it!), but that doesn't mean he expects his students to treat him like a peer. In other words: There is the honor given to the teacher and the lower level of honor given to somebody who knows more than oneself. The teacher can forgo the first kind of honor, but he doesn't forgo the second kind of honor thereby.

YE: This Halakha is found in BT Kiddushin 32b, where there are two stories related about teachers who served students at weddings (a clear sign of *Mechila*), yet were distressed when the students showed them no deference. As the Gemara terms it: *Afilu hakhi, hiddur mi'avid lei ba'u* - Nevertheless, they should have shown *Hiddur*. Rashi explains: "to move a bit, as if he wishes to rise in his presence". In other words, the student should not view the *Mechila* as a good piece of fortune, rather he should demonstrate that he wishes to show deference to his teacher, but is respecting the teacher's wishes by refraining from acting upon that wish.

Q4: Why does Rambam add the seemingly redundant phrase at the end: "even at the time he is *Mochel*"?

YE: As pointed out above, the source of this Halakha revolves around stories about deference [not]

shown at the time of *Mechila*. One might think that showing some deference at a later time is a reflection of the student's wish to honor his teacher - but that doing so _while_ the teacher is actively being *Mochel* the honor is a direct "violation" of the teacher's wishes and is frowned upon. Therefore, Rambam teaches that it is still a sign of proper respect.

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