

A vision of Torah education

Over the past two years I've had occasion to reflect on what it means to be an educator and the awesome responsibility of teaching Torah. A beautiful story in the Talmud brings home for me the purpose of our role as Jewish educators (what follows is based on my personal interpretation of a short passage found in the Babylonian Talmud Baba Mezia, page 85b).

The story opens up with Raysh Lakish, the great sage, marking the graves of the Rabbis who have died. The Talmud tells us that he was unable to find Rabbi Chiya's grave. He immediately became upset and interpreted his inability to find the grave 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?" Raysh Lakish reflected. He 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. He was pained and shocked that he was not worthy enough to be in service to the remains of the great Rabbi Chiya. In response to his outcry, a heavenly voice informs Raysh Lakish that Rabbi Chiya's superiority over him was not in the realm of Torah mastery, but rather that Rabbi Chiya surpassed him in the realm of Torah dissemination.

The Talmud continues and describes how Rabbi Chiya could disseminate Torah knowledge. He would begin his endeavor by planting flax seeds. The grown flax would be weaved into a net to trap a deer. He would give the deer meat to orphans and use the deer skin to write Torah scrolls. He would select five children and teach them each a section of the oral Torah (Mishna). He would then tell them: "until I return, teach one another the Torah and the Mishna.

This Talmudic passage assumes that the ultimate goals of Torah Study involve a creative confrontation with the world around us. The goal is not measured in the theoretical potential but rather in the accomplishment. Rabbi Chiya ensured the preservation of Torah by enabling children to understand the basic texts of Torah: namely the written word of the Humash and the oral tradition, of the Mishna. There is no mention of unique intellectual strengths or analytical abilities. His vision of preserving Torah thus appears to focus primarily upon communicating the basics, rather than upon developing a profound, highly sophisticated understanding of the material.

The means by which Rabbi Chiya disseminated Torah and thus preserved it involved a highly integrated approach bringing together teaching with industry. He confronted and worked creatively with representatives of all categories of life – not only people, but the world of agriculture and husbandry, and the world of print and pedagogy.

Let us examine more closely how Rabbi Chiya's method worked. He selected 11 students and taught each one of them text. Each student was then 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 others. While each student possessed an expertise, which he eventually taught 10 times, each teaching experience is unique as a result of Rabbi Chiya's method.

First, each repeated teaching experience involved a thorough review of the material, and as such created a heightened learning experience for the 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.

Second, the 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. Third, each new teaching experience occurred with an increased knowledge base of the teacher and the student. Every time teacher and student confronted each other the material was presented in light of the freshly acquired knowledge from their previous learning experiences. The first teacher-student meeting 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.

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 purpose of Torah.

The beauty of Rabbi Chiya's greatness however, lies in his gifted ability to see in a handful of flax seed a magnificent vision of transformation. Rabbi Chiya transformed the seed 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 is 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, then that the heaven decreed that Rabbi Chiya's grave not be found. Because 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. The effect of his commitment to the dissemination and perpetuation of Torah remains eternal in this world.