

## *Shifting Our Standards to Save Our Children*

By Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.

**W**e often refer to the “Yissachar-Zevulun relationship.” Zevulun is the merchant who supports Yissachar, the Torah scholar who can devote his time to Torah study thanks to that support. It is important to recognize that Yissachar and Zevulun operate according to the two different modalities.

Zevulun functions with a “bottom line” philosophy: His success is determined by the profit of his business ventures. He may operate according to the soundest economic theory, but if he fails to show a profit, his venture is considered a failure. On the other hand, if he pays no attention whatsoever to economic principles, yet makes a windfall profit, his venture is a smashing success. In his business world, success and failure are determined by profit or loss.

Yissachar does not operate according to mercantile standards. The *mitzvah* of *limud Torah* is just that: the *study* of Torah. How much ground one covers is secondary to the efforts one invests in Torah study. An exceptionally brilliant student may complete several volumes of Talmud in one year, whereas a slower student may achieve only a fraction of that. However, if

the time and effort invested by the slower student exceeds that of the genius, his *mitzvah* of *limud Torah* surpasses that of the genius.

Today there is a serious concern about the increasing number of students who run the risk of being expelled from *yeshivah* because their attitude and behavior are incompatible with *yeshivah* life. A number of new *yeshivot* have opened to accept these students. However, attendance at one of these *yeshivot* labels the student, who may then carry the stigma of being a second-rate student. Frequently, youngsters who are disappointed and are ashamed of their status find a peer group who welcomes and esteems them — a group of young people that may be indulging in drug use and other destructive behaviors.

This is not an entirely new phenomenon. There have always been bright students and slow learners. In the past, even if the latter were dissatisfied, they remained in the fold because there was nowhere else to go, short of making a total break with their environment. They generally adjusted to life, even if the adjustment was less than optimal. Today things are different — a student who is disillusioned can turn to a subculture that will welcome him with open arms. The fact that joining this subculture jeopardizes his future hardly discourages him. The feeling that one is equal to one's peers eclipses all other considerations.

Teachers and parents are human. There is no escaping from the fact that there is excitement in discussing a complicated and perhaps abstract Talmudic thought with a bright stu-

dent who readily grasps and analyzes its fine points. There is no escaping from the fact that parents beam with pride over their children's scholastic achievements. All this notwithstanding, we cannot afford to allow a weaker student to feel that he is “less than.” Indeed, the Steipler Gaon stated that in this way, Torah is distinct from other types of knowledge. A student who has difficulty with mathematical principles may not be able to become proficient in difficult calculus, regardless of how hard he tries. Torah is different. The weaker student who applies himself diligently to Torah study will merit the Divine blessing of excelling in it. However, if he feels he is of lesser value than the brighter student, he is apt to be discouraged and lose motivation. His studies will spiral downward in a self-fulfilling prophesy.

What can parents and teachers do to impress weaker students that they esteem them as much as they do their brighter classmates? I cannot prescribe any sure-fire techniques. However, I do believe *it is a matter of attitude*. If we truly have as deep a regard and love for the weaker student as we do the brighter one, these feelings will convey themselves to him. He will be encouraged to do his utmost, knowing that he is esteemed for his effort. He will not need to turn away from our community and Torah to find respect: no matter what his academic achievements, or lack of them, he will find that he is valued in his classroom, in his *shul* and at home. If more of us will seriously change *our* attitude toward less gifted learners, we will prevent losing much of our youth. **JA**

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