

What makes A GREAT TEACHER?



¹Bamidbar 3:1
²Id. d"r h v'eileh toldos aaron u'moshe
³The Founder and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Ner Yisroel
⁴Rabbi Nossan Tzvi Finkel
⁵Chulin 137b
⁶Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Hollander was also responsible for influencing and encouraging Rabbi Azriel Chaim Goldfein, z"l, Founder and Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva Gedolah of Johannesburg, to attend Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland.
⁷Yoma 18a
⁸Bava Basra 21a
⁹Ritvah
¹⁰S'fas Emes
¹¹The Founder and Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Shor Yeshuv

Adapted excerpts from a speech by Rabbi Yissocher Frand, a Rosh Yeshiva at Baltimore's Yeshivas Ner Israel, delivered at the 2010 Torah Umesorah Convention

GO THE EXTRA MILE

Based on an unusual phrasing in the Torah, our Sages explain that a teacher is like a parent. The Torah says¹: "These are the descendants of Aharon and Moshe...", but then only names the sons of Aharon. Rashi² takes note of this peculiarity and says Aharon's children are called the descendants of Moshe because Moshe taught them Torah, explaining that our Sages derive from this that one who teaches another's child Torah is considered "ke'ilu yeldo" (like he gave birth to that child).

Moshe taught Torah to the entire nation of Israel, yet the Torah doesn't say anywhere that Moshe is considered the father of the entire nation. So, the famous Maharal of Prague asks what makes Moshe Rabbeinu the parent of Aharon's children by virtue of the fact that he taught them. Moshe taught everybody! So

let everybody be considered Moshe's child... The Maharal answers that, yes, Moshe taught everybody, but what he taught to Aharon's children was special because Moshe taught them more than he had to – because he went the extra mile.

The Maharal is telling us a chiddush (a novel interpretation): the mere fact that we have a student in our class does not, in and of itself, make us like a parent to that student. For that to be the case, we must go the extra mile! Because that's what parents do. There is nothing too great and there is nothing too hard for a parent – any time of day, any time of night. And if we want to have that mantle of parenthood thrust on us because we are teachers, we too have to go that extra mile beyond what's necessarily demanded of us.

My Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchok Ruderman³, z"l, had a relationship

with his teacher, the Alter of Slobodka⁴, z"l, that was literally like that of a child to a parent. Rabbi Ruderman went to yeshiva in Slobodka when he was 12 years old, and while he was learning there, he lost one of his parents. Fearing that Rabbi Ruderman would be detrimentally influenced by his roommate, the Alter took Rabbi Ruderman into his own home. Rabbi Ruderman used to always tell over an incident that took place when he was just a child of 13 or 14. He was having stomach trouble one night and had to go to the outhouse – and he was afraid. So the Alter stood there with a lantern outside the outhouse while Rabbi Ruderman took care of what he needed to. This was the great Alter of Slobodka – standing with a lantern – at an outhouse – in the middle of the night! The Alter treated Rabbi Ruderman like he was the Alter's own child – because a parent would stand outside an outhouse. My son had a teacher who still calls him on his anniversary and on his birthday, and he remembers the names of my son's children. And I have to assume he doesn't only do this with my son. That's what makes a teacher into a parent.



LIGHT A FIRE

The gemara⁵ says that Rebbe Yochanan sat at the back of the yeshiva of Rebbe, aka Rabbi Yehuda HaNassi, the famous redactor of the mishna. Rav, another student in the yeshiva who sat closer to the front, and Rebbe – the student and the teacher – were sending lightning bolts back and forth at each other. Rebbe Yochanan says: I didn't know what they were talking about! So, if Rebbe Yochanan couldn't follow what was going on, why didn't he just leave the class? He didn't leave because he saw something there – he saw excitement, electricity, he saw that there was something going on over there that he wanted to become a part of. And that is what we, as teachers, must do: we must light that fire! We must show our students that there is something exciting going on. When we teach, we have to do it with a passion and an enthusiasm, no matter how long we've been doing it.

When I was in 6th grade, we only learned chumash (ie, the Five Books of the Torah)

“I remember Alden Cool who taught freshman journalism... He took a bunch of kids... and made them believe that they wanted to become newspaper reporters. It's not clear that he taught us a thing about journalism, but he taught me to love journalism.”

*Gwen Eiffel, National Public Radio**

“I remember Ms. Newberry, my English teacher... I'm not a big fan of American literature. But I still remember the American literature that she taught. She made it unforgettable. How she made Faulkner interesting. And finally, I remember Professor Oliver Schroeder who taught me constitutional law... This guy came in with so much energy, such excitement, such enthusiasm that I couldn't help but pay attention. I learned some constitutional law that summer, but I also learned that people respond in direct proportion to how much you reach out to them.”

*Donald Rumsfeld, former United States Secretary of Defense**

with Rashi; we didn't learn gemara (ie, Talmud) in our school. You had to go to an afternoon yeshiva if you wanted to learn gemara. I remember I thought chumash with Rashi was the end of the line. And one time I saw my teacher, Rabbi Chaim Tzvi Hollander⁶, he should live and be well, a student of Telshe Yeshiva

who had come to Seattle to teach in the day school, talking with some older boys, who were in the 8th grade and who attended the afternoon yeshiva, and he was yelling at them over a Ran (the acronym for Rabbeinu Nissim, one of the classic commentators on the gemara). And I stood there thinking: What's a Ran? What's gemara? What is this that's going on over here? There's something going on over here that I don't know about and I want to learn that too. This is what that gemara with Rebbe Yochanan means! The material is almost secondary. It's that excitement – that's what teachers have to create.

NEVER GIVE UP ON A STUDENT

It's my experience that parents rarely give up on a child. There may come a desperate point where that happens, but most of the time parents don't give up – they just don't give up. If Plan A doesn't work, they go to Plan B. There was a father who once asked me to take his son, who was a bit wild, into my class and his father even got him a paid chavrusa (study partner) to help him. But it just didn't work out. I thought: what's gonna be with this young man? Recently I met the father and he told me that he sent his son to yeshiva in Eretz Yisroel, got him chavrusos there, and that the boy has become a fine student – because his father didn't give up, because parents don't give up. And that's what good teachers are – people who don't give up.

“I remember my professor, John Brenner, once assigned a paper for a seminar and I knew when I turned [my paper] in that it wasn't very good. He shamed me in front of the whole class and said: 'Ms Walsh, this is a mediocre paper – you are not a mediocre person.' I think of that all the time. He taught me that I was not a mediocre person.”*

BELIEVE IN A STUDENT

But the greatest impact that you can have on a child, on a student – is how that student feels about himself!

The mishna makes⁷ a stunning statement: On erev Yom Kippur the elders of the Beth Din went to the Kohen Gadol (the High Priest) and they instructed him to say over the portion of the Torah that deals with the avodah (the service) of Yom Kippur – because maybe he forgot his learning or maybe he had never learned it. How could it be that the Kohen Gadol had never learned the Yom Kippur service? We need a little bit of history to understand this: in the first Beis HaMikdash (Temple), the Kohen Gadol was literally the greatest, most learned person of the >>

generation, but in the second Beis HaMikdash, the Kohen Gadol was merely a political appointment – and the way you got the political appointment was that you paid for it. This is what the mishna means when it says that you could have a Kohen Gadol who didn't know the service. The gemara then gives a remarkable example of such a Kohen Gadol: there was a woman who gave money to the non-Jewish ruler in order to have Yehoshua ben Gamla appointed the Kohen Gadol, despite the fact that he wasn't fit for the job.

Our Sages ask a question: what do you mean Yehoshua ben Gamla wasn't fit for the job? The gemara⁸ says elsewhere that if it wouldn't have been for Yehoshua ben Gamla, we wouldn't be here today! It used to be the case that a person's father taught him Torah. But what would happen with children who didn't have a father or whose father wasn't capable of teaching

them Torah? So Yehoshua ben Gamla established the first Torah day schools in Jerusalem – and the idea spread throughout Israel. One of Our Sages⁹ asks: we see that Yehoshua ben Gamla's actions saved the Jewish people, so how can we impugn his reputation, suggesting that he was some kind of con man who bought his position? Another one of Our Sages¹⁰ offers an answer that teaches a profound lesson: Yehoshua ben Gamla indeed started out as a con man, but when he became the Kohen Gadol, people treated him like he was the Kohen Gadol. They gave him the kavod

(honour) of a Kohen Gadol, they asked him questions like a Kohen Gadol, and you know what happened to Yehoshua ben Gamla? He became the Kohen Gadol! And that, perhaps, is the most important lesson that we can have. You treat a kid like a klutz and he'll become a klutz. But, if you focus on seeing a positive quality in a child – whatever it may be – and you praise that quality and elevate it and you treat the child accordingly – he becomes a different person. We have to believe in our students – that's how they changed Yehoshua ben Gamla, they believed in him.

“I remember my history teacher, Mr Gabe... The first test I got an A. The second test I got a B. He called me in after class and asked me what was the matter and I told him that a B wasn't bad. He looked me straight in the eye and made me believe that there was no excuse for me not getting an A. It was an extraordinary moment – to have someone believe in me like that.”*

SUCCESS BREEDS SUCCESS

If there's one book you should read, it's "Reb Shlomo" about Rabbi Shlomo Freifeld¹¹, z"l. Rav Freifeld had a motto: "Success breeds success." Teach them one verse at a time, teach them one mishna at a time, and make them understand it. And when they'll know that one mishna, they'll want to know another mishna. Part of the problem that he fought against is the constant push to keep going forward in learning, despite students not knowing what the last line of gemara said, not knowing what the last section in the gemara was about, and therefore not knowing the next one – and, as a result, we lose these students.

There was once a student who came to Rav Freifeld's yeshiva when they were learning Bava Basra – a mesechta (volume) that's 176 pages long. So this student says to his roommate: "I'm outa here tomorrow! Did you see the size of that?! I'm never gonna learn that!" The roommate went to Rav Freifeld and told him that this boy wanted to leave because Bava Basra was too overwhelming. So, Rav Freifeld went to the bookbinder of the yeshiva and told him: I want you to cut off the covers of a gemara and I want you to bind me one page – the first page of Bava Basra – between those two covers. The next day Rav Freifeld called in this student who was planning to leave and he said: "You see this? This is your Bava Basra. We're gonna learn this over and over and over again until you know this page backwards and forwards, and then I'll make a celebration for the entire yeshiva!"

WHAT TEACHER DO I REMEMBER?

I remember Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Kulefsky, z"l. I never saw anyone who enjoyed saying a vort (some words of Torah) as much as he did. He would say the same Torah on Shavuot and on Purim every single year. And he would say it with the same geshmak and enthusiasm as if it was the first time that he'd said it – not the 40th! You know what the hardest day for Rabbi Kulefsky was? Tisha B'Av (the 9th of the Hebrew month of Av, on which we mourn all Jewish tragedies, especially the destruction of the first and second Temples). You know why? Because he couldn't learn Torah on Tisha B'Av (due to it being a day of mourning). And I still remember how he would go up to Rabbi Ruderman towards the end of the day on Tisha B'Av and say: it's already after sunset, we can speak in learning – and they did. He said a shiur like nobody else – with geshmak, enthusiasm, passion, and excitement. I'm not the masmid (diligent student) that he was, I'm not the talmid chochom (learned person) that he was, I'm not the lamdan (someone who knows how to learn) that he was – I'll never be any of those things. But I got one thing from him and that's how to teach a class – how to make it exciting, how to make it passionate.

I guarantee that if we'll care for our students and elevate them, and we'll make them feel important and concentrate on what they do have to offer, and we'll go the extra mile – then they'll remember us just like Professor Schroeder and the others – because we can make an indelible impact on our students, just like those teachers did on their students. **■**

*The reminiscences on teachers quoted above by Rabbi Frand were excerpted from a book titled: *I Remember My Teacher*, by Daniel Shribman. Shribman interviewed hundreds of people from all walks of life to find out the role that teachers had played in their lives, asking: "Do you remember a teacher?" – Adapted by Robert Sussman