

Is Yeshivah Education Accomplishing What It Should?

By Chaim Eisen

Said Rabbi Yochanan: What is [the meaning of] that which is written, “For the Kohain’s lips should safeguard knowledge, and they should seek Torah from his mouth; for he is an angel of the God of Hosts” (Malachi 2:7)? If the rav resembles “an angel of the God of Hosts,” then “they should seek Torah from his mouth”; and, if not, then they should not “seek Torah from his mouth.”

(Chagigah 15b and Moed Katan 17a)

Apparently, the meaning of likening [the rav] to

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Some of the ideas presented in this essay are developed more fully in the chapter “Rabbi Chaim Eisen,” in Learning in Jerusalem: Dialogues with Distinguished Teachers of Judaism, ed. Shalom Freedman (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 5759), 85-115, where they first appeared. In addition, the author gratefully acknowledges the comments of Rav Nachum Neria, who reviewed this essay.

an angel is [based on] that which is written, “I shall give you moving ones, among these standing ones” (Zechariah 3:7). For man ... through his engaging in Torah ascends every day from level to level [and is therefore called “moving”]. And the angels are called “standing,” since they stand at one level, as at the moment when they were created... And Rabbi Yochanan’s intention is that the rav, when he teaches his students, should direct his attention to raise his students and to explain [Torah] to them graciously. And he should not think at that moment of benefiting [through] his own [attendant spiritual] ascensions. For thinking of his own ascensions prevents [focusing on] his students’ ascensions. And at that moment [the rav] must be like an angel, who is called a standing one...

(Rav Pinchas HaLevi Horowitz, “Pitcha Zeira,” Foreword to *HaMakneh* [Offenbach, 1801])



Over the course of almost 20 years of teaching in post-secondary yeshivot, I have often reflected on Rav Horowitz’s admonition. His words are especially germane



Photos from The Israel Yeshiva Guide for Overseas Students, published by NCSY of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America

when I encounter dedicated students who proudly announce their plans to pursue teaching careers themselves. Typically, when asked for their motive, their response is that they love studying Torah. Invariably, my (admittedly irreverent) reply is: So, because *you* love Torah learning, your *students* should suffer?

We aspire to instill a love of Torah in all our students, believing that Torah study should be “our life and the length of our days” (*Arvit* service, *Birkat Ahavah*) for all, regardless of vocation. Every profession is compatible with a serious commitment to ongoing Torah learning. And while a love of Torah is obviously a prerequisite of a successful career in Torah education, by itself it is woefully insufficient. Students who seek, through teaching, gratification of their own craving for Torah study fail to appreciate the teacher’s true mission and are liable to wreak havoc in the classroom.

Indeed, when we ignore Rav Horowitz’s warning regarding the challenges of teaching, the consequences are far more insidious than tragically inappropriate vocational guidance for would-be educators. While the vast majority of yeshivah faculty undoubtedly devote themselves heart and soul to their work, we need critically to consider whether we are providing our charges with what they need most. In particular, to what extent can we honestly claim to be successfully

reviewing *midrash*, *halachot*, and *aggadot*, and if he possesses no fear of sin, *he possesses nothing*.”² In Talmudic idiom, Torah is not simply learned but “acquired” (*nikneit*), connoting a process of internalization that can transform the acquirer. Thus, the sixth chapter of *Avot*, whose pervasive theme is study of Torah, is “the Chapter of *Acquisition of Torah*” (*Perek Kinyan Torah*), not the chapter of Torah learning or study.

In this light, the most immediate issue to confront concerns the agenda and priorities based upon which we structure our yeshivah curricula. Rav Avraham Yeshayah Karelitz (the Chazon Ish) forcefully deplored the current tendency to ignore such basic, straightforward commentators as Maharsha.³ Rav Yaakov Yisrael Kanievsky (the Steipler Rav) similarly stressed, “A *maggid shiur* [lecturer in Talmud] must understand that there is no need to present and it is best to avoid presenting self-composed novellae.... A simple answer to a simple question is immeasurably better than an intricate response comprised of multiple strands of thought woven into a tapestry of reasoning.”⁴ The dangers of indulgence in excessively recondite dialectics are first and foremost scholastic. Students who have not yet adequately developed the rudimentary tools for apprehending and analyzing the plain meaning of the text are often schooled prematurely in subtle abstractions. In

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equipping our students to function as exemplars of Torah values in contemporary society? I submit that, on four levels, our performance demands urgent review.

1. “*Talmud* [study] is greater, because *talmud* leads to deed.”¹

The Gemara stresses that *talmud* is great, not *if*, *when*, or *insofar as* it leads to deed, but rather *because* it leads to deed; true *talmud* that does not lead to deed is a contradiction in terms. Likewise, the Mishnah instructs us, “Study is not paramount, but deed is” (*Avot* 1:17). Since not all *talmud* relates to practical *halachah*, “deed” cannot refer simply to direct halachic ramifications. Rather, the study itself is expected to alter the student fundamentally. As a changed person, *all* his deeds will inevitably be affected. Therefore, warns the *Midrash*, “You [may] find a person

the grind to prepare the source list for such a Gemara *shiur*, even experienced students may lapse into a “checklist mode”: “covering” the requisite Talmudic passage, then “covering” Rashi, the Tosafot, and whichever additional commentators are on the agenda, preparing—perhaps even memorizing—the material well but externally. Attempts to understand remain detached and superficial, dominated by shallow questions of “what” rather than probing demands of “why.” One can amass encyclopedic knowledge this way—but passively, devoid of personal animation and individual innovation.

In the end, the results of such intellectual detachment are far more treacherous than pedagogical failure alone. Rabbi Emanuel Feldman recently observed, “Our teaching of Torah is measured by surface standards. Students of Torah are considered to have ‘succeeded’ when they know this or that Gemara.... But the noblest internal possibilities of the Jew ... are by and large not an integral part of the learning program—as if *middot* [manners] and general spiritual development will somehow take care of themselves.”⁵ Likewise, a friend of mine noted ruefully that, in many yeshivot, considering the practical halachic implications of

the Talmudic passage under scrutiny is de rigueur when studying *Seder Moed* (Shabbat and the holidays) and all but unheard of when studying *Seder Nezikin* (civil and monetary laws and ethics). The impression is unwittingly fostered that Judaism is a religion in a purely ritual or transcendent

that students will somehow acquire the requisite tools for elementary textual analysis on their own.

However, while competence in vocabulary and punctuation is vital, it is only the introductory phase. We must redress the “checklist mode” in tackling a passage, by teaching

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sense. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch⁶ eloquently decries this misperception, in which “a part of a work ... referring to worship and holy days” (i.e., the *Orech Chaim* component of the *Shulchan Aruch*) is mistaken for the totality of Jewish law. That people can bemoan the phenomenon of so-called “dishonest religious Jews”—as if someone dishonest could possibly be regarded as “religious” (God forbid!)—is a sad testimony to this perversion of Judaism. Torah has a standard of justice and righteousness for every situation, a message of goodness and uprightness that can be applied to every aspect of life. We must question whether we are inculcating this message in our students.

I submit that the solution demands basic curricular restructuring. We must teach Gemara, especially *Seder Nezikin*, in a manner that leads to and coheres with practical applications in every sphere of existence, particularly in the mundane affairs of business transactions and employment. This is no call for simple-minded reductionism. On the contrary, it is imperative that whatever complexities emerge from in-depth analysis of the Gemara should be anchored in its “bottom line” and seen through the prism of their worldly ramifications. *Choshen Mishpat*, the section of the *Shulchan Aruch* that encompasses civil law and business ethics, must become the student’s—and layman’s—companion, rather than the exclusive province of rabbinical judges and scholars. In recent years, several excellent works have begun to fill this void. However, most yeshivah curricula have yet to harness them.

More fundamentally, we must organize our curricula vertically, with a vision not only of where we expect our students to reach by the end of a well-defined program but also of how, and through what steps, we expect them to get there. Serious grounding in textual skills, for example, is the crucial basis upon which any well-ordered course must rest. It is irresponsible to skip to the “higher stories” of exacting dialectics in the naive hope

our students first to learn it critically from their own standpoint, asking themselves not only *what* the Gemara is saying but *why*. Rav Karelitz reportedly urged his students to formulate their own *peshat* (understanding of the passage) independently, before consulting Rashi or any other commentator—an approach already advocated six centuries ago by Rabbi Yitzchak Canpanton in *Darhei HaTalmud*, his systematic presentation of the pedagogical principles of study. Only with this *peshat* in hand is it possible to confront Rashi, the Tosafot, and whichever additional commentators are on the agenda, *without* succumbing to the “checklist mode.” Still, even as students prepare these later sources as well, we should continue to provide them with specific guidance in rigorous dissection of the text. Only thus can the Gemara—and the students—truly come alive.

Clearly, this course demands considerable individual attention to each student’s abilities, needs, and inclinations. We must direct each student through the discrete stages of scholarly development in a manner enabling each stage to serve as a firm foundation for subsequent, more rarefied levels. Moreover, at every stage, we should recall the Talmud’s admonition to teacher and pupil alike: “A person can only learn Torah from the place that one’s heart desires” (*Avodah Zarah* 19a). This is the crucial prerequisite of the internalization process whereby “initially, [the Torah] is ascribed to the Holy One Blessed be He, and ultimately it is ascribed *to him* [the student who labored in it (Rashi)]” (*ibid.*). Only through such a methodical program can we expect our students eventually to grapple with complex, abstract concepts without succumbing to the intellectual detachment that divorces learning from living.

Such an approach is indispensable in cultivating the student’s relationship to Talmudic study and life. It may be even more critical in the realm of Jewish thought. All too frequently, Jewish thought, if taught at all, is relegated to a few weekly *shiurim*, *sichot*, or *she-*

muesim, which may at most convey certain localized messages regarding the weekly Torah portion or contemporary issues. Alternatively, the subject may be treated as a purely academic discipline, utterly dissociated from divine service and the soul. Even advanced students are often appallingly ignorant of the axioms of Jewish belief and are at a total loss to grapple with—much less respond to—the theological, philosophical, and spiritual challenges of contemporary society. Worse yet, they are generally functionally illiterate in the most cogent means for ameliorating their ignorance. The timeless classics of Jewish thought from the early rabbinical period (the *rishonim*) most comprehensively articulate the essentials of Judaism and are arguably the most relevant to the crises of faith that beset us nowadays. Yet, if they are quoted, the citations are routinely superficial and out of context, treating these works as mere anthologies of quaint aphorisms. While such dabbling in Jewish thought may be appetizing condiments for a yeshivah curriculum, they definitely are not a balanced diet.

they construct into a practical, all-encompassing commitment in their lives.

2. “If a person tells you that wisdom exists among the nations, believe it.”⁷

Obviously, such a philosophy must be predicated first and foremost upon Torah. Still, general knowledge, too, can have significant implications for Torah knowledge. Thus, while the *Midrash* discounts the possibility of “Torah” existing “among the nations,” it affirms that, “if a person tells you that *wisdom* exists among the nations, *believe it*”—because indeed it does. To cite just two major examples, both Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi⁸ and the Rambam⁹ derive from the Talmud¹⁰ that to be eligible for membership

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In this domain, as well, it is imperative to define both specific goals for each student to achieve and the means to reach them. Certainly, we must carefully tailor the depth and breadth of such a course of study to individual capabilities, proclivities, and predilections. For all students, however, some systematic program, through which progressively to master fundamental concepts, is vital. A serious curriculum should build on the foundations of classic Jewish thought through diligent, consistent textual scrutiny, while stressing basic methodology and critical analysis of the subject matter. A complementary focus on *musar* (ethics) should emphasize the realization of devotional and religious ideals in practice. Direct treatment of particular theological, philosophical, or spiritual problems confronting students can be developed far more effectively based upon such a well-structured background. Ultimately, we should encourage and expect our students to glean the raw materials for beginning to cultivate, through supervised independent efforts, an individual Jewish philosophy. To this end, we must equip our students to draw upon expertise in all branches of Torah knowledge—and enable them to translate the philosophy

in the Sanhedrin (the chief rabbinical court), the sages were *required* to be well-versed in not only all aspects of Torah learning but also all branches of worldly scholarship. And, more broadly, the Vilna Gaon (whom his closest students, among them Rav Yisrael of Shklov in the introduction to *Peat HaShulchan*, described as having personally mastered all extant faculties of knowledge, “knowing them all completely”) warns *all* students of Torah, “To whatever extent a person lacks knowledge of the other wisdoms, one will correspondingly lack Torah wisdom one hundredfold, for the Torah and wisdom are coupled together.”¹¹

Unfortunately, the increasing trend toward specialization and compartmentalization at the expense of a holistic sense of the total picture is a major problem in the world at large, not just the Jewish world. (It was Robert Heinlein who protested that, compared with the grandeur of human potential, “specialization is for insects.”) But especially in Torah scholarship, we can keenly appreciate the Vilna Gaon’s recognition of the vital need for such holism in order truly to grapple with Torah—the most intense means through which we can interconnect with God—in all its dimensions. After all, God revealed Himself to us principally through two media: not only Torah (through Revelation) but also the world (through Creation). Any author’s works are better

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comprehended when another work by the same author is also studied. Likewise, to whatever extent one is steeped in an understanding of the world, one will better esteem the message of Torah (and vice versa). Furthermore, God gave us the Torah to guide us in the challenges of living *in this world*. Thus, to whatever extent we learn better to deal with this world, we are better equipped to relate to Him and to the Torah. Our involvement with *both* media enhances our connection with Him.

Granted, to avoid a dangerous imbalance, we must also note the other side of this coin. While extolling the usefulness of studying nature, Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi warns that such study is “at once the root of belief and the root of apostasy”¹² since—depending on what we derive from it—it can lead to either. If we could rely on wisdom and its proponents to remain always within the legitimate bounds of wisdom, we might embrace their conclusions unreservedly. Since that is manifestly not the case, a painstaking winnowing process is necessary; at times, microsurgery may be a more apt metaphor. Rambam’s *Moreh HaNevuchim* is a dramatic case in point. Although he incorporates much of Aristotelian

thought into his philosophy, he unhesitatingly rejects components that he regards as unproven and irreconcilable with foundational creeds of Judaism.¹³ Surely, knowing how and where to draw the line is no mean feat; microsurgery is not for amateurs. Not incidentally, Rambam warns that he intends his book neither “for the masses nor for those who are beginning to study nor to teach one who has studied only Torah knowledge.”¹⁴ In this vein, we can respect a certain pragmatic parochialism in avoiding exposing our students to extraneous alien influences.

Beyond a certain point, however, we risk producing students who are ill-equipped to contend with the conceptual challenges of the modern world. An ominous dichotomy may then result, in which such students, in their embrace of Torah, fail to function as productive members of society. Worse, they may conclude, in their frustration, that, since they were never trained to deal with such contemporary issues, Judaism lacks the wherewithal to do so.



Many reports of attrition within the religious community implicate this attitude as a significant cause. We must question whether the current tendency toward isolationism is excessive and, in the long run, self-defeating.

We should carefully weigh the vices of both inordinate openness and extreme insularity, to achieve a proper balance in yeshivah curricula. Undoubtedly, the maturity of the students and each individual's aptitudes and limitations will necessitate ongoing reassessments of our conclusions. But arbitrarily restricting or shunning external influences is a manifestly irresponsible course and a disservice to our students.

Ideally, our goal should be to direct our students first to distill from the diverse faculties of Torah study—both halachic and aggadic—the underlying themes and structures, which provide the basis of a Jewish approach and outlook toward the myriad, apparently divergent aspects of existence. Through applying such a Torah understanding to the various branches of secular wisdom, the student should cultivate a sense of the role and “truth value” each branch has to offer. Ultimately, the student must subordinate all these to an increasingly comprehensive, holistic Torah perspective. Clearly, this is an ongoing mission, whose conclusions should be subject to continuous refinement. This process is the lifelong struggle to construct one's own Jewish philosophy: the system through which one confronts, orders, and relates to the givens of reality in general and Torah in particular. 

This essay is Part I of two parts. Part II will appear in a future issue of *Jewish Action*.

Notes:

1. *Kiddushin* 40b, *Babba Kamma* 17a, and *Sifrei* on Devarim 11:13.
2. *Shemot Rabbah* 30:14 and 40:1.
3. *Kovetz Iggrot Chazon Ish*, I, 1.
4. “The Steipler's Advice on *Chinuch*.” trans. Hanoach Teller, quoted in *Sunset* (Jerusalem: New York City Publishing Co., 1987), 179.
5. “The Editor's Notebook: Observant Jews and Religious Jews,” *Tradition*, 26, No. 2 (Winter 1992): 1-2.
6. “Eighteenth Letter,” in *The Nineteen Letters*, trans. Rabbi Dr. Bernard Drachman, ed. Jacob Breuer (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1969), 122-123; and many later works.
7. *Eichah Rabbah* 2:13.
8. *Sefer HaKuzari* 2:64.
9. *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Sanhedrin* 2:1.
10. They derived this requirement from *Sanhedrin* 17a and *Menachot* 65a.
11. quoted by his student, Rav Baruch of Shklov, in the introduction to his book, *Euclid*.
12. *Sefer HaKuzari* 1:77.
13. See, for example, *Moreh HaNevuchim* 2:25.
14. *Ibid.*, preface.