YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**TORAH STUDY**

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**Shiur #28: Rabbinical Views on Pedagogy, Part I**

In recent years, Jewish educators have increasingly turned to secular literature and educational models in efforts to improve Jewish education, and rightfully so. This is having a decisively positive impact on the pedagogies teachers employ in many day-school classrooms. There is, however, a potential pitfall to this approach. Focusing our attention on current educational techniques runs the risk of overlooking the insights and models that our own tradition has to offer. Therefore, alongside implementing the most effective contemporary educational approaches in our classrooms, we must examine the Jewish tradition to see what educational philosophies and techniques it has employed and recommended throughout the centuries.

Unfortunately, a full study of this subject matter is beyond the confines of this series. To properly assess the Jewish perspective on pedagogy, we would need to explore in depth a whole range of subjects, including recognizing and responding to various developmental stages in learning, how to handle difficult students, the importance of reciting one’s learning out loud, sitting versus standing while studying and teaching Torah, the proper method for *chazara* (review), the use of mnemonics, “chunking” larger amounts of text into manageable portions, the use of questions and answers (such as on the *Seder* night), whether students should be passive recipients of knowledge or active participants in constructing their own understanding, and proper disciplinary methods on the part of the teacher. Moreover, different educational institutions throughout the ages have implemented a wide variety of curricula and educational methods. Properly reviewing this material would require at least a book-length treatment; indeed, in his *Mekorot Le-toledot Ha-chinnukh Be-Yisrael*, Simcha Assaf reviews this material over the course of four volumes.

For our purposes, we will suffice with a brief overview of some key biblical themes, and take two specific questions — the earliest age for study and the proper number of students per classroom — as case studies. This approach will lead us to a broad insight into one important theme that is present in many rabbinical treatments of the subject of pedagogy.

**In the Biblical Era**

A brief perusal of educational models in the period of the *Tanakh* reveals an emphasis on both national and familial responsibilities for educating the people.

It is clear that Moshe and, to a lesser degree, Aharon, his sons and the elders play a key role in transmitting God’s will to the people and deciding matters of law en masse, as the famous *aggada* in *Eruvin* 54b states:

Our rabbis taught: What was the procedure of the instruction in the oral law? Moshe learned from the mouth of the Omnipotent. Then Aharon entered and Moshe taught him his lesson. Aharon then moved aside and sat down on Moshe’s left. Thereupon Aharon's sons entered and Moshe taught them their lesson. His sons then moved aside, Elazar taking his seat on Moshe’s right and Itamar on Aharon's left.

Rabbi Yehuda stated: Aharon was always on Moshe’s right.

Thereupon the elders entered and Moshe taught them their lesson, and when the elders moved aside, all the people entered and Moshe taught them their lesson.

It thus followed that Aharon heard the lesson four times, his sons heard it three times, the elders twice and all the people once.

At this stage, Moshe departed and Aharon taught them his lesson. Then Aharon departed and his sons taught them their lesson. His sons then departed and the elders taught them their lesson.

It thus followed that everybody heard the lesson four times.

Nevertheless, the primary emphasis in the text of the Torah is on instruction from parents to children, particularly on the eve of the nation’s entry to the Promised Land in *Devarim*.

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev, when he said to me, “Assemble the people before me to hear My words so that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children.” (4:9-10)

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. (6:7)

In the future, when your son asks you, “What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?” tell him: “We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt … But He brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land He promised on oath to our ancestors…” (6:21-25).

Teach them to your children, to speak of them when you stay at home and when you go on the road, when you lie down and when you get up… So that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land the Lord swore to give your ancestors, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth. (11:19-21)

Remember the days of old;
 consider the generations long past.
Ask your father and he will tell you,
 your elders, and they will explain to you. (32:7)

The second and fourth texts are so important that we recite them twice daily in *Keriat Shema*, but all five share an important message about transmitting Torah directly from one generation to the next. This is particularly crucial in *Devarim*, as the Jews prepare to enter the Land of Israel, but the idea goes back all the way to their first steps leaving Egypt, in *Shemot* 13:

On that day tell your son, “I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.” (8)

In days to come, when your son asks you, “What does this mean?” say to him, “With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” (14)

Turning to later biblical works, *Mishlei* expends a significant amount of time emphasizing the responsibilities of parents to educate their children:

Heed your father’s rebuke, and do not abandon your mother’s teaching. (1:8)

Train a lad in the way he ought to go; he will not swerve from it even in old age. (22:6)

It is only in the rabbinical period, and then only under exigent circumstances, that we find mandatory universal educational introduced to the Jewish community, as we saw in our last *shiur* about Yehoshua ben Gamla.

**The Earliest Age for Teaching**

The Mishna (*Avot* 5:23) states:

Five years is the age for the study of Scripture.

Ten, for the study of Mishna.

Thirteen, for the obligation to observe the *mitzvot*.

Fifteen, for the study of Talmud.

However, after discussing Yehoshua ben Gamla’s educational reforms, *Bava Batra* 21a cites the admonition of Rav to the educator Rav Shemuel bar Shilat:

Do not accept a student before the age of six; from that age, you may accept them and stuff them with Torah like an ox.

The Mishna and Rav seem to be at odds, and this is further complicated by a *sugya* in *Ketubot* 50a:

Rav Yitzchak stated: It was ordained at Usha that a man must roll with his son until [he is] twelve years [of age].

From that age onwards, he may make it a matter of life and death.

The Gemara ibid. already notes the apparent contradiction and suggests that at the age of six, one may “stuff” a child with Torah, but the standards for discipline should still be that of “rolling with him,” i.e. not being overly harsh in discipline. Tosafot ad loc. (s.v. *Ve*-*safi*) use this to explain that the first year is one of light instruction, while the “stuffing” begins at age six. (In s.v. *Bar*, they suggest a similar approach to Mishna between the ages of ten and twelve.)

Tosafot in *Bava Batra* (s.v. *Be-vatzir*) suggest that it depends on the strength of the individual student, noting that the Gemara in *Ketubot* goes on to say:

Rav Katina says: Whoever brings his son [to school] under the age of six will run after him [to help him be strong] but never overtake him.

Others say: His fellows will run after him but will never overtake him.

Both statements, however, are correct: He may be feeble but learned.

If you prefer I might say: The former applies to one who is emaciated; the latter, to one who is in good health.

Ritva (*Bava Batra* s.v. *Ad*) offers perhaps the simplest explanation: at age five, a father ought to begin teaching his son *Tanakh*, but it is from age six that we send the child to school.

From this discussion, we can derive two principles. First, *Chazal* understand the importance of developmentally sound education. Not only does the Gemara appear to draw a subtle distinction between ages five and six, it also implies that education, to the extent it exists prior to age five, will look radically different than it does at later stages. Any attempt to “speed children up” and prematurely accelerate their education is doomed to fail. Second, *Chazal* understand the importance of judging each child’s needs independently. While the Gemara gives general parameters for our subject, it is clear that a certain degree of flexibility is built into the system. Instead of determining from the outset the precise model that will be most effective in all times and places, as Tosafot note, we focus first and foremost on the needs of the individual child and decide accordingly.

This takes us to the Gemara’s discussion concerning maximum class size, which similarly underscores the balance between formal pedagogic guidelines and built-in flexibility. *Bava Batra* 21a continues:

And Rava said: The number of children per teacher is twenty-five. For fifty, we appoint two [teachers]. For forty, we engage an assistant, and the city subsidizes it.

At first glance, the Gemara seems to imply that a town is not compelled to hire a teacher if there are fewer than twenty-five students. Indeed, this is the position of Tosafot (s.v. *Sakh*), who rule that for fewer than twenty-five children, the townspeople cannot coerce one another to pay for a teacher. Ramban (s.v. *Sakh*), Rashba (s.v. *Amar*) and Ritva (s.v. *Sakh*) disagree and hold that a town must hire a teacher for even two or three students.

Additionally, Rosh and Rambam argue concerning a class size between twenty-five and forty. Rosh (*Bava Batra* 2:7), following Tosafot’s view that until twenty-five students no teacher is needed, rules that the assistant is only necessary if there are more than forty children. Rambam (*Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 2:5), however, disagrees, requiring an assistant anytime there are more than twenty-five students.

Regarding the practical halakha, *Shulchan Arukh (YD* 245:15) rules in accordance with Rambam, requiring an assistant for any class between twenty-five and forty, while between forty and fifty requires two teachers. Despite this ruling, over the course of history, many communities have established their own norms in regard to this subject. Do such practices not conflict with the ruling of *Shulchan Arukh*? Shach (245:10), noting the dispute between Rosh and Rambam, explains that there is a built-in degree of flexibility in this matter: “It would appear that we follow the particular teacher and children, and whether they learn a lot or a little. Everything follows the context.”

Rama (ibid.) then cites both views about a community with fewer than twenty-five students. *Pitchei Teshuva* (ibid., 245:8) cites Rav Aharon Kaidanover (*Emunat Shemuel* 26), who suggests that we must be even more stringent nowadays due to the difficulty some have with educating children in the classroom. He therefore rules that everyone would agree that nowadays, members of a town with even fewer than twenty-five children can coerce one another to pay for a teacher. He prefers no more than ten to twelve students per class.

Thus, for Shach and Rav Kaidanover, the takeaway of these *halakhot* is not a strict set of rules concerning classroom staffing. Instead, it is to be seen as a call for honest appraisal of the dynamics of a particular classroom in determining the number of teachers necessary.

In the end, then, the rabbis seek to strike a careful balance. On the one hand, there are clearly halakhic and aggadic passages that the responsible, religious school leadership must take into account when making educational decisions. At the same time, the later commentators make it clear that there is a meaningful degree of flexibility intentionally built into the system. In the end, pedagogy is about the best way for a particular student to study Torah. It is through a dynamic approach to Jewish education that we can best ensure the perpetuation of our timeless traditions.