

Parashat Mishpatim 5772, 2012:

Who Should be Our Teachers?

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel.

Our *parasha* begins with some very well known words: “*V’aleh hamishpatim asher tasim lifneihem.*” (“And these are the laws that you [Moshe] should place before them [the Jewish people].”) The halachic *Midrash* to *Sefer Shemot*, known as the *Mechilta*, suggests that this *pasuk* (verse) refers not just to Moshe, but to every rebbi, *morah*, and teacher who will teach Torah in the future:

Rabbi Akiva said: “And these are the laws,” why was this said? It was said since in another place the Torah states: “Speak to the Jewish people and say to them” [*Sefer Vayikra* 1:2]. From this statement I would only know that it would be necessary to tell them once, from where would I derive an obligation to repeat it to them a second, third, and fourth time until they would [thoroughly] learn it? The Torah, therefore, states: “And you should teach the Jewish people.” [*Sefer Devarim* 31:19]. I might have thought this could mean that they would only have to learn it and not repeat it, therefore the Torah states: “Place it in their mouths” (Ibid.). [Furthermore,] I might have thought that it would be sufficient for them to be able to repeat it, but not to fully comprehend it. The Torah therefore teaches: “And these are the laws that you should place before them.” [This places the obligation upon the teacher] to set the laws before them like a [fully] set table (*shulchan aruch*) just as it says: “You are the ones who have been shown so that you will know that G-d is the only G-d, and there is none besides Him.” (Ibid., 4:35) (Translation my own)

A brief analysis of Rabbi Akiva’s second century teaching method reveals the following:

1. The act of teaching Torah requires patience and skill on the part of the educator since he/she is obligated to teach and repeat the material in such a way that the students thoroughly master it.
2. Reinforcement of the material is crucial and essential to the learning process. Therefore, it is insufficient for the teacher simply to thoroughly teach the Torah. He/she must review the passages/laws under discussion until “they can repeat it” i.e., it becomes part of them. In other words, the students must assimilate the

material so that it becomes an essential part of their knowledge base and their cognitive repertoire.

3. Mere knowledge of the material is a necessary, but insufficient, step in the Torah learning process. The end goal, according to Rabbi Akiva, is true intellectual mastery of the subject matter. This places the onus upon the Torah educator to teach with such clarity that the Torah content under discussion becomes so accessible that it is “like a [fully] set table (*shulchan aruch*).”

The Rambam (1135-1204), in *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 4:4, according to the analysis of the great Yemenite scholar, HaRav Yosef Kapach *zatzal* (1917- 2000), bases himself upon the above cited passage from the *Mechilta* in his formulation of the halacha: “The Rav who teaches and finds that the students do not understand should not become angry with them and become annoyed with them. Instead, he should review and repeat the material even many times until the students understand the depth of the halacha (law).” (Translation my own) The *Tur*, (Rabbeinu Yaakov ben Asher, 1270-1340), in *Yoreh Deah*: 256, and Rabbeinu Yosef ben Ephraim Karo (1488-1575) in *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah*: 256:10, quote the Rambam’s statement verbatim. This is the case, as well, in the first Lubavitcher Rebbe’s (Rabbeinu Shneur Zalman of Liadi, 1745-1812) *Shulchan Aruch HaRav*, *Yoreh Deah*, *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 4:18 and in the *Aruch HaShulchan*, *Yoreh Deah*: 256:26 of Rabbeinu Yechiel Michel ben Aharon Yitzchak Halevi Epstein (1829-1908). Beyond a doubt, Rabbi Akiva’s statement, as found in the above-quoted passage from the *Mechilta*, must be taken as normative halacha since his words, via the formulation of the Rambam, are codified by the leading halachic experts throughout the generations.

Now that the Halacha has revealed to us the true task of the Torah educator, and the manner of exposition that he/she should follow, the question remains: “Who should be our teachers?” Clearly, our teachers must be individuals who are dedicated to serving Hashem by the act of transmitting His Torah and its authentic meaning. They need, therefore, to be people who have chosen *Chinuch* (Jewish Education) as a *l’chatchila* (their first choice), and not as a *bidieved* (by default since they have not “found anything else”). They ought to be people who are inspired, who feel that they have a special opportunity to impart G-d’s word to others. They need, as well, to realize the tremendous obligation and responsibility that they bear as their words and actions will directly affect their student’s perceptions of *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* and His Torah.

The sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn (1880-1950), summarized some of the most salient qualities that a Torah educator should possess:

To be fit for the position, an educator or counselor requires special preparation - to ensure that his education or guidance brings about the desired benefits. Not everyone who would step forward to assume the title of educator or counselor can accept this great responsibility, since an unsuitable person not only fails to correct anything, but in addition makes things worse, bearing the full blame for doing so. The first step of an educator or counselor in preparing for this highly responsible and holy work of education and guidance is introspection.

Aside from an incisive self-critique of his teaching and its style, the educator or counselor needs to review his methodology, to ensure that it is characterized by extreme deliberation and politeness.

He must attempt to find sayings that are appropriate for his lessons, and communicate them pleasantly. In this way, the lessons will be engraved on the heart of a pupil, appearing before his eyes even after he leaves the presence of his educator or counselor. An educator or counselor must realize not only that it is essential for him to use appropriate phrases in his lessons, but that the manner of expression - whether he expresses them with politeness and patience, or with agitation and derision - also affects the foundation of education and guidance.

... words of disdain when coming from the mouth of his educator or counselor, though true, diminishes the educator's stature in his pupil's eyes. Many educators and counselors err here. They think that ferment by way of thunderous noise and clamor helps them

achieve their goal in education or guidance. Among them are those who attack their pupils with extremely harsh and angry words, insulting and berating them.

Truly, even if the pupil becomes temporarily upset from the flaming words of the educator or counselor, his heart shrinking within him in pain, and at times he cries bitterly, this type of education or guidance yields no [lasting] benefit whatsoever.

Any [temporary positive] effects vanish like a fleeting dream. (Selections from The Principles of Education and Guidance, *The Second Provision*:

The Preparation of the Educator and Counselor, as found at <http://www.chabad.org/library/article.asp?AID=115232>)

Yehoshuah ben Prachiah teaches us in *Pirkei Avot* (“*Ethics of the Fathers*”) 1:6 “*Aseh lecha Rav*” (“Make a teacher for yourself”). In light of everything we have explored above, I would like to interpret this aphoristic statement in the following manner: Choose a teacher for yourself who first and foremost represents the highest standards of ethical behavior and treats others with true *derech eretz* – especially his or her students. Choose a teacher for yourself from whom you will learn not only Torah content, but Torah values as well. Choose a teacher for yourself who demonstrates kindness, patience, and a love of Torah that is so powerful he or she must share it with others. May we all be *zocheh* (“merit”) to find such teachers and benefit from their guidance in our never-ending quest to serve Hashem. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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