



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS
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PIRKEI AVOS - PEREK 3 MISHNA 3

Let us visit another time, another place. Picture Poland just after the First World War. The religious world is going through a major upheaval. The social changes surrounding our kehillas have started to impact our youth. The year is 1923, and in a small town near Warsaw, a Rebbe opens a new yeshiva. The Rebbe's name is Harav Kolonymus Kalman Shapiro, the town is Piaseczno, and from these small beginnings a huge light would illuminate Jewry.

The Rebbe proved to be a brilliant pedagogue, and soon his students could be counted in the thousands. His success was a result of his deep-rooted understanding of the young generation. The Rebbe touched each student at the pintele that motivates the soul, his inner point. He was an ohr chozer, a returning light. Each of his students reflected the love he had for them.

The Rebbe wrote several sefarim, only one of which was printed during his lifetime. Entitled Chovas Hatalmidim, it contains the Rebbe's advice to Torah students on how to achieve true spiritual growth. The sefer was considered a major work of brilliance from the day it was published, and it was used in yeshivos throughout Poland.

In the first chapter of this insightful book, the Rebbe addresses parents and teachers. I would like to share just a few snippets from that chapter. I think you will be amazed at how much things never seem to change. Although addressing a time and era so completely removed from us, it speaks to us as clearly as if it was written today.

"To truly educate is not just a matter of getting a child to follow your commands, or even of getting a child accustomed to doing good deeds. True education is a much greater and more galvanizing process. Someone who tries to educate through command and habituation need not pay any attention to his child or student - to his nature, to the way he thinks or to his other distinguishing characteristics. The command itself - "do this" or "do that" - is all that is needed. Nor is it necessary to deal with

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each student separately. A single command can suffice for an entire age group, for it is not the student or the child that is important, but the person giving the commands. He has commanded, and that is everything.

By contrast, there is the educator who wishes to uncover the soul of the child that is hidden and concealed within him, who wants to help it grow and ignite it so it will burn with a Heavenly fire upward toward that which is holy, so that the student's entire being, including his physical body, will increase in holiness and will long for Hashem's Torah. Such an educator must adapt himself attentively to the student; he must penetrate into the midst of his limited consciousness and small-mindedness until he reaches the hidden soul spark. Then he can help it emerge, blossom and grow."

The very marrow of one's bones feels the power of these stirring words.

The Rebbe goes on to explain why his generation's youth were often turned away from the traditional Torah path, and, time and again, he returns to tell us: Teachers, it's up to you. You must take the responsibility to find the spark that every Jewish child carries.

"One must penetrate into his inner life, bring him close and ignite his heart and soul until they are dedicated to G-d."

"The education of each child must be different, depending on his nature, mind, character and all his other unique qualities."

On it goes - a plea, an indictment, and a prayer. "Please," he cries, "give our young their Torah identity."

Most of my readers are aware that this huge "light of understanding" ultimately became the father of hundreds of orphans in the darkness of the Warsaw ghetto. He was the last chassidic Rebbe to survive the fires and ruins, and he died al kiddush Hashem in Treblinka on the fourth of Cheshvan 5704 (1943). Throughout his writings, especially this chapter of the Chovas Hatalmidim, he shows a deep understanding of what a Torah rebbe must be. He points out that it is not what the teacher wants to say, but what the student can understand and accept that counts.

A passage from the third mishna of the third chapter of Pirkei Avos can help us understand this dynamic.

"Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon says: 'If two sit together and there are no words of Torah between them, it is a session of scorners.... However, when two people sit together and there are words of Torah between them, the Divine Presence dwells among them....'"

The Kotzker Rebbe and his close colleague, the Vorker Rebbe, both point out their understanding that the mishna should be read literally. "If there is not between them - words of Torah." If two people sit together and nothing comes between them, if they relate to each other with humility and love, this in itself is words of Torah. Only when one looks down on the other and does not think about his friend's needs or wants does it become a meeting of scorners.

Teachers bring into the classroom their own egos, insecurities and emotional baggage. This is normal - we are human and not angels. However, if the rebbe lets this get in the way, it becomes a wall between his student and himself, and then there can be no Torah - because the rebbe is acting on his own needs, not those of the Talmid.

Let me share an example I recently witnessed.

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A child was being bullied by his classmates. (By the way, bullying is no simple, petty playground crime. Bullying is soul destroying. It goes against everything our Torah teaches us and should never be allowed. To say, "Well, it's all part of growing up," is not to really understand the violation that bullied children live with.) This particular case was interesting. The child involved was not a born "victim" that had always been at the receiving end of the bullying attacks.

The situation began when a new teacher took over the class. I looked into the case and discovered that the teacher had felt at a loss with this child. For some reason, he couldn't connect with him. Rather than question himself, however, he gave off the signal that the child was not worthy. The other children soon picked up on this, and it was now "free-for-all" on this little eight-year-old.

At one point, the parents told the child, "Just stay away from those bad boys. Stand on the side."

The child turned to his mother and said, "Mommy, I do that, but you know - it's so very lonely there."

Eight-year-old Yiddische children should never be lonely. No child can be so bad that we should allow for such a crime. It's really all about two sitting together - and what's going on between them.

Teachers and parents can never allow themselves to forget. Don't let your own problems stand in the way. Children turn from Torah, chas veshalom, and even become scorners if they are not taught in a way they can hear.

There are those who will say, "You don't understand. I have a large class. I can't win them all. Some kids just get lost in the shuffle." To this there is but one response. Look to the real rebbes, to real daas Torah, like the Chovas Hatalmidim. Do you think such thoughts ever entered their minds?

The Pnei Menachem once heard someone speak ill of another Jew. He took the fellow by the hand, walked him over to his office door and said, "Put your hand on the mezuzah and repeat after me three times, Alle Yidden zenen heilig! All Jews are holy!"

This is true of every Jew - but even more so of every Jewish child. They are especially holy, and they are the light of our eyes. Dare we extinguish that light? There is no greater position in our community than that of our teachers. The true teacher is not a fount of information that spews forth knowledge at the touch of a button. For that we now have computers. The true title of rebbe or teacher should only be carried by one who refuses to allow his own ego to get between himself and his students. Torah can only be found when such walls disappear. If not, we may find ourselves trying to cope with a generation that has lost all contact within their own souls - with a generation that can only be called "scorners."

On a positive note, the mishna ends by asking if someone who sits alone and occupies himself with Torah will receive a reward from Hashem. In answer, the mishna tells us, "Let one sit in solitude and be still, for he will have received a reward for it." Everyone who is in the position of teacher (yes, parents and grandparents included) should take moral stock of his own perceptions "in solitude." In the stillness of one's heart, a person can examine his true understanding. In this way the educator can realize what he needs in approaching others and what it may be that builds walls between his words and his students. His Torah will then be true Torah and deserving of Hashem's greatest rewards.