

THE DISCERNING ELEMENT BETWEEN A TORAH SCHOLAR AND A TORAH SAGE

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. The Discerning Element Between a Torah Scholar and a Torah Sage

The Gemara tells us that Rebbe Akiva had 24,000 students (talmidim) who were the Torah sages of that generation. During the period between Pesach and Shavuot, all 24,000 passed away. There is a discussion among the commentators as to when the students began dying and when they stopped. Everyone agrees that they perished over a 33-day period. The Gemara tells us that after they had passed away the world was considered desolate. Other than Rebbe Akiva, there were no more Torah sages.

The Gemara explains that the reason all the students of Rebbe Akiva passed away in such a short period was that "They did not conduct themselves with proper respect towards one another." The students of Rebbe Akiva were the most advanced Torah sages of that generation. Thus, it is not possible to even consider that they were disrespectful to one another. In addition, had Rebbe Akiva noticed any inappropriate behavior among his students he would have rebuked them. Evidently, the failing must have been so subtle that even Rebbe Akiva was not able to detect it. How do we understand the Gemara's statement that the students of Rebbe Akiva passed away because they did not respect one another?

The students of Rebbe Akiva were most certainly respectful to one another. However, there is a subtle aspect to which they were not sensitive. All of the students had a special dimension of Torah scholarship; however, there were slight shades of differences between each of them. When one accords respect to a Torah sage it must be appropriate to the individual's level of Torah. The Torah Sages neither addressed or acknowledged the subtle differences of greatness between them, and thus ignored these distinctions. They treated each other with the same level of respect, which was not sufficient. They should have accorded one another the appropriate level of respect commensurate with each individual's greatness. Why were the students of Rebbe Akiva held to such a standard of liability for a seemingly minor infraction?

Reb Aaron Kotler z'tl explains that the students of Rebbe Akiva were the sages who were responsible for the transmission of Torah to the future generations. They had the responsibility of communicating to the Jewish people what Torah is and is not. However, if they did not have the sensitivity to evaluate the nuances between their different levels of Torah and act accordingly, then

they were not qualified for this awesome task. Since they did not recognize the subtleties between themselves, it was an indication that they did not have the necessary level of discernment to transmit Torah with the accuracy that was necessary. Their passing had nothing to do with their level of Torah knowledge, rather it was because they did not qualify to be the transmitters of Torah. Had they not passed away, the Torah that they would have communicated would have been deficient.

One could be a Torah scholar and possess an enormous amount of knowledge, but he may not necessarily qualify as a Gadol b'Torah (Torah Sage). A Torah sage is another dimension of person. He has the sensitivity and ability to weigh and evaluate all situations and see the far-reaching consequences that will evolve into the future. He can perceive with clarity how his decisions will impact on the Jewish people. This is the difference between a Torah scholar and a Torah Sage.

2. Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam - the Redeemers of Israel

The verse in Zecharya states, "I will remove the three shepherds in one month..."

The verse is informing us that Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam would pass away in the same month. The Gemara in Tractate Taanis asks, "How do we reconcile this with the fact that Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam did not all pass away during the same month? Miriam passed away in the month of Nissan. Aaron passed away in the month of Av. Moshe passed away in the month of Adar." The Gemara answers that the verse is informing us that when each of them passed away the gifts that came through them no longer continued. The Gemara tells us that in the merit of Moshe the Jewish people were given the gift of the Manna, which sustained them in the desert. In the merit of Aaron, they were given the gift of the Clouds of Glory, which protected them. In the merit of Miriam, they were given the living wellspring, which provided them with water. Each of these gifts ceased when each of them passed away. When Miriam passed away, the wellspring ceased and was reinstated in the merit of Moshe. When Aaron passed away, the Clouds of Glory ceased and were reinstated in the merit of Moshe. Consequently, when Moshe passed away, all three of the gifts ceased. Only then did the Jewish people sense the loss of all the "three shepherds" - Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam. Thus, it was the equivalent of all of the "shepherds" passing away during the same month.

It is interesting to note that the verse refers to Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam as "shepherds (ro'im)" The Gemara in Tractate Taanis refers to them as "communal leaders (parnasim)." However, the Midrash Tanchuma refers to them as, "redeemers (goalim)." There is no question that Moshe was the Redeemer, who took the Jewish people out of Egypt. However, why does the Midrash classify Aaron and Miriam also as "redeemers?" In what capacity did they function so as to be valued as "redeemers?"

Evidently, we see from the Midrash's classification of Aaron and Miriam that being a "redeemer" goes beyond taking the Jewish people out of Egypt. Had it not been for the Clouds of Glory to protect them and the wellspring, which miraculously provided them with water for forty years, they would not have been able to survive the trek in the desert. Without these miracles, leaving Egypt would

have had no value. Therefore, it is true that Moshe is identified as "the Redeemer" because he was the one who had taken the Jewish people out of Egypt. However to bring about the ultimate value of redemption, Moshe, Aaron, and Miriam were all necessary to bring the process to completion.

Because of their integral role vis-à-vis the survival of the Jewish people, Aaron and Miriam were more than "shepherds" or "communal leaders." They assumed the value of "redeemers" and thus each was a different dimension of person.

When the Midrash tells that it was in the merit of Miriam that the Jewish people had the wellspring, it identifies her as, "the one who led the women in song (after the splitting of the Sea)." Why does the Midrash identify Miriam in this manner? It would have been enough to say that in the merit of Miriam, the Jewish people received the wellspring.

It is interesting to note that the wellspring was only needed after the splitting of the Sea. Seemingly, what the Midrash is communicating to us is that the basis for Miriam's merit to bring about the wellspring was that she led the women in song after the splitting of the Sea. Because she led the women in song, she brought them to another level of clarity and appreciation of G'd. In addition, the women's expression of praise was a public sanctification of G'd (kiddush Hashem). Through Miriam's articulation of what had transpired at the splitting of the Sea, she merited that the wellspring come about through her. Had it not been for this special merit, like the manna, the wellspring would have come about through Moshe, Miriam is identified as a "redeemer" not only because she provided water for the Jewish people in the desert, but also because of her song at the Sea, through which she provided a new level of appreciation and understanding of G'd.

We see that the greatest level of merit that one could have is to bring others to an understanding and realization of G'd's Omnipotence. His involvement is in every aspect and nuance of existence. A Jew should surely sing the praises of G'd for everything he has been endowed with and for all that he receives, because it is only because G'd deems it so.

3. The Basis for the Jews' Failing in the Desert

The Midrash states, "G'd said to the Jewish people, you had said to Moshe, 'Why did you take us up out of Egypt?' Did I (G'd) treat you as if you were in a desert? If a mortal king were to go out into the desert, does he have the tranquility and comfort of his own palace? Does he have the same amount of food and drink available to him? With Clouds of Glory, I took you out of Egypt where you were slaves to Pharaoh. I gave you three redeemers to accommodate your needs. I provided you with the Manna and the wellspring. Yet you complained."

The generation of the desert had witnessed the ten plagues in Egypt and the splitting of the Sea. The revelation of G'd at the splitting of the Sea was at such an advanced level that even Yechezkel the prophet did not merit seeing what the maidservant had seen. Despite having such a unique level of clarity and experiencing such an advanced level of revelation, the Jewish people complained to Moshe, "Why did you take us up out of Egypt?" What was the basis for the Jews to complain, if G'd in

fact provided for all of their needs in the desert? Evidently, there was something missing.

The basis for the sense of inadequacy among the Jewish people, which caused them to complain, was that they were in a situation where they had no choice but to adhere fully to the Word of G'd. Just as G'd had put the mountain over their heads with an ultimatum - that they had no choice but to accept the Divine Will upon themselves, so too they continuously had no choice throughout the forty-year period. They witnessed immediate repercussions whenever they deviated from the Will of G'd. They could not pursue their own interests without the Attribute of Justice intervening. Although they were no longer the slaves of Pharaoh, they were conscripted to be the servants of G'd. In the desert, they had no sense of personal accomplishment because G'd was their full provider. It was this confining relationship with G'd that caused them to rebel.

We read in Pirkei Avos, "There is no free man other than the one who engages in Torah." The only person who is truly free is the one who appreciates and understands that freedom is not only exercising his own will, but also having the clarity and appreciation for truth. This can only come about through serious Torah study. It is only if one is totally permeated with spirituality that he understands and appreciates that all of his good fortune is due solely to G'd. It is because the Jewish people were not fully purged from the impurity of Egypt (idolatry) that they could not completely appreciate their predicament. Egypt was a location of debasement and thus was antithesis of spirituality. The Egyptian experience impaired the ability of the Jewish people to appreciate fully G'd's unlimited Kindness. They perceived their situation as going from being slaves of Pharaoh to being bound to G'd. They were not able to deviate an iota from G'd's Will without immediate retribution. Thus the Jews felt that they were not truly free - causing them to speak in a defiant manner.

The Jewish people were deficient in their fear of G'd on the most minute level. King David writes in Tehillim, "The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G'd." Meaning, the prerequisite to wisdom is to fear G'd. One is only able to maximize his knowledge and process it as "wisdom" when it is predicated on the fear of G'd.

One only has true fear when one understands his true insignificance - thus resulting in no interference. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos states, "If one fully sees (appreciates) three things, he will not come to sin - from where do you come, to where are you going, and before whom will you give a reckoning..." The language employed in the Mishna is communicating to us that it is not enough for one simply to be aware of certain realities in order to be impacted. Rather, one must "visualize" the realities of what he understands conceptually. Only then, will he not come to sin. Fear of heaven in Hebrew is referred to as "yiras shamayim." The word "yira" is derived from the word "roeh" which means "to see." When one visualizes heaven and G'd becomes a reality, as one sees something, one understands who he is not - thus causing him to appreciate who G'd is.

4. The Mitzvah of Spiritual Procreation

The Torah states, "These are the offspring of Aaron and Moshe...These are the names of the sons of Aaron, the firstborn was Nadav, and Avihu, Elazar, and Ithamar." Although the verse is addressing the offspring of both Aaron and Moshe, it only mentions the sons of Aaron. Moshe's children are not mentioned. It seems from the verse that Aaron's sons are being identified as Moshe's sons. Why is this so? The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that we are able to derive from this verse, "When one teaches Torah to his fellow's child, it is as if he gave birth to him." Seemingly, Chazal should have stated, "When one teaches his fellow's child Torah, it is as if he is his son." Why does the Talmud use the expression "it is as if he sired (fathered) the child?"

The appellation of "son" to identify a father's relationship to his child does not have the same connotation as the expression of "siring" a child. The connotation of "giving birth to" communicates the father's involvement from the very beginning of the child's existence. He is responsible for bringing his child into existence. Just as a father's relevance to his own child begins at conception, so too does a teacher who mentors another's child in Torah have a similar relevance to the student. Because Moshe had taught Torah to Aaron's children, it is considered as if Moshe had brought them into being ("gave birth").

The human being is a composite of spiritual and physical. One's spirituality can only be developed through a mechanism known as Torah and mitzvos. All existence was created for the sole purpose of providing the setting for the fulfillment of the Torah. The responsibility was given to the Jewish people. The one who transmits the Torah to his student (melamed) is the one who is responsible for the development of that aspect/spirituality of his student. Without the mentoring of the teacher (melamed) through the transmission of Torah, one's spirituality remains unaffected and thus his soul remains dormant. In this context, the soul's only value/function is to maintain life within the physical. This is the reason the Talmud states, "The evil person (rasha), in his living state, is considered dead." His soul has no effective value because the evil person is involved in physical pursuits. The soul only has meaning and value if its needs are addressed, which can only be facilitated through the study of Torah and performance of mitzvos. Thus, whoever mentors/teaches his fellow's child in Torah, giving life and meaning (soul) to his spirituality, it is as if he had given birth to him.

The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos cites a verse from Psalms, "The dead are no longer able to praise G'd." The Gemara tells us that one should engage in Torah study and mitzvos before passing away because death will cause him to become detached from Torah and mitzvos - and G'd will no longer have praise from him. The Gemara is telling us that a Jew brings "praise" to G'd only through his study of Torah and performance of mitzvos. When the Jew engages properly in Torah and mitzvos, he is fulfilling the words of the Prophet who states in the name of G'd- "For My Glory I have created it (the world)." The purpose of existence is only to give glory to G'd.

If the Jew does not engage in Torah study and mitzvos, the objective and purpose of existence is not being addressed. Consequently, G'd's relevance to the world is limited just as the soul has limited affect on the body without Torah and mitzvos. It is interesting to note that the Gemara in Tractate

Berachos tells us that there is a commonality between G'd's relationship to the world and the soul's relationship to the body.

Since the soul only assumes its potential through the melamed (Torah mentor), it is as though the mentor gave birth to his student. Reb Chaim of Volozhin z'tl, who was the main disciple of the Vilna Gaon z'tl, and the founder of the world-renowned Yeshivah of Volozhin, was once in a community away from his city. He was approached by an individual who asked, "What is your vocation?" Reb Chaim humbly responded, "I am a melamed." During that period of Jewish history, the term "melamed (teacher)" had a pejorative connotation, which meant that a person had limited capabilities and was only qualified to teach young children. Later, this individual discovered that he had spoken to Reb Chaim of Volozhin the world-renowned Torah sage. This individual again approached Reb Chaim and said, "When I had asked you about your occupation, you responded that you were a simple melamed. Why did you not divulge your true dimension of person - that you were the rosh yeshivah of Volozhin?" Reb Chaim of Volozhin responded, "We conclude the first blessing which we recite before the study of Torah - Blessed are You, Hashem, Who teaches (hamelamed) Torah to His people Israel. If G'd identifies Himself as a "melamed" - should I not consider it the greatest honor to be identified as such?"

G'd is identified as the "melamed." Thus if one teaches his fellow G'd's Torah with the emphasis on advancing the individual's spirituality and fulfilling the purpose of creation, then he too is a "melamed." However, if one were to teach the Torah for the sake of transmitting Jewish intellectualism, he is not considered the one who brought that student into existence because it will not develop the spirituality of that individual. It is only if the Torah is communicated as the Word of G'd that it functions as the mechanism that perfects the recipient's soul. This is the reason the Gemara specifically uses the term - "one who is a melamed of Torah to the child of his fellow, it is as if he had given birth to him." It is only in this context that he is identified as fathering that child. Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and Torah.org.

Rabbi Kalatsky is the founder of the [Yad Avraham Institute](http://YadAvrahamInstitute.org), a New York-based learning center whose mission is to disseminate Torah to Jews of all backgrounds and walks of life.