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Is Yeshivah Education Accomplishing

What It Should?

Part II

By Chaim Eisen

In Part I of this essay (see winter 5762/2001), we considered two, relatively academic matters of the yeshivah curriculum as the most immediate questions to face in evaluating our performance in post-secondary yeshivah education. Admittedly, there are those who view curriculum as the *only* subject worthy of contemplation in this regard. I have heard putative educators assert that the “spirit” of Torah learning, engendered by good curricula alone, suffices to redress all

additional issues—and teachers should therefore refrain from “wasting” study time (“*bittul Torah*”) on private consultations with students regarding personal, nonscholastic problems. I have heard others argue that *any* additional issues are simply irrelevant: The yeshivah teacher’s job is to teach Talmud, and other areas of concern to his students should be of no greater interest to him than they would be to a university professor.

This is dangerous nonsense. Viewing

Torah education as merely a discipline, whose nonacademic ramifications can be left to the discretion of the student or otherwise ignored, is the negation of Torah’s all-encompassing status as that which “teaches and shows you the way of life.”¹ Moreover, affirmation of God’s Oneness is a recognition that everything derives from—and is traceable to—a single, divine Source. Since everything is connected to that Source, everything is relevant to Judaism, and Judaism is relevant to everything.

Apart from the specific halachic implications of whatever we learn, noted above, our mission is to infuse the Torah’s meaning and values into every nook and cranny of existence. No “no man’s land” should remain bereft of the light of Torah, in either our individual or communal lives. In that vein, we consider two additional, equally vital issues.

“Anyone who engages in Torah alone resembles one who has no God.”²

The Talmud affirms, “Anyone who says he has *only* Torah [without fulfilling it (Rashi)]...has not *even* Torah.”³ Worse than a contradiction, such “Torah” is a fraud. In particular, “Torah for its own sake” is necessarily “a Torah of loving-kindness.”⁴ Conversely, the Midrash cautions, “Anyone who denies loving-kindness is as one who denies the basis [of belief in God].”⁵ Similarly, the Talmud warns, “Anyone who engages in Torah alone [without loving-kindness] resem-

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Some of the ideas presented in this essay are developed more fully in the chapter “Rabbi Chaim Eisen,” in Learning in Jerusalem: Dialogues with Distinguished Teachers of Judaism, ed. Shalom Freedman (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 5759), 85-115, where they first appeared. In addition, the author gratefully acknowledges the comments of Rav Nachum Neriah, who reviewed this essay, and the insights of Rabbi Shalom Berger, who also furnished him with the conclusions of his doctoral dissertation, cited above.

bles one who has no God.”⁶ In fact, a *greater* involvement in Torah generates a correspondingly *increased* obligation to engage in loving-kindness.⁷

Unfortunately, a disparity between Torah study and practice, especially in relating to mundane acts of loving-kindness and general *menshlichkeit* (human decency), is all too apparent to passersby on sidewalks and buses frequented by yeshivah students. Rabbi Emanuel Feldman once noted that, “While we have created many observant Jews, we have not created many religious Jews.... When it is possible for a Jew to don *tefillin*, be rigorous in his *kashrut*, live a life marked by many *chumrot* [strictures], and yet be lax in his *ben adam la-chavero* [interpersonal *mitzvot*], something is clearly not right.... We seem content to stop at the basic level of Torah study and of *mitzvah* observance, neglecting to push onward to that most challenging and fulfilling of all plateaus in the life of Torah: the inwardness which results from the deep awareness of the author of Torah and *mitzvot*.”⁸ More recently, a detailed analysis of the impact of a year of study in Israeli yeshivot on American yeshivah high school graduates yielded a parallel assessment: “In virtually all areas of religious ritual practice... there is a substantial increase in students scoring HIGH. There are similar increases in commitment to continued Torah study.... [But] with regard to... development of ethical behavior... there is no indication of change.”⁹ We must question to what extent we have impressed upon ourselves and our students the crucial linkage between *learning* Torah and fully *living* Torah. To whatever degree we have failed, we are not truly engaging in Torah—or serving God—at all.

Rabbi Shalom Berger, the author of the study, considered various explanations for his findings. He suggested, *inter alia*, “The yeshivot spend a tremendous amount of time encouraging students to absorb information and to learn to process and better analyze that information. Perhaps encour-

agement to make decisions and choose to change behavior patterns is not emphasized in the same way.”¹⁰

It is undoubtedly essential to stress incessantly the Talmud’s differentiation between the student whose conduct is consonant with Torah values and his antithesis. The former inspires others to comment, “So-and-so who was taught Torah—see how pleasant are his ways, how refined are his deeds”; the latter elicits the reaction, “So-and-so who learned Torah—see how corrupt are his deeds and how ugly are his ways.”¹¹ One causes “the Name of Heaven to be loved,”¹² epitomizing the utmost sanctification of God’s Name and Torah, whereas the other induces their most woeful profanation.

Yet, this is not an issue that we can redress through simple exhortations and curricular modifications, for it is primarily a matter of attitude—first and foremost, that of the faculty. In particular, we must emphasize the distinction, in yeshivah instruction, between a *melamed* and a *mechanech*. The former, from the root *l.m.d.* (learn, teach), simply means “teacher.” The latter, from the root *ch.n.ch.* (initiate, dedicate), implies far more. Rashi comments that “‘*chinuchi*’ denotes ‘beginning.’”¹³ Thus, “*chanichav*”¹⁴ means those whom Avraham “initiated in the *mitzvot*. It denotes the beginning of the introduction of a person or an instrument into the work in which it is to remain. Likewise, ‘*train* a child,’¹⁵ ‘*dedication* of the altar,’¹⁶ ‘*dedication* of the House.’¹⁷¹⁸

The *mechanech* must appreciate that his mission is preeminently to be his students’ role model, personal counselor, and confidante, in even the most mundane aspects of living. (I annually inform my students that I judge my success in *chinuch* by the percentage of them who approach me to discuss “girlfriend problems.”) Scholastics are definitely a crucial part, but certainly far from all, of what the *mechanech*’s task entails. Surely, this is the most basic meaning of the Gemara’s admonition, “If the *rav* resembles ‘an angel

of the God of Hosts,' then 'they should seek Torah from his mouth,'¹⁹ and, if not, then they should not 'seek Torah from his mouth.'²⁰

Furthermore, complete fulfillment of this role depends on more than good intentions of a committed faculty. Since counseling skills are rarely solicited or cultivated as prerequisites for employment as yeshivah teachers, supplementary training is often imperative. This is an institutional mandate. At least, educators must learn to refer students, when necessary, to colleagues better equipped to relate to the students' needs. Thus, the yeshivah staff as a whole serves as the students' collective *mechanech*. In any case, only through sensitivity to the *mechanech's* mission can we successfully "initiate" our students in, and "dedicate" them to, a lifelong, all-encompassing commitment to Torah values.

"All your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven."²¹

An obvious corollary of our quest to infuse the Torah's meaning and values into every component of our lives should be our position on work in general and one's career in particular. A job provides a livelihood and means for financial independence and support of one's family. Considering the dire spiritual consequences of the loss of such autonomy, decried continually in the Talmud and Midrash, these are laudable Jewish values in themselves. Moreover, our sages repeatedly stress the significance of even the most demeaning work as the basis of human dignity and honor—indeed, of life itself.

More substantively, the Mechilta emphasizes that "*melachah*" (work) is a religious imperative: "'Six days you shall work'²²—Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi] says: Behold, this is a distinct decree; for, just as Yisrael were commanded regarding the positive *mitzvah* of Shabbat, they were commanded regarding *melachah* on the six [week] days."²³ In its context, this observation provides the impetus for a veritable litany of

statements by various sages extolling "how great is *melachah*."²⁴ In the same vein, the Mishnah exhorts us to "*love melachah*"²⁵—not merely to engage in it—considering Torah with "*derech erez*" (worldly occupation) as corequisites of a worthy life.²⁶ Indeed, the Gemara concludes that, in a sense, "one who benefits from his own toil is greater than one who is God-fearing."²⁷

Ultimately, expounds the Midrash, our involvement in *melachah* is a crucial element in our fulfilling the mandate of *imitatio dei*—to emulate God as He manifests Himself in this world and thereby become Godly ourselves: "'In the beginning, the Lord created the heavens and the earth'²⁸—and He did *melachah* before you came to the world.... On the sixth day [of Creation], which was the last [day] of [God's] *melachah*, He created man. He said to man, 'Until now, I was engaging in *melachah*, from now on, you will engage in it.... I built all the city [the world] and all that is in it.... Thus, you shall build and do the *melachah* of the world.'... 'The Lord created man with His essence,'²⁹ to provide for all the needs of the world and its institutions, as He did initially."³⁰ Evidently, then, one's *avodah* (in the sense of vocation) is necessarily a central aspect of one's *avodah* (in the sense of the service of God).

Too often, either explicitly or tacitly, yeshivot communicate the viewpoint that the only truly ideal employment is ecclesiastical. However, the Talmud concludes that, for "each and every one, the Holy One Blessed be He beautified one's trade to him,"³¹ by predisposing each of us to a particular field of endeavor. Therefore, a student whose God-given abilities and aptitudes are best suited for a different role will find maximum happiness, satisfaction, and fulfillment there, since these result from the sense of exhilaration achieved by feeling that all of one's capabilities are being effectively directed and fully actualized. Such a student can pursue his dream and

conclude that he is a religious failure, or disdain the professional mission that God equipped him to fulfill—and, with it, the precious niche through which he might best have contributed to providing "for all the needs of the world." Either scenario is tragic for both the student and society at large. The first possibility may lead to a successful career, but one likely embittered by the misguided belief that Judaism regards any secular job per se as inadequate. Such a sense of deficiency may well compromise the student's attitude toward continued Torah study as well as his capacity to consider his work a critical opportunity to serve God by sanctifying and bettering His world. The second possibility will likely produce a misplaced, mediocre, miserable Torah teacher, or worse: one who, by eschewing his calling, forfeited a true sense of happiness and vocational success—and his chance, through that success, to contribute most decisively to perfecting the world. Imagine the ramifications to the next generation of viewing such a teacher as the paradigm of being "transformed" by Torah.

Even yeshivot that concede the legitimacy of other occupations frequently gauge their alumni's spiritual success solely by inquiring about ongoing involvement in Torah learning and communal prayer. The implied message is that no other aspects of a person's life are religiously significant. The Mishnah's mandate, that "*all your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven*,"³² is reduced to a hollow summons, applying to only one domain of existence. We must question the extent to which we are faithfully steering our students toward fruition in all dimensions of their "*avodah*."

To rear a generation of students who can function as exemplars of Torah values in contemporary society, we must reevaluate our ideals and priorities. The Mechilta lauds one who studies Torah as much as he can "and engages in his *melachah* all day" as having "fulfilled all the entire

Torah."³³ Likewise, the Midrash applies the appellation "holy assembly" to those who divide their time among "Torah...prayer...[and] *melachah*."³⁴ On manifold levels, such people have many opportunities that rabbis lack to sanctify God's Name through even mundane actions and daily routines.

On an additional plane, I recall an observation I once heard from one of my teachers: that a hotel manager with the proper outlook continuously engages in an unending chain of *mitzvot*. After all, such a person is always involved in *hachnasat orechim* (welcoming guests)! Of course, the manager must charge money for these efforts, because otherwise the hotel would go bankrupt and the opportunity for *hachnasat orechim* would be lost. But, as long as one relates to the money as only the means to perform the *mitzvah*, one is fulfilling the Mishnah's mandate that "all your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven." (Conversely, there may also be hotel managers who relate to the money as the goal and the "*mitzvah*" as but the means to make money; they would obviously miss this opportunity.) More generally, every legitimate profession, which necessarily responds to some societal need and better the quality of life, contributes to the spiritual mission to refine and perfect the world. The scientist, the shopkeeper, the surgeon, and the street cleaner (to name just a few) each advance this goal in different ways, all of which are vital. It is all a matter of attitude and commitment.

Consider, for example, the Torah's extraordinary praise of Chanoch, "Chanoch walked with God."³⁵ An enigmatic *midrash* comments cryptically that he was a cobbler, "sewing shoes and unifying [God's] Name."³⁶ Rav Yisrael Salanter demanded: What could be laudable about such conduct? After all, the Tosefta and Gemara require day laborers to take various "shortcuts" in even mandatory prayers and blessings, to avoid effectively robbing their employers, who are paying for a full day's

work.³⁷ Certainly, then, the Midrash would not praise Chanoch for "praying on the job," when a client was waiting and paying for his services! The response: Chanoch's "unifications" were not exercises in the obscure or abstract. On the contrary, he was unifying the reign of God with the earthly domain of *shoes* through focusing, with every stitch, on rendering his services as faithfully as possible by making the best pair of shoes he could.³⁸ *That* perspective is what the Torah calls "walking with God."

We must encourage our students to pursue their individual callings as means to "unifying God's Name" like Chanoch: not by withdrawing into a realm of transcendence but by infusing every "stitch" of their worldly endeavors with a sense of and a dedication to Godliness and perfection of His world. This is the all-encompassing nature of true *avodah*—that "*all your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven*." The Baraita appends to these words trenchant Scriptural support: "*In all your ways, consider Him, and He will direct your paths*."³⁹ Particularly, we must instruct our students to prepare for whatever careers can best harness their God-given talents and capabilities and thus enable them to attain maximum fulfillment, satisfaction, and happiness.

"To perfect the world through the reign of the Almighty"⁴⁰

In conclusion, we must maintain our focus on the objective toward which all the above proposals, for guiding our students to learn and live Torah more fully, are intended. All are vital steps in realizing the goal we affirm at least three times daily in prayer: "to perfect the world through the reign of the Almighty." In this sense, we can appreciate the purpose of Torah study, as expressed by the Midrash: "*Because the Torah teaches a person how he should do the will of the Omnipresent One, the reward of study is great*."⁴¹ Certainly, as noted above,

"study is not paramount, but deed is."⁴² Fundamentally, "the object of wisdom is repentance and good deeds,"⁴³ and, without such a commitment to practice, "wisdom does not endure."⁴⁴ But imagine a talented young student who, stirred by earnest altruism, decides to drop out of school to solicit contributions door to door to feed the world's hungry. While we should genuinely encourage such idealism, we still ought to discourage the plan. After all, by investing in a good education, the student's eventual capacity to alleviate global hunger and poverty will be vastly augmented. With so much potential seething within, why sell oneself—and *all the world*—so short? In our ongoing mission to perfect ourselves and the entire world, "*talmud is greater, because talmud leads to deed*."⁴⁵ That is the Torah's definitive role.

Simultaneously, once we understand what the Torah is and what it charges us to do, the operative ramifications for us and our students are inevitable. "A Torah of loving-kindness" necessarily impacts upon every element of our lives and colors our relationship with everyone and everything with which we share the world. The key word to inculcate in ourselves and our students is *responsibility*. The Midrash expresses this as a warning: "When the Holy One Blessed be He created the First Man...He said to him, 'See how becoming and praiseworthy My creations are! And all that I created, I created for you. *Pay attention that you not become corrupt and destroy My world!*'"⁴⁶ Likewise, from God's decision to create man singly, the Mishnah derives that "each and every one is *obligated* to say, '*For me the world was created*.'"⁴⁷ This is not a prerogative but a mandate: Each of us is accountable for the world created on our behalf. Life is a gift *with* "strings attached."

We are all obliged to contribute to the goal "to perfect the world through the reign of the Almighty" through whatever



worldly activities we pursue, fulfilling the Mishnaic mandate that “all your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven.” Initially, our responsibility through yeshivah education is to advance our students to self-actualization through studying Torah properly. As a user’s manual enables the customer to get the most out of one’s purchase, the Torah empowers us to get the most out of life. Torah addresses the totality of existence, potentially infusing meaning into everything we do, everywhere. It summons us relentlessly to be all we can be, always—and, thus, through Torah, to confront and grapple with everything in the world around us. Finally, this Torah should train and transform us, to become Godly dispensers of loving-kindness

for the benefit of all.

In that light, the Torah we study and teach provides us with the ultimate challenge: to uplift ourselves as means to elevating all of humanity. “*I, God, have called you in righteousness and shall hold your hand; and I shall safeguard you and give you for a covenant of the people, for a light of the nations... I have given you as a light of the nations, that My salvation may be to the end of the earth... And nations will go by your light, and kings by the gleam of your shining.*”⁴⁸ By rising to the challenge, we have the capacity to raise—and redeem—the entire world. **JA**

Notes

1. *Tiferet Yisrael* (Maharal), ch. 9, p. 32.
2. *Avodah Zarah* 17b.

3. *Yevamot* 109b.
4. *Sukkah* 49b, in com. on Mishlei 31:26.
5. *Kohelet Rabbah* 7:1 [4] and *Midrash Shemuel* 23:8.
6. *Avodah Zarah* 17b.
7. *Ibid.*
8. “The Editor’s Notebook: Observant Jews and Religious Jews,” *Tradition*, 26, no. 2 (Winter 1992): 1-2.
9. Rabbi Shalom Berger, “A Year of Study in an Israeli *Yeshiva* Program: Before and After,” Diss. Yeshiva University 1997.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Yoma* 86a.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Rashi on Devarim 20:5.
14. Bereishit 14:14.
15. Mishlei 22:6.
16. Bamidbar 7:10-1,84,88.
17. Tehillim 30:1.
18. Rashi on Bereishit 14:14.
19. Malachi 2:7.
20. *Chagigah* 15b and *Mo’ed Katan* 17a.
21. *Avot* 2:12.
22. Shemot 20:8.
23. *Mechilta DeRabbi Shimon Bar Yochai* on Shemot 20:8.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Avot* 1:10.
26. *Ibid.* 2:2 and 3:17 and *Kiddushin* 1:10.
27. *Berachot* 8a and *Midrash Tehillim* 128:1.
28. Bereishit 1:1.
29. *Ibid.* 1:27.
30. *Midrash HaNe’elam*, “*Bereishit*,” 5a.
31. *Berachot* 43b.
32. *Avot* 2:12.
33. *Mechilta* on Shemot 16:4 and *Tanchuma BeShalach*:20.
34. *Kohelet Rabbah* 9:9.
35. Bereishit 5:22,24.
36. *Yalkut Reuveni*, “*Bereishit*,” and *Midrash Talpiyyot*, “*Chanoch*.”
37. See *Tosefta Berachot* 2:7-8 and 5:25 and *Berachot* 16a and 46a.
38. See *Michtav MeEliyahu*, I, 34-5.
39. Mishlei 3:6, quoted by *Avot DeRabbi Natan* 17:7.
40. *Aleinu* prayer.
41. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:9.
42. *Avot* 1:17.
43. *Berachot* 17a.
44. *Avot* 3:9,17.
45. *Kiddushin* 40b, *Babba Kamma* 17a, and *Sifrei* on Devarim 11:13.
46. *Kohelet Rabbah* 7:13.
47. *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 4:5.
48. Yeshayahu 42:6, 49:6, and 60:3.