TORAH STUDY - REVIEW VS. NEW

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And you shall teach them thoroughly to your children and you shall speak in them. (6:7)

Everyone has heard (but let us review...) the famous story (see Gemara Eiruvin 54b) of Rabbi Preida and his less than gifted (but very diligent) student, who needed to review each new concept he learned four-hundred times before fully grasping it. Patiently Rabbi Preida studied with him, day after day.

One day, when they were in the middle of reviewing, someone came and told Rabbi Preida that he was needed at a communal function. "When we finish reviewing four-hundred times, I will come," he said. When they reached the four-hundredth time, however, Rabbi Preida saw that his student was still not fully understanding. "Why is it, my son," he asked, "that today, even after reviewing four-hundred times you remain unclear?"

"From the time they asked the Rebbe to come," he answered, "I lost my concentration. Each moment I kept saying to myself, 'Now the Rebbe is going to get up, now the Rebbe is going to get up.'"

"Put your mind back into the studies," Rabbi Preida said, "and I will teach it to you again." And they reviewed the concept another four- hundred times. [By virtue of Rabbi Preida's patience and diligence in studying with his student four-hundred times, he was granted four- hundred years of life, and his entire generation was granted everlasting life in Gan Eden. (Gemara ibid.)]

The concept of chazara/review of one's Torah studies is poignantly emphasized in this week's Sidrah. "Ve-shinantam le-vanecha, And you shall teach them thoroughly to your children." Chazal, our Sages, teach that the word ve-shinantam comes from the word shinun, meaning "to sharpen." In their words (Kiddushin 30a), "The words of Torah should be 'sharp' in your mouth. [You should study the words of Torah so diligently that] if someone asks you [about a concept which you have learned], you need not hesitate and tell him, but respond to him immediately. As it is written (Mishlei 7:4), 'Say to wisdom: You are my sister,' [that is, your Torah studies should be perfectly clear and familiar, just as it is perfectly clear to you, and requires no hesitation, to remember that your sister is forbidden to you. [Rashi]"

This Gemara is quoted by Shulchan Aruch HaRav (Hilchos Talmud Torah 2:3). He then writes, "Thus, even in our times, when all of Torah has been transcribed and recorded, and [even if one forgets] he can always look it up in its source, he does not fulfil his obligation of 've-shinantam,' since were one to ask him, he would have to hesitate and look it up and would not be able to answer immediately,

and this halachah (law) is not as clear and obvious to him as the law of 'his sister'."

Even if, he writes, this means that one will not be able to learn as much new material, so be it, as Chazal say (Avos 2), "It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but nor are you absolved from trying." This is how Torah was studied in the Talmudic era: They would start out learning only two or three Mishnayos or Beraysos in a week, which they would then review more than one-hundred times.

R' Chiya bar Abba said in the name of R' Yochanan: What is the meaning of that which is written (Mishlei 27:18), "He who guards the fig tree shall eat from its fruit?" Why are the words of Torah likened to a fig tree? Just as a fig tree - every time one handles it, he finds more ripe figs (the fruits of a fig tree ripen at staggered intervals), so too with the words of the Torah, every time a person studies them he finds in them new flavour. (Gemara Eiruvin 54b)

In his preface to Pe-as Shulchan, R' Yisrael Shklover writes of his master and teacher, the Gaon of Vilna, "He reviewed all of Talmud Bavli every month. His toil in the study of the holy Torah defies description. He would review each chapter and masechta (tractate) hundreds, and even thousands of times. Out of immense love for the holy Torah, he once spent a long winter night reviewing over and over a single Mishnah in Seder Taharos." (Quoted in For Love of Torah p. 76)

Sefer Toldos HaAdam (by R' Yechezkel Feivel of Vilna, Dyhrenfurth 1801) writes: R' Leib, son of R' Ber of Vilna, related to me: Once his father R' Ber watched as the tzaddik R' Zalman (of Volozhin, brother of R' Chaim) paced back and forth in a room, as was his way, studying and reviewing a Torah thought with wondrous desire and powerful love, in a clear sweet voice that was music to one's ear. The soul of the listener was aroused to love of Hashem and a desire for wisdom and spiritual guidance. He reviewed the thought once, twice, three times, fifty times, one hundred times... until one lost count! All this was with a joyous heart and boundless love, which mere words can not describe.

R' Ber observed in silent wonder. In his heart, he thought, "Torah, Torah, how great is the love in R' Zalman's heart for you! It is a consuming fire!" He then grabbed hold of R' Zalman and said, "My brother, whose soul and flesh is part of me, by the love that exists between us, I demand you tell me how many times you reviewed this matter!"

When R' Zalman saw the way that R' Ber was imploring him to reveal the absolute truth, he told him, "In truth, I have reviewed the matter two-hundred and fifty times." [Ibid]

It was not a light matter, as far as R' Zalman was concerned, to review his studies four or five hundred times. He would remind himself of Chazal's allegory (Eiruvin 54b), "Just as a hunter who captures birds, if he breaks their wings [so that they will not fly away], then they are secure with him. If not, they will fly away from him... [so too a student must review his studies as soon as he learns them, or else he will forget them]." He used to say that this allegory can arouse one's soul from its laziness in reviewing one's studies. [Ibid]

Sefer Menuchah U-Kedushah writes: "I have heard that the Gaon of Vilna would submit a prospective disciple to the following test (to determine if his soul had been sufficiently purified to taste the sweetness of the Torah): He would instruct him to review a given matter many times. If the more he reviewed, the more its love grew in his heart, inspiring him to continue to review without interruption - with this he found favour in the Gaon's eyes to be accepted as his disciple." [Ibid]

This Friday is the fifteenth of Av. Chazal say (Taanis 31a), "From now on (from the 15th of Av through the winter) he who increases (his hours of Torah study as the nights grow longer) adds (days to his life). But he who does not increase (the hours of his Torah study) decreases (the days of his life)." As our hours for Torah study increase, we must be sure to set aside ample time for proper chazara/review.

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