YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur #26: Unfit Teachers of Torah**

One of the more difficult areas of the mitzva of *talmud Torah* concerns disgraced teachers. Tragically, the question of studying the works of fallen teachers has become all too common in our generation. Instead of focusing on its practical aspect, an important issue but tangential to the purposes of this series, we will consider the underlying reason for the rabbinical objection to this practice.

The Gemara (*Chagiga* 15b) teaches:

And Rabbi Meir, how could he learn Torah from the mouth of *Acher*? Did not Rabba bar bar Chana say that Rabbi Yochanan said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “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” (*Malakhi* 2:7)? The verse teaches: If the rabbi is similar to an angel of the Lord of hosts, they should seek Torah from his mouth; but if not, they should not seek Torah from his mouth.

Reish Lakish said: Rabbi Meir found a verse and interpreted it homiletically: “Incline your ear and hear the words of the wise, and apply your heart to My knowledge” (*Mishlei* 22:17). It does not state: to their knowledge, but “to My knowledge.”

Rav Chanina said that one can find support for this from here: “Listen, daughter, and consider, and incline your ear; but forget your own people and your father’s house” (*Tehillim* 45:11).

If so, the verses contradict each other!

This is not a problem. This one refers to a *gadol*, that to a *katan*.

When Rav Dimi came [from the Land of Israel to Babylonia], he said: In the West, they say: Rabbi Meir ate a half-ripe date and threw the peel away.

Rava taught: What is the meaning of that which is written: “I went down into the garden of nuts, to look at the green plants of the valley” (*Shir Ha-shirim* 6:11)? Why are Torah scholars compared to nuts? To tell you: Just as this nut, despite being soiled with mud and excrement, its content is not made repulsive, as only its shell is soiled; so too a Torah scholar, although he has sinned, his Torah is not made repulsive.

What is the problem with an unfit teacher? We may raise a number of possibilities:

1. The student may be led astray by the teacher’s objectionable worldview.
2. A teacher who is not fully committed to Halakha may convey imprecise or entirely incorrect halakhic teachings.
3. Studying with a sinful teacher may generate a *chillul ha-shem*.
4. Aside from any negative consequences, there is an intrinsic objection to studying from a tainted mentor.

We encounter evidence for these various views in a number of halakhic texts. First, our Gemara’s distinction between a more mature and less mature student (*gadol* versus *katan*), as well as Rav Dimi’s depiction of Rabbi Meir as having eaten the fruit and discarded the rind, seems to lend support to one of the first two interpretations. Thus, Rashi (s.v. *Gadol*) explains that a more mature scholar will not learn from his teacher’s actions; this seems to follow our first interpretation. Meiri (s.v. *Asur*, *Ve-khen*) appears to distinguish between a prohibition against studying from an unfit scholar and a heretical one; for Meiri, most likely, the concern is that one will come to learn from both the scholar’s behavior (in the former case) and beliefs (in the latter).

Rav Ya’akov David Wilovsky (Ridbaz, *Commentary to Parashat Teruma*) seems to adopt a variation on the second approach, claiming that “one who has heresy will not merit to reach the truth of Torah.” This implies that the concern is not so much that the students will be seduced by the teacher’s philosophical positions, but that the teacher’s understanding of Halakhawill necessarily be colored by his philosophical convictions, which will in turn inevitably render his teaching inaccurate.

*Mo’ed Katan* 17a addresses the issue as well:

There was once a certain rabbinical student whose reputation was objectionable. Rav Yehuda said, “How is one to act? To excommunicate him [we cannot], as the rabbis have need of him [as an able teacher]. Not to excommunicate [we cannot], as the name of Heaven is being profaned.”

He said to Rabbah bar bar Chana, “Have you heard anything about this?”

He replied that Rabbi Yochanan said: What is the meaning of that which is written: “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” (*Malakhi* 2:7)? The verse teaches: If the rabbi is similar to an angel of the Lord of hosts, they should seek Torah from his mouth; but if not, they should not seek Torah from his mouth.

Later, Rav Yehuda fell ill. The rabbis came to inquire about him and that man came along with them. When Rav Yehuda beheld him he laughed.

The man said to him: “Not enough for him that he excommunicates that man [me], but he even laughs at me!”

He replied: “I was not laughing at you; but as I am departing to that World, I am glad to think that even towards such a personage as you, I showed no indulgence.”

Rav Yehuda struggles between the practical need for the rabbis to learn from an accomplished scholar and the fear of *chillul ha-shem*. After he is told Rabbi Yochanan’s teaching, he sets aside the former. However, it is not clear if he is still motivated by the concern for *chillul ha-shem* or a general prohibition of learning from a sullied scholar. Since the first passage does not speak of the former issue, it might be simplest to conclude that it is not the impetus. Indeed, Rashi (s.v. *Ve-im*) and Ritva (s.v. *Amar*) may as much. Still, the *chillul ha-shem* approach remains a possibility.

***Gadol/ Katan*, and a Final Explanation**

Another consideration might lead us toward interpretation #4, which suggests that the Torah of a disgraced scholar is inherently objectionable. This consideration depends on whether or not we accept *Chagiga* 15b’s differentiation between *gadol* and *katan*. *Ta’anit* 7a teaches:

Rabbi Yirmeya said to Rabbi Zeira: “Please, Master, come and teach.”

The latter replied: “I do not feel well enough and am not able to do so.”

“Please, Master, expound something of an aggadic character.”

He replied that Rabbi Yochanan said: What is the meaning of that which is written (*Devarim* 20:19): "For is the tree of the field man?" Is then man the tree of the field? [This can only be explained if we connect the verse with the words immediately before it] where it is written, “For you may eat of it, but you shall not cut it down”; but then again it is written (ibid. v. 20), “It you shall destroy and cut down”? How is this to be explained? If the Torah scholar is a worthy person, “you may eat of it, but you shall not cut it down;” but if he is not, “It you shall destroy and cut down.”

Like the previous passage, this one does not draw distinctions between *gadol* and *katan*, but Tosafot (ad loc. s.v. *Im*) maintain that this passage addresses a novice in Torah study. Rambam (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 4:1, followed by *Shulchan Arukh YD* 246:8), however, omits any distinction between *gadol* and *katan*. After citing a parallel injunction, also drawn from *Ta’anit* 7a, which warns against teaching unfit students, Rambam rules:

Similarly, one should not study from a teacher who does not follow a proper path, even though he is a very wise man and his [instruction] is required by the entire nation, until he returns to a good path, as it is said: “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.” Our Sages said: “If the rabbi is similar to an angel of the Lord of hosts, they should seek Torah from his mouth; but if not, they should not seek Torah from his mouth.”

In addition to his omission of the distinction between *gadol* and *katan*, Rambam’s comments are noteworthy for a few additional reasons. First, by emphasizing that this law applies even to a scholar who “is a very wise man and his [instruction] is required by the whole nation,” Rambam alludes to the dilemma of Rav Yehuda, in which the *gadol/* *katan* distinction is unmentioned. Second, Rambam emphasizes that this status is not permanent; a scholar who is known to have repented may be accepted again into the community as a teacher. Third, by pairing this teaching with the law concerning teaching an unfit student, and using “Similarly” in introducing the latter, Rambam implicitly draws a connection between the proscriptions against teaching an unfit student and studying with an unfit teacher. Finally, by citing *Malakhi* 2:7, Rambam may be drawing attention to the fact that this verse does not seem to allow for distinctions between students of varying stature. Instead, Rambam implies that if the teacher is unfit, there is never room to permit any relationship with students.

If we accept that Rambam does not draw any distinction between *gadol* and *katan*, we would presumably conclude that he views the *sugyot* as contradictory, and rules against the Gemara in *Chagiga* and in favor of Rabbi Yochanan’s approach.

However, some Acharonim challenge this, as the Gemara in *Chagiga* is supported by the personal example of Rabbi Meir. Shakh (*YD* 246:8), for example, offers two explanations. He first suggests that while Rambam fundamentally accepts the distinction between *gadol* and *katan*, in practice, the standards for *gadol* are so high that no contemporary person would qualify for this category. Because the distinction is not practically applicable, Rambam omits it entirely. Shakh goes on to cite his father, who alternatively contends that Rambam views Rabbi Meir’s as a lone view; his colleagues make no such distinction, and the halakhic ruling follows them. Regarding Shakh’s first approach, we may add that some (e.g., *Sha'ar Yosef, Horayot* 12a) note that many will be tempted to hold themselves up as the exceptions who qualify as *gadol*; Rambam’s across-the-board ruling is meant to correct for the temptation of self-aggrandizement.

In his *Birkei Yosef* (*YD* 246), Rav Chayim Yosef David Azulai (Chida) raises an objection to Shakh’s father’s interpretation: if Rambam truly held that one is not permitted to study from a problematic source, on what basis did he himself study from a wide range of philosophical treatises, as evidenced throughout his writing? Indeed, as Chida notes, this question is already raised by Rivash (Responsum 45), who suggests that Rambam cites the verse “Incline your ear and listen” (quoted in *Chagiga* 15b) in the introduction to his *Guide to the Perplexed* to implicitly justify his own broad course of study. Thus, Rivash confirms that Rambam implicitly modeled himself after Rabbi Meir’s example in studying so widely.

We may, however, offer a number of alternative solutions to this problem regarding Rambam’s own practice. First, he may have drawn a distinction between studying face-to-face with a scholar and studying from one’s books. Indeed, there is a dispute among Acharonim as to whether or not the Gemara’s stricture applies to studying from books at all. *Shevet Ha-Levi* (3:145) contends that there is no difference whatsoever, while others (such as *Divrei Yirmeyahu* to Rambam’s *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*) distinguish between the two. As the latter camp contends, if we do draw this distinction, there is no contradiction between Rambam’s recorded position and his personal practice, and we may hold with Shakh’s father that he rejected Rabbi Meir’s view entirely. We must acknowledge, however, that this answer appears difficult. We hardly get the sense in the *Guide* that Rambam would have refused to speak with Aristotle, or members of the Kalam, the great Muslim philosophers of his day, on philosophical matters.

I therefore prefer an alternative solution. Importantly, the Gemara never outright bans studying with an unfit teacher; instead, it specifically outlaws *talmud Torah* with such a figure. Central to Rambam’s thought is the distinction between Torah and metaphysics; indeed, controversially, he seems to assign greater weight to the latter than to the former (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 4:13). Thus, just as he would have felt comfortable learning mathematics and science at the feet of the greatest mathematicians and scientists, and just as he mastered the great medical works in the course of his studies, Rambam would have gladly studied metaphysics from the great philosophers of his time. Rambam here does not mean to prescribe a general prohibition against studying from unfit teachers; rather, he suggests that there is a particular problem with studying Torah from an objectionable teacher. The teacher of Torah, who represents God’s wisdom on earth, must be similar to an angel. If he lacks this character, the very process of Torah study is undermined.

If we accept this understanding of Rambam, we can account for our previously cited observations regarding Rambam’s treatment of our *halakha*. We noted that Rambam seems to conceptually link the prohibition against studying from an improper master to that of teaching an improper student. Strikingly, Rambam (ibid.) compares one who violates the latter proscription to one who “throws a stone to Markulis,” an instance of idolatry. Teaching Torah to an unfit student is not just wasteful, but borders on the idolatrous: it undermines the religious character of the student-teacher relationship. If either one is unfit, the relationship is deemed objectionable; they are therefore viewed as two sides of the same coin.

This also helps us to account for Rambam’s citation of *Malakhi* 2:7. As we saw a few weeks ago, a wider examination of the surrounding verses suggests that the prophet castigates the Levites not only for the abandonment of their teaching responsibilities, but because “you have violated the covenant with Levi” (ibid. v. 8). The relationship between the teacher and student is intended to be a manifestation of the divine covenant. Thus, Rambam’s position may be said to correlate with the fourth position we laid out at the beginning of the *shiur*.

This “intrinsic” approach to the prohibition against studying from an unfit teacher carries additional implications. First, it is possible that the aforementioned dispute as to whether or not to draw a distinction between learning directly from a teacher and studying from books may depend on the reasoning for the prohibition in the first place. If we maintain that the concern is that an unfit teacher will lead a student astray, there is room to debate whether a similar concern exists for one who is merely reading a book and not studying directly from that teacher. (Today we might inquire about viewing video recordings, which might fall somewhere in between learning face-to-face and merely reading.) If, however, we maintain that there is something intrinsically problematic about such a teacher-student relationship, that stricture likely would not apply regarding the written word.

This approach might find support in *Ta’anit* 7a, which, in addition to treating consecutively the subjects of teaching unfit students and studying from unfit teachers, speaks of poisonous Torah study:

It is taught that Rabbi Bena’a would say: Anyone who engages in Torah for its own sake, his Torah study will be an elixir of life for him, as it is stated: “It is a tree of life to them who lay hold upon it” (*Mishlei* 3:18), and it says: “It shall be health to your navel” (ibid. 3:8), and it says: “For whoever finds Me finds life” (ibid. 8:35). And anyone who engages in Torah not for its own sake, it will be an elixir of death for him, as it is stated: “My doctrine shall drop [*ya’arof*] as the rain,” and *arifa* means nothing other than killing, as it is stated: “And they shall break the heifer’s neck [*ve*-*orefu*] there in the valley” (*Devarim* 21:4).

This passage returns us to the subject of *Torah Lishmah*, suggesting that the Torah is “poisonous” for one who studies with ulterior motives. Why? In light of Rambam’s approach and our reading of the verses in *Malakhi*, we may suggest that one who studies Torah with improper intentions, much like one who learns from an unfit teacher, undermines an essential element in the learning process. Particularly if we maintain that Torah study is a manifestation of our covenantal relationship with God, to study under the wrong circumstances is, to borrow Rambam’s terminology, like throwing a stone to Markulis. It poisons the relationship that is intended to animate the learning process.

This approach accounts for additional rabbinical teachings regarding Torah study. *Eikha Rabba* 2:13 teaches that one should believe that there is wisdom among the nations, but one should disbelieve that there is Torah among the nations. This seems perplexing; contemporary realities, at the very least, demonstrate that there are some first-rate non-Jewish Talmud scholars. What does it mean that there is no Torah to be found among non-Jews? We can take the *midrash* to mean that while a non-Jew might understand Torah, something fundamental is lacking because of the lack of a covenant to bind the learner to God through the process of study.

The prohibition against studying from an unfit Torah scholar, then, not only constitutes an unsavory yet critically important subject, but also illuminates the wider themes of *talmud Torah* that we have been exploring throughout this course.