

An Integrated Vision of Jewish Education

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Jewish education is for visionaries. Rabbi Chiya, the famous 2nd century sage, was one such visionary. His organic outlook, along with his creative passion left an imprint on those who recorded the stories of the Talmud. A careful reading of Baba Mezia 85b not only resonates but also presents a relevant model for Jewish education today.

The short story opens with Raish Lakish, the third century sage, marking gravesites at a cemetery. His inability to find Rabbi Chiya's burial place is immediately interpreted as a sign of his personal lack of merit relative to Rabbi Chiya: "Master of the universe, have I not analyzed the Torah as sharply as he did?" Raish Lakish evidently felt that heaven would only allow him to mark the graves of those to whom he was at least an equal in Torah scholarship. In response to his outcry, a heavenly voice informs Raish Lakish that Rabbi Chiya's superiority over him was not in the realm of Torah mastery, but rather in the realm of Torah dissemination.

The Talmud then describes how Rabbi Chiya went about disseminating Torah knowledge. The process, the Talmud insists, began for the rabbi by planting flax seeds. The grown flax would be woven into a net to trap a deer. The meat was fed to orphans while the deer skin was used to write Torah scrolls. He would select five children and teach each of them a section of the written Torah and then select another six children and teach each of them a section of the oral Torah (Mishna). He would then instruct them: "until I return, teach one another the Torah and the Mishna you have learned".

This precious Talmudic passage assumes a creative holistic process that engages mind body and spirit with the physical and spiritual domains of human endeavor. The goal is not measured in the theoretical potential but rather in the accomplishment. The preservation of Torah begins with a foundation of the basic texts: Torah and Mishna. Yet the lofty goal of Torah dissemination and preservation begins with the humble act of planting a flax seed. This highly integrated approach bringing together teaching with industry (agriculture, husbandry, print and pedagogy) suggests an egalitarian attitude and a monolithic approach to both the spiritual and material worlds.

Let us examine how Rabbi Chiya's educational method worked. He selected 11 students and taught each of them one text. Each student was then transformed into a student-teacher and required not only to teach his portion to the other 10 students but also to learn one of the 10 portions from each of the other student-teachers.

Each repeated teaching experience involves a thorough review of the material, and as such created a heightened learning experience for the student-teacher. We all know,

based on our personal experience that every time one reviews Torah, one becomes more attuned to its nuances, and thereby discovers new levels of profundity. Each student-teacher instructed 10 individual students. Each student was unique and had a unique learning style. Such situations forced the teacher to present his or her material in new ways in order to accommodate the unique background, personality and intellectual capabilities of each student.

Every teaching / learning experience was different because every time teacher and student faced each other the material was presented in light of the freshly acquired knowledge from their previous learning experiences. The first meeting between disciples was dramatically different than the tenth such meeting. The tenth time the book of Breishit was taught it was presented in the context of a more learned teacher and a more sophisticated student.

While each student possessed an expertise, which was eventually taught 10 times, each teaching experience was unique as a result of the countless changing variables. Rabbi Chiya's educational model is not only a paradigm of enlightened pedagogy but also represents a profound act of Tikun Olam. The small flax seed, the quill, the ink, the deer, the student and teacher are all part of a dynamic equation which endows reality as a whole with ultimate purpose and meaning. Every act in one's life is to be evaluated on the basis of its ultimate contribution to the service of God. Dissemination of Torah involves unifying and harmonizing all of reality for the divine purpose.

Rabbi Chiya's greatness however, lies in his gifted ability to see in a handful of flax seed a magnificent vision of transformation. Seed was turned into flax, which in turn was transformed into a net to catch a deer. The meat of the deer was used for an act of kindness to feed the poor while its skin was transformed into scrolls. Children were transformed into students and students into teachers. All this began with flax seed.

Rabbi Chiya understood that the guarantor of Torah continuity is not merely education, but the education and constant transformation of educators. Every Jew is in essence a potential educator no less than he or she is a potential student. Our desire to communicate the redemptive knowledge of God's will to others should be no less intense than our yearning to internalize it in the first place.

It is not surprising that heaven decreed that Rabbi Chiya's grave not be found. In a very real sense Rabbi Chiya is still alive and vital. In fact, the very name Chiya comes from the word Hayim which means life. His holistic approach to life enabled a promise of Torah for the future.