



## **Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l at ATID -- April 15, 1999**

Discussion evening with ATID Fellows -- Summary by R. Uri Cohen

*This document summarizes the recorded question-and-answer session (length: 1:59:03) available for download at [www.blog.webyeshiva.org](http://www.blog.webyeshiva.org)*

00:00-02:39

Introduction: Rav Chaim Brovender introduces Rav Aharon's Q&A session.

### **1 Biblical Personalities (Part 1)**

02:39-03:55

Question by Rav Chaim Brovender: How should we present Biblical personalities to our students? As people they can relate to, or superhuman?

03:55-24:51

RAL: (My answers aren't authoritative.) There are different traditions. Rav Aharon Kotler wrote a *kuntres* on the Avot. *Sefer Parashat Derakhim* relates to the topic too. *Ya'arot Dvash* on *Megillat Esther*. Baalei Mussar have an etherealized view -- Avot as superhuman. We would come to Rav Hutner's house; his Sichot were later turned into *Pachad Yitzchak*. Speaking with me afterward, he referred to Rav Lessin (Mashgiach Ruchani at YU) as speaking about "Esav HaTzaddik." Cf. Rav Yitzchak Isaac Sher's comment that Esav came with 400 roshei yeshiva!

In contrast, we find it hard to relate to the superhuman. We want to see the conflicts, tensions, inner drama. What did Avraham feel during the 3 days before the Akeidah? Was he torn?

We have to cope with Charlton Heston [and other Hollywood portrayals]. Biblical criticism in the 19th century was not only about tearing apart the text, but tearing apart the people as well.

We can acknowledge the greatness while recognizing faults as well -- the greatness is human. Ramban and Netziv took this approach. It isn't cutting down the Avot to our size! Reverence isn't encouraged today... Being critical is legitimate, but maintaining reverence and awe is critical.

24:52-25:02

R. Jeffrey Saks asks for questions from the ATID fellows and faculty.

### **2 Biblical Personalities (Part 2)**

25:03-25:56

Question: How should we present Biblical personalities to younger children? (How do we instill reverence and Yirat Shamayim?)

25:56-30:16

RAL: (Don't refer to me in the third person.) We'd like early youth to be an age of wonder. No need to rush to tamper with it by raising questions they don't have yet (at least on this topic). In contrast, high school students will raise the questions themselves.

### **3 Textual Variants in the Chumash**

30:23-30:57

Question: When the Rambam speaks of Torat Moshe, does he mean he must believe that as a

historical fact? I'm referring to the Rabbi Akiva Eger and *Masekhet Sofrim*.

30:58-39:57

RAL: (First clarifying the question with the questioner.) The question needs to be about Chazal (it wasn't an innovation of the Rambam). Would someone who was familiar with only the Rambam be aware of the "secret" that there are some variants in the text of the Chumash (as mentioned in Rabbi Akiva Eger on Shabbat)? Probably not. They'd get the impression of a monolithic text. But that doesn't undermine the overall position in Rambam and Chazal -- there are differences here and there. Chazal and Rishonim were well-aware of this. For example, "Three Torah scrolls were found in the Courtyard" (*Masekhet Sofrim* 6:4). Ben Asher and Ben Naftali. Yesh Eim LaMikra and Yesh Eim LaMesorah. The Orthodox Forum volume [*Modern Scholarship in the Study of Torah*] has an article on the topic by Yeshayahu Maori. Rambam's position is not completely clear. He adopted a tradition [Ben Asher], but knew about the other one.

Should we communicate this to our students? Current Chumashim include the variants, so intelligent high school students might already be aware of the issue. If they're told that there are no variants, and then discover in college that there are, it could hurt their Emunah. Gemara Kiddushin 30a: "We don't know which words are supposed to be Chaser and Yeter." The Sha'agat Aryeh used this as the basis to say we can't fulfill the mitzvah of writing a Sefer Torah. The Rav thought that was inconceivable, and gave the Gemara a different reading. I wonder if the Sha'agat Aryeh would still have said it if he had lived after Wellhausen.

#### **4 Reading Up on Challenging Material; Yetziat Mitzrayim (Part 1)**

40:03-40:35

Question: To what extent should educators study such material [that challenges the Torah]?

40:37-54:10

RAL: Two aspects -- studying for themselves personally, and as part of their professional training. Personally -- Once, the great enemy was philosophy. But R' Bachya [ibn Pakuda] writes in Sha'ar HaYichud that faith without investigating God's existence is shallow. Some extend this to today's problematic issues. Tanakh in light of archaeology, Semitic religions, etc. Rav Mordechai Breuer tried to be *megayer* the Documentary Hypothesis with a kabbalistic mikvah. That's one approach. The other approach would rather have *temimut* than confrontation. One issue is which kind of *emunah* is better. Another is the risk of losing one's faith (which wasn't a threat in R' Bachya's time).

Professionally -- An educator needs to be aware of the issues that will come up, to know how to field questions. More important than any answer you give is that the students should have respect for your depth (not your naivete). They should sense that you're aware of a problem (e.g., the double creation story), and they're not the first ones to notice it. But you need to weigh loss against gain. It depends what population you're dealing with. If dealing with Charedim, this literature isn't as important. An overview of the issues would be enough for you. In contrast, some questions don't come from exposure to the outside culture but are immanent in the text itself. For example, a teacher once told me that a boy asked how Yetziat Mitzrayim was different from someone setting a house on fire and then rescuing the residents (since God caused the Jews to be enslaved in the first place).

#### **5 Tanakh vs. Gemara (Part 1)**

54:13-54:33

Question: What's the place of Tanakh in the day school curriculum (elementary and high school)? Should there be a difference between boys and girls?

54:39-1:09:06

RAL: For centuries, Tanakh didn't play an important part in yeshiva curriculum, especially in Europe. (In the Sephardi world, it was taught, but largely with memorization.) "Keep your children away from *higayon*" (*Berakhot* 28b). Rav Moshe Feinstein knew Tanakh backwards and forwards, but didn't learn it with the same seriousness as Gemara! Many Jews end up having Christian associations with Tanakh concepts such as God as redeemer. They relate to God as a commander (*metzaveh*). The joke in Telz was that someone would know the *pasuk* from the Gemara, would know the Gemara from the Tosafot, and would know the Tosafot from the *Ketzot*. (Jokes are often revealing.) For many, the prime religious experience is through Torah SheB'al Peh.

In fact, there's no Machshavah without Tanakh. There are *pesukim* that can nourish us in ways that Torah SheB'al Peh can't. (On David's wish that people should receive reward for reciting Tehillim just as for learning the tractates of Negaim and Ohalot, Rav Chaim of Volozhin commented that he didn't get his wish.) Today, there's a revival of Tanakh study. Our yeshiva [Har Etzion] is a leader in it.

Consider the population you're dealing with. Will their Jewish education end after high school? If so, the need for Machshavah is that much greater.

While I'm keen on girls learning Gemara, I would still assume it's less central for them than for boys. Besides, girls tend to be more interested than boys in human issues, which come up more in Tanakh than in Gemara. I'm in favor of both subjects being taught to both genders, but the combination should probably differ. I'm not so in touch with elementary school issues, but the differences seem to be overly exaggerated. We complained to Chorev that while our sons started Mishnayot in 2nd grade, our daughters didn't start until 6th grade (so we had to teach them at home).

## 6 Tanakh vs. Gemara (Part 2)

1:09:09-1:14:22

Question by Rav Chaim Brovender: You're confident that on the intellectual level, the Torah is alright. But you also mentioned the word "reverence." I've never found that answering confrontational questions leads to reverence or *emunah*; all it does is deflect. On the other hand, you mentioned the prime religious experience being through Torah SheB'al Peh. We've been learning it for thousands of years, so that's where our *frumkeit* is, where our Yirat Shamayim is. There's a whole tradition of interpretation for Torah SheB'al Peh which barely exists for Tanakh. (Except for the Malbim, we don't have a tradition of learning Tanakh that is associated with reverence.) If the main religiosity is through Gemara, shouldn't it play a larger role in the curriculum? Maybe the Telz joke is right -- essential to learning Gemara, and Tanakh is just along the way.

1:14:23-1:28:42

RAL: (Is the whole of Torah included in responding to confrontational questions? Certainly not. I never said it was.) First, intellectual analysis vs. inculcating reverence. I am wholly in your camp as far as giving more weight to reverence than to intellectual analysis. (Cf. *Avot* on one's *Chokhmah* vs. his Yirah.) We need to work on inculcating awe in general and awe for God. They determine a person's religious stance much more than does the intellectual.

Second, how much of that comes through Tanakh, and how much through Gemara? I question your assumptions. Many in our schools are turned off by Gemara. I don't accept it, but I can't ignore it. Many high schools in Israel have a sense of crisis about learning Gemara. Even if you say our current population is "sick" so they need the "medicine" of Tanakh, but that a "healthy" population should just learn Gemara, I don't accept that either. Traditionally, people *brought* their reverence to the Gemara. The reverence didn't come from what they were learning; it was an

interaction which led to more reverence. It's an unfair comparison to say "Just look at these people reading articles in *Megadim!*" Rav Mordechai Breuer pointed out that people were just not learning Tanakh [until recently].

Chazal learned Tanakh! You can see it in midrashim. Afterwards, people who would have focused on Tanakh got it through Machshavah. You certainly *can* get reverence from Tanakh. (It might not come from *Ezra* and *Nechemiah*, but it can come from *Chabakkuk*.)

I'm in the same camp as Rav Chaim [Brovender] as far as the primacy and centrality of learning Torah SheB'al Peh. But I think there's a great deal to be gained from learning Tanakh. The Rav and [his brother] Rav Ahron dealt with Tanakh in a serious way.

### 7 Tanakh vs. Gemara (Part 3)

1:28:45-1:31:31

Question by Simi Peters: This is a very Litvish conversation, and seems very removed from the educational world we live in. What about Machshavah, Chassidut, and Mussar? (All of them deal with Middot.) How *does* one create a community that has reverence? My son (who switched to a Charedi school and is happy with the Ahavat Torah there) asked me, "Does *anybody* like learning Gemara?"

1:31:32-1:36:12

RAL: (I was dealing with the issues as formulated in the question about Gemara vs. Tanakh.) I agree with your critique. The spiritual elements are critical. But having Yirah sequentially before Chokhmah isn't necessarily how it works in school. And it's hard to give a course in Yirat Shamayim. Mussar works wonders for some, but not for others.

### 8 Reverence

1:36:13-1:36:50

Question by R. Jeffrey Saks: Given the sociological problem of irreverence, what should educational and rabbinic leaders do to help create reverence?

1:36:52-1:39:26

RAL: We can try to radiate a sense of the depth and reverence we feel. I don't know if a rabbi's sermon can do more than a classroom presentation. Yes, there's a problem when children have heard of the Rolling Stones but not the Avnei Nezer. Being familiar with our rabbis can be valuable. But what is more important is what the adults radiate.

### 9 Challenges of Education

1:39:30-1:39:54

Question: What are the educational issues that you've been struggling with?

1:39:57-1:47:47

RAL: If I had a different population, I'd have different problems. Rav Amital likes to quote the Kotzker that the Gemara's recommendation to drag the Yetzer Hara to the Beit Midrash (Sukkah 52b) means that you'll find a different Yetzer Hara there. It's a constant effort to grow [spiritually]. Sometimes you have to run just to stay still. Problems are in three areas: (1) Spirituality. (2) The motivation. How do you turn people on to learning? Passionate educators don't always succeed in communicating that passion. (3) Emunah. Faith, belief, trust in God. Sometimes you find yourself being more conservative than you want to be, driven to guard [what's important].

Rav Hutner said that you never know in education where the successes and failures will come from. Try to communicate a sense of your own involvement, your own values. That's the single

most effective thing you can do. The glory and frustration in education are connected to trying to mold people. They're not moldable clay -- they are malleable and can be influenced only up to a point. The highs and the lows in education have a much greater distance between them than in most careers. (It's not like a sine curve but a cosine curve.) The wonder and the frustration! Anybody in education who says they're never frustrated -- that's absolutely a lie.

### **10 Yetziat Mitzrayim (Part 2)**

1:48:13-1:48:22

Question: How did you answer the question about Yetziat Mitzrayim?

1:48:35-1:51:50

RAL: Being in the Kur HaBarzel (Devarim 4:20's description of Egypt as a purifying furnace) created a meaningful experience. We should convey a sense that Galut Mitzrayim was not simply torture or a punishment. It raises the other issue of individual suffering vs. collective good.

### **11 Text vs. Tradition**

1:51:58-1:53:06

Question: The mimetic tradition vs. textual approach (in other words, text vs. tradition). Should educators emphasize one over the other?

1:53:09-1:57:57

RAL: Unfortunate if they're presented as opposed to each other. In homes where the children have no mimetic tradition to pick up, they turn to the text (or mimic their rosh yeshiva). Regarding the Gemara in Bava Batra (21a) about establishing an educational system, Rav Hutner said it was a response to a crisis, not what ought to have been. "Veshinantam levanecha" indicates that the ideal was for a father to teach his children directly.