**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**The Path of the Piaseczner Rebbe**

**By Dr. Ron Wacks**

**Shiur #56: Education (continued)**

**Motivating the Younger Generation**

In our generation, education can no longer be achieved through coercion, as it was in the past. As noted previously, one of the reasons that R. Kalonymus lists for the educational and religious crisis of our times is the early maturation of the youth, who have a sense of independence and resist the authority of the older generation. In light of this reality, R. Kalonymus argues that the responsibility must be transferred to the youth themselves. They must internalize the idea that all the educational activity that happens around them is meant for their sake and for their benefit. Their responsibility is to educate themselves, to grow in Torah, and to make Torah and Divine service their life’s focus and mission, rather than being passive or antagonistic. They must understand that their parents, rabbis, and teachers are there to help them in this quest, but it is not for their sake that they must study:

It is not sufficient to simply teach the child that it is his duty to listen to his teachers and that’s all, for this alone will not have any effect. In the end he will see his teacher as an opponent, a foreign despot… The child must be told over and over again and made to understand the duty that he carries: to raise and educate himself as a Jew, a tree in the garden of God, in Eden. His father and teacher are there only to instruct him as to how to do this, how he is to educate himself and to know what God has spoken… It is his own duty; and it is he himself, with his own sense of independence and self-esteem, which have developed so quickly, who must rule and educate himself.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In addition to dissipating the resistance to the guidance of parents and teachers and causing the youth to assume responsibility for his own education, R. Kalonymus also points out another advantage to this approach: Youth who have become alienated from the path of Torah will be drawn closer:

It is a principle of the human spirit that when a person has someone else to rely on, he allows himself to be neglectful and depend on the other person. The same is true of young people… they become neglectful because they think their father or teacher is going to do everything for them. However, when they come to realize that it is all their duty, and that they are their own guide and educator, they will exert themselves and cease to be neglectful.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The youth must accept the help and support of his parents and teachers until “the flame rises and burns on its own” – i.e., until he is committed and motivated himself to serve God.

R. Kalonymus conveys the same message in his direct appeal to the youth:

As we have already emphasized, you yourself must be, to a very great extent, your own teacher…[[3]](#footnote-3)

Children, your responsibility is great, greater than you know. You must raise up and establish the whole house of Israel. From among you must emerge *tzaddikim* and righteous people, sages and leaders. Even the process of revealing God’s presence in the world and bringing close the coming the Messiah has been placed in your hands…[[4]](#footnote-4)

If you rely on your friends, and assume that they will provide Israel with great leaders and sages, you will find that they in turn will have relied on you. What will then become of Israel, the holy people? What will become of the *Shechina*, God’s presence on earth? Each and every Jewish young person who learns Torah and seeks God has a duty: to discover and reveal from within himself the inner soul of Israel. You must make of yourself a pillar that will support the house of Israel. Not a single one of you may excuse yourself from this great responsibility.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The younger Jewish generation must be encouraged and motivated, and inculcated with an awareness of the importance of its exertion and efforts, far beyond the matter of grades and report cards.

**Education out of Joy, Love, and a Positive Approach**

A person must study with joy and love. *Chazal* teach that it is proper to start a study session with “a word of humor” (*Shabbat* 30b), the goal being to bring the students to a state of joy, for the Divine Presence resides only where there is joy. Today, with the prevalent alienation between teachers and students, it is particularly important to teach with joy, exerting efforts to draw the heart of the student:

In order to heal the wound of alienation that has come between the student and his teacher, the teacher must make an effort to capture the student’s heart and to re-create the closeness that has been lost. Joy is one of the fundamental means through which young hearts can be captured; children and young people have no toleration for sadness. Their teacher must not appear to them to be an angry or contentious person.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This in no way entails sacrificing the teacher’s status or dignity, for if these are lost then the students will have no respect for him. Rather, he must aim to be for them “an elevated person – but also pleasant and good.” The students’ respect for him should flow from their perception of his character, not out of fear of his anger or violence. If the teacher draws the heart of his student with joy and love, then even when he is forced to rebuke him, the student will not hate him, but will continue to feel love and respect.

Education must be undertaken with an emphasis on the positive aspects of the child. Even when the educator is forced to rebuke him, he should do so by strengthening the child’s self-image. He should tell him, “You’re a smart kid; why would you do such a thing?” R. Kalonymus cites the Shelah as the source of this idea:

“You shall surely rebuke and shall not bear sin on his account” – meaning, you should say to him, “You are a good person; why would you do such a thing?” This is a positive interpretation of the directive, “Do not rebuke a fool lest he hate you” (*Mishlei* 9:8): [Reprove by] telling him [not that he is fool, but rather] that he is wise, and then he will love you and listen to what you say.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In this way, the student will not be “put off” by hearing his teachers’ guidance, since he will be accustomed to receiving positive feedback and encouragement along with any admonishments that they offer. The educator must always seek to reinforce the students’ positive qualities and to find points for praise. Of course, the teacher must use his discretion and not overdo such praise, lest the student become arrogant and conceited.[[8]](#footnote-8)

R. Kalonymus directs himself not only to the rabbi or teacher, but also to the students themselves. In *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, his positive reinforcement and encouragement of his young readers is evident throughout. The following are just a few examples:

Child of Israel, you are fortunate and blessed. You have merited to study Torah, which shines with divine radiance. You are God’s delight… You too should be filled with joy and exultation at your great good fortune. You are like someone privileged to be in the intimate circle of the King…

If you are discouraged because your immediate ancestry is undistinguished, lift yourself up and gaze beyond, deeper into your past. You are descended from holy men and women, from prophets, from the sages of the Mishna and Talmud, from great rabbinic masters and *tzaddikim*. The Talmud states (*Pesachim* 66a) that the people of Israel, if they are not prophets themselves, are at least the children of prophets. It is clear from the context that the Talmud is not referring to the distant past, but means to suggest that even now a spark of the prophetic power of his ancestors is to be found within every Jewish child. All you have to do is dig for it and you will discover it within you.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Addressing the Difficulties of Adolescence**

As discussed, R. Kalonymus’s approach is that the young student should assume responsibility for his own spiritual state, rather than the more conventional view of this role as belonging to rabbis and teachers. Accordingly, the uniqueness of R. Kalonymus’s book *Chovat* *Ha*-*Talmidim* is that it addresses itself to the young students themselves. It is therefore only natural that the difficulties faced by young people – as R. Kalonymus perceives them – occupy a central place in the book. Let us look at some typical challenges and the proposed ways of dealing with them.

Laziness is the most common and the most destructive of the ailments of character that afflict young people.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This sentence introduces the chapter entitled “Laziness and its Cure.” R. Kalonymus analyzes the different manifestations of this character flaw: Some like to sleep a lot; some dislike working and prefer to be idle. A student who is lazy will exert himself only for the first week or two of the semester at *yeshiva*, and will then have endless excuses and explanations for his lack of dedication.

R. Kalonymus addresses this student and asks him why he should be different from any other living creature that works at the task assigned to it by God. Amongst the Sages there were many sterling examples of scholars dedicated to Torah study who also engaged in their respective occupations and would get up early to head for the *beit midrash*.

Things that are unimportant and of little worth are easy to obtain; things that are more important require more work. Torah is acquired only with effort – and it is important to remember that a person is not required to do that which beyond his capability.

A distinction should be drawn between laziness and lethargy. Someone who is lazy is idle, while someone who is sluggish or listless does his work, but without enthusiasm or energy, simply to fulfill the technical requirements. From one perspective, it is worse to be lazy, since laziness leads one to do nothing at all, but sluggishness is harder to cure. A lazy person may be given advice as to how to perform his work using different means, but if someone is listless in all that he does – his prayer is lifeless, his learning is superficial – it is difficult to get him to exert himself and put some effort into what he does. He operates as though half-asleep; his brain and limbs receive no instruction from his inner will to work with intensity, and thus he also feels no satisfaction, pleasure, or joy in what he does. In a previous chapter, we discussed R. Kalonymus’s emphasis on the need for fervor and passion in one’s service of God. Lethargy and lifelessness would seem to be the opposite of the traits that he encourages. R. Kalonymus addresses the young reader and explains the disadvantages of being lazy or listless, and offers stories that illustrate why it is impossible in such a state to progress in one’s service of God and to bring redemption.

However, R. Kalonymus does not suffice with persuasion. He devotes an entire chapter to “Some specific advice for the lazy,”[[11]](#footnote-11) since, as he points out,

The desire to become diligent in the service God is not sufficient in itself. It is necessary to explore and discover devices and strategies that will help you uproot laziness and establish diligence.

If a student has to review a page of *gemara*, he should estimate how much time this will take – say, half an hour – and then commit himself to the task. If he fails to complete the task in time because of laziness, he should admonish himself: “What will become of me? As a result of my laziness, I am depriving myself of both worlds and am provoking God’s anger.” It is notable that while R. Kalonymus wrote his book in Hebrew, this self-admonishment is formulated in Yiddish. R. Kalonymus clearly meant for the student to experience his own self-censure as though some external voice was urging him to concentrate and keep up a good pace of work.

If a student is studying alone, not as part of a class and without a study partner, it is better that he study quantitively (*beki’ut*) rather than aiming at in-depth understanding (*iyyun*). In-depth study requires greater concentration, meaning that the student will more easily fall into day-dreaming and distraction, while quantitative learning offers constantly new material.

The student should plan a detailed daily schedule, “starting with the time you wish to get up in the morning and continuing with all your activities. Use [this] as a reference, checking back during the day to see if you have accomplished what you set out to do.” R. Kalonymus also points out that “even someone who is still in *yeshiva* can add additional periods of learning to the official *yeshiva* schedule during lunchtime and at night. Why not steal some time to devote to God from the edges of the *yeshiva* schedule?”

After becoming accustomed to a fixed daily schedule, the student will come to feel that something is missing if for whatever reason he skips a lesson or a study session; he will feel regret and will try to make up what he lost. If, for example, on Monday he reviews the schedule that he had set for Sunday and finds that one of the tasks that he set for himself was not achieved owing to laziness, he should complete it. If, on the other hand, the schedule was not kept because the student explored a question in depth or encountered a particularly difficult passage, then there is no need for him to force himself to make up the lost material or to feel any regret.

R. Kalonymus offers an encouraging vision:

The more work you take on, the more you will be stimulated to work… You will grow stronger and more courageous. You will be totally transformed into an industrious person who regularly bends himself under hard labor… A lazy person is one whose soul-powers are slumbering. These powers must be prodded awake and forced to work. Once they have been aroused and are already making an effort to work, the next step – that of deepening one’s learning – occurs naturally. However, without the yoke or obligation of a certain amount of work that must be completed each day, there is nothing to shake the soul awake…[[12]](#footnote-12)

Translated by Kaeren Fish

1. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, pp. xix-xx (= *A Student’s Obligation*, pp. 15-16). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. p. xx (= ibid., p. 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. p. 47 (= ibid. p. 39). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. p. 34 (= ibid. pp. 28-29). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. p. 35 (= ibid. p. 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. p. xxvi (= ibid. p. 21). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. R. Yeshaya Horowitz, *Shenei Luchot Ha-Berit Ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem, 5753), vol. 4, *Torat Kohanim*, *Torah She-Bikhtav*, *Parashat Kedoshim*, p. 360. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p. xxvii (= *A Student’s Obligation*, p. 22). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., chapter 1 (= ibid., chapter 1 – “A Call to the Student”). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. p. 43 (= Ibid. p 36). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *A Student’s Obligation*, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)