

TALMUD TORAH 5:9

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

9. A student who saw his teacher violating the words of the Torah should say to him: "Our teacher, haven't you taught us such and such?" Every time that he mentions a teaching in his presence, he should say: "Thus you have taught us, our teacher." He should not mention anything which he did not hear from his teacher, unless he mentions the source/author of the statement. When his teacher dies, he should rend all of his garments until he reveals his heart and he should never mend them. In what case does this apply? To one's *Rebbe Muvhaq* - (outstanding teacher) - from whom he learned most of his wisdom. However, if he did not learn most of his wisdom from him, he is a colleague-student and he is not obligated to honor him in any of these [above-mentioned] ways. Nevertheless, he should stand up in his presence, rend his garment at his [death] as he does for all of the deceased for whom he mourns. Even if he only learned one thing from him, whether a small or great matter, he should stand in his presence and rend his garments at his [death].

Q1: Does the student "point out" the violation in front of others, or just privately?

YE: From the classic examples in the second chapter of Mishnah Berakhot (involving Rabban Gamliel), it seems pretty clear that this type of "correction" was exclusively done in front of the other students. Every example of "Our teacher, haven't you taught us such and such?" that I found in both Talmuds was done in front of other students. Perhaps this is not only the proper method for "correction"; it also may be an educational experience which should specifically occur in the presence of the students.

Q2: What if his teacher was about to violate the Torah; does the student then speak "more sharply" to keep him from sinning?

YE: Certainly - if the student is allowed (even encouraged) to "violate" the teacher's honor by stopping another from sinning in the teacher's presence, it follows that the student should certainly do whatever is necessary to prevent his own teacher from violating the Torah. However, it is equally obvious that the greater extent that the student can accomplish this without embarrassing his teacher, the better (and likely more efficacious) this "rebuking" will be.

Q3: Why can't the student say something, not of his teacher's teaching, without citing the source?

HH: So that the teacher will not be held responsible by default.

YE: Good point. See the Kessef Mishneh (on our Halakha) who points out that anything the student

says is assumed (by listeners) to be a quote from his teacher - unless he cites another teacher/source.

Q4: What is the reasoning behind the category of *Rabo Muvhaq* (outstanding teacher)?

HH: If one had to rend one's garments to shreds everytime any teacher died, and never mend the garments, one would run out of clothes very soon. (This reminds me of an argument in Berakhot about tearing one's clothes in the face of blasphemy.)

YE: In addition, the teacher is compared to the parent (see TT 5:1 - see also BT Bava Metzia 33a) - and, in a unique piece of homiletics, to God (BT Bava Kama 41b). In each case, there is a unique member of the model set - either the parent (one mother, one father - to whom the comparison is usually made - see our discussion on TT 5:1) or God. It follows that only one teacher can be classified as that special individual to whom we owe this honor.

Q5: What is the exact parameter within which we measure "most wisdom", such that one individual becomes *Rabo Muvhaq*?

YE: Although R does not specify here, in Hilkhos Gevula va'Aveda 12:2, he adds the following: "*Rabo Muvhaq* - from whom he learned most of his _Torah_ wisdom.

The source of this definition is the Tosefta in Horayot 2:5: "What is *Rabo*? His teacher who taught him Torah, not his teacher who taught him a trade. Which one is this? The one who taught him first (or: opened him up (to learning) first); R. Meir says: *Rabo* who taught him wisdom and not *Rabo* who taught him Torah (!); R. Yehuda says: anyone from whom the majority of his *Talmud* (study) comes; R. Yossi says: Whoever enlightened him in his Mishna-study." (This Tosefta is quoted, with slight variations, in the central *sugya* dealing with *Rabo Muvhaq* - BT Bava Metzia' 33a). The Gemara in Bava Metzia 33a accepts R. Yehuda's opinion, which is reflected in R's ruling(s).

Q6: What about an auto-didact? Is it a given that everyone has a *Rebbe Muvhaq* - or is it possible, even to be a great scholar, without having one?

YE: Although we are commanded/advised (Avot 1:6) to get a teacher, there doesn't seem to be anything inherently invalid about self-teaching. Although in the times of the Talmud this would be virtually impossible, because of the ban against writing down the oral law, in our days, all of the classical works of Jewish law are available in print. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is still an "oral" tradition which cannot be gained from the detached written word alone - this includes "how to read" a text, how to balance various concerns within the Halakhic universe etc.

A comment on the ban against writing down the oral tradition (BT Gittin 60b). R. Eliezer Berkovitz zt"l gave a beautiful explanation (I believe that it is found in his "Not In Heaven" - very worthwhile reading). Since the nature of the written word is to become static and unyielding - and since the Torah is ideally a living, breathing, interactive system which is constantly reflecting the interchange between underlying concepts which are eternal and changing realities which those concepts must

address - therefore this tradition was to remain unwritten and, thus, unstatic. Another possible explanation which is also borne out by today's reality - by not writing down the tradition, a dependence upon teachers and, thereby, upon tradition, remained part of the learning process. It is impossible to learn without a teacher if he is the only source of knowledge. This dependence creates an almost inescapable reliance on tradition, which insures that the academic enterprise of learning does not eclipse and pervert the ultimate goals and principles of Torah.

Q7: According to this Halakha, if I hear of the death of anyone who taught me anything at any point in my life, am I obligated to "tear *Q'ria*" (rend my garments) out of grief for his death? This is certainly not the common custom.

YE: Not exactly. The one added stipulation is that this person is indeed a *Hakham* - a sage. In that case, even if you only learned one lesson from him, you would still tear *Qeria*" upon learning of his death - but not the intense *Qeria*" reserved for *Rabo Muvhaq*.

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