

An earlier version of this article appeared in the February 1989 issue of Hamevaser

## Of Rabbis and Books

by Robert Klapper

*They found Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon sitting involved in Torah and gathering large crowds about him, with a sefer Torah resting in his lap, so they brought him and wrapped him in the sefer Torah and surrounded him with bundles of kindling and put the torch to them,. and they brought bundles of wool and soaked them in water and placed them on his heart so that he would not die quickly.*

*His daughter said to him: "Father, that I should see you thus!"*

*He said to her: "Were I being burned alone this would be difficult for me. Now that I am being burned together with a sefer Torah, He who will revenge the humiliation of the sefer Torah will revenge my humiliation."*

*His students said to him: "Rebbe. what do you see?"*

*He said to them: "The parchment is burning but the letters are flying."<sup>1</sup>*

I spent some time many years ago at a New York Public Library exhibit of Jewish books and manuscripts, titled "A Sign and A Witness". The exhibit's title was taken from Isaiah 9:20's description of a Messianic altar, and on reflection I was struck by the superiority of the prophetic usage. Aliars can be signs and witnesses merely by existing; books must be read. What use are books whose pages can't be turned? Like the kidnapped *sefer Torah* in Journeys' "Take Me Home Where I Belong", the books and manuscripts in the glass cases on 42nd Street seemed to be longing for the *beit midrash*.

Yes, the artwork was colorful, intriguing, perhaps sometimes even brilliant. And the variant scripts provided important information, and I was glad to finally understand why medieval printers used illegible cursive typefaces (why we still use them is a separate question). But as I read the learned and acclaimed prefaces the curator had written for each section, as I studied the charts and figures he had drawn, I grew bored, and walking around the exhibit found myself gazing time and again at the words<sup>2</sup>. Here was the sixteenth century Venice edition of the Babylonian Talmud, open to the beginning of Tractate Peah; how frustrating that the *mishnah*'s end was inaccessible. And here the Talmud Yankee, a sidesplitting early 20<sup>th</sup> century satire on American materialism, open to the last page of *Masekhet K'zavim*<sup>3</sup>: what parodied rabbinic text did it describe as "*potach b't'kiah v'siyem b'k'zivah*"<sup>4</sup>?

Books are important to Judaism. We are, after all, "the People of the Book", and we deservedly pride ourselves on the high literacy rate we have maintained throughout our history. But our tradition also sees books as dangerous as well as powerful, hence the original structure of an Oral Torah

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zarah 18a

<sup>2</sup> cf. Walt Whitman, "As I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"

<sup>3</sup> Tractate Falsehoods

<sup>4</sup> "The text opens by discussing yelling in someone's ear (a standard Talmudic tort), and concludes with a discussion of lying!". This is a standard Talmudic question regarding a text with abrupt transitions.

paralleling the Book. Writing down *halakhot*, even when admittedly necessary, is described as *hafarat haTorah*, negation of the Torah<sup>5</sup>. Kohelet<sup>6</sup> warns against “עשות ספרים אין קץ”, endless bookwriting<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps this is merely good advice, but more likely the proliferation of books has negative potential beyond wasting time.

Both the power and the danger of books are articulated in Lekhem Mishnah’s equation of *s’farim* and *rebbeim*<sup>8</sup> in the modern age: “for the books are the teachers”<sup>9</sup>. Books are important and acceptable when, and only when, they teach. Books serve their proper function when they create human “signs and witnesses”, but should not themselves be signs and witnesses. The authoritative interpretation of Torah must never be separated from the ongoing life of Torah<sup>10</sup>.

Lekhem Mishnah’s equation also teaches us that *rebbeim* must be living books, not in the sense that they must be animate *mishnayot* or collections of *b’raitot* but rather in terms of pedagogic method. Books are inert – they can only teach if someone bothers to open and read them. This is also true, but regrettably less obvious, with regard to teachers.

As importantly, if not more so, books cannot teach by compulsion. Books cannot reshape the personality of the reader to meet their message. Books cannot clone themselves – and neither should *rebbeim*. Preventing this is, however, the responsibility of the student as well as the teacher. Pirkei Avot<sup>11</sup> teaches “עשה לך רב”, “Make yourself a teacher”, mandating the student’s active participation in forging the relationship.

A model rebbe-talmid relationship can be found in the following episode.

*He (Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai) said to them: “Go out and see which is the righteous path that a man should choose for himself.”*

*Rabbi Eliezer said: “A good eye”.*

*Rabbi Yehoshua said: “A good friend”.*

*Rabbi Yose said “A good neighbor”.*

*Rabbi Shim’on said “He who sees what will be”.*

*Rabbi Elazar said “A good heart”.*

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<sup>5</sup> BT Temurah I4b

<sup>6</sup> 12:12

<sup>7</sup> See, however – or perhaps especially – Abravanel in his introduction to Jeremiah and Netziv in his introduction to **Haamek Sh’eilah**, both of whom interpret the verse as *requiring* endless bookwriting.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this article, “rebbe”, “talmid”, “talmidim” and “rebbeim” should be treated as gender-neutral, i.e. as meaning “teacher/student of Torah”. Stylistic considerations militated against abandoning the standard nomenclature.

<sup>9</sup> Commentary to Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, Laws of Talmud Torah 5:4. See also Pitchei T’shuvah to Yoreh Deah 242:1, note 3, in the name of Rabbi Jacob Reischer (Sh’vut Yaakov): “For our teachers (*raboteinu*) are our books.” See also Pri M’gadim’s “Rules for the Behavior of the Questioned and Questioner”, section 3, at the end of his introduction to Orakh Chayim: “He who rules without support from books is like one who decides halakhah before his *rebbe*”

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the key distinction between an Oral and a Written Torah is that the former can never exist apart from living human beings. Another formulation: When Torah is oral one need never fear that power will pass from “the judge who will be in those days” (Devarim 26:3).

<sup>11</sup> Generally known in English as Ethics of our Fathers. This line appears in both 1:6 and 1:16.

*He said to them, "I prefer the words of Elazar ben Arakh to your words, for his words contain yours."*<sup>12</sup>

Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai taught by asking questions, by forcing his students to express their thoughts - even in, perhaps especially in, matters of *hashkafah*<sup>13</sup>. At the discussion's conclusion, he does not issue a *psak hashkafah*<sup>14</sup> but rather states one man's opinion. The *mishnah* accordingly records the entire exchange, not just the last line<sup>15</sup>.

It may even be that Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai never states his own opinion. Perhaps he feared that no matter how noncommittally or nonauthoritatively he spoke, his students would feel constrained to abide by his words. So he said, in effect, "Of what I've heard so far, Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh's opinion seems best. But I'm not one hundred percent sure he's got the complete answer either. Keep thinking!"

Yet why should teachers have such respect for their students' characters and ideas? Ray Chaim Volozhin's comments<sup>16</sup> on "Let your student's honor be as significant to you as your own"<sup>17</sup> suggest that the principle is pragmatic: "For the (evil) impulse blinds man and makes someone greater than him appear to be among the least of his students."

The Gaon of Vilna's comment<sup>18</sup> on "*aseh l'kha rav*", however, hints at a strikingly different reason. The Gaon believes<sup>19</sup> the reciprocal relationship between Moses and Aaron to be the paradigmatic *rebbe-talmid* relationship. "Moses would say to Aaron 'Teach me', and Aaron would say to Moses 'Teach me'."<sup>20</sup> The ideal *rebbe-talmid* relationship is founded not on the imposition of authority but rather on recognition of one's own inadequacies — and that recognition is both feasible for and obligatory on everyone.<sup>21</sup>

The remainder of Avot 1:6 reinforces this theme.

"*Aseh l'kha rav uknei l'kha chaver*", "*Make yourself a teacher and acquire yourself a friend*" — the parallel to friendship teaches that discipleship should be a complementary relationship. Indeed, Rambam takes this phrase to refer to "*ahavat rav latalmid v'talmid larav*", "the friendship of the *rav* for the *talmid* and the *talmid* for the *rav*".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Avot 2:9

<sup>13</sup> Religious philosophy and values. The term is used in contrast with *halakhah*, law.

<sup>14</sup> Authoritative ruling on *hashkafah*. The phrase would be neologistic.

<sup>15</sup> For alternate general explanations of why multiple opinions are recorded see the opening of Mishnah and Tosefta Horayot. It's not clear to me that these explanations apply to matters of *hashkafah*.

<sup>16</sup> In his **Ruach Chayyim**

<sup>17</sup> Pirkei Avot 4:12

<sup>18</sup> **Biurei HaGra** to Pirkei Avot 1:6

<sup>19</sup> based on Mekhilta ??

<sup>20</sup> Maimonides' comments to Avot 1:6 may imply that he believes the Moses-Aaron relationship shows only that even the greatest must find a teacher. (See however R. Kafah's note.)

<sup>21</sup> This attitude is the obligation of the *rebbe*; the *talmid's* obligation is "*viv'hei mora ravkha k'mora shomayim*", "Let the awe you feel for your *rav* be like the awe you feel for Heaven." (Avot 4:12)

<sup>22</sup> Rashi, however, interprets "chaver" as "sefer"! In the commentary on Avot attributed to Rashi printed in the Vilna Talmud, the text is "*yesh omrim s'forim v'yesh omrim chaver mamash*". Rav M. Kasher believes that edition to contain students' interpolations and published from manuscript a shorter version, in **Peirushei Rishonim L'masekhet Avot**, which he claims is purely Rashi. The text there is "*seforim veyesh omrim chaver mamash*". See

“*Aseh 1'kha rav uknei l'kha chaver v'hevei dan et kol haadam l'khaf zechut*”, “*Make yourself a teacher and acquire yourself a friend and be one who judges all human beings<sup>23</sup> favorably*”. - the sine qua non of any positive relationship is favorable judging. Were we to focus on the possible flaws of others, we could never find a friend or choose a *rebbe*.

Rav Yochanan makes this a legal as well as pragmatic truth. He states that “If the *rav* seems to them like an angel of God, they should seek (Torah) from his lips. If the *rav* does not, they should not seek Torah from his lips”.<sup>24</sup> Few indeed could meet this standard if not judged *l'khaf z'khut*. And if the *talmid* can accept the *rebbe* only by judging him favorably, it would be ironic indeed for the *rebbe* not to judge his *talmid l'khaf z'khut*.

Rav Ovadiah Bartenurah and others make this point in his comments on the phrase “*v'he'emidu talmidim harbeh*”, “raise up many students”<sup>25</sup>. The mishnah comes, he writes, “to exclude the position of Rabban Gamliel, who said ‘any student whose interior does not match his exterior (piety) should not enter’<sup>26</sup>. This teaches us that we teach Torah to all men and do not investigate them”. Tiferet Yisroel offers an explanation of the same phrase that takes this point to a brilliant and incisive extreme. “And the elders who saw that prophecy had ceased commanded that we raise up many *talmidim*, (saying) ‘perhaps (in them) will be found the fountain of the holy prophecy’<sup>27</sup>. The *rebbe* must go so far in judging his *talmidim* favorably as to view them as embryonic prophets.

Teachers have two major advantages over books. The first is their capacity to adapt themselves, and their message, to different students<sup>28</sup>. The second is their capacity to demonstrate Torah<sup>29</sup>. The *rebbe* can teach not only through his words but through his very existence. He can serve as a reference point, as a standard against which students will evaluate their lives and as something to which they can point and say “*kakh hi darkah shel Torah*”, “this is the way of the Torah.”

This second advantage brings with it added responsibilities. Hillel’s Golden Rule, “What you

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<sup>23</sup> Note, however, R. Borukh Epstein’s translation in **Borukh She’amar**: “Judge the entire human being”.

<sup>24</sup> (Moed Katan 17a, Chagigah 16b. See Siftei Kohen Yoreh Deah 246:8 for a discussion of an apparent contradiction in the way the two Talmudic passages treat the statement. The statement is based on Malachi 2:7: “For the lips of a kohen shall preserve knowledge, and Torah they will seek from his lips, for an angel of God Lord of Hosts is he”.

Note that Maimonides (?) appears to have had a variant text which read “If the *rav* seems” rather than “If the *rav* seems to them”.

<sup>25</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:1

<sup>26</sup> Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 28a. Note the fascinating claim of Avraham Kurman in *Pianuach Aggadot* that the phrase refers to frisking students for weapons – i.e., to prevent members of anti-Roman guerrillas from learning in the *beit midrash* and endangering all the students - rather than to a character test.

<sup>27</sup> Machor Vitry explains that the Elders advised “*he'emdu talmidimharbeh*” for the *rav*’s edification, on the grounds of “*harbeh Torah lamadti merabotai, umechaverai yoter merabotai, umitalmidai yoter mikulam*”, “*I have learned much from my teachers, more from my friends, and yet more from my students*” See Babylonian Talmud Taanit 7a.

<sup>28</sup> Note, though, that Maimonides’ **Guide**, and many similar works, are written to be understood differently by readers of differing abilities and backgrounds, and that many teachers (myself strongly included) have a quite limited range of adaptation.)

<sup>29</sup> Of course, books can to some degree demonstrate proper treatment of disagreement, proper balance between humility and responsibility, etc.

hate do not do to your friend”<sup>30</sup> applies a fortiori to teachers, for they must concern themselves not only with justice but with the knowledge that *talmidim* will follow their ways. This is particularly true in areas, such as the obligation to judge other favorably, which are critical constituents of the teacher-student relationship. Because teachers of Torah are more than books; they are signs and witnesses.

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<sup>30</sup> Shabbat 31a

