

Dispelling the Elitist Myth

By Aharon H. Fried

In an article in *The Jewish Observer*¹ addressing the needs of weaker students, the author relates how Rabbi Shlomo Lorincz once asked the Chazon Ish (Rabbi Avraham Yeshayah Karelitz) his opinion on creating a different kind of yeshivah for such youngsters. Since these boys were not likely to become great Torah scholars, Rabbi Lorincz suggested creating a new yeshivah model, one that would emphasize *peshat* (literal meaning) and *halachah* rather than *lamdut* (critical analysis). In this way, these students would at least acquire basic skills.

The Chazon Ish was vehemently opposed to the idea, and responded, "Our *chinuch* must be based on the assumption that every boy can be a *gadol* [Torah genius]. One who does not seem blessed with great intellectual gifts can turn the corner one day and be blessed with formidable intelligence. Suddenly all the wellsprings of Torah open up to him and he is recognized as a considerable *ba'al kishron* [one who is intellectually gifted]."

A few paragraphs later, in the same article, we are told of the Chazon Ish's great concern for each and every yeshivah student and his

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belief that expelling either a boy from yeshivah or a girl from school is a matter of *dinei nefashot* (life and death) and, in effect, may not be done.

Many who read the two statements above saw, if not a logical contradiction, at least a practical one. How can we maintain that a yeshivah's mission is to create future Torah scholars and, at the same time, serve every yeshivah student?!²

Another rendition of the same question is, "How can we purport that the yeshivah exists to create *gedolim* (great Torah scholars) and, at the same time, remain true to the ideal expressed by *Shlomo Hamelech* of teaching every youth "according to his way?"³

These questions, in fact, echo the accusations that many parents and child advocates make against yeshivot. "If the yeshivah exists only to create *gedolim*," they say, "is every student who is not destined to be one to be considered second class? Isn't this a very elitist position? And doesn't this elitism contribute to, if not actually create, the problem of yeshivah students becoming dropouts?"

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In response to these charges, many yeshivah administrators have used the above statement by the Chazon Ish to defend what they see as the difficult but necessary decisions they must make. Thus, they justify not accepting weaker students into the yeshivah, not accommodating the ones already in their yeshivot, and, in some cases, even asking such students to leave. Feeling bound by the mandate to produce Torah scholars, they refuse to relent to the demands of parents and others that the yeshivah make accommodations for less-than-stellar students. "Making accommodations invariably translates into lowering the yeshivah's standards," they assert. "This would hinder our ability to produce true scholars."

To solidify their argument, they often cite the *midrash* that states: "One thousand students enter the study hall but only one of them emerges as an interpreter of the law." Thus rendered, the *midrash* suggests that while not every-

Rabbi Fried, Ph.D., is associate professor of psychology and education at Stern College for Women and at the Azrielli Graduate Program in Jewish Education. He maintains a private practice in psychology as well. For the past 30 years Rabbi Fried has held various positions in Jewish education, and is best known for his early pioneering work in Jewish special education. He is currently working with the Ba'er Hetev Program of Torah Umesorah developing teaching materials and methodology. His recently published Kriyah Scan is a test of Hebrew reading.

one is destined to become a genius in Torah, our institutions must nevertheless be geared towards producing them. But the *midrash* also raises an obvious question: if only one person is destined to become an interpreter of law, what happens to the other 999 students?

The answer given is that by definition, a *gadol* is a *muram ma'am*, one who has arisen from amongst his people (rather than having existed and developed separately from them). Therefore, the genuine Torah scholar requires a critical mass to serve as, so to speak, a support base. The Torah scholar—these yeshivah administrators assert—is so important to *Klal Yisrael* and the *Ribbono Shel Olam* (Master of the World) that his emergence justifies even 999 students doing nothing but "supporting" him.

I believe that there are fundamental misunderstandings surrounding the interpretations of both the *midrash* and the Chazon Ish. These misunderstandings have resulted in much confusion, frustration, and anger.

In order to understand what the Chazon Ish is really saying, we must keep in mind the following: The Chazon Ish was opposed to any movement or institution that made mediocrity its ideal. In fact, he once wrote⁴ that the Rambam's 13 principles—which stress uncompromising devotion to *Hashem*—directly contradict the comfort of compromise and mediocrity.

The Chazon Ish felt that even if one is aware of his limitations and knows that he will not attain the highest levels in learning, he is still obligated to try to do so. To a priori compromise and lower one's goals is tantamount to giving up the struggle before engaging in the battle. As the Mishnah says, "It is not your responsibility to complete the work, but neither may you free yourself from it," (*Avot* 2:21). What the Mishnah is saying is this: even if one will not reach the pinnacle, he is obligated to begin the ascent.

Thus, the kind of yeshivah the Chazon Ish opposed was one which at the outset sets its sights low, promising to produce good laymen rather than top-notch Torah scholars and thereby failing to provide its students with the opportunity to reach the highest levels of Torah scholarship. However, this in no way implies that a yeshivah should not cater to the needs of every student. Saying "a yeshivah must provide the opportunity for reaching the top" is not the same as saying "the *only* opportunity a yeshivah should provide is for reaching the top." Yeshivah should not be an "all or nothing" experience.

Earlier, I cited a popularly quoted *midrash* which seemed to imply that a yeshivah exists only to support the development of the future Torah scholar. At that point, I was presenting misperceptions and therefore chose to misquote the *midrash*, using its popularly misquoted and abbreviated version. Let us, however, look at the *midrash* as it was *really* stated by *Chazal*.

“It is customary in the world, that a thousand people enter the study of Scripture. One hundred of these emerge to study Mishnah. Ten of these emerge to study Gemara. One of these emerges as a teacher [of the law]” (*Midrash Rabbah Kobelet*, chapter 7 section 40).

Seen in this light, I believe that the Chazon Ish’s view of the yeshivah is neither exclusionary nor elitist.

In this more complete version of the *midrash*, its message is a very different one. Certainly the ideal is the *echad maelefmatzasi*, the “one in a thousand,” who is the Talmudic scholar and teacher of law. However, in the *beit midrash* depicted in this *midrash*, nobody wastes his time. Nobody serves as a mere “support system” which produces the scholar. (Indeed, I truly wonder whether anyone seriously believes that a community of young people who are not succeeding in learning themselves can, in any way, offer support to the rising Talmudic scholar.) According to this rendering of the *midrash*, there are those who excel in Scripture, those who move on to study Mishnah and still others who advance to study Gemara. Thus, the *midrash* clearly indicates how the rest of students, while not destined to become Torah giants, have their own achievements, and seek success in the areas of Torah in which they have shown promise.

Certainly, the Chazon Ish felt that the ideal way to learn Gemara is in great depth, drawing upon *rishonim* (early or medieval commentaries) and *iyun* (in-depth analysis requiring close reading of the text). However, he also felt that understanding “simple” *peshat* is important too since knowing the basic *peshat* is essential to fully appreciate any particular piece of Gemara.⁵ Similarly, if one were to ultimately find another area of Torah learning (e.g. *halachah* rather than *lamdut*), or a particular method of learning (e.g. *bekiut* rather than *iyun*, that is, broad surface knowledge rather than in-depth) to be more productive, the Chazon Ish would never have discouraged him from pursuing that particular path.⁶

Seen in this light, I believe that the Chazon Ish’s view of the yeshivah is neither exclusionary nor elitist. As I have attempted to show, the Chazon Ish believed that the yeshivah’s mission is to set lofty goals for *all* members of *Klal Yisroel*, and to provide an environment in which each and every student can strive towards that goal in his own way and at his own pace.

What remains to be clarified is how exactly this is achieved: How does one cater to the needs of the average and below-average student and, at the same time,

that of the future *gadol*? I submit that the difficulty seen by many in doing this, is, to a great extent, illusory. It is based on the tendency to confuse the yeshivah’s method with its mission. While the yeshivah’s mission may be to produce top-notch scholars, the yeshivah’s methodology should not be geared to *only* top-notch scholars. In other words, while the goal of a yeshivah is to produce *gedolim* in Torah, *rebbeim* cannot not use a level of instruction that is suitable for only the top tier of students. This only confuses the rest of the class and leaves them floundering.

A young man I know, who is currently a *maggid shiur* (a lecturer in Talmud), once told me that on his first day as a student in *yeshivah ketanah* (elementary school), his *maggid shiur* began reading the first two lines of a *mishnah* and immediately began citing a question raised by the Pnei Yehoshua (a latter day commentator). He said he got lost right then since he did not yet know the *mishnah* well enough to follow the question. Subsequently, as the *maggid shiur* continued in this manner, he remained lost for the rest of that school year. Indeed, it is pure folly to believe that teaching a student material that is way above his current level of comprehension will raise him to a higher level. As the Maharal writes, “It is impossible for a child’s mind to grow if he has been fed material for which he is not ready and which is not commensurate with his present intellectual abilities.”⁷

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All too often we fail to appreciate the hierarchical nature of learning. We skip over earlier steps so as to bring our students to the higher and more exciting levels of conceptual reasoning and thought. Thus, we introduce the Gemara, the *rishonim* and the *achronim*, if not in the same breath, certainly in the same hour. It is here that I believe we err.⁸

The Gemara seems to advocate a different approach when it states: “A person should first learn what’s stated and then go back and analyze it” (*Shabbat* 63a).

In fact, this was the practice of *talmidim* (students) in their time, as the Gemara relates:


“Rava and Rami bar Chama, when they left the lesson of Rav Chisda, together reviewed what he had stated, (what they had heard from him—such is permitted such is prohibited—Rashi) And only after that, scrutinized its logic (what the reasoning for something is and whether there is anything to question—Rashi)” (*Sukkah* 29a).

Similarly, in *Ta’anis* (7b-8a), Rashi, elucidating the Gemara, states: “Resh Lakish said, ‘If you see a student

whose learning is as hard for him as iron, meaning he is plagued by many questions—it is because his learning is not organized. And [either] he doesn't remember what is written, and therefore cannot answer his questions, or he reviews [what he has learned] in error, exempting the obligated and obligating the exempt, and then [erroneously] asking questions from other sources. As Scripture says, "And he does not know his learning because he ruined what preceded, that is, he ruined [his knowledge of] Mishnah which precedes Gemara."

If we insist on teaching without regard for the hierarchy of learning, we turn the yeshivah into an all-or-nothing experience whereby some students get everything...and others get nothing.

Rebbeim (in elementary as well as high school) would do well to teach the *peshat* in the Gemara before introducing *rishonim*⁹ (as opposed to the more common practice of introducing the *rishonim* while going through the *peshat* of the Gemara).¹⁰ Once the *peshat* has been mastered by most students, they should introduce the *rishonim*, and only after should the *achronim* be introduced. If more *rebbeim* would follow this technique, we would lose fewer *talmidim*.

T rue, not all *talmidim* will be able to follow their *rebbe* as he ascends the ladder of understanding. However, with such tiered learning, all will learn something. Some will learn only Gemara with Rashi's *peshat*, others will go on to Tosfot, still others to *rishonim*, and others to *achronim*. But without first having gained a good footing on terra firma, our students cannot be expected to scale the heights. Without a tiered approach to learning, we find students who cannot follow, get confused and ultimately fail to master even the basic *peshat* of the Gemara. Once they falter, we try to catch them, and break their fall. But all too often, by then it is too late. If we insist on teaching without regard for the hierarchy of learning, we turn the yeshivah into an all-or-nothing experience whereby some students get everything (or almost everything) and others get nothing. It is the *talmidim* in the latter group, whom we give nothing to in yeshivah, who eventually decide they have no reason to stay. Small wonder. 

Notes:

1. Rabbi Zvi Yabrov, "The Chazon Ish on the Educator's Responsibility to the Weak and Wayward Student," November 1999, 12.
2. I am phrasing the questions as I heard them expressed. In actuality, *gedolim* are not "created." They develop and emerge in a house of Torah, a *beit midrash*. The yeshivah can only provide the fertile soil in which a *gadol* may grow.
3. Mishlei 22:6.
4. See *Kovetz Igrot Chazon Ish*, Part III, *Iggeret* 61.
5. *Ibid.*, Part I *Iggeret* 2. There he clearly writes that when one begins to learn any *sugyah* (topic) in Gemara, it is important to get a clear understanding of *peshat*, after which, "New gates of light will open for the learner bringing infinite intellectual pleasures." He cautions, "One should be careful to keep from spending too much time on explaining underlying logic, instead one should spend time on learning Gemara, concentrating on *peshat* and the clarification of its conclusions."
6. The Chazon Ish was the *ba'al iyun* par excellence. Yet it is known that his nephew, Reb Chaim Kanievsky, committed himself more to learning *bekiut*. The Chazon Ish never once suggested that his nephew try a different path. (My knowledge of this is based on speaking with a source close to the family). It was through a tremendous amount of *bekiut* that Reb Chaim Kanievsky is said to have ultimately attained greatness in Torah. There are many paths to the same goal. That is what we mean by *Chanoch lan'ar al pi darco*.
7. *Gur Aryeh* on *parshat V'etchanan* 6:7. It is worthwhile to read the entire text.
8. I know there are others who will suggest that the error is in not doing enough "ability tracking" that is, creating parallel classes on different levels. I am certain that under some conditions, and in a limited way, ability tracking has its place. It is, however, fraught with danger especially, for vulnerable adolescents. It needs to be approached with trepidation and very clear guidelines, lest it destroy more than it builds. Ability tracking can be especially helpful to children at the gifted end of the spectrum. I have chosen however, to write about what I call "tiered learning," a methodology that I believe would not only save many weaker *bachurim* but would benefit stronger students as well. If we are still left with *bachurim* who aren't making it after tiered learning is instituted and the classroom teaching is in order, then we should resort to tracking.
9. The same *maggid shiur* referred to in the article related to me how recently he had had an epiphany, a real insight! He had always had trouble understanding *achronim* like the Chasam Sofer. Recently, he had been learning a *sugyah*. After he had learned the positions of most of the *rishonim* who commented on the *sugyah*, he chanced upon the Chasam Sofer and decided to try to learn it. Surprise and delight overtook him when comprehension of the Chasam Sofer came to him easily. It was, he realized, because he was already familiar with the *rishonim* the Chasam Sofer was discussing. He had the prerequisite information!
10. In *Igrot Chazon Ish*, Part 1, *Iggeret* 1, the Chazon Ish bemoans this trend and urges the learning of Maharsha whose commentary elucidates the clear *peshat* of the Gemara. He writes that our generation has lost the knowledge of real *peshat*, having become accustomed to superficial analysis.