

# TORAH STUDY - PLEASURE OR RESPONSIBILITY

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

Perusing the Yahrtzeit section of an old "HaModia," I came across the following exceptional description of the Yeshiva established by Harav Yehuda Rosner Hy"d, Rav of Szekelheid. While meritorious in its own right, perhaps it will shed light on a section of this week's parsha as well:

Harav Rosner opened a yeshiva in Szekelheid, which he headed throughout his years there. Although he was eventually offered rabbinical positions in larger towns such as Uhel (Ujehly), he refused them on account of his yeshiva. Szekelheid had only 120 Jewish families, and that allowed the Rav to dedicate most of his time and attention to the yeshiva, which ultimately grew until, in the 1930's, it housed over 300 bachurim.

R' Yehuda ran the yeshiva almost singlehandedly, serving as Rosh Yeshiva (dean), mashgiach (supervisor), maggid shiur (teacher), and administrator. His rebbitzen too assisted him devotedly, running the yeshiva kitchen, and adding a motherly touch for the bachurim where it was needed. The yeshiva was always strapped for funds, and making ends meet was always on R' Yehuda's mind. Often there was not enough money to pay for Shabbos meals for the boys; Harav Rosner's solution was to take the money needed out of his personal salary as town rav. His talmidim recall that when his only son married, and received a dowry of 100,000 lei, the money was used to cover the yeshiva's deficit.

Yeshiva in Szekelheid began at 4:30 a.m., when the vecker would go around the small town waking up the bachurim at their various lodgings. Sometimes the rav would surprise the bachurim by conducting an early- morning inspection to assure all had arisen.

Meanwhile, the rebbitzen was already busy cooking breakfast for the students. Anyone not coming to yeshiva on time was not entitled to breakfast, unless of course they were sick, in which case warm, nourishing meals were sent to their rooms.

The learning at the yeshiva in Szekelheid was intense; tests were given every day or two. On Mondays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays, Harav Rosner delivered a shiur iyun (in-depth lecture) in the mornings, and a shiur bekius (comprehensive lecture) in the afternoons. The shiur bekius progressed at the prodigious rate of three blatt a week.

On Friday, Shabbos (no days off!) and Sunday, the bachurim studied Chumash with Rashi, along with Orach Chaim and Yoreh Deah (two sections of Shulchan Aruch, the Code of Jewish Law), on which

they were tested Sunday evening.

Every Thursday, a notice was posted with a page of Gemara that the boys were obliged to cover on their own, in order to encourage independent study. On this too, they were tested, to ensure that they were attaining a true understanding of the underlying issues, and to verify that the bachurim were using their time efficiently.

Testing was taken very seriously at the yeshiva. All bachurim were tested, although among the advanced bachurim only one boy was tested each week. Since the boy to be tested was chosen by lottery immediately before the test, every boy in the advanced group always needed to be prepared. The rest of the boys were called in to the rav four boys at a time, according to a list he had prepared. He would ask them questions; those who were clearly fluent with the material were sent off at once, while a weaker student might be held for additional questioning to determine where he was lacking, and what needed to be reviewed. All this contributed to an intense atmosphere that was felt by every bachur in the yeshiva.

Each bachur was assigned a card, on which the rav would write the results of each exam. At the end of the semester, the rav would write each boy a letter, along with a copy of his card, summarizing his achievements. The most advanced students often received an approbation designating them as "chaveir" or "moreinu" - titles of distinction. One would be hard pressed, I believe, to find present-day yeshivos where testing and examination is taken so seriously and with such intensity.

This brings me to a question I often get asked, sometimes by parents - more often by students: What is the need for testing? Doesn't it create an unnecessary pressure and burden on the already-overworked students? If he knows it, great. And if not, how is testing him going to make him know it better? And isn't learning meant to be enjoyable, and not a pressure?

In this week's parsha, Moshe is instructed by Hashem to take a census of the Jews. "Se'u es rosh - Take a head count of the Children of Israel (1:2)." Rashi notes that counting each individual is a demonstration of great love and distinction: Hashem doesn't lump Jews together into one big group; He counts and considers each person separately.

Why, when describing the count, does the Torah use the wording "Se'u es rosh" - literally, "pick up their heads?" The Midrash (1:11) notes that "elevating the head" can have two seemingly opposite meanings, both of which are found in Yosef's interpretations of the dreams of the wine- steward and baker. To the wine-steward, Yosef says, "In three days Pharaoh will elevate your head, and return you to your post. (Bereishis/Genesis 40:13)" To the baker Yosef says, "In three days Pharaoh will elevate your head and remove it from your body, and hang you upon a tree. (ibid. 40:19)" So too, concludes the Midrash, if a Jew merits, his head will be elevated and uplifted through the count. Otherwise, it will be his demise.

What this Midrash means, say mefarshim, is that the importance and distinction symbolized by the individual count is upon reflection a two- edged sword. Being counted among G-d's chosen nation,

learning His Torah, and doing His mitzvos is truly a great privilege, but it is also a tremendous responsibility. If one recognizes and appreciates what it means to be a Jew, his dedication to Torah will elevate him above the entire physical realm. If, however, one fails to treat Hashem's Torah with respect and reverence, the very importance it grants him will itself be his demise.

If one were to find out that one's doctor had never been adequately tested on his medical knowledge and know-how, it's fair to say one would be wary of using him. After all, being a doctor - prescribing medicines and issuing diagnoses - is serious business. I believe that by testing his bachurim so demandingly, R' Rosner was trying to impart to them that Torah study is not meant to be fun-and-games. The Torah is Hashem's gift to us, and its understanding is the underpinning of everything it means to be Jewish. Certainly learning is meant to be enjoyed, but not the way one enjoys a good novel or a sumptuous meal. The enjoyment should come from the thoroughness of our study, and the feeling of accomplishment one receives from working hard and reaching ever-deeper levels of understanding. He was teaching his boys that everyone, both the strongest students and the weaker ones, bear a tremendous responsibility, and that responsibility should never be taken lightly.

Nowadays, one might say that "pleasure" has replaced "responsibility" as our core value. The merit and value of things are judged by how much enjoyment they bring us, instead of by what is right. "Does it feel good?" has supplanted "Is it the right thing to do?" As someone once quipped, we're the "What's-in-it-for-me" generation. Se'u es rosh teaches us that while it's beautiful and pleasurable to be a Jew, it's also a responsibility that must be treated with the utmost respect.

Have a good Shabbos.

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