



VAYIKRA

Emor

How To Educate Our Youth

May 5, 2018

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ABSTRACT

Ah, education, one of humanity's favorite subjects, one that reminds us, naturally, of our school days and, instinctively, puts us to sleep. (I can't help but notice a few nodding heads, nodding not in agreement, I daresay ...)

It's a sad fact: teachers are very often boring. I guess this is because, as George Bernhard Shaw, the witty Irish playwright, once quipped: "Those that can, do. Those that can't, teach."

Let's face it: no one loves school, just as no one loves shul.

Rabbis are, essentially, teachers. Teachers are perceived as knowing what you don't and so no one likes them (all that much). Rabbis are no different.

The only difference between school and shul is that in the former you're a child with no free will, and in the latter, you can walk out anytime you like without being sent to the principal's office.

But, perhaps we can do something about it. Perhaps we can create a more mature and sophisticated type of education, and expect more from our teachers and rabbis. Because in truth, our teachers, rabbis, parents and mentors were meant to inspire us and believe in us more than they are meant to be condescending, boring or irrelevant ... Perhaps the secret ingredient is found in the most profound – and educational – book ever to grace this physical plane ... Could that be true?

Yes indeed. Our Torah reading holds within it a most profound lesson, what it means to truly educate – for the elders to educate the youth, for parents to educate children, for rabbis to educate communities, and for all of us to educate each other.

And this vital message is underscored by the Rashbi, whose yahrzeit we just celebrated on Lag B'Omer.

1.Sleepy Student (Joke)

Teacher to student: "You know you can't sleep in my class."

Student to teacher: "I know. But maybe if you were just a little quieter, I could."

2. Education

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But, perhaps there is a more mature and sophisticated approach to education, to teachers and rabbis ... Perhaps teachers, parents, rabbis and mentors are meant to inspire us and believe in us more than they are meant to be condescending or boring and irrelevant ... Perhaps the secret ingredient is found in the most profound – and educational – book ever to grace this physical plane ... Could that be true?

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3. Parshat Emor

Our Torah portion is entitled, *Emor*, which means "speak," and its title is derived from the first verse:

And the Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: Let none defile himself with a dead person among his people.¹

An obvious question jumps right out at us. The Torah parses every word, with no letter superfluous, and yet, our present verse seems to be repeating itself with no evident purpose. *Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them – why the redundant, speak...and say? Could not the verse have stated: Say to the priests, the sons of Aaron: Let none defile himself with a dead person among his people?*

The Talmud² derives a directive from the double expression of "speak and say" – cautioning adults to be

¹ Leviticus 21:1.

² Yevamot 114a. As quoted by Rashi on the verse.

responsible for minors, *lebazbir bagdeolim al haktanim*.³

The Talmud voices this warning while discussing the Jewish court's responsibility in preventing minors from transgressing and breaking the law. And it cites this very verse as proof that the Torah required the elder priests (Kohanim) to not only remain pure themselves but also to ensure that their youth remained pure.

A priest, who officiated in the Temple before G-d, had to remain pure to serve, and could never be touched by the impurity of death. This was obvious.

But the Talmud takes this requirement one step further: From the repetition of “speak and say” it deduces that the elders were required not only to keep themselves pure but also take care to keep the youth, the minors, innocent and pure as well.

4. Reptiles and Blood

There are two other instances, noted by the Talmud, where the Torah seems to be repeating itself. From those repetitions, the Talmud derives the same lesson – that the adults must take care to educate the minors

The first instance is in *Parshat Shemini*, where the Torah prohibits the consumption of creeping creatures, like reptiles. From there⁴, the Talmud learns that the repetition is meant to warn the elders concerning the minors.

The second instance is in *Parshat Acharei Mot*, which we read last week. There the Torah prohibits the consumption of blood, as it states, “None of you shall eat blood.”⁵ We already know that we cannot eat blood from the verse before, so what does this come to add?⁶ Says the Talmud,⁷ it comes to warn the elders about the minors.

Thus we see that we have three different sources that teach us that the elders must educate the minors. Not only are the seasoned veterans meant to adhere to the Torah but they also must teach the minors to do the same.

The question then arises:

³ See Mizrachi.

⁴ Leviticus 11:42.

⁵ Leviticus 17:12.

⁶ Note that Rashi on the Talmud seems to interpret the verse's redundancy differently than he does in commentary on the verse.

⁷ Cf. Torat Kohanim 17:110.

We already know that the Torah does not mince words or lessons, so why does the Torah simply not include one all-encompassing law to teach us that, in all cases, the elders must take care to educate the youth? Why do we need to deduce this from three distinct Torah verses – reptiles, blood and purities – to learn this command?⁸

5. Three Mitzvahs, One Lesson

Perhaps we may say that these three distinct mitzvahs – prohibitions against creepers and blood, and the demand for priestly purity – come to teach us a timeless and essential lesson in our everyday lives, a lesson as to what education is all about.⁹

Education is straightforward and simple when everything goes right. When a child or student or member of the community (or any Jew, really) is eager to learn, receive and accept, it's relatively easy to convey the message. Then, education is natural.

The challenge arises when things do not go as planned; when education is not natural and is not naturally received. Say a student does not desire to learn, or a child stubbornly does not listen, or a Jew does not want to hear about his/her responsibility and heritage, or a family member does not want to discuss something that you feel strongly about – what to do then? What do you do when faced with such a challenge?

The Torah – with the repetition of “speak...and say” in our portion, and with the repetitions in the portions about creeping creatures and blood – comes precisely to address this issue and tear down the perceived barrier between teacher and student, parent and child, rabbi and congregation, Jew and Jew, elder and minor.

6. Three Keys to Education

Three general situations may give us pause, causing us to lose hope and give up on reaching out and educating:¹⁰

- Irrelevance: When someone is so far removed from the subject we are trying to teach, we might say the person is a lost cause.
- Bias: When, from day one, someone has developed a prejudice or stereotype against a particular ideal.

⁸ The Talmud there (114b) explains why we need all three, creepers, blood, and priestly purity to teach us the adult responsibility vis-à-vis the minor, for each on its own is deficient due to its outstanding uniqueness. But why indeed could the Torah not find a case that encompasses all of Israel and is not unique in nature?

⁹ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 7. p.147 ff for a nuanced approach to this topic.

¹⁰ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 2, pp. 679-682.

Their negative attitude to the ideal we are trying to teach may have been etched into their psyche, making us feel hopeless in changing this person's mind.

- Conformity: When the subject is supra rational, belief-centric, instinctive and faith-based (like much of religion), and goes against the grain of “what everyone else is doing,” we may believe that such a subject is beyond the ability of the teacher/parent, the “elder,” to get across to the pupil/child, the “minor,” who would prefer to conform to social standards.

Says the Torah, to all three: If you think that way, you are emphatically wrong. Education is based on believing in your student or child; believing that they are capable of far more than one can imagine.

- When people are so far removed from the subject we are trying to teach, as to consume creeping creatures, perhaps they may seem beyond education, beyond reach and salvageable hope. BUT, says the Torah – *so the elders shall teach the minors*. Even in case of the epitome of depraved consumption, even in such a far-out reality, you must reach out and teach the “minors.”
- When, from day one, people have been engraved with something antithetical to the ideal we are trying to teach them; when something that is part and parcel of who they are, part of their blood,¹¹ perhaps they may seem unreachable. BUT says the Torah, *so the elders shall teach the minors*. Even in case of blood, when something negative seems to part of someone's very life force, even then we can and ought to reach and teach them.
- When we are trying to teach things that are supra-rational, like the laws of purity and impurity,¹² education may not seem possible. We may fear that the student will not be receptive to that which is beyond the norm. BUT says the Torah, the elders, the seasoned, the mature shall teach the minors even the supra-rational lessons like *tuma v'tahara*, purity and impurity. True education touches not just influence the mind or even the heart; true education teaches and reaches the soul.

7. To Forewarn, To Shine

This also sheds light on an interesting phraseology employed by the Talmud:

lebazbir hagdeolim al haktanim may be read: “For the elders to admonish the minors.” Or *lebazbir hagdeolim al haktanim* may be read: “For the elders to *illuminate* the minors.”

¹¹ See Sifrei to Acharei ibid.

¹² See Maimonides conclusion of Laws of Mikvaot.

Lebazbir is akin to the word *zohar v'obr*, meaning “to shine and illuminate.”¹³ When the elders take heed to warn and educate the minors, they should be doing so in a manner that illuminates the children, causing them and the entire world to shine.

When the seasoned elders and sages approach the youth with these three lessons in hand – everyone is reachable, even those who 1) dabble in the creepy, 2) are ingrained in their blood with opposing standards, and/or 3) are disconnected from the supra-rational.

Then a new light – *zohar* – enters the educational sphere and the student feels as if the teacher is talking directly to him/her. The effect on the minor is very different when the message is coming across as a warning or as an illuminating light.

The illumination element in education also conveys confidence in the student or child. Imagine having a rabbi who, without a shadow of a doubt, believed in you. Whose attitude exuded a sense that you are pure at your core, no matter what you had consumed, no matter how you were educated, no matter your level of faith in the supra-rational?

Imagine you had such a rabbi or parent or teacher?

Wouldn't you shine? Wouldn't the world shine?

Indeed, it would. Because this illuminating and warm approach to education touches the deepest parts of us, the *pintele yid*, the divine spark, the *neshama*, the soul.

8. Lag B'Omer Connection

The emphasis on education through illumination – *zohar* – is interestingly connected to Rabbi Shimeon Bar Yochai (Rashbi), whose *yahrzeit* we celebrated this past Thursday, as the Rashbi himself requested, that his *yahrzeit* should become a day of great celebration.

Rashbi is the author of the *Zohar* – the classic work of Jewish mysticism. One of the reasons the book is called *Zohar* is because it illuminates the inner soul of Torah, which in turn illuminates our souls and the souls of our children and students.

The importance of educating and speaking to others with love, even those that needed healing and repair, is

¹³ Sefer Hamaamorim 5708, Zeh Hayom, end chapter 2 (p. 240); Igeret Hakodesh end epistle 7; Likkutei Sichot 7, p. 151 fn. #25.

captured in a powerful story related in the Talmud about Rashbi:¹⁴

When the Roman rulers of the Holy Land placed a price on the heads of Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar, they hid in a cave for twelve years. During this time, they spent every minute of their day studying Torah. When they emerged from the cave, they were shocked to discover people plowing and sowing: How could people set aside the eternal life that is Torah and occupy their days with the transitory life of the material? So intense was their wrath at such folly that whatever met with their burning glance went up in flames. Proclaimed a voice from heaven: “Have you come out to destroy My world? Return to your cave!”

Rabbi Shimon’s thirteenth year of study, while increasing his knowledge and appreciation of the eternal truth of Torah, also taught him the value of endeavors other than his own. Now, wherever he went, his look would heal rather than destroy.

Even the greatest of sages and mystics had to reach a higher state of spiritual maturity – a 13th Bar-Mitzvah year – to burn up the world, but to heal it.

This is one of the foundations of the *zohar* approach to education – *Emor v’omarto/l’bazhir* – to transform through warmth and illumination.

9. Jarring Education (Story)

The teacher cleared off his desk and placed on top of it a few items. One of the items was an empty mason glass jar. He proceeded to fill up the jar with golf balls until he could fit no more. He looked at the classroom and asked his students if they agreed that the jar was full. Every student agreed that the jar was indeed full.

The teacher then picked up a box of small pebbles and poured them into the jar with the golf balls. The pebbles filled the openings in between the golf balls. He asked the students if the jar was full. Once again, they agreed.

Now the teacher picked up a bag of sand and poured it into the mason jar. The sand filled in the empty space left between the golf balls and pebbles. He asked the class again if the jar was full. The students agreed it was technically full.

Finally, the teacher pulled out two beers from under his desk and poured both of them into the jar filling the empty space between the sand. Now the students began to laugh wondering how far this was going to go.

The teacher waited until the laughter stopped. “I want you to recognize that this jar represents your life,” he started. “The golf balls represent the important things: your family, children, health, friends, purpose, soul and

¹⁴ Shabbat 33b.

passions. If everything else was lost and only they remained, your life would still be full.

“The pebbles represent the other things in life that matter, such as your job, house, and car. The sand – that is everything else. The small stuff. If you put the sand in first, there is no room for the pebbles or golf balls.

“The same goes for life. If you spend all of your time and energy on the small stuff, you will never have room for the things that are most important. Pay attention to the important things in your life. Put the golf balls in first and you will have room for everything else. Put the sand or pebbles first, and you will have no room left over for the important things.

“Enjoy time with family. Go to dinner with your spouse. Play games with your kids. There will always be time to clean the house or take yourself shopping. Take care of the golf balls first – the things that really matter. The rest is just sand. You are dismissed.”

Before the students left, one shouted out. “You never mentioned what the beer represents!”

The professor smiled and said, “Well I’m glad you asked. The beer just shows you that no matter how full your life may seem, there’s always room to have a beer with a friend.”¹⁵

10. Wondrous Education (Optional Second Story)

In this story, a class of students was asked to list what they thought were the current ‘Seven Wonders of the World’. While there were certainly some differences in the lists created, the following received the most votes:

1. Egypt’s Great Pyramids
2. The Taj Mahal
3. The Grand Canyon
4. Panama Canal
5. Empire State Building
6. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon
7. The Great Wall of China

While gathering the student lists, the teacher noted that one student had not finished her paper yet. So she asked the young girl if she was having trouble creating her list.

¹⁵ <http://www.sunnyskyz.com/feel-good-story/111/A-teacher-s-life-lessons-using-a-jar-and-some-golf-balls>.

The girl replied: Yes, a little. I couldn't quite make up my mind because there were so many.

The teacher told her: Well tell us what you have and maybe we can help.

The girl hesitated and then read her list to the class:

1. To see
2. To hear
3. To touch
4. To taste
5. To feel
6. To laugh
7. And to love

The classroom got so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop.

Education is the difference between learning a pre-conceived notion of wonder, or a wonder that resonates.

11. Test Me (Joke)

Pupil: "I don't think I deserved zero on this test!"

Teacher: "I agree, but that's the lowest mark I could give you!"

12. Higher Education (Conclusion)

The test of a real education, the classroom that is life, is not graded by numbers but by steps. We must be always going one step higher, one step further, one step deeper.

The Talmudic dictum – *lebazhir gedolim al baktanim*, the warning to the elders concerning the minors – does not just refer to elders in age and minors in age (i.e. the white-haired elders educating the youngsters), it also refers to elders and minors in knowledge and ability.

Each and every one of us has a unique something to teach this world, a distinct talent that makes us an "elder" compared to others. Our portion teaches us that we must use this G-d-given skill to *bazhir*, to light up and illuminate the world – we are obligated to use our expertise to make the minors around us shine.

- As we sit here today, on this Shabbat, we must each ask ourselves two questions: “What is the ‘elder’ element that lives within me, the uniqueness that G-d has given me?”
- And: “How will I use that ‘elder’ uniqueness to change the world, to inspire and educate and uplift and illuminate the ‘minors’ around me who may not yet be privy to the same gift within them?”

This is how we will remain a “holy nation and a kingdom of priests” – never, ever defiled by the impurity of death, but always ascending and transcending with the purity of life!

Shabbat Shalom!

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