

# TALMUD TORAH 6:11

*by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom*

**11.** It is a great sin to degrade or hate scholars. Yerushalayim [Jerusalem] was not destroyed until they degraded \*Talmidei Hakhamim\*, as it says: "But they kept mocking the messengers of God, degrading his words, and scoffing at his prophets..." (Divrei Hayamim II [Chronicles II] 36:16), in other words - degrading those who teach His words. Similarly, that which the Torah said: "If you reject My statutes (Vayyiqra [Leviticus] 26:15) - [means] the teachers of My statutes . Anyone who degrades the scholars has no share in \*Olam haBa\* (the hereafter) and is included in "For he has degraded the word of God" (Bamidbar [Numbers] 15:31).

**Q1:** Why was the degrading of scholars a cause of the destruction of Yerushalayim (presumably the First Temple)?

**YE:** The Gemara in Shabbat (119b - somewhat parallel piece in Midrash Eikhah 1:21) lists several causes for the destruction. Yerushalayim was destroyed due to...

1) The desecration of Shabbat; 2) Ignoring the morning and evening reading of the Sh'ma; 3) Suspension of the school children from Torah study; 4) A lack of shame between people; 5) A lack of distinction between great and lesser people; 6) A lack of reproof/instruction between people; 7) Degrading scholars; 8) A dearth of trustworthy people.

Significantly, #7 is the only one cited by R in Mishneh Torah. It may be that R understood all of the other causes to be symptomatic of the attitude which directly leads to degradation of scholars. 6 of the other 7 behaviors mentioned fall into 2 categories:

(a) Lack of respect for the power of speech (#4,6,8) and

(b) Lack of respect towards the value of study (#2 - according to many Rishonim, the twice-daily recitation of Sh'ma is the focus of daily Torah study - see BT Menachot 99b- #3, #5).

These are two attitudes which underlie degradation of scholars:

(a) Scholars are mighty with their speech - their power is the power of words. Often, scholars are degraded because of this;

(b) Scholars are valued because of the value of learning.

It may be that R saw fit to list degradation of scholars as "the" cause for the destruction of Yerushalayim, as the attitudes which lead to this transgression lead to (almost) all of the other

causes mentioned.

**Q2:** According to the exegesis of these verses, are scholars identified with God, with Torah - or both? (i.e. is a rejection/degradation of scholars a rejection of God or Torah - or is the rejection of one considered the rejection of the other?).

**YE:** Both approaches are supported within the context of the \*sugya\*: Following the Gemara's presentation of the several things which were causes of the destruction (see response to previous question), the Gemara relates: "Do not touch My anointed ones" - this refers to the school children - "and do not harm My prophets" - this refers to scholars. - Here we see that the scholar is to be protected - and violation of his honor is a matter with which God deals harshly - because he is a "prophet" - i.e. messenger of God. Conversely, R here places the focus on "degrading His words" - seemingly, that the scholar represents and embodies and nearly personifies the Torah and bears the honor of the Torah.

**Q3:** Why does one who degrades scholars lose his share in \*Olam haBa\*?

**YE:** Two possible approaches:

(a) Degrading scholars is a degradation of God \_and\_ His Torah - which is itself enough to forfeit one's share in the afterlife;

(b) If one degrades scholars, he is most unlikely to learn from them - either instructionally or behaviorally. One who does not learn the instruction and proper behavior of the Torah - by studying with, observing and emulating \*Talmidei Hakhamim\* - cannot properly learn how to live the good life which is necessary for him to "earn his share" in the World to Come.

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