YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

**Shiur #24: Teaching Torah**

Up to this point in our series, we have focused our attention on the obligation of studying Torah. However, it is striking that numerous texts emphasize the idea of teaching Torah.

In the Torah itself, on a national scale, Moshe’s blessing at the end of his life indicates that the Levites are charged to teach Torah to the nation (*Devarim* 33:8-11).

About Levi he said…  
For he watched over your word  
    and guarded your covenant.  
They shall teach your precepts to Ya’akov  
    and your law to Yisrael.  
They shall offer incense before you  
    and whole burnt offerings on your altar.  
Bless his legion, Lord,  
    and be pleased with the work of his hands.  
Strike down those who rise against him,  
    his foes till they rise no more.

This linkage between the sacrificial service and the teaching of Torah is underscored by the central role played by Moshe, a Levite, and, to a lesser degree, Aharon, the High Priest, in the transmission of the tradition.

Centuries later, in the Second Temple Era, Malakhi castigates the tribe (2:4-8):

"And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue,” says the Lord of Hosts. “My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin.

“For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts, and people seek instruction from his mouth. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the Lord of Hosts.

Contemporaneously, the Sanhedrin sits in *Lishkat Ha-gazit*, the Chamber of Hewn Stone, a Temple office, reinforcing the larger connection between the sacrificial service and the transmission of the tradition. The Sanhedrin, after all, is charged not just with the adjudication of difficult legal questions but also with deciding and disseminating the authoritative interpretation of the law.

The Sanhedrin’s location in the Temple underscores the connection we noted earlier in the series that *talmud Torah* has with both *tefilla* (“the service of the heart”) and the sacrificial service. This fits well with our suggestion that *talmud Torah* is rightly to be viewed as a form of devotional service. Indeed, this explains what Rambam writes at the conclusion of *Hilkhot Shemitta Ve-yovel* (13:12-13):

Why did the Levites not receive a portion in the inheritance of *Eretz Yisrael* and in the spoils of war like their brethren? Because they were set aside to serve God and minister unto Him and to instruct the people at large in His just paths and righteous judgments, as the verse (*Devarim* 33:10) states: "They shall teach your precepts to Ya’akov and your law to Yisrael." Therefore they were set apart from the ways of the world. They do not wage war like the remainder of the Jewish people, nor do they receive an inheritance, nor do they acquire for themselves through their physical power. Instead, they are God's legion, as the verse (ibid. v. 11) states: "Bless his legion, Lord" and He provides for them, as the verse (*Bamidbar* 18:20) states: "I am your portion and your inheritance."

Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him, so he understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before God to serve Him and minister to Him and to know God, proceeding justly as God made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings which people seek, he is then sanctified as holy of holies. God will be His portion and heritage forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world like He provides for the priests and the Levites. And thus David declared (*Tehillim* 16:5), “The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup: you maintain my lot.."

Of course, the Levites’ mission is national education; as for the personal dimension, the Torah stresses that parents are charged to be their children’s primary educators. This is particularly evident in *Devarim* 6:7, “You shall teach them diligently to your children and you shall speak of them, when you stay at home and when you go on the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” What is more, on special occasions, such as the Seder night, parents are obligated to convey particular narratives to their children (*Shemot* 13:8). Other texts urge children to inquire of their parents and elders regarding the meaning of historical events (*Devarim* 32:7) and heed their parents’ advice (*Mishlei* 1:8).

This aspect is particularly salient when we consider how many *mitzvot* are involved in *talmud Torah*. Rambam integrates studying and teaching into a single mitzva: “to study Torah and to teach it” (Positive 11; see also *Semag* 13). In his *Mishneh Torah*, Rambam goes so far as to begin *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* with the laws of teaching Torah (1:1-7); he turns to the obligation to study Torah only in 1:8. In doing so, Rambam implies that teaching is more basic to the mitzva than studying; one might even go so far as to infer that study is merely preparatory for teaching, which is the true essence of *talmud Torah*.

Other commentaries disagree with Rambam’s count, enumerating two or even three commandments regarding *talmud Torah*. Saadia Gaon (14-5) and *Semak* (105-6) count two *mitzvot*, one to learn and another to teach. *Halakhot Gedolot* (25, 72, 73) and *Yere’im* (225, 256, 268) count three: studying, teaching children and teaching students. These Rishonim implicitly sever, to some degree, the relationship between learning and teaching. At the same time, by counting teaching as a distinct mitzva, they raise its profile to the status of an independent obligation.

As a result, while, technically speaking, a father may fulfill his obligation by hiring a teacher for his son, there are indications that the ideal is for a parent, when feasible, to play a key role in educating one’s child. It is striking that, with the possible exception of recounting the Exodus, teaching Torah is the only obligation of *chinnukh* (education) mentioned explicitly in the Torah. This points to the critical importance of this mitzva. Indeed, *Shulchan Arukh Ha-rav* opens its treatment of *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* by making precisely this point: whereas the general mitzva of *chinnukh* is merely rabbinic in nature, the obligation to teach Torah to one’s child constitutes a biblical obligation.

The Gemara (*Bava Batra* 21a) recounts:

Rav Yehuda has told us in the name of Rav: Yehoshua ben Gamla is to be remembered for the good, as but for him the Torah would have been forgotten from Israel. For at first if a child had a father, his father taught him, and if he had no father he did not learn at all. By what verse did they guide themselves? By the verse, “And you shall teach them [*otam*] to your children” (*Devarim* 11:19), which they read: “And you yourselves [*atem*] shall teach your children.”

They then made an ordinance that teachers of children should be appointed in Jerusalem. By what verse did they guide themselves? By the verse (*Yeshayahu* 2:3), “For from Zion shall the Torah go forth.”

Even so, however, if a child had a father, the father would take him up to Jerusalem and have him taught there, and if not, he would not go up to learn there. They therefore ordained that teachers should be appointed In each region and that boys should enter school at the age of sixteen or seventeen. [They did so] and if the teacher punished them, they used to rebel and leave the school.

Eventually, Yehoshua ben Gamla came and ordained that teachers of young children should be appointed in each district and each town. and that children should enter school at the age of six or seven.

This implies that under ideal circumstances, parents are the best teachers. Yehoshua ben Gamla’s edict is critically important, but it reflects a reality far from the ideal.

In a moving lecture, HaRav Lichtenstein speaks directly to the importance of learning with one’s children and refers specifically to the actions of Yehoshua ben Gamla:

I feel very strongly about the need for personal attention in child-raising, and have tried to put it into practice. I, too, was raised that way. A number of my *rebbe’im* also used to speak of the value of learning with one’s children. The Rav once said that when one gets to *Olam Ha-ba*, he is going to be asked, “Based on what do you deserve entry to *Olam Ha-ba*?” Personally, he mentioned three things, one of which was that he learned with his children.

I remember a *derasha* that Rav Yitzchak Hutner *z”l* gave around *Shavuot* one year when I attended Yeshivat Rabbeinu Chayim Berlin. He discussed the *gemara* in *Bava Batra* (21a) that “Yehoshua ben Gamla is to be remembered for the good,” because he founded a network of Jewish education. Before his time, everybody had studied with his own child or hired a private tutor, but he founded schools. The *rosh yeshiva* said that historians, secular historians in particular, think of this as a great event, resolving the chaos of home education with something systematic: schools, buildings, educational infrastructure. To the contrary, Rav Hutner said, it was a sad day; the ideal is to follow the literal meaning of the verse, “You shall teach them to your children” (*Devarim* 11:19). The *rosh yeshiva* would frequently discuss with us the need to study with one’s son or one’s daughter, just as the verse states.

Indeed, as HaRav Lichtenstein points out, *Chazal* are surprisingly critical of Moshe Rabbeinu in this regard, suggesting that due to his focus on the Jewish community, Moshe failed to raise sons who were capable of taking over for him after his death. God therefore spurns Moshe’s request to appoint his sons in his stead, opting for Yehoshua instead (*Bamidbar Rabba* 21:14). *Chazal* even go so far as to suggest that Moshe’s grandchildren and great-grandchildren become idolatrous priests (*Bava Batra* 109b). As Chatam Sofer (*Torat Moshe*, *Bamidbar* 3:1) suggests, Moshe spent his time receiving those individuals who approached him with questions, but he did not proactively seek out opportunities to study with his children. As a tragic consequence, Moshe’s children were not able to take the mantle of leadership from their father.[[1]](#footnote-1)

To this point, we have stressed the importance of the father’s obligation toward his son. As noted, however, it is clear that there is also a wider obligation of teaching Torah to one’s grandchildren or to any students. This holds whether we follow *Halakhot Gedolot* and *Yere’im*, who count a distinct obligation of teaching students, or we follow the general view that there is no such obligation. In either case, the rabbis read the obligation to teach children as encompassing the obligation to teach students generally. Indeed, in many places, *Chazal* suggest that a student is viewed as the teacher’s child, for example:

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani said in Rabbi Yonatan's name: He who teaches Torah to the son of his fellow, the verse ascribes it to him as if he had begotten him, as it says, “Now, these are the generations of Aharon and Moshe” (*Bamidbar* 3:1), while it goes on to say, “These are the names of the sons of Aharon” (ibid. v. 2) — this teaches you that Aharon begot and Moshe taught them; hence they are called by his name [as well].

Rambam (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1:2) thus rules:

Just as a person is obligated to teach his son, so too is he obligated to teach his grandson, as the verse (*Devarim* 4:9) commands: "And you shall teach them to your sons and your grandsons."

[Furthermore, this charge is not confined] to one's children and grandchildren alone. Rather, it is a mitzva for each and every wise man to teach all students, even though they are not his children, as the verse (*Devarim* 6:7) states, “You shall teach them diligently to your children." The oral tradition (*Sifrei* ad loc.) explains: “‘Your sons’ — these are your students… for students are also called sons… as the verse *(II Melakhim* 2:3) states: ‘And the sons of the prophets went forth.’"

If so, why do the commandments [explicitly mention] one's son and grandson? To grant precedence to one's son over one's grandson, and one's grandson over the son of a fellow Jew.

The unique obligation to teach Torah to any student, who is then treated as one’s own child, gives rise to the unique characteristics of the *rebbe-talmid* relationship, which we will explore in the next *shiur*.

1. For recent treatments of this subject, see Dovid Bashevkin, <https://www.ou.org/jewish_action/06/2017/growing-public-eye-children-rabbis/>, and Elli Fischer, “The Patron Saint of Rabbis’ Kids,” <http://www.thelehrhaus.com/commentary-short-articles/patron-saint-of-rabbis-sons>. For a psychological perspective, see Irving Levitz, “The Children of Rabbis,” <http://traditionarchive.org/news/originals/Volume%2023/No.%202/Children%20Of%20Rabbis.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)