

EDUCATION OF DEDICATION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Many people are aware of the great emphasis Judaism places on education. From a very early age, the Jewish parent begins the process to bring his or her child up as an intelligent, God-fearing Jew, to the best of the parents' and child's ability. As one rabbi put it, "Where some societies bronze the first pair of shoes a child wears, Torah-observant Jews 'bronze' their child's first question ..."

We see the importance of children's questions, and the parent's responsibility to custom-design the answer to each child's question, in the account of the Four Sons of the Haggadah of Pesach. Very often, it is the early questions that train the child not to be shy to ask questions, and to have the confidence to seek answers. A parent, and rebi, should never belittle the little one's questions, no matter how silly they may sound.

The question is, just how far does the responsibility go to teach a student go? This week's parsha deals with this very issue.

The parsha begins, "These are the judgments that you will place before them." Why does God command Moshe to "place" the judgments before them, as opposed to merely teach them to them? Rashi, basing himself on the Mechilta, answers by saying that God wanted to let Moshe know that his job as rebi of the Jewish people went far beyond simply transmitting the Torah, far beyond simply repeating the halacha two, or maybe three times, until they could repeat it verbatim. Rather, Moshe's responsibility was to make Torah accessible for the people, in very much the same way a set table makes eating easy and appealing (hence, the name of one of the most important bodies of Jewish law, "The Shulchan Aruch," which means "Set Table").

The Talmud (Eiruvim 54b) develops this discussion further. It states that a person is obligated to teach his student a lesson at least four times, and if that is not enough, until the student sufficiently learns it. The rebi has to make sure the student can say the halacha or idea clearly, and explain it to the student so that he understands the meaning of it. To support these ideas, the Talmud quotes the first verse from this week's parsha, "These are the judgments, etc."

How much does such dedication to teaching mean to God? (Incidentally, the word "chinuch," which means "education," comes from the same word that means "dedication.") The Talmud illustrates this point with a story:

Rebi Preida once had a student that had to be taught something 400 times before he could

understand it. One day, the rebi was asked to do a mitzvah, and the student failed to learn the lesson. "Why is it different today than all other days?" he asked his talmid. "Because," he answered, "from the moment the master was asked to do the mitzvah, I was distracted, thinking to myself, 'Soon the master will have to get up ... Soon the master will have to get up ...'." Rav Preida said, "If that is so, let me teach the lesson to you again." He then repeated the teaching another 400 times, and because of this, a heavenly voice called out to Rav Preida, "Which reward do you want? Either you can live a long life, or you and your generation can merit The World-to-Come?" He answered, "I request that I and my generation merit The World-to-Come." To this God responded, "Give him **both** rewards!"

Teaching a student a single idea 800 times seems both tedious and strenuous. However, it also seems to be a small effort to make to earn Eternal Life! Yet, through this, Rebi Preida not only guaranteed himself a portion in The World-to-Come, but he even guaranteed his his **whole generation** a portion in The World-to-Come!

And if this is so, then how can we understand another section of the Talmud, which records a dialogue between Rebi Preida and his students, who asked their rebi, "Rebi, to what do you owe your long life?" Rebi Preida answered them, "No one ever arrived at the Bais Medrash in the morning before me" (Megillah 27b).

This may have been true of Rebi Preida, that he was the first one to the Bais Medrash every morning, but the gemora in Eiruvim said that his long life was the result of his patience in teaching his student an extra 400 times! Why didn't Rebi Preida answer his students with the reason stated in Eiruvim?

The answer to this question is what makes the Jewish people unique as a nation, and the truth is, even the evil prophet Bilaam recognized this for himself.

Every morning when we walk into shul we say the words, "How good are your tents, Ya'akov; your dwelling places, Yisroel." Where did these words come from? They were the words from Bilaam's prophecy regarding the Jewish people in Parashas Balak (BaMidbar 24:5). The rabbis explain that "tents" refer to our Battei Midrashos, and the "dwelling places" refer to our shuls. Furthermore, the rabbis tell us, if you want to understand what kind of curses Bilaam tried to heap onto the Jewish people, look at the blessings God forced him to say instead (they're merely the curses transformed into blessings). If so, then Bilaam was trying to curse us in our places of learning, and our shuls!

That Bilaam should curse us in our shuls is understandable; that's where we pray to God. If you are trying to disrupt the relationship between God and the Jewish people, the shuls are a good place to do it. But why curse the places of studying Torah? And why place them in the curse before the shuls?

The concept of prayer is not new, nor is it unique to the Jewish people. Anyone who has sought a relationship with God has intuitively expressed himself or herself in words of prayer. However, though prayer can be a measure of one's dedication to truth, it is not necessarily so. On the contrary,

it is evident that people often pray to God for selfish reasons, or just to feel they have paid God homage before returning to their own lives and concerns.

This is not the case with learning Torah. Just to learn Torah, to sacrifice time to study it and its myriad of details is by definition a measure of dedication to God. Just to "engrave" Torah on one's own heart is a tremendous indication of one's commitment to truth, and the upholding of it. How much more so is the dedication to helping **others** reach this level the measure of one's commitment to God and His Torah? Can there be a greater act of kindness than this?

Such dedication doesn't grow in a vacuum. It must be the product of its leaders, and the Torah environment they foster. The more dedicated the leaders of Torah are, which will be indicated by their willingness to take the time to thoroughly explain the subject matter and answer their students' questions, the more the true message of Jewish education comes through: learning is for the sake of reaching higher levels of **dedication** to God and His Torah.

This was Rebi Preida's answer to his students. "The reason I have lived a long life," he told them, "is because of my dedication to Torah, not just my learning of it. How is this indicated? By going to the 'home' of Torah, the Bais Medrash, long before there was anyone there who could see me learn, whom I could impress, and whom I might need to encourage me to learn. Just knowing that the Bais Medrash was a place to become immersed in Torah was enough incentive to draw me there early in the morning while others slept. Furthermore, it was that same dedication that inspired me to be so concerned as to teach my students 400 times, if not 800 times, until Torah became engraved on their hearts."

God's response to that is: Such people justify their existence in This world, and The Next World. Bilaam understood that this was the key to the intimate relationship the Jewish people had with God, and therefore, the secret to their Divine protection. It was **this**, the Jewish people's dedication to becoming **one with Torah**, that Bilaam tried to curse, thereby undermining that relationship and making the Jewish nation vulnerable to attack.

And where the rebi goes, so too must the students follow, because such a relationship breeds interdependency. As rebi said, "I learned much from my colleagues, even more from my friends, but the most from my students." A long life This World can increase one's personal portion in The World-to-Come. But a rebi is concerned about his students' portion in The World-to-Come as much, if not more, than his own. Furthermore, such a rebi has the power to elevate his whole generation, even to the heights of The World-to-Come. This is why the Rambam states that, in Jewish law, one's concern for his rebi precedes that of his own father, because, whereas the father's interest is for his son's welfare in This World, his rebi is focused on getting his student into The World-to-Come. Such a focus can't help but dramatically affect the quality of chinuch of any institution, and the level of understanding of a whole generation!

No person understood this message better than Moshe "Rabbeinu"-the rebi for all the generations

throughout our long history. And no better place was there to teach this central concept than right after the giving of the Ten Commandments, at the beginning of a barrage of details of technical laws. For, as the Talmud points out, "God dwells within the four ells of Jewish law," and more precisely, among those who are dedicated to knowing, understanding, and living by them.

This Parsha Page is dedicated to all those who are dedicated to dedicated education.

Have a great Shabbos

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