YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

**By Rav Tzvi Sinensky**

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Please pray for a refua sheleima for טובה מאטל בת חנה אטל

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**Shiur #25: *Rebbe-Talmid* Relationship**

The *rebbe-talmid* relationship is among the most significant in the Jewish tradition. The obligation to revere and honor Torah scholars, especially one’s own teacher, is generally acknowledged to be a biblical obligation (see Rambam, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 5:1, 6:1). Reverence for a teacher is akin to reverence for the Divine Presence (Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua, *Avot* 4:12). One must even honor a *rebbe* ahead of one’s parent; for instance, the Mishna (*Bava Metzia* 2:11) rules: “One must recover a lost object belonging to his teacher ahead of that of his father: whereas his father brought him into this world, his teacher, who has instructed him in wisdom, brings him to the World to Come.”

Numerous prohibitions indicate the severity of this obligation. For example, one who issues a *halakhic* ruling in front of one’s teacher is liable to the death penalty. The paradigms of this category are Nadav and Avihu who, according to one view, died because they ruled in the presence of their teacher Moshe (Rabbi Eliezer, *Eruvin* 63a). One who begins a disagreement with his *rebbe* is like one who disputes the Divine Presence (Rav Chisda, *Sanhedrin* 110a). Rambam (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 5:2) therefore rules that a student may not establish a yeshiva competing with that of his teacher (see Ramach ibid. and *Beit Yosef,* *YD* 242 s.v. *Ve-eizeh*). Based on *Sanhedrin* 99a, Rambam (*Hilkhot Teshuva* 3:14) rules that one who regularly degrades Torah scholars, including one’s own teacher, does not merit a share in the World to Come.

**“Make For Yourself a Teacher”**

Reinforcing the importance of the *rebbe-talmid* relationship, the first chapter of *Avot* includes two exhortations to “make for yourself a teacher”: first, Yehoshua ben Perachya teaches (1:6), “Make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend;” then Rabban Gamliel instructs (1:16), “Make for yourself a teacher, and remove yourself from doubt.” The commentators are troubled by a series of questions on these two *mishnayot*. The range of responses highlights a number of key themes regarding the importance of maintaining a *rebbe*.

First, the commentaries are troubled by the very need to exhort one to establish a teacher; for anybody who is committed halakhic observance, is this not a given? Moreover, the language of “Make for yourself” also perturbs the commentators; it is not entirely clear what this means. There are two basic perspectives among the commentators: a) the *mishna* emphasizes that one should appoint a *rebbe* rather than no teacher at all; or b) the *mishna* rules that only one teacher is appropriate, not multiple *rebbe’im*.

The first camp is represented by numerous Rishonim. Rashi (s.v. *Aseh*), for example, writes that though one might be tempted to learn primarily from *sevara* (logic), one should nonetheless appoint a teacher. Meiri (s.v. *Yehoshua*) echoes this view, citing the statement of Rabbi Ze’ira in the name of Rabbi Elazar (Yerushalmi, *Pesachim* 6:1): “Any Torah without a father’s house is not Torah.” Along similar lines, *Tiferet Yisrael* (*Yakhin* 27) reads the *mishna* as admonishing one to appoint a *rebbe*, even if one thinks one is no longer in need of a teacher. Rambam (s.v. *Aseh*, followed by Rabbeinu Yona, s.v. *Yehoshua*) offers another variation, contending that one must appoint a *rebbe* even if the teacher is not entirely fit for the position, even if the “student” actually knows more. This is because a person retains and understands more clearly that which one learns from somebody else. *Tashbetz* (s.v. *Yehoshua*) echoes Rambam’s themes by invoking the admonition of the *Kuzari*’s Sage (2:72) that one learn “from scholars and not from books.” *Avodat Yisrael* notes the juxtaposition of teachers and friends, explaining: “Everyone should make a friend like a teacher, so that [the friend] will offer rebuke for any objectionable behavior and will be listened to; if such an individual is merely a friend, it will be too embarrassing to voice such rebuke.”

The second camp argues that the *mishna* limits the number of teachers to one. This is set forward in *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* (8:2):

Rabbi Meir used to say: To whom may one who studies Torah with a single teacher be likened?To one who has a single field, sowing part with wheat and part with barley, planting part with olives and part with oak trees. Now that person is full of good and blessing.But when one studies with two or three teachers, this is like one who has many fields, sowing one with wheat and one with barley, planting one with olives and one with oak trees.Now this person’s attention is divided between many pieces of land, without good or blessing.

Similarly, in regard to halakhic practice, it is far easier and more streamlined to rely on a single teacher as much as possible, rather than end up with confused practices that issue from different sources and even, at times, contradict each other. *Tashbetz* (ibid.) cites a number of other Talmudic sources to support Rabbi Meir’s contention, but notes that the School of Rabbi Yannai teaches: “One who learns Torah from a single teacher will never see a sign of blessing” (*Avoda Zara* 19a). He explains that when it comes to learning analytical skills, it is important to maintain multiple mentors who will help to sharpen one’s thinking. Nonetheless, *Tashbetz* concludes, in regard to halakhic rulings, all would agree that it is ideal to stick to a single teacher where possible.

The commentaries are also perturbed by the apparent repetition and try to explain what Rabban Gamliel adds. Rambam (1:15, s.v. *Zeh)* argues that Yehoshua ben Perachya refers to one’s theoretical learning, whereas Rabban Gamliel refers to halakhic rulings. *Tiferet Yisrael* (*Yakhin* 62) suggests that Yehoshua ben Perachya refers to the obligation of a city to appoint a rabbi, whereas Rabban Gamliel addresses an individual.

Still other commentators see the two as teaching the same principle. *Tashbetz* (*Magen Avot* 1:16, s.v. *Aseh*), for example, notes that *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* (22:1) “interprets [the latter] like the first.” Rashi (1:16, s.v. *Aseh*) simply says, “I explained it above.” According to this view, as *Tashbetz* points out, the subsequent clause, “remove yourself from doubt,” can be read as distinct from the admonition to appoint a teacher for oneself.

However, this prompts the question: what justifies this repetition? If Yehoshua ben Perachya has a distinct teaching, it would be strange for Rabban Gamliel to reiterate it. Consider two statements in the fourth chapter of *Avot*:

Rabbi Levitas of Yavneh would say: “Be very, very humble, for the hope of mortal man is worms.” (4:4)

Rabbi Meir would say… “Be humble before every man” (4:10)

The commentators (ad loc.) distinguish between these views; but in our case, the exact same terminology is used by both sages. Apparently, in the case of making oneself a teacher, we have an exception from the general rule of not being repetitious. This speaks to both the critical importance of establishing a teacher for oneself, as well as the strong temptation to avoid this responsibility. The repetition, as well as a wide of range of themes suggested by the classical commentaries, speaks volumes about the importance the Rabbis assign to the *rebbe-talmid* relationship.

**Different Types of Relationships**

Just as *talmud Torah* itself is multidimensional, so too there are a variety of *rebbe-talmid* relationships, each of which is governed by a distinct set of rules. There is, firstly, a sharp differentiation between the general obligation to revere a Torah scholar and the obligation to respect one’s own *rebbe*. Thus, Rambam treats these subjects in separate chapters in *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (Chapter 5 addresses respect for one’s own *rebbe*, Chapter 6 for any Torah scholar). While the meaning of the term “*rav muvhak*” (primary teacher) is unclear and has been subject to wide debate throughout the centuries (see *Bava Metzia* 33a), it is clear that this is the most intimate type of *rebbe-talmid* relationship. Authorities debate whether, on a biblical level, the range of obligations of respect mentioned above apply only to a *rav muvhak* or to any teacher one has. Strikingly, *Avot* 6:3 teaches that one must treat as one’s *rebbe* even a person who teaches one a single *halakha*. Does this mean that there is a biblical obligation to treat any every such individual with reverence? This seems to be the subject of a dispute. Rabbi Eliezer of Metz (*Yere’im* 231) clearly states that the full range of biblical obligations apply even to the teacher of a single law. Tosafot (*Bava Kama* 41b, s.v. *Le-rabot*), however, imply that the biblical requirement of respect is limited to one’s primary teacher. (See also *Responsa Binyan Tziyon* 83, which follows Tosafot.)

Further muddying the waters, there are a whole range of in-between scenarios: a student who rises to or supersedes the teacher’s level (*talmid chaver*); a first teacher of Jewish studies, including *aleph-bet*; a teacher who brings one into the world of Torah and *mitzvot,* even as a convert. In these and other situations, the authorities debate the precise parameters and malleability of the *rebbe-talmid* relationship. Put differently, just as there are countless facets to Torah study, so too there are numerous permutations of being a teacher of Torah.

**Parent-Child Relationship**

As we saw in the previous *shiur*, at its most profound level, the relationship between *rebbe* and *talmid* is the relationship between parent and child. Taking this as a full-fledged halakhic principle, Rav Moshe of Trani (*Kiryat Sefer*, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 5:1) notes that Rambam opens the chapter by writing that “Just as one is obligated in the honor and reverence of his father, so too one is obligated in the honor and reverence of his teacher, even more so than his father.” Rav Moshe deduces from here that the biblical obligation to revere one’s teacher is an extension of the biblical obligation to respect one’s parents.

On the basis of this comparison, the Gemara applies the laws of mourning to one whose teacher dies. *Mo’ed Katan* 25b teaches that when Rabbi Yochanan died, Rabbi Ami observed the traditional laws of *shiva* and *sheloshim*. While the Gemara says that this was too much, it does acknowledge that one should mourn for a day. Similarly, a few lines later, the same *sugya* (*Mo’ed Katan* 26a) goes on to teach that one tears and may not resew one’s clothing upon the loss of a father, mother, teacher or national leader or in other tragic scenarios. In support of the requirement to tear upon the loss of a parent or teacher, the Gemara cites the precedent of Elisha:

“For his father or mother or for his master who taught him wisdom” — from where do we know this?

From what is written (*II Melakhim* 2:12): “And Elisha saw it and he cried: My father. my father, the chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof.”

“My father, my father” — that is, [to rend on the loss of] one's father or mother.

“The chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof” — that is [for] a master who taught one Torah.

How exactly does it convey this [meaning]? — As Rav Yosef rendered it: “My master, my master, who was better [protection] to Israel with his prayer than chariots and horsemen.”

**Nowadays**

Despite the great significance accorded to the obligations attending one’s respect for a teacher, there is a striking suggestion, already among the Rishonim, that these laws may no longer be applicable in the modern age. The 14th-century Tosafist Rav Aharon from Narbonne (*Orchot Chayim*, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 21) cites a letter from Rav Shemuel of Évreux and his brother:

From the day on which our forefathers were exiled, our holy Temple was destroyed and our lands were corrupted, the Torah and our hearts have been diminished,and we can no longer say that “the reverence of your teacher should be like the reverence of heaven.” All the laws governing how a student ought to interact with a teacher have been nullified; for the *Gemarot*, their explanations, the novella and compositions are the teachers of people, and everything follows the intelligence of the hearts. For this reason, in their town, they were accustomed for the student to teach, and we do not apply the rule that one who issues halakhic rulings in the presence of one’s teacher is liable to death. Likewise, a student may contradict his teacher’s words if he can, in accordance with his analysis.

Analogously, Maharashdam (*CM* 1) argues that, nowadays, “it is not the scholar who rules, but the book.” Thus, if the Évreux brothers hold that nowadays one may issue halakhic rulings in the presence of one’s teacher, it is certainly justified for a student who has reached the level of a *posek* to issue halakhic rulings in the same community as another *posek*, which would otherwise be prohibited out of respect for the teacher.

Maharic (*Responsa* 171), however, forcefully rejects the position cited in *Orchot Chayim*. Noting that Rambam and Tur cite the full range of *halakhot* regarding proper respect for one’s teacher in their halakhic compendia, he infers that these authorities maintain that these rules remain in force nowadays; there is no basis whatsoever, he contends, for relaxing these rules.

In reflecting on this seminal argument, it is worth noting more generally that, through the course of this series, we have seen three disputes concerning whether or not the parameters of *talmud Torah* have shifted in light of technological changes in the nature of learning. First, in regard to the question of Sinai and *oker harim* (*shiur* 15), Rav Shelomo Kluger and *Peri Chadash* debate whether nowadays all would agree that analysis is prized over breadth of knowledge due to the proliferation of books in print. Second, the Vilna Gaon controversially maintains that the prohibition against forgetting one’s learning is no longer in force nowadays (*shiur* 16). Third, we have now seen the debate between *Orchot Chayim* and Maharic regarding the deference owed to one’s *rebbe* nowadays. While there is certainly room to distinguish among these three areas, taken together, they raise an overarching question about the interplay between the timeless value of *talmud Torah* and the technological shifts that have impacted the nature of learning throughout the centuries.

In a different sense, Rav Kook’s treatment of *Torat Eretz Yisrael* suggests that there are other ways in which the meaning or live experience of Torah study may shift not only with technological advances, but also with new stages in Jewish history. In discussing the value of learning at night, we alluded to the possibility that the emphasis on nighttime learning might change with the advent of electricity (*shiur* 21). While the value of the *rebbe-talmid* relationship and *talmud Torah* generally is a given, the manifestations of these overarching values may shift significantly over the course of time.

**Wrestling Over Torah**

In conclusion, it is worth noting an inherent tension that runs throughout this *shiur*, particularly in relation to the remainder of our series. On the one hand, with the exception of our final discussion concerning the contemporary applicability of the laws concerning the *rebbe-talmid* relationship, this *shiur* has emphasized the extreme honor and deference owed to one’s teacher. At the same time, the entire spirit of *talmud Torah* is one of an intellectual battle (*milchama*) for the sake of truth. In such an environment, it would seem that undue deference might in fact hinder the larger pursuit of truth in which Torah students and their teachers are engaged.

In seeking to resolve this question or at least to allow both aspects of this tension to coexist, it is well worth citing a comment of Rav Chayim Volozhin. In his *Ruach Chayim*, he offers a homiletical interpretation of *Avot* 1:4, in which Yosei ben Yoezer urges one to “embrace the dust” (*mitabeik*) at the feet of the wise. Rav Chayim relates it to the similar term used to describe Ya’akov’s contending with the angel *(Bereishit* 32:25), offering a blueprint for how one ought to study with a teacher. For the sake of truth, one must even be willing to “fight” with one’s teacher by raising questions and counterarguments that militate against the teacher’s understanding. Nevertheless, at all times one must comport oneself with proper respect; this is the meaning of the phrase “in the dust at their feet.” One may only engage with one’s *rebbe* in an analytical argument for the sake of truth, demonstrating proper respect. One who seeks this balance truly shows proper deference for scholars and the Torah they seek to convey.