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TEACHING FROM
WITHIN/TEACHING FROM
WITHOUT:
THE PROBLEM OF UNSHARED
ASSUMPTIONS IN THE HIGH
SCHOOL GEMARA CLASS

If being Mayor of New York is the second toughest job in America, teaching Talmud runs a close third. Besides having to present subtle and complex material to students with various intellectual capabilities, one must often deal with students whose religious perspective and attitude towards Torah study differs from one's own. What follows is one approach to deal with the problem of teaching Talmud to classes that contain a sizable number of students whose religious commitments are ambivalent or minimal and to suggest the outlines of a solution.

At the present time there are three types of yeshivah high schools on the American scene. The first models itself after the great pre-war yeshivot of Eastern Europe; in fact, a number were founded by products of these yeshivot. The primary goal of these institutions is to imbue their students with piety, humility, a love for Torah and, above all, an intense commitment to Torah study. Secular studies are valued mainly as tools for better understanding the Torah. These yeshivot set aside the bulk of the day, including evening sessions, for *limudei kodesh* consisting almost exclusively of Gemara. Students are often discouraged from attending college; if they do attend it is usually on a part-time basis with a concentration on non-ideological subjects such as math and physics. These yeshivot draw most of their

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students from homes identified with Agudath Israel, many of the parents having received similar education here or in Europe. The common goal of administration and parents is to produce knowledgeable and firmly committed graduates who will continue learning in yeshivot gevohot and who have also received sufficient secular training to earn a livelihood and to understand related areas of Torah.

A second group of yeshivot has developed in response to the criticism that yeshivot of the first type provide neither a well-rounded Jewish education nor a viable ideological program for the student who will attend college and work in the secular community. While devoting the same amount of time to *limudei kodesh*, these yeshivot include *Humash*, *Nakh*, and Hebrew in their curriculum. A conscious effort is made, moreover, to confront the challenge of secular ideology to Torah values and to point out the good and the bad, from a Torah perspective, in the secular subjects being studied. It is assumed that most graduates will attend college, and general studies are taught on a level reflecting this expectation; nonetheless, it is also assumed that most students will continue their religious studies on as regular a basis as possible, with perhaps a year or two devoted to learning full time in Israel. The student population of these yeshivot hails from homes that are often products of, or ideologically aligned with, Yeshiva University. In these yeshivot as well the religious and educational goals of the yeshivah are shared and encouraged by the parents.

Both of the aforementioned groups of yeshivot are usually located in urban centers and have dormitory facilities. Thus in addition to drawing on the native population, they are able to accept students from anywhere in the country. This permits them to be highly selective, admitting only those students who will be compatible with the religious environment of the school. The dormitory, in conjunction with a requirement that students spend certain *shabbatot* and holidays at school, provides these yeshivot with further environmental control.

This control is not available to yeshivot of the third type—community schools which draw their students from a wide range of backgrounds. Generally coeducational—while yeshivot of the first two types are usually not—these yeshivot have the difficult task of formulating a religious and educational policy for an extremely heterogeneous student population. Worse, parents of many or even most of the students have a very different perspective from that of the administration. While the administration would like to emphasize Torah study, many of the less observant parents are concerned

primarily with obtaining top-drawer college preparatory education for their children. They view the *limudei kodesh* as informationally useful and are glad to send their children to a Jewish school; they are even amenable to the religious demands (*davening*, wearing *tsitsit*) which the yeshivah requires during school hours. They would be extremely uneasy, however, were the yeshivah to announce as its primary goal making its students Orthodox and were it to pursue that goal actively during the school day and through extra-curricular activities. The fact remains, nonetheless, that this is the goal, even if unstated or modified, of faculty and administration.

The problem in such a yeshivah lies not in presenting secular studies but rather in teaching Jewish subjects generally and Gemara in particular. The teacher wants to present Gemara as an intellectually rigorous discipline worthy of his students' efforts and attention; he also wants them to see Gemara as the embodiment and instrument of Torah as an ongoing process that guides and commands each generation. His students, however, usually do not share his enthusiasm for study for many reasons. Firstly, they are intimidated by the degree of expertise necessary to master the Gemara's language, syntax, and terse style. Second, they are aware that the Talmud assumes on the part of its readers a broad knowledge of Written and Oral Torah which they have only begun to acquire. Third, in yeshivot which stress conceptual analysis, they may feel inadequately equipped to engage in the method's subtle dialectics.

These barriers are surmountable if a student desires to overcome them. Students with little commitment to halakhah, however, usually lack this desire. They view the Talmud as a highly technical document whose function is to dictate halakhic observance. This perception is a doubly negative one for the minimally observant adolescent. High school students need to find meaning in their studies that relates to efforts at self-definition. Any subject that does not touch them personally will gain their attention only at exam time. Second, high schoolers typically express their need for individuality through rebellion against authority. The more a student perceives Gemara as a commanding voice, the more likely he is to defy it.

Teacher and student, therefore, enter the Talmud class with radically different perceptions. If one teaches from within his perspective without explicitly sharing and discussing it, one runs the risk of engaging one's students in a series of fruitless confrontations—or of not engaging them at all. A teacher who takes for granted that all of *Torah Shébaal Peh* was given at Sinai and refers to this belief in a way that assumes that his students share or should share this belief will either anger or alienate his more skeptical

students. If they express their feelings in the form of ridicule, the teacher may further alienate his students by relating to them subsequently as willful mockers and deniers rather than as adolescents acting out their conflict, confusion, and frustration.

Am I suggesting, then, that a Gemara teacher should abandon his perspective and adopt that of his students? No, I advocate only that he step outside his perspective in a way that makes it accessible to others, and makes his students' views accessible to him. Presentation of one's belief in the Sinaitic origin of *Torah Shébaal Peh* can serve as an example. If a teacher senses potential resistance to his teaching from this perspective, I suggest that he explain its significance—for example, how through the study of Gemara he is linked to the Revelation at Sinai. He can also explain how this concept expresses the legitimacy and vitality of the efforts of the tannaim and ammoraim. It is also important to acknowledge the difficulty of accepting this notion, and to allow and to encourage students to share their own views. The essence of this "teaching from without," then, is presenting beliefs as personal convictions rather than as universal ones which one's students must perforce accept.

This approach is liberating for one's students. Once they know that their teacher does not demand absolute and unquestioning religious allegiance, they are open to enjoy Talmud study for their own reasons, which may or may not correspond to those of the teacher. Because they are not expected to accept the teacher's perspective and because it is being discussed and explained, students are more likely to give the teacher's view a sympathetic hearing. They will become more willing to accept his premises for the purpose of classroom study even while withholding commitment in their daily lives. Most important, the teacher will convey to the students his respect for them even as he disagrees with their views; this will contribute to their confidence in themselves and to their regard for their rebbe.

Some teachers may fear that the approach I have described will compromise the religiousness of the classroom environment. I can only point out that the teacher is only one element of that environment; the students are at least as important a component. A teacher who attempts to create an environment without taking his students into account will almost certainly, unless he is endowed with unusual charisma, create an environment that is false and unproductive. By acknowledging and accepting his students' limitations he will almost certainly inspire his students to go beyond them.