

FROM THE MOUTH OF A "TURNED OFF" STUDENT

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 174 -- Twins. Good Shabbos!

Learning The Interpretation Of A Verse From a "Turned Off" Student

After Yosef's dialog with his brothers, he finally breaks down and says "I am Yosef -- Is my father still alive?" [Bereshis 45:3] All the commentaries ask an obvious question: the entire dialog between Yosef and his brothers was centered on their father. Yaakov had been the constant focus of Yosef's questions and the brothers' responses. So why does Yosef ask again if his father is still alive?

I once spoke at a Torah U'Mesorah convention on the topic of "What makes a Great Jewish Educator." One of my sources was the Rambam's comment [Hilchos Talmud Torah 5:12] that a teacher must love his students as if they were his own children. I pointed out that in previous generations it was perhaps more difficult to understand what it meant for teachers to have to love their students. In our generation, however, we have been given additional insight into this matter.

Unfortunately, in our society (due to our multitude of sins) parents sometimes do not care about their children. Some children do not receive the love which they need. Their parents are too busy making money by working 12, 14, or 16 hours a day to have time for their children. Some parents think love is giving their child a Mercedes for his 16th birthday. This is not love. Love is spending time with your child and being there for your child.

Today we have a generation that is simply starving for love. Therefore, children are often looking for love in the classroom. A function that was always provided by the parents -- a pat on the back, or a hug -- now falls to the teacher, because no one is home, literally. Our new insights into the words of the Rambam come to us because we see what children are not receiving at home, and we see what they need. And this is the love that teachers must often provide.

I then related the following true story, which explains Yosef's question.

There was once a student whose father had deserted his family. This sort of student often causes a lot of problems for a teacher. He was totally "turned off" to everything. The teacher tried to become

close to the child. He invited the child over to his house. Nothing helped. The child just sat there in class and did not participate.

As is unfortunately the case with teachers sometimes, the teacher was prepared to write this child off. "Put him in the back of the class; let him just sit there. Hopefully he will absorb some of what is being taught. I gave it my best shot, there is nothing more I can do." And so that is what the teacher did.

For about half the year, the child just sat and 'vegetated'. Finally the class started Parshas VaYigash. They learned the dialog between Yosef and the brothers. Then they learned the verse "I am Yosef -- is my father still alive?" The Rebbe asked our question to the students -- what does Yosef mean by this question?

This child from the back of the classroom, the one who had not participated for half the year, raised his hand and gave this incredibly poignant interpretation: "Yosef is saying, 'I know that YOUR father is still alive, but is MY father still alive? Has my father given up on me? I have been away from home; I have been in a strange land for 22 years; is MY father still alive? Do I still have a father who cares about ME?'"

That child was not only asking Yosef's question. He was asking his own question. Sometimes we have children who in different ways and in different forms are asking "Is my father still alive?" "Does my father still care about me?"

We must listen to questions like that.

Glossary

Torah U'Mesorah -- A National Organization of Jewish Day Schools

Rambam -- Rabbi Moses Maimonides, 12th C. CE.

Sources and Personalities

Ramba"m -- (1135-1204) Rav Moshe ben Maimon; Spain, Egypt; Authored "Yad HaChazakah" (Mishneh Torah), Code of Jewish Law.

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