

Measuring Success Jewishly

By Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman, Kingsway Jewish Center

How do you measure success in the realm of Torah study? Is it about getting a good grade on a test? Remembering pages of Gemara? Chapters of Tanach? Answering parsha questions at the Shabbat table? Coming in first place at a Kahoot Jewish trivia contest?

PART 1 - PRIMING QUESTIONS

As we read the following two mishnayot from Pirkei Avot related to different types of students, let us think about the following questions;

- 1) Within each Mishna, what are the different qualities being described?
- 2) If relevant, what are the conclusions made about each quality?

<p><u>Avot 5:12</u> There are four types of disciples:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Quick to comprehend, and quick to forget: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. his gain disappears in his loss; 2. Slow to comprehend, and slow to forget: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. his loss disappears in his gain; 3. Quick to comprehend, and slow to forget: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. he is a wise man; 4. Slow to comprehend, and quick to forget, <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. this is a bad portion. 	<p style="text-align: right;">אבות ה:יב</p> <p>ארבע מדות בתלמידים. 1. מהר לשמע ומהר לאבד, a. יצא שקרו בהפסדו. 2. קשה לשמע וקשה לאבד, a. יצא הפסדו בשקרו. 3. מהר לשמע וקשה לאבד, a. חכם. 4. קשה לשמע ומהר לאבד, a. זה חלק רע:</p>
<p><u>Avot 5:15</u> There are four types among those who sit before the sages: a sponge, a funnel, a strainer and a sieve.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. A sponge, soaks up everything; 2. A funnel, takes in at one end and lets out at the other; 3. A strainer, which lets out the wine and retains the lees; 4. A sieve, which lets out the coarse meal and retains the choice flour. 	<p style="text-align: right;">אבות ה:טו</p> <p>ארבע מדות ביושבים לפני חכמים. ספוג, ומשפד, משמרת, ונפה. 1. ספוג, שהוא סופג את הכל. 2. משפד, שמכניס בזו ומוציא בזו. 3. משמרת, שמוציאה את היין וקולטת את השמרים. 4. ונפה, שמוציאה את הקמח וקולטת את הסלת:</p>

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- 1) In comparing the Mishnayot, what is the difference between the categories presented in the first Mishna versus those presented in the second Mishna?

More directly, how would you fill in the blanks: The first Mishna is presenting four categories of students in relation to how well they _____, while the second is discussing how well they _____.

2) How did the students get to be so different? Is there anything they can do to change?

3) What is the purpose of these Mishnayot? They seem to just be descriptive – should we be learning anything from them?

After thinking about these questions, let us now see how Rabbi Simeon ben Zemah Duran (14th-15th centuries), addressed these issues in his commentary to the second Mishna.

<p>Those with these traits are not described as being pious or wicked, because it is not within their control to improve them. The same was mentioned for the students described in the context of memory and forgetting. This Mishna is not discussing memory and forgetting but is describing those who have the ability to reason accurately and discern what is incorrect. This trait is a gift from G-d and is not in the hands of the individual, therefore there is no judgment of piety or wickedness.</p>	<p>אלו המדות אין ראוי להקרא בהם האדם חסיד ורשע, כי אין בידו להיות לו מדה יותר טובה ממה שיש בו. וכבר זכר זה בתלמידים ארבע מדות שהן לענין הזכרונות והשכחה. וזאת המשנה לא באה לפרש ענין הזכרון והשכחה, אלא לפרש מי שיש כח בידו לברור הדעת הנכונה ולהניח את שאינה נכונה. וזאת המדה היא מתת אלקים שהיא טובה ואינה ביד האדם, ואין בזה חסיד ורשע. וארבע מדות יש בהם</p>
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Before reading further, see if you can answer the reflection questions from above, based on Rabbi Duran's commentary.

According to Rabbi Duran, the first Mishna is addressing memory and the second is referring to the ability to reason and think clearly. In both Mishnayot, unlike others in the 5th chapter of Avot, there is no character judgement, as these abilities are not within one's control. The students can only be evaluated and held responsible if the traits were in their control, and the assumption is that their memory or ability to reason is not totally in their control and depends on Hashem.

What do you think? Does a student have the ability to improve his or her memory or reasoning? Should one be judged or graded based on those abilities?

PART 2

Being that our memory and reasoning skills aren't completely in our hands, does it make sense to judge our success in Torah learning based on tasks that require memory and reasoning skills? If not, is there a way to assess success? What are the ramifications for how we judge ourselves, our students, our children?

With these questions in mind, let us reflect on another question. One of the verbs commonly used to describe learning Torah is עמל – to toil. What is the significance of this word choice?

Rabbi Yosef Yavetz (14th-15th centuries), in his commentary on **Avot 6:4**, writes as follows;

<p>I have already written numerous times, that Hashem does not now require of us knowledge of Torah, only according to each individual's potential. That is why the word "labor" is used, because according to the pain is the reward, not according to the learning retained...</p>	<p>כבר כתבתי פעמים רבות, כי לא ידרוש השי"ת ממנו ידיעת התורה כי אם כפי הכנת כל אחד ואחד. ולזה כיון באומרו עמל, כי לפום צערא אגרא לא לפי הלימוד...</p>
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Hashem does not judge us based on how much knowledge we know compared to anyone else. It is a subjective judgement related to our abilities and based on how much effort we input. The word עמל is used to highlight that the essence of learning is toil, effort, and grit, not objective results.

On a similar note, when Rabbi Tarfon's states that "if you have studied much Torah, you shall be given much reward" (**Avot 2:16**), Maharal (16th-17th centuries) is so troubled by the possible reading that reward is given for the amount of Torah learned, that he argues fervently that this cannot be what the Mishna means!

<p>Rather, we can suggest that we are talking about effort. If you learned, (meaning) you toiled immensely, you receive rewards based on the toil and the difficulty... But for sure, if one person has amassed more knowledge over the course of a year's worth of effort, and one person attained less knowledge with the same effort, they are both equal.</p>	<p>ואפשר לומר בכאן לענין העמל נאמר, שאם למדת תורה ונצטערת עליה הרבה נותנין לך שכר הרבה לפי העמל והטורח... אבל בודאי אם אחד למד תורה הרבה בשנה אחת על ידי עמל שנה, ואחד למד תורה מועטת בעמל שנה שניהם שוים</p>
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Torah learning is not judged based on information amassed, but on effort exerted!

CONCLUSION

Recent educational and psychological research indicates that success in learning doesn't necessarily flow from innate intelligence. Our effort, passion, and perseverance can propel those with lesser innate abilities to success. Conversely, lack of effort, passion, and perseverance can stunt the success of those who are innately talented. Celebrating effort is more effective than praising results. This has been the rubric for grading Talmud Torah for millennia.

Success in learning Torah is not measured based on information attained, but rather on how much effort we put in. Some people can think more clearly or more in depth than others. Some people have better memories than others. We shouldn't judge ourselves or others either positively or negatively based on how much knowledge we have. Instead we should focus our energies on increasing our effort, passion, and perseverance, the true measures of success.