

TALMUD TORAH 5:13

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

13. The students add to the teacher's wisdom and expand his understanding. The sages said: I have learned much wisdom from my teacher, more from my colleagues and the most from my students (BT Ta'anit 7a); and just as a small piece of wood ignites a large one, similarly a small student sharpens the teacher's mind until he extracts from him, through his questions, wondrous wisdom.

Q1: Is this a separate idea, extolling the value of the students - or a continuation of the reason why a person should value and embrace his students?

HH: If my answer to Q1 above (on Halakha 12) made any sense, then Halakha 13 is a continuation of the reason.

YE: Perhaps both explanations fit:

(a) Rambam is providing a reason why it is to the teacher's advantage to cultivate his relationship with his students - and why they are worthy of his honor and affection;

(b) Rambam is instructing the teacher as to how he should relate to the students' questions and comments. Up until now, Rambam was advising the teacher to show his students honor and affection - as students. In this Halakha, they become part of the teacher's learning process and growth - which demands a more serious, respectful attitude.

Q2: In the original version of the statement, the word *Hokhma* (wisdom) is not there. It reads "I have learned much from my teachers; from my colleagues more than my teachers and from my students more than from anyone else." Why does Rambam add the word *Hokhma*?

HH: To make clear that one learns not only from the mistakes of one's students, but also from the students' wisdom (which is brought to light by the teacher).

Q3: Following the logic here, a person must maintain a certain respect and closeness with his colleagues; why doesn't Rambam mention that here?

HH: Because Rambam is focusing on the teacher-student relationship.

Q4: How does the student extract "wondrous wisdom" from the teacher through his questions?

HH: The student's questions clarify the teacher's ideas, make him pay attention to what he has previously glided over, and give him more topics to think about. Besides, a student gains particularly

from the teacher's answers to his questions because he is particularly interested in the themes of the questions.

YE: In addition, the need to explain to others forces the teacher to reevaluate the premises upon which he based his explanation - and this reevaluation often leads to a deeper conceptual explanation of the material.

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