

TORAH AND PTA

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

This year we have the distinct pleasure of having Shabbos and Yom Tov together - three days in a row. It seems appropriate to discuss something that touches upon both the parshas ha-shavuah (weekly Torah reading) and the Yom Tov of Shavuot. Hope you enjoy.

We read this week (3:1): "And these are the offspring of Aaron and Moshe on the day Hashem spoke with Moshe at Mount Sinai..." The pasuk then goes on to enumerate the children of Aaron - but not those of Moshe! The Talmud (Sanhedrin 19b, quoted by Rashi) infers from this that, "Anyone who teaches someone else's child Torah is regarded as if he had begotten them." Because he taught the Torah to Aaron's four sons, Moshe became their "spiritual father" just as Aaron was their biological father. The moral implication of this is that it is near-sighted to limit one's horizons to those within one's physical "family". One's example and guidance can influence and "give life" even to complete strangers. All the more so if we consider that when one influences someone in a positive way, they in turn will likely influence others, who will further influence others, and so on. Akin to the physical family, where the birth of just one child hopefully leads to many generations upon generations, so too the ultimate impact of even one good deed, good word, or good example which influenced someone else is very far reaching. A veritable "family" of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren etc. can be the ultimate result of a small effort to be a positive force in someone else's life.

By structuring the verses in this particular manner, says Rabbi Avraham J. Twerski in *Living Each Week*, the Torah establishes another important principle: One who teaches a student Torah has a parental obligation to that child. The instructor of mathematics has accomplished his goal and discharged his obligation when he successfully imparts the desired knowledge to his students. It is not required, nor is it usually a good idea, that the instructor become concerned or involved in the students' personal lives. The indication of his excellence as a teacher is based on his students' grades.

In the teaching of Torah this is not enough. Scholastic achievement is only one facet of the teacher/rebbe's responsibility. The Torah requires that the teacher take a parental interest in his students, and be concerned with every aspect of their lives - as though they were his own offspring.

The reason for this difference is obvious. Secular knowledge is simply a means to an end. It is a tool to be utilized if needed, and discarded if not. How or if the student eventually uses these tools and knowledge is of little concern to his instructor. Torah knowledge, in contrast, is only the beginning of

the student's ultimate goal. If the student has fully mastered the subject material of his Torah lessons, yet has failed to integrate them into his everyday life, then his instruction is far from complete. In order to fulfil his obligation, the Torah instructor must go beyond the role of teacher, and become like a father - concerned with every aspect of his students' lives.

Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, the great Rosh Yeshivah of Baranovitch in pre-War Europe, lived in abject poverty. Once, R' Meir Shapiro, Rosh Yeshivah of the larger (and wealthier) Yeshivas Chachmei Lublin, visited Baranovitch and witnessed first-hand the poverty with which R' Elchonon lived. He promptly offered him a position in his own yeshivah, and assured R' Elchonon that every comfort and need would be provided. R' Elchonon did not even think before responding. "But what will be with all my children?" he asked, casting his gaze upon the hundreds of students studying in his yeshivah's study hall.

Eventually, R' Elchonon would give up his very life for the sake of his students. When visiting the United States in 1939, R' Elchonon was implored by his admirers to remain there, as the Nazi threat loomed ever larger. "How could he," asked R' Elchonon, "when his students needed him - especially at such a time?" He returned to Poland, and was a tremendous source of encouragement and radiance to his students. In 1941, he was martyred along with many of these students.

The following story demonstrates the amazing bond between a rebbe and his talmid (student). R' Yosef Levitan was an American-born product of the well-known Yeshivah, Mesivta Torah Vodaas. For fourteen years, until his passing in 1964 at the age of thirty-nine, he was one of the Mesivta's most beloved rebbeim, a source of inspiration to all who were privileged to meet him.

Once, as a bachur (youth), R' Yosef was experiencing great difficulty understanding a certain sugya (topic) in Masechta Kiddushin of the Talmud. He and his chavrusa (study partner) laboured long and hard, but could not resolve the difficulty. R' Yosef made the rounds in the beis midrash (study hall) discussing his difficulty with other bachurim, but none were able to offer a solution to his question. That night, as they parted, R' Yosef's chavrusa noted the great distress upon his friend's face over his lack of complete understanding of the Gemara.

When the two met the next morning, R' Yosef's face was radiant. His joy seemed boundless. He related, "Last night, when I went to sleep, my mind was totally occupied with trying to resolve our difficulty. During the night, my revered rebbe, R' Shlomo Heiman (Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaas until his passing in 1945), of blessed memory, appeared to me in a dream. He referred me to a comment of the Ritva (a medieval Gemara commentator) on a certain daf (page of the Talmud), which, he said, would resolve our question. When I awoke, I immediately opened the Ritva to that daf, and sure enough, there was our question, along with a beautiful explanation which shed light on the entire Gemara!"

After relating the Ritva's comment, R' Yosef remarked, "The dream gave me pleasure on two accounts. First, it revealed that our question had already been asked by one of the great Torah

commentators, who answers with an enlightening explanation. And second, I was gratified to know that my rebbe continues to be concerned with me, even in the World of Truth."

As we take the opportunity this Shabbos to prepare for Shavuos - Zeman Mattan Toraseinu/The Time of the Giving of Our Torah - it may be an appropriate time to reflect for a moment on the great effort which our children's educators expend to give them a lifelong connection to Toras Chaim/The Torah of Life. And to consider in which ways we too can become positive influences upon the lives of others, becoming their teachers and "parents", thereby engendering generations upon generations of good deeds, ethical behaviour, and Torah living.

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