

Of Torah Study and Relationships

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I.

The third and central book of the Torah, Sefer VaYikra, opens with a seemingly extraneous clause: ויקרא אל משה, the Almighty called to Moshe. If one continues to read the rest of the verse, וידבר ה' אליו מאהל מועד לאמר, that the Almighty spoke to Moshe from the Tent of Meeting, one instantly realizes that the first clause requires some clarification. The Torah, so famed for its terseness, could have simply written, וידבר ה' אל משה מאהל מועד לאמר. What, then, the need for the קריאה beforehand?

R. Chanina, cited in the Talmud¹, interprets this verse to be instructive of proper etiquette. That is, prior to communicating a message of substance to someone, it is best to first call them directly.

R. Baruch Ha-Levi Epstein² takes this in a pragmatic vein, interpreting the Talmudic interpretation of the clause in question as of a fundamentally practical nature. Simply put, one wishes to give one's listener a chance to orient himself, and establish proper focus to receive the message which is about to come.

Rashi, however, opts for a far more ambitious, and to my mind, more poignant interpretation of this opening clause, ויקרא אל משה. Prior to communicating any substance to Moshe of a halakhic nature, the Almighty first reached out with a personal touch, as a sign of affection, חבה³. Apparently, this קריאה was not merely to focus Moshe's mind, but to communicate something far deeper: that the optimal context in which Torah must be taught is one of affection, where both the transmitter and the recipient are bonded in an intimate, personal relationship.

Conceptually speaking, learning Torah is not the aggregate of millions or billions of pieces of information which is communicated via some form of impersonal transmission, be it in a textbook, podcast, or the now obsolete tape recorder. Rather, the discipline of Torah study is, has been, and always will be, an intimate and personal experience, one which existentially bonds those who engage in it together to one another, at one plane, and, simultaneously, to the Almighty Himself.

¹ תלמוד בבלי מסכת יומא דף ד':

² תורה תמימה, ויקרא, פרק א, הערה א, "וטעם הדבר כדי שיכין עצמו השומע לשמוע".

³ רש"י ויקרא א:א, ד"ה "ויקרא אל משה".

II.

It is the קריאה, the personal calling, at the very outset of this process which sets the tone for this kind of deep and intimate act. Yet, the relationship between teacher and pupil, if cultivated, is granted by halakha the loftiest status, equated, and in certain senses, surpassing, the parental relationship itself. The normative implications of this relationship, including obligations of honor and awe, on the one hand, as well as responses to loss, including tearing and mourning practices, on the honor, are dramatic manifestations of this halakhic reality.

Perhaps most strikingly, the halakha ascribes the teacher of Torah with a dual identity: as a quasi-biological parent in this world, כל המלמד את בן חבירו תורה מעלה הכתוב, כאילו ילדו, and concomitantly, as the one who brings the pupil into the World to Come, מביאו לחיי עולם הבא.

Of course, none of this comes about willy nilly. In formulating the obligations of the educator, Rambam requires the pedagogue to both honor his students and to draw them near, לכבד את התלמידים ולקרֵבן. Perhaps even more impressively, Rambam formulates these obligations as inherently reciprocal, mirroring the pupils' obligation to honor the teacher, כְּשֵׁם שֶׁהַתְּלִמִּידִים חִיְבִין בְּכַבּוּד הָרַב כִּן הָרַב צָרִיךְ לְכַבֵּד אֶת תְּלִמִּידָיו וּלְקַרְבָּן. Subsequently, Rambam raises the stakes further, citing the rabbinic maxim that requires one to honor one's students literally as oneself.

Yet, all of these dimensions are overshadowed by the thunderous crescendo of this halakha in Rambam, וְצִרִיךְ אָדָם לְהִזְהָר בְּתִלְמִידָיו וּלְאַהֲבָם שֶׁהֵם הַבְּנִים הַמֵּהֲנִים לְעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, וְלְעוֹלָם הַבָּא. Rambam requires that the teacher demonstrate both great caution and invest love in each pupil, as each one is a child who brings the teacher great pleasure 'in this world and in the next.' Rambam, apparently noting the dual identity of the teacher, parent in this world, and the one who ushers the pupil into the World to Come, ipso facto, ascribed the inverse dual identity to each pupil, children in this world and in the next.

However demanding this investment, Rambam immediately goes on to note that it is duly rewarded, הַתְּלִמִּידִים מוֹסִיפִין חֲכָמַת הָרַב וּמִרְחִיבִין לְבוֹ. The pupils do not only add to their teacher's understanding, but quite literally, expand his emotional range, elevating and purifying his spiritual persona, which in turn, further enables the teacher to grow spiritually, לְפִי רוּחַב שִׁישׁ בְּלִבוֹ וַיִּשׁוּב דַּעְתּוֹ.

While, in an extremely narrow and pragmatic sense, there may be discrete moments when the teacher must 'sacrifice' personal development for the sake of the students, in a broader sense, Rambam's position was unmistakable. The relationship is one marked by constant reciprocal cognitive-spiritual growth and development, which, concomitantly, further reinforce the sense of shared bond. In this sense, Rambam considered the highest form of human association, עשה לך רב וקנה לך חבר, to be one defined by a shared spiritual odyssey.

III.

At the outer boundaries of this relationship an intense loyalty is cultivated. The depth of bond which is formed defies and transcends obstacles, both halakhic and practical. It grants a permission structure to leave the *terra sancta* of the Land of Israel for ongoing instruction, much as it requires the student to follow the teacher who has committed accidental murder to a city of refuge.

The outside observer, or even the partially sympathetic intellectual who can imagine devotion of a certain form to a mentor, can hardly make sense of this halakhic pattern. And yet, for the insider, it is a logical consequence of the shared numinous activity in which the partnership is engaged. For, the war which those who study Torah together wage, מלחמתה של תורה, has the sui generis impact of forging erstwhile 'adversaries' into an unbreakable bond, נעשו אוהבים זה את זה.