YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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UNDERSTANDING AGGADA

By Rav Yitzchak Blau

In Loving Memory of
Jeffrey Paul Friedman z"l
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כ"ב אב תשכ"ח – י' אב תשע"ב

Shiur #3: From Mother's Milk to Butter - The Toil of Torah

They said in the study hall of R. Yannai: "What does it mean when it says, 'The churning of milk brings forth butter, the wringing of the nose brings forth blood, and the forcing of anger brings forth strife' (*Mishlei* 30:33)? In which individual will you find the butter of Torah? In the one who spits out the milk he sucked at his mother's breast for it [the Torah]." (*Berakhot* 63b)

 This forceful statement certainly calls for an explanation. What is intended by the imagery of spitting out mother's milk, and how does it enable a person to achieve success in Torah learning?

 We are fortunate to have R. Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook's commentary on the aggadot in *Berakhot*, a tractate packed with aggada. Rav Kook interprets this gemara as a message to all educators and pedagogues. Many educators conceive of their job as the constant attempt to make learning easier for their students. They think that the goal of education is to create a learning environment that enables student achievement with a minimum of toil and effort. The perfect symbol for such a vision is the nursing baby, who needs no previous work to achieve a good meal.

For Rav Kook, the above educational approach has two shortcomings: it mistakenly prizes quantity over quality, and it misjudges the educational impact of this type of learning on a student's personality. It is true that one can invent all kinds of ingenious methods for imparting masses of information fairly quickly. However, there are no clever tricks for teaching depth of understanding. Therefore, the focus on easing the student's burden invariably sacrifices depth in the quest for covering more material.

Furthermore, the student trained for a life of easy acquisition will fail to experience the personal growth necessary for true academic excellence. Ultimately, there is no personal or educational greatness without the ability to persevere in the face of massive difficulties. It is the hard-won insight that usually bears retelling. Finally, only the intense effort expended in trying to understand a text enables the student to truly internalize the message and meaning of that text.

Thus, any educational environment that fails to make real demands of its students does them a great disservice. In Rav Kook's understanding of the talmudic imagery, the growing child eventually eschews his mother's milk despite the ease with which it provides dinner. Real growth depends upon a decision to procure food that involves more effort.

Rav Kook's educational message should have great resonance for our generation. The broader society, influenced by the successes of modern technology, often seems solely dedicated to making life easier. From this standpoint, it seems that the final goal of human existence would entail sitting on the couch with a remote that controls everything else in the house and brings you whatever you need without your ever having to get up. This atmosphere has influenced religion in general, and Judaism in particular. The current publishing flood of English translations of traditional works and of collections summarizing masses of material is intended to make learning easier. Without denying that these works can often be helpful, we should still realize that an over-reliance upon them will not produce real *talmidei* *chakhamim*. One can finish *Shas* with the help of ArtScroll or a short daf yomi shiur, but still not learn how to read gemara independently in the original Aramaic. I have encountered several students in recent years who fit the above description.

Obviously, Rav Kook's contention does not mean that a teacher should impose as many arbitrary difficulties as possible in order to enhance student growth. We should avoid difficulties that crush the student's spirit, as well as those that are truly pointless. At the same time, we should remain wary of a frequent search for easing the educational burden. The constant attempt to remove difficulties leads to a diminishing of the depths of the material, to a lessening of the impact of the material, and to a stunting of student's personal development.

Soren Kierkegaard tells the story of sitting in a garden in Copenhagen on a Sunday afternoon and thinking about how the great modern benefactors are dedicated to making life easier. As William Barrett retells Kierkegaard's account:

They were benefactors because all of their efforts were directed at making life easier for the rest of mankind, whether materially by constructing railroads, steamboats, or telegraph lines, or intellectually by publishing easy compendiums to universal knowledge, or - most audacious of all - spiritually by showing how thought itself could make spiritual existence easier and easier… It occurred to him that since everyone was engaged everywhere in making things easy, perhaps someone might be needed to make things hard again. (*Irrational Man*, pp. 156-157)

Kierkegaard himself expresses the point beautifully in his work, *The Attack upon Christendom*. In the following citation from that work, he distinguishes between procuring water and achieving eternal blessedness.

Far be it from me to speak disparagingly of the comfortable! Let it be applied whenever it can be applied, in relation to everything which is in such a sense a thing that this thing can be possessed irrespective of the way in which it is possessed, so that one can have it either in this way or in the other, for when such is the case, the convenient and comfortable way is undeniably to be preferred. Take water for example: water is a thing which can be procured in the difficult way of fetching it up from the pump, but it can also be procured in the convenient way of high pressure; naturally, I prefer the more convenient way.

But the eternal is not a thing which can be had regardless of the way in which it is acquired; no, the eternal is a not really a thing, but is the way in which it is acquired. (Robert Bretall, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, pp. 441-442)

Even if we reject Kierkegarrd's overly strong formulation that the eternal is identical with the way in which it is acquired, we can accept his point that the most important things in life cannot be had by circumventing the arduous path that leads to them. This rings true for all religious, moral and personal growth, and certainly for the world of Torah learning. As this Danish philosopher did a century and a half ago, we must understand the tide of our time that searches for greater ease, and swim against that tide. In the long run, only a life of toil and striving produces the sweet butter of Torah.