

The Importance of Teaching in Judaism

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The teaching profession is unique in a number of ways. It is the only profession whose goal is to make itself superfluous – i.e., the purpose of teaching is to create students who no longer need a teacher at all, but can stand on their own and learn by themselves.¹ In addition, it seems to be the only profession that nearly all parents feel qualified to evaluate and criticize. While they would never question a particular diagnosis or medicine prescribed by a physician, the specific work of a dentist (or any other professional that involves their child), most parents feel competent to comment upon or question the specific actions or behaviors of their child’s teacher (one can confirm this assertion by speaking to any school principal). If this is true in the general population, it is certainly more so in the Jewish community. (Why this is so will be demonstrated below.)

Although teachers often have a greater impact upon the life of students than any other person alive, their salary in most countries today is almost at the bottom rung when compared to the salaries in any other profession. Moreover, though teachers used to be among the most highly respected individuals in society, esteem for educators has nosedived since the latter part of the twentieth century. Similarly (or as a result), unlike the case in previous generations, today in the Western world the teaching profession is by and large attracting individuals with lower grades than those of average students. Why has this profession lost its place of honor in society? How does Judaism view teachers and why? Is there a “proper” way to teach in Judaism, and an improper way? Are certain individuals not qualified to be teachers in the Jewish community? This chapter will explore these and other questions related to this distinguished profession in Jewish society.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEACHER OF CHILDREN IN JUDAISM

It is clear that Judaism views teachers as a crucial component of every Jewish society, and holds teachers in high esteem. Chinuch says that a Jewish community may not even be formed without teachers, and that any Jewish community without instructors for the young should be destroyed.² The Talmud describes an incident that shows the value and specialness of a teacher. In a year when there was no rain, Rav decreed a fast for the community, but still no rain fell when the community fasted. Then one individual rose to be the Cantor, recited a few verses about the rain, and the rains came forth in torrents. When Rav asked in what merit this particular person had the “ear of G-d” to bring the rain and save the community, the Cantor replied that he was a teacher of young children, even those whose parents could not afford to pay tuition, and those who were reluctant to learn.³ The Midrash speaks about the seven groups of righteous people who will be greeted by G-d Himself after this life. Which of these seven groups is the most worthy? One opinion

¹ Mishna Avot 1:1

² Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 419

³ Taanit 24a

is that it is the teachers of young children who inspire them with awe. These teachers will stand at the right hand of the Almighty.⁴

When the prophet Daniel speaks of the righteous who are eternal like the stars, the Talmud explains that he was referring to teachers. Why? Maharsha explains that just as the stars are not seen during the day but nevertheless always have an impact on the earth, so too, teachers are no longer seen after they complete teaching their students, but their impact continues long after the students have left the classroom.⁵ Maimonides says that anyone who has learned (Torah) but has not used that knowledge to teach others (which apparently should be the goal of every Jew who learns), is considered an evil person, an imbecile and vulgar.⁶

Abraham was the person chosen to found the Jewish people, the first Jew. What made him so special? While there are many unique qualities that are ascribed to Abraham, when G-d wanted to demonstrate what made him distinctive, He said that it was Abraham's ability to pass down to the next generation (and future generations thereafter) the ways of G-d, justice and righteousness.⁷ There had been several righteous people before Abraham, such as Noah, who was called a righteous man. But Abraham was the first person who was able to teach his children and inculcate his values into the next generation and the generations thereafter. That was indeed Abraham's greatest quality – he was a teacher. The Midrash says that first Abraham "discovered" G-d at an early age, then kept the precepts (before the Torah was given), but greatest of all, he then taught these ideas to future generations of Jews. G-d says that since Abraham taught Torah in this world, that in the World to Come, G-d Himself will teach Torah to the Jewish people.⁸ In fact each day in the morning prayers, G-d's profession is described as that of a teacher of the Jewish people.⁹ The Midrash declares that teaching Torah is indeed a partnership between man and G-d: in this world it is man's duty to teach Torah, but in the Next World G-d will be everyone's teacher of Torah.¹⁰ And since Jews are supposed to follow in the ways of G-d,¹¹ just as G-d is a teacher (even in the Next World), ideally all Jews should become teachers (in this world).

G-d is described by many roles (and models) in the Midrash: He was a warrior in defeating the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds (Red Sea), He was like a groom meeting his bride at the dedication of the Tabernacle (in His symbolic marriage to the Jewish people). But G-d was an elderly teacher at Mount Sinai, when He gave the Jewish people the Torah.¹² Another Midrash takes the idea of G-d as teacher one step further. It says that a teacher sometimes has to have a stern/scary face, sometimes a serious face, sometimes a cordial or smiling face, and sometimes a face full of laughter. G-d had all four at different times in His role of a teacher. G-d teaches us that just as He had a stern/scary face, teachers should have that same disposition when teaching the verses of the Torah (inspiring awe). A serious face should be put on by the teacher when teaching the Mishna. A cordial or smiling face should be put on when teaching Talmud. And the teacher should have a face of laughter when

⁴ Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 30:2

⁵ Daniel 12:32, Bava Batra 8b with Maharsha commentary

⁶ Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 5:4

⁷ Genesis 18:18-19

⁸ Midrash, Bereishit Rabbah 95:3

⁹ Morning blessings in the daily prayers

¹⁰ Midrash, Yalkut Shimoni, Vayikra 19

¹¹ Deuteronomy 28:9

¹² Midrash Pesikta Rabbati 33

teaching the Midrash. G-d demonstrated all of these facial expressions and attitudes, and all teachers of Torah should imitate G-d in this respect.¹³ This concept is echoed by other Midrashim as well.¹⁴

Learning and teaching in Judaism seems to be quite different from learning and teaching in the secular world, and it seems far more important. Jewish knowledge that is accumulated simply for its own sake is not considered on the same high spiritual level as the Jewish knowledge needed in order to teach others.¹⁵ The learning of mere information by students in Judaism is not sufficient. A student must learn from a teacher through the teacher's actions as well as his or her words, and therefore a Jewish student who does not observe and learn from a teacher outside of the classroom is considered an ignoramus.¹⁶ Similarly, learning from the personality of the teacher is so important that if a Jewish teacher behaves immorally in his or her private life, Shulchan Aruch rules that it is forbidden for any Jewish student to learn from this person, even if the entire Jewish people needs this teacher's knowledge, until this teacher's moral behavior has reformed.¹⁷ On the other hand, the impact of a teacher continues long after the actual act of teaching, as noted above. King David wished to remain "eternal" and said that he would accomplish this feat only if his words of Torah are repeated in the House of Prayer and House of Jewish Learning.¹⁸ To this day, King David's words of Torah fill all Jewish synagogues and Jewish houses of learning, as his words and teachings are repeated daily through the Psalms. This is similar to the righteous who are called "living" even after they die.¹⁹ How is it possible to remain alive even after physical death? Just as the knowledge internalized by students continues to impact life far beyond the actual teaching, the kind actions of the righteous often reverberate and continue far beyond the life of a righteous person. Rashi says that the acts of the righteous are equated to one's children, since both continue a person's influence and impact long after his or her physical death.²⁰ So it is with Jewish teaching as well.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION IN JUDAISM

The teaching profession itself is held in the highest esteem in Judaism. Originally, there were no schools, and the responsibility of teaching children fell to each parent. This obligation was considered so significant, that this commandment was intentionally placed in the Torah in the Shema paragraph, the seminal declaration of Jewish belief, commitment and obligation to G-d.²¹ The obligation to teach is thus repeated three times daily (twice in prayer and once before bedtime) by traditional Jews each day. The Midrash differentiates between the learning of Torah and the teaching of Torah, when it says that if a person merely learns Torah without teaching it, all that learning is considered a waste.²² Rav Nehorai says that all other professions pale in comparison to teaching, which protects Jews both in their younger years and later years of life, unlike other professions which become impossible to continue when illness or old age affects an individual.²³

¹³ Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, Shemot 20

¹⁴ Midrash Chidushai Agadot, Section 1, Page 71, Masechet Shabbat

¹⁵ Midrash Chidushai Agadot, Section 1, Page 125, Masechet Rosh Hashana

¹⁶ Sotah 22a

¹⁷ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 246:8

¹⁸ Jerusalem Talmud 13a

¹⁹ Midrash Kohelet Rabbah 9:4

²⁰ Genesis 6:9 with Rashi commentary

²¹ Deuteronomy 6:4-9

²² Midrash Devarim Rabbah 2:26

²³ Kiddushin 82a

Since Judaism believes that Torah learning is equal to fulfilling all the commandments combined,²⁴ making it the most important Jewish act possible, and since Judaism also believes that he who causes others to fulfill a commandment is worthy of reward that is greater than if he actually does the commandment alone,²⁵ then it follows that a teacher who causes others to fulfill this greatest Jewish act of Torah learning is considered to be on the top of the pyramid of Jewish life. That the learning of Torah is the highest ideal cannot be disputed. Every Torah scholar is called a *Talmid Chacham*, a student of wisdom and not *Chacham*, a wise person, because every Jewish scholar must continue to learn Torah as every student does, even after attaining Jewish wisdom. That is why two Torah scholars should clash with each other in Torah learning, as they learn from each other by doing so, and are compared to two pieces of iron that are rubbed against one another, causing each to become sharper as a result.²⁶

Maimonides says that a Jew is judged initially at death based on the amount of Torah learned, and only subsequently on his or her actions or fulfillment of other commandments.²⁷ Shulchan Aruch also codifies this concept, and adds that even in Jewish law, the learning of Torah is equivalent to keeping all the other 612 commandments combined. Therefore, even if a person learns Torah for the “wrong” reasons or incentives, that is preferable to not learning Torah at all.²⁸ Another proof that Torah learning is the most important and holy activity for a Jew comes from a Jewish law regarding public monies collected for tzedaka-charity. Monies collected for a holy purpose may only be diverted for another holy purpose that is equal in holiness to the first purpose or even holier. Shulchan Aruch thus declares that money collected to build a synagogue (certainly a very holy purpose) may indeed be used to build a House of (Torah) Learning. But monies collected for a House of Learning (even a place that does not also function as a synagogue) may not be used to build a synagogue, a place of lower holiness. This demonstrates that a place of prayer, as holy as it is, is not as holy in Judaism as a place used to learn Torah or a Torah itself.²⁹ That is why the Torah scholar who has a potential to be a teacher of Torah to young children but refuses to do so, forgoing the opportunity and obligation, this person is regarded very negatively by Maimonides. This is especially true if this individual prefers to teach adults more than children, since he thinks this is more prestigious.³⁰ Jewish law, therefore, requires that each city must set up a system of Torah learning for little children. If they do not, the townspeople are excommunicated until they do so, because the world only continues to exist and thrive when little children learn Torah. The Torah teacher who wastes time with the little children by doing something else other than teaching Torah is considered cursed.³¹

WHY IS TEACHING TORAH SUPERIOR TO LEARNING TORAH?

The very first law that Maimonides brings in his laws of learning Torah is the obligation to teach Torah to others, even before discussing the obligation to learn Torah for oneself.³² This shows that the teaching of Torah is superior to the learning of Torah. Why is this so? Even though Torah

²⁴ Shabbat 127a

²⁵ Bava Batra 9a

²⁶ Midrash, Beraishit Rabbah 69:2

²⁷ Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 3:5

²⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 246:18-20

²⁹ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 153:5, 2 and Mishne Berurah commentary no. 1

³⁰ Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 5:4

³¹ Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 2:1, 3

³² Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:1-3

learning is paramount in Judaism, it only remains paramount if that learning is translated into action. And teaching Torah is one such action beyond learning. But the true goal is to translate the learning into both teaching and also superior mitzvah-commandment performance.³³ Mere Torah learning alone without any action as a result is not the goal of Judaism.³⁴ Rabbi Chiya says that if a Jew simply learns Torah for its own intellectual sake but it does not improve one's behavior, it is better that this Jew would not have been born.³⁵ Therefore, a teacher of Torah turns his or her own Torah learning into a positive action affecting others, and does not simply let it remain at the intellectual stage of learning alone.

WHAT AND WHEN EXACTLY IS TORAH LEARNING AND TEACHING?

Most people believe and picture the ideal Jewish learning situation where Torah learning is conducted in a classroom with many students surrounding a teacher. But the Torah's mandate to teach Torah encompasses all aspects of life, not merely time spent in a sterile classroom. The Torah twice says that children should learn Torah in their homes, learn when they walk on the streets, learn when they lie down and learn when they rise.³⁶ Torah learning, then, involves all aspects of life and is not limited to traditional classroom learning. The blessing recited each day by traditional Jew regarding Torah learning also reflects this idea. The blessing required before a Jew learns Torah is "*La-asok bidivrei Torah*-To be involved in the learning of the words of Torah."³⁷ It does not say "*Lilmod Torah*-To learn Torah," which might have been the expected phrasing. This teaches us that even when a person is doing something else during the day, as long as the person is thinking about it as a Jewish activity somehow connected to Torah ("involved" in the words of Torah), he is still fulfilling this commandment. That is why the Code of Jewish Law rules that this blessing required for Torah learning is not repeated each time a person formally learns Torah during the day, because all other daily activities are or should be connected somehow to Torah learning in some manner or form, and thus there is no interruption from Torah learning until a Jew goes to sleep for the night.³⁸ Maimonides echoes this same idea when he says that every activity of a Jew during each day should somehow be transformed into something Jewish.³⁹ Therefore, in the broader sense, Torah learning is actually Jewish living.

Although the Mishna gives a formal timetable for when to begin learning each part of Torah – the Written Torah (Five Books of Moses) at the age of five, the Mishna (first part of the Oral Torah) at age ten, and Talmud (the later, larger section of the Oral Torah) at age fifteen⁴⁰ – the practice today is somewhat different: Jewish children usually begin to learn the Written Torah at age six or seven, in first or second grade. Mishna is usually taught earlier than age ten in Israel, where the Hebrew language of the Mishna is a student's native tongue, but in the Diaspora, Mishna learning often indeed begins at age ten. The learning of Gemara or Talmud, however, usually begins prior to the age of fifteen. It is interesting to note that in strict Jewish law the requirement of teaching Torah is only for the Written Torah or the Five Books of Moses. Therefore, teachers had to be paid a wage for this instruction, but they did not have to be paid a salary for teaching the Oral Torah.⁴¹ In the

³³ Mishna Avot 4:5

³⁴ Mishna Avot 1:17

³⁵ Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 35:7

³⁶ Deuteronomy 5:7, 11:19

³⁷ Blessing recited at the beginning of every morning prayer service

³⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 47:10, 12

³⁹ Maimonides, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 3:2

⁴⁰ Mishna Avot 5:21

⁴¹ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 245:6

twenty-first century, Jewish schools do not make this distinction, and teachers of all types of Torah are usually paid equally.

TEACHING ONE'S OWN CHILDREN

As noted in the Torah verses cited above, originally there were no schools at all. The obligation to teach was incumbent upon each parent. This parental obligation is noted in the first paragraph of the Shema⁴² and also the second paragraph of Shema,⁴³ and is recited in the daily prayers. It is noteworthy that in the Hebrew language, the words for parent (*Horeh*) and teacher (*Moreh*) are very similar, and are derived from the same verb signifying teaching. Thus, the ideal is for each parent to teach his or her own children Judaism, not merely the words written in the Oral and Written Torah, but about all aspects of living as a Jew. As the verse notes, it should be done through each of the routine activities in life, even when walking and even when lying down. This was first demonstrated by the very first Jewish teacher, the first Jew, Abraham. As ill as he was after being circumcised at the age of ninety-nine, Abraham insisted on doing everything himself to serve his guests (the angels, unbeknownst to him) in order to fulfill the commandment to be hospitable to strangers. And yet, it says that after Abraham ran to get the sheep, "he gave it to the boy." Why did Abraham give the sheep to the boy and who was this boy? Based on the Midrash, Rashi states that this was Abraham's son, Yishmael. Abraham was teaching his son Yishmael by showing him how a mitzvah-commandment (*schechita*) is performed – not only by learning from a book, but teaching by doing and showing.⁴⁴ This is Jewish teaching, by a father to his son.

One commentary on Shulchan Aruch points out that even though a minor is not technically obligated to learn Torah yet, his or her parent is nevertheless obligated to teach that child Torah.⁴⁵ The Midrash states that any Jewish parent who shirks his or her responsibility to teach a child Torah, it is as if that parent had worshipped an idol, and that child will eventually turn to a dark, non-Jewish path in life.⁴⁶ Chinuch states that the obligation of a Jewish parent to teach a Jewish child Torah begins as soon as the child starts to speak (as early as age two?), and lists which verses that young Jewish child should then memorize. Then at age of six or seven (today's first grade equivalent) parents should bring the child to a school to learn Judaism from a Jewish teacher.⁴⁷ (This was written in the thirteenth century when Jewish schools were prevalent and it was no longer the custom for a parent to formally school the Jewish child.)

Before Jewish schools were established, the Talmud asks exactly how much must a parent educate his or her Jewish child. It answers that although some say that teaching a child the Written Torah is sufficient to fulfill one's parental obligation, Zevulun ben Dan used to teach his children the Written Torah, the Mishna, the Talmud, Jewish Law and also Midrash, and that curriculum seemed to be preferred by the Talmud. The passage continues and states that any parent who teaches his own Jewish child Torah, since that teaching will continue to be repeated by that child to his child (the grandson) and then to the next generation all the way until today, this parent gets credit as if he or she has taught Torah to all succeeding generations in that family continuing down to the present time.⁴⁸ Rabbi Joshua further states that he who teaches a grandchild Torah, it is as if that Torah

⁴² Deuteronomy 5:7

⁴³ Deuteronomy 11:19

⁴⁴ Genesis 18:7 with Rashi commentary

⁴⁵ Bayit Chadash commentary to Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 245

⁴⁶ Midrash, Yalkut Reuveini Yitro

⁴⁷ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 419

⁴⁸ Sotah 11a

taught was received directly from G-d at Mount Sinai and given to that child.⁴⁹ Thus, the special merit and privilege of teaching Judaism to one's children and grandchildren yields great rewards to that teacher/parent.

TEACHING THE CHILDREN OF OTHER PARENTS

If the Torah commandment is to teach Judaism to one's own children, and that was the intention of the Torah, then why do virtually all children in the Jewish community today accumulate most of their Jewish knowledge from teachers who are not their parents, and they learn it in schools, not at home as the Torah seems to command? The Talmud answers this question by describing the unfortunate situation with Jewish orphans who had no parents to teach them. Originally, schools for orphans were set up only in Jerusalem. But because of the proliferation of orphans (possibly due to unnatural deaths due to wars), Rabbi Yehoshua ben Gamla set up a school system in every city and town where Jewish children lived, not only for orphans but for all Jewish children, who were then taught by teachers rather than their individual parents.⁵⁰ This is why and how Jewish schools came about in every Jewish community, continuing to the present day.

Once this system became the norm – i.e., that teachers, and not parents, taught Jewish children Torah – the Talmud comments on how these teachers are viewed in Jewish thought. The original person who taught Torah to other children besides his own was none other than Moses himself. The Torah states that “these are the children of Aaron and Moses,” but then lists only Aaron's children.⁵¹ The Talmud explains this anomaly by declaring that Moses taught Torah to the sons of Aaron and thus was also considered their father. Furthermore, anyone who teaches Torah to any Jewish child is considered as if he gave birth to that child.⁵² Similarly, when Abraham left Charan, the Torah said he took with him “the souls he had made.” How can a human being “make” souls (especially the childless Abraham)? The Talmud explains that these were the people whom Abraham had taught and brought closer to Judaism, and therefore anyone who teaches Torah to someone else's children, it is considered as if he or she had “made” them.⁵³ In the context of describing the commandment to teach Torah, Chinuch also states that a person's Jewish students are called one's children, and cites other verses to support this claim.⁵⁴

The high esteem accorded to Torah teachers who are not the pupil's parents is more than simply equating them with parents who created these children. The Talmud states that these teachers (after this life) will sit on high, right beside G-d, and it also states that even if a teacher had been destined by G-d for an evil decree, such a decree is invalidated due to the noble occupation of teaching Torah.⁵⁵ And if there are questions of priority between one's biological parent and one's teacher (who is one's spiritual parent) regarding Jewish law, the Talmud rules that an individual's teacher supersedes the rights of one's parent. If two lost objects are found, one belonging to one's teacher and one to one's parent, the Talmud states that a person should return the object first to the teacher and only then to the parent. When explaining why this should be the Jewish law, the Talmud states that a parent brings an individual into this world, while a teacher brings a person into the Next World, which is on a higher level than this world. However, if a parent is also a Torah scholar who

⁴⁹ Berachot 21b

⁵⁰ Bava Batra 21a

⁵¹ Numbers 3:1-3

⁵² Sanhedrin 19b

⁵³ Genesis 12:5, Sanhedrin 99b

⁵⁴ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 419

⁵⁵ Bava Metzia 85a

taught his child Torah, then the parent's lost object should be returned before the teacher's (since the biological parent fulfills both roles in this case).⁵⁶ When Shulchan Aruch reflects this Talmudic passage in normative Jewish law, he adds two other situations where a teacher takes precedence over a parent. If someone's parent and Torah teacher both need help carrying a load, the person should first help the teacher and then the parent. Similarly, if both are unfortunately held captive, an individual should first secure the release of the Torah teacher and only then secure release of the parent.⁵⁷

SPECIFIC JEWISH PRACTICES, BEHAVIORS & TECHNIQUES OF JEWISH TEACHERS

Regarding the wages of teachers, as noted above, Shulchan Aruch says that ideally teachers should take wages only for teaching the Written Torah but not for teaching the Oral Torah, such as Mishna and Gemara. However, since today most teachers need the income from teaching in order to survive, it is permitted take wages for all Jewish teaching. However, the salary should not be too high, not more than a low-level income⁵⁸ (which is certainly the case in most Jewish schools today). One commentary on Shulchan Aruch stresses that the obligation to teach a child the Written Torah (with pay) includes not only the Five Books of Moses, but also all of the Prophets and all Scripture including the Megillot and Psalms.⁵⁹

According to Jewish tradition, a student who has no interest in learning and is not a proper student should not be taught Judaism at all until he or she returns to a "proper path" and is ready to learn.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, this is often difficult to follow today, when parents pay high tuition and demand that their children be in a Jewish learning environment, irrespective of the child's wishes or attitude. It is also impractical and ill-advised to force a misbehaving Jewish child to leave a school and enter a non-Jewish school, where a proper Jewish environment does not exist. To solve this problem, some Yeshiva high schools in large cities today have a policy agreement to switch chronic misbehaving students with each other for a specified time period, hoping that the change of environment will inspire the students to obtain the proper attitude to Jewish learning.

Even in the time of Maimonides, the age that formal Jewish studies began was first grade (age six or seven), but this directive was flexible and dependent on the physical and mental maturity of the child. Jewish learning would take place all day and even during a small part of the evening, in order to teach a child to learn both day and night. There would be no time "off" from Torah learning except for Fridays and Jewish holidays. One could never waste time and take away any minutes of Jewish learning by little children, even if that time would be used to build the Third Holy Temple!⁶¹ The traditional Jewish classroom was set up so the teacher would sit in front and the students would surround the teacher in a semi-circle, insuring each pupil could clearly see the teacher. The teacher was not supposed to sit or stand above (or below) the students, but had to be on the same plane as the pupils.⁶²

Some of the traditional Jewish techniques included the notion that a teacher should never get angry with students who failed to understand, but the teacher should calmly repeat the

⁵⁶ Bava Metzia 33a

⁵⁷ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 242:4

⁵⁸ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 246:5

⁵⁹ Bayit Chadash commentary on Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 245:5

⁶⁰ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 246:7

⁶¹ Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 2:2

⁶² Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 246:9

information as many times as it took until the students would understand even the deepest passages. Similarly, it was the responsibility of the student not to tell the teacher that he or she understood if the material taught was not truly comprehended. Rather, the student should ask again and again to have it explained. If the teacher begins to get angry, the student should remind the teacher “Rebbe, this is Torah, which I am obligated to understand, and my brain is not sufficient to get it the first time.”⁶³ However, it is a perfectly legitimate technique for the Jewish teacher to intentionally make mistakes in repeating information that students learned previously, so that the student should “catch” the teacher in the mistake, which will sharpen the attention span and comprehension of the students. Similarly, it is legitimate for the teacher to question the students on information learned previously on another topic, in order to get them to think and remember.⁶⁴

Just as Jewish students must show respect for the teacher, the Jewish teacher must show respect for his or her students, in order to draw them closer to Judaism and form a personal relationship. A teacher should grow to love his or her students, and understand that the world (both this world and the World to Come) continues to exist only for the sake of these children who learn about Judaism.⁶⁵ Those students who are not yet inspired to learn Judaism out of love and who do not yet understand the importance of Torah learning (like young children and women at the time of Maimonides), may be given rewards or fear stimuli (possibly something like report cards) that will inspire them to learn better, until they mature and understand to learn Judaism out of love.⁶⁶ But Maimonides also states that the Jewish teacher should not play with the students and “fool around,” nor eat and drink with them. Rather, they should maintain a distance and engender awe which will help the students learn better.⁶⁷ The famous verse written by King Solomon to teach each child according to their needs⁶⁸ requires the Jewish teacher to differentiate his or her teaching, and not teach in a “one size fits all” manner. Understanding the different levels, different rewards and different needs of each student is a key to success in Jewish (and all) education. Finally, a good teacher understands how greatly Jewish students can benefit the teaching profession, and that they can even teach him or her more than any adult does.⁶⁹

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is “to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way.” Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.

⁶³ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 246:10

⁶⁴ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 246:12

⁶⁵ Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 5:12

⁶⁶ Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuva 10:5

⁶⁷ Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 4:5

⁶⁸ Proverbs 22:6

⁶⁹ Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah 5:13