



Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l at ATID -- March 28, 2001

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

This document summarizes the recorded question-and-answer session (length: 1:32:10) available for download at www.blog.webyeshiva.org

00:01-03:23

Introduction: Rav Dovid Ebner introduces Rav Aharon's Q&A session. Rav Hutner explained why a student got so much out of his short *divrei torah* for Purim. It was because they were unprepared, and thus in the category of "*Devarim hayotz'im min halev nikhnasim el halev*" (what comes from the heart can enter the heart).

1 Discomfort with Question-Answer Sessions

03:25-09:32

RAL: I accepted the invitation tonight [to answer questions], but with some discomfort. Two reservations:

First, I remember reading about Coleridge that he stopped writing and stayed at home. People called him "the sage of Highgate" because they would come visit and he would share his wisdom. Being like that would make me feel old!

Second, it's before Pesach now, a time of questions. My home follows the tradition of only the youngest child asking. But Briskers, based on the Rambam, say that while the youngest starts the asking, everyone asks. Tonight, it's as if all you have to do is ask me, press the button, and out comes an answer. That's erroneous, and from my perspective pretentious.

Questions from the world of Chinukh are perennial; the answers, though, are not perennial but always change. Some issues do stay the same.

We should see ourselves as sharing problems with each other. If I have something to contribute, I will. But you don't have all the questions, and I certainly don't have all the answers.

2 Educational Goals

09:50-10:37

Question: What should we be asking ourselves when we walk into the classroom?

10:41-18:51

RAL: In general, it's good to start with what your ends and goals are, and then to think of the best means to achieve them.

Part of the problem is that the goals are often self-contradictory. For example, I recently heard a rosh yeshiva cited as saying that we can no longer follow the Talmudic advice (*Sanhedrin* 107b) of "*Smol docheh v'yamin mekareveh*" (the left hand should push away and the right hand should bring close), but rather we should do Kiruv (outreach) only. I also met someone in America who complained that at his son's high school, the rabbis just focus on getting the students to go to learn in Israel (because maybe there they'll learn a little); accordingly, they don't assign any homework in Limudei Kodesh (Torah classes). On the one hand, you want to inculcate skills and knowledge, and on the other hand you want to inculcate Ahavat HaTorah (the love of Torah). Coming down hard on a student might get better results [in skills and knowledge]; but what will

his relationship be with Torah? (Story about the Green Bay Packers.)

The goals will differ in different communities. In some places, the rabbis are fighting for Shemirat Shabbat. In others, against intermarriage. In yet others, those are taken for granted. You need to deal with the total socio-cultural situation of the student and the class.

After clarifying the goals, curriculum can be addressed.

3 Teaching *Middot*

18:57-19:16

Question: Should *middot* (proper character traits) be taught as a separate discipline within Limudei Kodesh? Or should they be taught through the teacher being a role model?

19:20-26:56

RAL: They don't contradict each other. The teacher should be a role model no matter what. Not necessarily as a role model, but because the Torah requires proper behavior; and hopefully that will result, in effect, in being a role model. The Gemara (*Chagigah* 15b) speaks of a teacher being like an angel. It's not that he plays the role of an angel, but that he does what he's supposed to do [the same way that an angel carries out its task].

The question is whether there should also be formal discussion of *middot*. First, Plato presents Socrates as addressing the issue of whether or not virtue can be taught. The Sophists said yes, in the sense of a finishing school [that teaches manners]. There's a whole literature on moral education, which would turn off the Briskers. Some of it is artificial, e.g., a medieval work (*Saint Benedict's Rule for Monasteries*) has a chapter on [twelve] (eight) steps to humility. My nephew Rabbi Mayer Twersky gives a series of *shiurim* at YU on *middot*. Some people like that! The question is whether you can make a nuts-and-bolts science out of it. *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography* has a schedule of working on *middot* (www.bartleby.com/1/1/4.html, paragraph 169ff). D. H. Lawrence, from a romantic point of view, has a blistering essay against this (www2.sunysuffolk.edu/lewiss/lawrence.htm). I can understand both.

One should certainly relate to *middot* as such. (What's wrong with arrogance, anger, jealousy.) Unlike secular educators who might want to keep values out, we would radically disagree and say we should educate morally.

4 Learning vs. Character Development

27:00-28:46

Question: Rav Doniel Schreiber writes in *Alei Etzion* ("Humility and Halakha: Placing Derekh Ha-limud in Perspective," www.vbm-torah.org/alei/7-6donie.rtf) that

Another issue that bears mention is character development. Moreinu HaRav Aharon Lichtenstein shlita once commented that if he were forced to choose between fostering learning or character development, he would rather people know less gemara but have greater sensitivity for one another. On many occasions HaRav Lichtenstein shlita has vigorously emphasized that "*yir'at Hashem hi otzro*" (Yeshaya 33:6), fear of God is His treasure, and as such must be heavily guarded and protected, as well as nurtured.

According to this, people should take time out of learning to develop their character. I was wondering about that: Isn't Gemara supposed to improve one's character and *middot*? What is learning supposed to change about the person, and how do they achieve it?

28:47-44:07

RAL: I don't imagine that Rav Schreiber is saying there's an inherent dichotomy and that you need to choose. Certainly a dichotomy is not what I have in mind. Nonetheless, the statement does reflect what I think, or at least what people think I think. What distinguishes the yeshiva

world from the academic world is that we say learning is organically related to Yirat Shamayim, *middot*, etc. It should mold character! We think the Torah ennobles and enriches the soul: "*meshivat nefesh*" (restoring the soul) in spiritual terms if not psychological. So it's fundamental to the way we structure a learning program.

Sadly, it doesn't always work. There are *talmidei chakhamim* (Torah scholars) who are substantial *lomdim* (learners) and yet are insensitive, arrogant and vain, or highly competitive. 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. As we know, there's a Yetzer Hara that exists in the world of accomplishment and intellectual dexterity. So it doesn't always work.

The article's statement is correct in the following sense: If I had to choose between (1) people who were simple but of high moral station and (2) eminent *talmidei chakhamim* of low moral station, I'd much prefer the former. *Pirkei Avot's* statement that Yirah should come before Chokhmah is partly in terms of chronological sequence, but also in axiological priority: which is more important to you?

Rav Chaim of Volozhin says that Torah LiShmah (for its own sake) doesn't mean for the sake of heaven but for the sake of Torah. The equivalent of art for art's sake, or knowledge for knowledge's sake. Others have a more pietistic view. Rabbenu Bechaye on *Pirkei Avot's* statement that "*Lo hamidrash ikar ela hama'aseh*" (doing beats learning) says that the only purpose of learning is doing, the pragmatic result. That's anathema to me as a Brisker, but there's something to it. Without the action, there's a question as to the depth of one's commitment.

45 years ago I spent Shabbat with Rav Ahron Soloveichik. He was in favor of women learning, and commented that "If I hadn't learned *Masekhet Shabbat*, I think my Shabbat would be different." He wasn't referring to knowing what to do, but rather to the passion of keeping Shabbat.

Yes, you need to confront the issue of prioritizing what to learn. But I would steer clear of a forced dichotomy between *midrash* and *ma'aseh*, or between character development and learning. What we should insist on is that you need to bring something spiritual to the learning. If that starts to evaporate, take some time out to learn *mussar*. One author tries to fit it with the Gemara that compares Yirat Shamayim to *chomtin*, a preservative (*Shabbat* 31a). The ratio of preservative to grain is 1:180. So then he says that if you learn 15 hours a day, take out 5 minutes to learn *mussar*. I don't know about that.

Rabbenu Bechaye on "*Chaim mavet ... uvacharta bachaim*" says there's a Torah of life and a Torah of death. He cites the Gemara that Torah is a *sam* (potion) -- sometimes it's a potion that gives life, and sometimes it's a potion that gives death (*Yoma* 72b).

Ideally, it's a dialectical dynamic: one learns, becomes ennobled, and wants to learn more.

5 Kids at Risk

44:12-45:27

Question by Michelle Berkowitz: I'm doing a project on children at risk (substance abuse, leaving the path, etc.) Do you think this phenomenon is due to a weakness in our educational system? And do we have the tools to deal with it?

45:30-55:35

RAL: Our community does involve greater exposure to the outside. Milton wrote in the *Areopagitica*: "I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue [unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary]." He believes in the value of confrontation. That's part

of the educational philosophy of the Modern Orthodox, even though they haven't read the *Areopagitica*. Separate from religious and moral reasons, the Modern Orthodox want to be part of the world for material reasons, and don't want to see themselves as cloistered. Nothing to do with building character. There were Rishonim who viewed a superior faith as resulting from confronting and overcoming challenges. Of course, that's *if* you overcome it. *Chovot HaLevavot* denigrates faith that was handed down by tradition. Meiri does as well. They assumed the result of the confrontation would be positive. In a modern context, very often it is not. (That Milton quote is from 1644, when the English Revolution was getting into high gear and his hopes for England were dashed.)

Not that things are fine in the Charedi world. *The Jewish Observer* devoted an issue to substance abuse in their world. Probably the numbers of defections from mitzvah observance and religious identity are higher in the Modern Orthodox world. But is that a reason to reject a Modern Orthodox approach? Arguable. We would pay a heavy spiritual price, and the loss would outweigh the benefit. (And many of us wouldn't be able to become Charedi.) Skepticism and drugs both involve abandonment of one's home values. But the motivations may well be different. Both are branches, but the root is the issue of one's identity.

6 Literary Criticism in Torah Learning

55:38-56:04

Question: In which Jewish areas of study can we use literary criticism?

56:07-1:02:10

RAL: I've been out of the world of literary criticism longer than you've been alive! When I started learning Torah, no *mechkar* was involved at all. But later, I found it useful for structural and textual elements of Tanakh, *halakhah*, and *aggadah*. The main thing I learned in Harvard Graduate School was about complexity. The complexity of life, of people, of history, of literary works. I found that enriching in life and certain areas of learning. Lately, though, I've been viewing *halakhah* more in terms of its own categories.

7 Career Decisions

1:02:13-1:02:52

Question [Hebrew]: What direction should we recommend for high school graduates?

1:02:54-1:11:30

RAL [Hebrew]: There's no one answer. The economic and spiritual challenges before the State and in the early days of the State are very different from today's. Then, Zionists would ask, "What does the Land need?" Today, it's less about how to keep people from starving and more about the distribution of wealth. Therefore, what we need to focus on is the spiritual side. "*Im ein kemach, ein Torah; im ein Torah, ein kemach*" does not mean the two are equal. As Moliere wrote, "One must eat to live, and not live to eat" ("The Miser"). The ethical and spiritual quality of life is more important, and is critical to our national survival. People today make decisions based on egocentrism, and we need to return things to the way they were -- idealism. When you're beyond the point of "eat bread with salt," you can focus on the spiritual quality of life.

8 Turning Students Against Parents

1:11:35-1:13:01

Question [Hebrew]: Our students come from a different world. Sometimes the values of the home contradict those of the classroom. How much should the teacher get involved?

1:13:04-1:23:40

RAL [Hebrew]: Some say to strive for maximum separation of the student from his home's values.

Early Bnei Akiva high schools set up dormitories for this purpose. There are schools that unapologetically say "We want to change you completely." I can understand this, but it annoys me and I view it as very *b'diavad* (nonideal). I don't want a school to be a shield between parents and children, and an extreme form of *in loco parentis*. If you separate a student from his parents in order to make him more receptive to your messages, you're closing off the possibility of having those messages influence the home. (Not many homes have changed on account of a child who learned something contradictory at school.) Don't give up on the home! Use your judgment; it depends on the family. But I'm very opposed to announcing that you're trying to get the child to rebel against the home. You want to raise the home's threshold of mitzvah observance without bulldozing who they are.

9 Problems with Scholarship

1:24:01-1:24:37

Question: What problems are involved with the use of academic scholarship in Torah study?

1:24:49-1:31:21

RAL: There are two problems. One is the problem of content, with scholarship of history or archaeology possibly contravening Tanakh or Chazal. The other is the problem of historicization per se. Someone wrote, "If I knew Shakespeare, what would I know? I'd see him in a pub." What does that have to do with the immortal bard? So too, some are concerned that being too familiar with the world of Chazal and Rishonim would take away from their idealization. In reading about Rashi's wine dealings, the sense of his (not literal) *ruach hakodesh* could get lost. This relates not just to hero worship and romanticism, but to the *mesorah* in general. The secular world doesn't have a sense of awe, but we very much want to have it. My teacher Douglas Bush cited Erasmus' famous utterance, "Saint Socrates, pray for us," and pointed out that a modern critic would never have such reverence (Douglas Bush, *The Renaissance and English Humanism* [University of Toronto Press, 1939], pp. 132-33). Debunking and lowering of stature is a problem. If you can get your students to imagine our great ones as higher in stature, you're strengthening their connection to the *mesorah*.

1:31:21-end

Rabbi Jeffrey Saks: Some of the topics addressed tonight appear in RAL's essay in the volume edited by J.J. Schacter (*Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures*).