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# *Impassioned Chinuch*

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO  
REACHING THE NEXT GENERATION

# ***IMPASSIONED CHINUCH***

**TEACHING TO REACH THE NEXT  
GENERATION**

**RABBI SHAYA COHEN  
WITH NOSSON STERNBACH**

PRIORITY-1 PRODUCTIONS



# IMPASSIONED CHINUCH

לעילוי נשמת

שלמה יחיאל בן משה הלוי

**Shlomo Yechiel Ben Moshe HaLavi**

Who firmly believed in the importance of Torah  
education and was *moser nefesh* to give his children a

Torah *chinuch*

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# INTRODUCTION

The world is changing faster than we can imagine. Despite the horrors of World War II, there followed a massive resurgence in the observant Jewish community. Once marginalized and deemed an irrelevant relic of the past by secular pundits, the *frum* community has experienced enormous growth since the mid-20th century. Politicians now tour our packed *bati medrash*, and elementary schools find themselves inundated with *talmid* applications. Additionally, the observant community is blessed with an unprecedented abundance of religious amenities. Unlimited kosher food with the strictest *hashgacha*; vast crops of exquisitely beautiful *esrogim*; and a plethora of stores offering countless products designed exclusively for the *frum* community.

When we take stock of our situation, a simple reality emerges, we have become “The Establishment.”

This sounds like a phenomenal development - gone are the days of fighting to keep Shabbos or searching to find kosher food - but this rosy state of affairs hides a darker truth: Our *chinuch* system is facing serious challenges, and unless we act quickly, we may be in trouble.

I have been involved in *chinuch* for over fifty years, and it is clear to me - as well as to my colleagues - that we have grown too big for our own good. Our system has turned into a slow-moving behemoth that churns out *talmidim* without the ability to give the services and attention needed to bring out each individual's strengths. In previous generations, *rebbeim* fought to retain each *talmid*. Now we take them for granted and simply assume that every new class will follow our tradition.

The world is changing around us. Children are more sophisticated than in the past, the world is more complicated, and parents can be clueless. Often, it's only when their child begins cracking under the pressure of anger, apathy, guilt, and doubt that parents realize something is wrong. By then, it may be too late. The damage is done, and the children will have to begin the slow, hard process of building themselves back up from the ground floor.

Ubiquitous internet access is only a small part of our problem. As a community, we have become religiously meticulous, but Hashem - and our relationship with Him - has slowly been pushed out of the picture. Our *frumkeit* has grown quantitatively but has deteriorated qualitatively. Most of us plod on, hoping to one day rekindle our inspiration. This approach may work for people who have established lives and routines, but our children pick up on this apathy, and it can have a devastating effect. Many of our *talmidim* are doing great: they are excited about *mitzvos*, learn diligently, marry well, and give us lots of *nachas*. But

many others are drifting. Some are listlessly going through the motions, more or less following the rules, but are indifferent towards *Yiddishkeit*. Others realize that they never really CHOSE this life. They lie awake at night, fantasizing about escaping their religion for a life of their own choosing. Often the parents and *rebbeim* sense nothing, until one day the child musters the courage to simply leave; to walk into the nearest McDonalds and turn his back on *frumkeit*.

Do not be naive and believe that your neighborhood/school/shul/family is isolated enough from the outside world to protect your children from this phenomenon. People do not talk openly about this topic, but trust me, I have been dealing with this problem for decades and I can assure you that no one is immune.

This issue is no longer limited to a narrow demographic of “at-risk” teenagers. The age of children flirting with exiting *Yiddishkeit* is getting ever younger. Fifth graders are approaching their teachers with stories of living double lives full of doubt and conflict, unsure about the truth of the Torah and unsure whether they want to lead *frum* lives.

Children are also not the only ones leaving. The burgeoning phenomenon of “adults-at-risk” is growing too large to ignore. *Yeshiva* educated adults, many with large families, are leaving *frumkeit*. Some get divorced and move out of the community. Others stay and put on a show for the world, but are completely devoid of any religious attachment. No one knows the exact number of people who

have left or who are leading double lives, but the little that we do know shows that this trend is a cause for serious concern.

It is not my intention to be a fear monger: rather I am trying to shine a light on a challenging situation. In order to be effective in guiding the next generation of *talmidim* it is critical that we understand that we have a problem. Our 'establishment status' has led us to lower our guard, and we are suffering the consequences of this mistake. Proper *chinuch* requires vigilance and the ability to adapt to each generation's needs. Instead of playing catch-up, it is time to take the initiative and take measures to prevent this tragedy from growing.

So, what can we do? In this book, we will attempt to outline several simple yet fundamental adjustments in our approach to *chinuch* that can make a massive impact. Everyone has *bichirah*, and it is impossible to force anyone to succeed, but we must do everything in our power to give our *talmidim* the best chance to experience an impassioned and lasting commitment to *Yiddishkeit*.

One important area that we can emphasize is creating a happy and positive atmosphere in our *yeshivos*. Pressure and criticism can poison even the most dedicated *talmid*, and teachers must learn strategies to create a positive and growth-oriented atmosphere in their classrooms.

Teachers and *Mechanchim* often do not understand how powerful and meaningful they are in their *talmidim's* lives.

*Talmidim* look to teachers for support and approval, and a *talmid's* entire self-image can be destroyed by an overly critical *rebbe*. *Chazal* teach us that if one sees a *talmid* who is struggling in his studies, it is because his *rebbe* has not displayed a pleasant countenance toward him (Tannis 8a). Many successful people recall “that one *rebbe*” who gave them the confidence to succeed; who complimented them on their strengths, believed in them, and helped them to overcome their weaknesses. A *rebbe* can forever alter the course of his *talmid's* life with something as simple as offering a non-judgmental ear when they are struggling or a few genuine words of praise when he puts in an effort. In this book, we will discuss practical strategies for *rebbeim* to build these critical relationships and to maintain these connections long after their *talmidim* leave the classroom.

Another important change we can make in our *chinuch* system is to bring *emunah* into the classroom. This has been an issue of much controversy lately, with some educators encouraging the introduction of lectures intended to disprove evolution, biblical archeology, and biblical criticism in our *yeshivos*, while other *gedolim* decry this practice in the strongest terms, claiming that this approach backfires and leaves *talmidim* with far shakier *emunah* than before the lectures. The approach that I have found effective is to address the concerns on both sides of the aisle. There is no question that our children's *emunah* needs to be fortified, and inaction can lead to tragedy. On the other hand, “proving” the Torah to our *talmidim* is the wrong approach. We

believe that *rebbeim* must find ways of conveying to their *talmidim* the reality that Hashem created the world and gave us the Torah at *Har Sinai*. This can be accomplished by emphasizing our connection to an unbroken chain of *mesorah* as well as the reality of Hashem's presence in our day to day lives. In the coming chapters, we will outline an approach that allows *rebbeim* to infuse their *talmidim* with confidence in their *emunah*.

While on this topic, it is important to mention that *rebbeim* must be more prepared than ever to help *talmidim* who are struggling with questions of *emunah*. In our democratized world, a simple visit to the library or bored click on a computer screen can fill a *talmid's* mind with *kifraah*. Knowing how to address these concerns will be discussed in the coming chapters.

Another important change in the *chinuch* system is to begin emphasizing the benefits accrued by a life of Torah and *mitzvos*. This generation of *talmidim* are increasingly less interested in benefits in the next world and need to know what they stand to gain in the 'here and now' by following in their *rebbeim's* footsteps.

An important issue that must be addressed is how to create *shiurim* that maximize the growth of our *talmidim*. *Rebbeim* must create a *shiur* format that challenges and involves *talmidim*, not a long-form lecture that discourages inclusion and participation. *Rebbeim* often do not realize when they are cramming too much information into one

*shiur* or are creating an atmosphere that inhibits optimal growth. If we want our *talmidim* to thrive, we must leave the lecture format behind and embrace a more dynamic approach to transmitting the Torah. Common pitfalls and advice on how to create a great *shiur* experience will be discussed in the coming chapters.

Most importantly, we must help our *talmidim* build a personal and passionate relationship with Hashem. Unless our educational system makes a deliberate attempt to teach its *talmidim* how to connect with Hashem, our students often simply forget about Hashem, or worse - develop a negative attitude towards Him. I often say that when I ask teenagers what they think about when they imagine Hashem, they quote the pasuk, “*Kal nikamos Hashem.*” What a tragedy! We must transmit our excitement for avodas Hashem to our *talmidim*.

As educators, parents look to us to teach and train their children. We are on the front lines, and the religious commitment of the next generation rests squarely in our hands. We are living in a crazy world, and how we act now can have effects that reverberate for hundreds of years.

***Rabbi Shaya Cohen***

# CHAPTER 1: LOVE AND VALIDATION

From the moment we walk into a classroom, we are tasked with one of the most significant challenges we will ever face. Our sole responsibility is to pass on our *mesorah* to the next generation and to transform our *talmidim* into healthy, well-adjusted *shomrei Torah u'mitzvos*. We all want to be great teachers. We want to connect to our *talmidim* and help mold them into people who will make us proud. Yet giving over proper *chinuch* is no simple matter. The most important question that every *rebbe* must answer is how to influence their *talmidim*. To do this, one must be aware of how the heart and mind operate. If one looks at the Torah for guidance, a number of profound ideas emerge.

Firstly, love and friendship are two of the most powerful forces in the world, and are critical for effective teaching. When Esav came to confront Yaakov, he was burning with such intense hatred that his emotions solidified into a law of nature – *halacha hi bi'yadua, Esav soneh l'Yaakov*. Yet, the Ralbag (*Toelios, Parshas Vayishlach*) teaches us that when Yaakov offered the possibility of friendship, Esav's

hate could have been melted. Such is the power of love. Even the possibility of friendship can be enough to melt the hardest heart. After all, Esav must have been suspicious that Yaakov was, once again, trying to fool him. Nevertheless, Yaakov's overtures of friendship could have melted his heart<sup>1</sup>.

Additionally, making your *talmidim* feel validated as a person and respected for their positive qualities is one of the most effective tools in a *Rebbe's* arsenal. Wanting to feel worthy and appreciated is one of the most potent drives of every human being. The Hebrew word for happiness – *osher*, shares a root with the word *ishur* – validation. When a *talmid* feels respected and appreciated as a person by his teacher, his entire being fills with brightness and opportunity. (For more information on this topic, see Appendix 1: What is Happiness.)

When Rav Nosson Zvi Finkel *zt"l*, the *Alter* of Slabodka, was opening his *yeshiva* he approached Rav Yisroel Salanter *zt"l* for advice. Rav Yisroel Salanter quoted the *pasuk* in *sefer Yeshaya*: “The purpose of a *yeshiva* is *li'hachacha*

1 כתב הרלב"ג בפרשת וישלח (בתועליות), שהטעם שיעקב האריך לפרש עניינו לעשו באמרו עם לבן גרתי ויהי לי שור וחמור וגוי, היה משום שהרוצה להסיר שנאת חבירו מעליו יגיד לו עניניו ופרטי חייו, שהתקרבות כזה אין האדם עושה אלא עם אוהבו ויעלמו מהשונא, וא"כ כשיספר עניניו להשונא ישא בלבבו שהוא באמת אוהב אותו וישבור שנאתו.

וקי' שעשו היה שונאו שנאה גדולה משום ויעקבני זה פעמים, וכבר היה בחוק הטבע של עשו הלכה היא עשו שונא ליעקב, ויעקב לא הגיד לו אלא קצת מעניניו. אשר מזה נראה שכח האהבה הוא חזק כ"כ שאפי' ספק בלבד בלב השונא דלמא הוא אוהבו באמת משכח אפי' השנאה הגדולה ששייד, אבל דוקא אהבה אמרי תית ולא מן השפה ולחוץ.

*yos ruach shi'falim u'lihachayos leiv nidkeim* (Yeshayahu 57:15)– to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the despondent.” This remarkable advice created a revolution in the concept of *yeshivos*.

Being a successful educator requires understanding the key motivators of the human spirit. The Alter of Slabodka created a *yeshiva* that taught each of its *talmidim* to appreciate their own incredible value and discover their hidden strengths. It was this ideology of validation and encouragement that my *rebbeim* taught me as the central approach to *chinuch* and that I, in turn, try to teach my *talmidim*. Few tools are as influential in shaping behavior as are uplifting someone and giving them the respect due to a human being.

I remember one of the most troublesome *talmidim* to ever walk into the *yeshiva*. A bright and energetic young man, Yitzchak was one of the biggest troublemakers I had ever encountered. I have been teaching for close to half a century, yet in all those years few people have managed to cause me as much tension as Yitzchak.

He lit fires on *yeshiva* property, picked fights, drank alcohol... I found myself dreading the ring of my phone alerting me about Yitzchak's latest exploits. During the time that Yitzchak was a *talmid* in the *yeshiva*, I spent more time in the dormitory settling issues than at almost any other time in my life.

I often felt like expelling Yitzchak, but always held back,

hoping that perhaps, somehow, he would change for the better.

One day, after around six months of mischief, Yitzchak showed up for *shacharis* on time, a rare occurrence. The next day I noticed another peculiar sight, Yitzchak was sitting with a recorder trying to write up the day's *shiur*. Yitzchak was transforming. My phone stopped ringing with staff members asking me to come down and deal with Yitzchak's latest escapade. Before long, Yitzchak had completely transformed into a productive and well-adjusted bachur. I was thrilled with Yitzchak's transformation, and one day I asked him to explain to me what changed. I will never forget what he told me.

“Wherever I went I was always a troublemaker. I was not good at learning and was a disruptive force in any classroom. I knew that my teachers and parents saw me as a failure. I internalized the fact that I would never amount to anything and embraced the life of a troublemaker - until I got to this *yeshiva*. The *rebbeim* here believed in me. They saw a potential in me that I did not think I possessed. It was that faith in my abilities that pushed me to change my behavior and become a proper *ben Torah*.”

It is worthwhile to elaborate on these two ideas: love and validation.

# LOVE YOUR TALMIDIM

Making a *talmid* feel loved and validated is critical to building a relationship.

I recall a chilling meeting I once had with a parent of one of my *talmidim*. My *talmid* felt a coldness from his parents that had caused him to lose all sense of self-worth. Despite being a talented young man, he had failed out of every *yeshiva* and was on the brink of abandoning *Yiddishkeit*.

“Your child does not feel connected to you,” I told the father. “If he felt that you loved him and cared about him, I think he will be able to stabilize his life and reintegrate into the *yeshiva*.”

“I love my child.” The father said. “But I don’t like him. I am sorry, but there is nothing I can do.”

I was speechless. I had never heard a parent say something like that about their child. This father did not like his child, and that apathy soured the relationship. We cannot hide anything from our children. This child sensed his father’s dislike – and it destroyed him.

When I was growing up, I felt the tremendous power of my parent’s love towards me. As a small child it was clear to me that I mattered to them more than anything in the world. I honestly believed that my parents lived for me. It was that love that gave me the strength to face the world and to keep fighting in the face of hardship.

The most important element of being an effective teacher is understanding this simple idea: Children need love and approval. They need it as much as a fish needs water and a person needs air. Without love and approval, children break.

As a teacher it is your job to cultivate a relationship with your *talmidim*. Below are a few ideas to help build a loving and warm *rebbe-talmid* relationship.

### *Engage with Your Talmidim*

This may sound obvious, but to build a relationship with our *talmidim*, we need to engage with them. Do not sit in a proverbial “ivory tower,” aloof and inaccessible. Rather, pay attention to your *talmidim*. Find time to talk to them about their progress. Talk to them with warmth and let them feel that you enjoy their company.

If something is bothering your *talmid*, sit down with them and tell them that you care about their success. If a *talmid* shares something that is challenging him, be an empathetic listener and try to help lighten their load. There are many different ways of communicating, but when your *talmidim* discuss their challenges, the most critical role that you can take is that of an empathetic listener. Do not rush to give advice. Rather, just listen, and let them feel that you fully understand and feel their pain.

As an aside, many people, when trying to be empathetic, end up being condescending and their attempts at helping

the person backfire. It is worth noting that there is a vital difference between sympathy and empathy. Sympathy is a form of expressed pity that is inherently condescending and often counterproductive. Empathy is connecting with someone else's feelings. When talking to someone going through a struggle, be careful not to talk down to them or let them feel that you pity them. Rather, make them feel you understand, connect with, and validate the emotions that they are feeling. Nothing is more soothing to a wounded heart than feeling understood.

### *Show Your Love*

A teacher should do little things to show his *talmidim* that he cares for them. Let them break class a few minutes early every now and then. Smile when they say something clever or intelligent. Show them that you want to spend time in their company. If you have a new *chiddush*, let them feel how excited you are to share it with them. Find ways to show each *talmid* how much having them in your class means to you. Each one of these actions leaves an indelible impression on your student. They understand that they are important to you. This gives them the confidence to grow and develop into outstanding bnei Torah.

## VALIDATION

To understand why validating our *talmidim* is so important, it's worthwhile to take a step back and analyze one of the foundations of the human condition. Consider

the following: All humankind shares a singular goal - to be happy. Yet defining happiness can be quite challenging. What exactly is happiness? Happiness comes in different forms, but a study in *Lashon Hakodesh* (see above) teaches us that one of the highest manifestations of happiness is the sense of contentment that fills someone when they feel good about themselves. When someone looks at their life and sees that they are valuable; that they are utilizing their talents and living a life that is true to themselves, they are filled with indescribable joy. This conception of happiness exists across the gamut of human experience, from the youngest child to the most elderly adult. We all want to feel good about ourselves.

The next question then becomes: how do we quantify our actions to decide if we are worthy of self-respect? There are many ways to gauge our self-worth, but one of the most common, especially for children, is the way others perceive us. Do other people appreciate our qualities? Are we loved and respected by our parents and teachers? We recognize love as the warm feeling engendered by those that appreciate our personality and strengths. When we feel loved, we feel validated as human beings. This feeling, in turn, allows us to rejoice in our life accomplishments and form a healthy sense of identity.

Many of us are mentally strong enough to enjoy our accomplishments even if others do not recognize our worth. But children are different. They are still forming their own conception of self and outside confirmation of their in-

trinsic value is critical for their development. One of the primary roles of a teacher is to give his *talmidim* the sense of self-confidence that comes with knowing that they are capable human beings. When your *talmidim* feel that you believe in them and view them as worthwhile, intelligent human beings, they are filled with happiness and feel empowered to succeed. The primary way to help your *talmidim* believe in themselves is to show them respect.

## RESPECT YOUR TALMIDIM

The concept of respecting your *talmidim* may sound odd. Aren't *talmidim* supposed to respect their teacher?

Yes, of course, *Talmidim* must respect their teachers; but teachers must also respect their *talmidim*. This idea is stated explicitly in the Rambam (*Hilchos Talmud Torah* 5:12). The Rambam writes that just like a *talmid* is obligated to honor his teacher, so too a teacher must honor his *talmidim*<sup>2</sup>. This powerful idea is the crux of effective education. Honor your *talmidim*. Give them respect and treat them with dignity. By treating your *talmidim* with respect, you fill them with a profound sense of self-worth.

Practically, this is achieved in the following ways.

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<sup>2</sup> כשם שהתלמידים חייבין בכבוד הרב כך הרב צריך לכבד את תלמידיו ולקרבן. כך אמרו חכמים (משנה אבות ד יב) "יהי כבוד תלמידך חביב עליך כשקד". וצריך אדם להזהר בתלמידיו ולא להבם שהם הבנים המהנים לעולם הזה ולעולם הבא:

## ***Respect Their Opinion***

The most significant form of validation that you can give your *talmidim* is to show them that you value their opinion. As a teacher, it is your job to train your *talmidim*'s minds and to expose them to new sources of information, but you will gain much if you also relate to them as intelligent and creative people. If they are making a point, even if it is mistaken, hear them out. If they are making a mistake, point out their error with respect and humility, and encourage them to reformulate their position correctly. Do not interrupt them and tell them that they are wrong. Take a moment or two to contemplate their opinion before answering. This shows them that you consider their opinion valuable and worthy of your attention.

## ***The Chazon Ish***

Our family has letters that the *Chazon Ish* wrote to my father-in-law discussing various Torah thoughts. Reading the letters, it is remarkable to see the respect and dignity the *Chazon Ish* displayed when voicing his disagreement. When engaged in an argument, no matter where the other person's level of scholarship stands relative to your own, it is always wise to talk respectfully and with humility.

## ***Minimize Rules***

As much as possible, allow your *talmidim* the freedom to make their own choices. When a teacher fills his *talmid*'s life with rules, they send the message that the *talmid* is

powerless and isn't capable of controlling their own life. The more autonomy you give your *talmidim*, the more confident and capable they will become.

Minimizing rules in the school or classroom can be difficult for teachers: giving *talmidim* independence can lead to problems, and it is easier to impose strict and unbending rules. But this authoritarian approach must be tempered. It is wise to walk a delicate balance between respect and caution.

Obviously, a well-established structure is important to the success of any classroom, and a *rebbe* must lay down a few firm rules and expectations. These rules must then be enforced in a consistent manner with consequences that are made clear from the start and that are educationally appropriate. Yet rules should be enacted sparingly, and even when you are administering consequences, be genuine and sympathetic. This sends your *talmidim* the message that you respect them and consider them capable of proper behavior even without external consequences.

### ***Respect Your Talmid's Individuality***

As schools grow and begin bursting at the seams with *talmidim*, educators can begin treating their *talmidim* as a collective block, creating 'molds' and expecting their *talmidim* to all conform to a single set of written and unwritten modes of thought and conduct. The reality is that every child is different, and it is deeply painful for a child to feel

shoehorned into a mold that does not allow him to express his individuality. We are a very academically oriented society and we want our *talmidim* to succeed in school and *yeshiva*. But every *talmid* has their unique strengths and weaknesses, and what comes naturally for one *talmid* may be very difficult for another. Children are hurt if they feel that they are being forced into a metaphorical box, and it is important that your *talmidim* do not feel forced to conform to a standard that does not fit their personality or temperament. Part of an educator's job is to find each of his *talmidim*'s unique talents and abilities and to find a way to allow each *talmid* to express and nurture them.

## CHAPTER 2: HOW TO GIVE CRITICISM

*Talmidim* misbehave, sometimes gravely and in a manner that demands swift correction. But understand, criticism can be dangerous and should be used with caution. *Talmidim* need their teachers to be proud of them, and directing disappointment or anger towards your *talmidim* can be devastating to them. It should be avoided whenever possible. One overly harsh word can undo years of work that have gone into building your *talmid's* self-worth.

Teachers will often react to this idea by pointing out that they are simply trying to be *michanech* the *talmid*. “It is my responsibility to teach my *talmidim* the correct path.”

This sentiment is well placed. Teachers must guide their *talmidim* in proper behavior. This does not mean, however, that one should react negatively whenever a *talmid* acts up. As a *rebbe*, your obligation is to give your *talmidim* the tools to serve Hashem. You must provide them with the training to learn independently, the inspiration to believe in themselves, and the emotional fortitude to persevere in the face of hardships. A *talmid* grows far more from knowing that

his teachers believe in him than from any reprimand. True *chinuch* stems from letting your *talmidim* know that you expect high standards from them because they are capable of great things. Scolding your *talmidim* over every petty issue is the antithesis of proper *chinuch*. *Talmidim* who are exposed to constant biting criticism will often develop a distaste for *yahadus*.

The way to truly influence your *talmidim* is to take the long view. When your *talmid* does something wrong and you want to reprimand him, ask yourself: Have I thought about the best way to approach this situation? Are my actions going to help my *talmid* grow to love *mitzvos* and Hashem? Is my response proportionate to the misdeed, or am I being reactionary? These questions will allow you to analyze whether or not your criticism is well placed. Practically, there are three general rules for proper criticism.

## WAIT, WAIT, WAIT

Unless your *talmid* is engaging in an activity that requires immediate interference, it is ill-advised to reprimand your *talmid* at the moment of his misdeed. Our instinctive knee-jerk reactions are often harsh and ineffective. If you reflexively criticize your *talmidim*, while they may desist from the inappropriate behavior, they will resist, and a deeply negative paradigm can develop. Your admonitions will lose their potency and you will be perceived by your *talmidim* as someone who cannot control his temper.

Whatever constructive effect you hoped to achieve will be transformed into needless resentment. If your *talmid* did something wrong, wait until the situation passes before taking any action. Approach your *talmid* later and calmly and gently explain to him why his actions were incorrect<sup>3</sup>.

## NEVER CRITICIZE THE PERSON

When you are reprimanding your *talmidim*, never make them feel like they are the problem. “What you did was a mistake,” is far more effective than, “What is wrong with you?!” If one makes their *talmid* feel like a failure, they have stunted the growth and have compromised their ability to be an effective and influential teacher.

## BE GENTLE

If your criticism is overly harsh, you will hurt your *talmid* and he will either begin ignoring you or he will begin to view himself as a failure. Couch your criticism as gently and softly as possible. Give your *talmid* every opportunity

3 רש"י בריש פרשת דברים (פ"א א"ג), מלמד שלא הוכיחן אלא סמוך למי תה, ממי למד מיעקב שלא הוכיח את בניו אלא סמוך למיתה, אמר ראובן בני אני אומר לך מפני מה לא הוכחתיך כל השנים הללו, כדי שלא תניחני ותלך ותדבק בעשו אחי, עכ"ד. והדברים תמוהים שראובן כבר עשה תשובה על מעשה בלהה והיה צדיק גמור, ויעקב ידע להוכיח בשפה רכה שלא יכלימונו, ואעפ"כ חשש יעקב שאם יוכיחנו בחייו ילך ראובן וידבק בעשו הרשע. וזה לימוד גדול עד כמה התוכחה יכולה לקלקל ולדחות בנים ותלמידים, וצריכים לזהר בתוכחה מאד מאד. וכ"ש שאסור להוכיח מישהו באופן שמשפילו ומבזהו, וכ"ש ק"ו בן בנו של ק"ו שלא להוכיחו בפני אחרים ולא ישא עליו חטא.

to save face. I will often advise teachers not to bring up the issue directly. For example, if your *talmid* acted with a lack of respect in the *Bais Medrash*, a few weeks later, engage your *talmidim* in a discussion about the proper way to act in a *Bais Medrash*. Speak rationally and explain that frivolous actions are inappropriate. Do not directly bring up your *talmid's* misdeed. This sends the right message while also sparing your *talmid* the shame of directly 'calling him out' for what he did.

## CONFRONTATION

Sometimes teachers discover that their *talmid* has committed a severe religious violation. This violation can involve stealing, viewing inappropriate material, listening to inappropriate music, or any number of *devarim assurim*. Many teachers find themselves overwhelmed with anger or panic when they discover the violation. "How could a *talmid* of my *yeshiva* do that?!" "What was he thinking?!" This overwhelming horror and disbelief can cause teachers to make critical *chinuch* mistakes. For your *talmid's* sake, take a deep breath and calm down.

Your *talmid* is human, and every human being makes mistakes. The worst thing you can do when you catch your *talmid* doing something wrong is to confront him without first reigning in your emotions. Your gut reaction will almost certainly engender a response that exceeds the response required for effective *chinuch*. Indulging in such

an emotionally charged response will hurt your *talmid* and teach him that you cannot be trusted to know his failings. If you react too strongly too often, your *talmid* will learn to vigilantly hide his wrong behavior, and will be unable to muster the courage to open up to anyone when he needs help.

Conversely, passivity is also misguided. Your *talmid* did something very wrong, and unless firmly reprimanded, he will view your tame response as tacit consent to his activities and become increasingly audacious. Aside from reinforcing harmful behavior, this haphazard approach can hurt the *talmid's* self-esteem. He knows that his actions were wrong and your indifferent behavior sends a message that you either do not care about him and have given up on him or that you do not care deeply enough about *Yiddishkeit* R”l.

The appropriate way to respond is to quietly, calmly, and seriously sit down with your *talmid* in a private place and discuss his actions. Let your *talmid* know that you are aware of his wrongdoings, but quickly turn the conversation towards the incredible power of *teshuva* and what he can learn from this slip-up. Make it clear to him that you understand that everyone makes mistakes. Most importantly, help your *talmid* formulate a plan for growth so that he is prepared the next time he is inclined to repeat the negative behavior.

Remember, being caught in a severe wrongdoing is trau-

matic, and your *talmid* is probably feeling mortified and humiliated. Aside from proper direction, your *talmid* also needs assurance that you still respect him. When reprimanding your *talmid* it is critical to repeatedly stress that their actions do not affect how you look at them. Tell your *talmid* what a fantastic person he is and tell him that you are confident that he will grow from his mistakes. Make it clear that everyone makes mistakes and that nothing stands in the way of sincere repentance. Your *talmid* will be grateful, and this softer approach will engender incredible loyalty in your *talmid* and lead to a lasting change in his behavior.

## CHAPTER 3: GETTING YOUR *TALMIDIM* TO LOVE *MITZVOS*

Every Jew's relationship to *mitzvos* exists somewhere on a spectrum of meaning. On one end is the view of *mitzvos* as a long list of rules, devoid of any profound significance. On the other end of the spectrum is the view of *mitzvos* as infinitely precious opportunities to connect to our Creator. Children's entire lives are circumscribed by rules. Without guidance, it is natural for children to relate to *mitzvos* as just more rules, rather than as opportunities for growth. Children have little control over their lives and are conditioned to follow rules regardless of whether they appreciate or understand their function.

There are four main keys to getting your *talmidim* to love and appreciate *mitzvos*: teaching the context of the *mitzvos*, explaining the benefits of *mitzvos*, showing that you love *mitzvos*, and making *mitzvos* pleasurable.

## TEACHING CONTEXT FOR THE *MITZVOS*

One of the most critical ways to give your *talmidim* an appreciation for the *mitzvos* is to teach them the significance and context of their actions. Teach them - on whatever level they can understand - the meaning of the *mitzvos* they perform. Bring up *mitzvos* that are performed daily and try to give your *talmidim* a broader sense of the importance of their actions. They should understand that every *mitzvah* is meaningful, and is a vital part of a cosmic mission. Explore the reasons and meaning behind each *mitzvah* in as much detail as they can understand. Once someone understands the reasons behind their actions, those actions are automatically imbued with far more significance than an act performed without comprehension.

## SHOW THE BENEFITS OF *MITZVOS*

One of the keys to making your *talmidim* appreciate *mitzvos* is to demonstrate their benefits. *Talmidim* must feel that performing *mitzvos* is advantageous to them in the 'here and now.' *Yiddishkeit* can feel like a burden to some *talmidim*, and a promise of reward far in the future is just not enough to motivate them to act.

When I was a child, a pressure cooker exploded in my grandparent's kitchen, intensely burning my grandmother.

I was a small child, but I will never forget my grandmother's reaction. She spent several weeks in bed, recovering from her burns. Whenever the pain would bite into her, she would repeat to herself, "*in yeneh velt svet zein gliklalch* (it will all be good/happy in the next world.)" It was that phrase that comforted her through her pain, and in my young mind I understood that she looked at life from a unique perspective. To my grandmother, life was transient and fleeting, no matter the pain - all that really mattered was what will happen in *yeneh velt*.

I remember being struck by that worldview. I was not interested in waiting for my entire lifetime to finally reap the benefits of *Yiddishkeit* in the next world. While my grandmother is, of course, correct - what really matters is The Next World - it was a difficult concept for me to comprehend. As I grew older, I realized that what had bothered my younger self about her approach represented a fundamental psychological truth about children: Children value the present. A child will resist *Yiddishkeit* if it is presented as an investment that only pays dividends in the next world. For children to appreciate our heritage, they must feel that the joy and happiness of *Yiddishkeit* are readily accessible in this world.

To address this present-oriented mindset, teachers should continuously point out to their *talmidim* the ability for each of them to develop a relationship with Hashem in this world. As this relationship develops, they will begin to realize all the amazing acts of *hashgacha pratit* that occur

during their daily lives. Continuously stress the *chesed* of Hashem and how it impacts our lives. Every week, ask your *talmidim* to relate events from their lives for which they are grateful to Hashem. We all want to experience happiness in this world, and if you want your *talmidim* to be passionate about *Yiddishkeit*, you must inculcate them with the sense that Hashem loves them and is actively and positively involved in their lives<sup>4</sup>.

## SHOW THAT YOU LOVE MITZVOS

*Talmidim* learn how to view the world by looking at their mentors. If you want your *talmidim* to develop a love for *mitzvos*, show them you're passionate about doing the

4 בספר החינוך פרשת ויקרא (מצוה קי"ז), כתב בענין הלאו כי כל שאור וכל דבש לא תקטירו וז"ל, שורש מצוה זו נעלמים מאד למצא אפילו רמז קטן מהם, ואולם מפני שכבר הודעתי בפתיחת דברי שכוונתי באלו הטעמים שאני כותב לה רגיל הנערים ולהטעים להם בתחלת בואם לשמוע דברי ספר, כי יש לדברי תורה טעמים ותועלות, ויקבלום על דרך ההרגל שלהם וכפי חלשת שכלם, ואל יהיו להם המצות בתחלה כדברי הספר החתום, **פן יבעטו בהם מתוך כך בנערותם ויניחום לעולם וילכו להבל**. על כן אכתב בהם כל אשר יעלה בתחלת המחשבה וכו', עכ"ל.

וצריך להבין מה היה חושש בעל ספר החינוך בזה, הרי ספר החינוך נכתב אחרי חורבן הבית וכבר לא היתה מצוה זו נוהגת, והיאך חשש שמא מתוך שאינם מבינים שורשה של מצוה זו יפרקו עול כל המצוות "ויניחום לעולם וילכו להבל". וע"כ הביאור בזה הוא, שאם ימצאו אפי' מצוה אחת שאינם יכולים להבין טעמה, כבר יש להם תשובה על כל התורה ויבעטו בכולה, שאז התורה כולה נראה להם כספר החתום שאין להם הבנה בו כלל. ואע"פ שכבר נתן טעם לכל מצות התורה, מ"מ חשש שהנערים צריכים טעם והבנה בכל התורה כדי שיוכלו לקבלה ולקיימה, ואם יראה בעיניהם אפי' מצוה אחת שהיא כחוק בלא טעם, כבר מרגישים בעצמם שאין התורה ניתנה להבנה אלא כולה חוק וגזירה מה' עלינו.

*ratzon* Hashem. Conversely, one of the easiest ways to turn your *talmidim* away from appreciating *Yiddishkeit* is by showing them that *mitzvos* are a burden to you. Even if you are passionate about *Yiddishkeit*, your *talmidim* will not necessarily pick up your feelings unless you make a conscious effort to express your excitement and happiness over *shmiras ha'mitzvos* and *limud HaTorah*.

Additionally, teachers must continuously work on cultivating their own passionate relationship with Hashem. Our job is to serve as role models, but the truth is that no one is perfect. At times *mitzvos* can be challenging, but remember, your *talmidim* are always watching you - both consciously and unconsciously - for cues on how to view the world. If you show that you are waiting for *seder* to be over, your *talmidim* will internalize that you do not appreciate learning. If you seem burdened by davening, your *talmidim* will pick up on it and lose their respect for *tefillah*.

## WHY WAS HE ZOCHEH?

Rav Moshe Feinstein *zt"l* was once speaking at the *levaya* of a particular layman. During that time period, American Jewry was suffering an epidemic of youth abandoning *Yiddishkeit*. The deceased boasted a sizeable *frum* family; every one of his children remained committed Jews.

“Why was this man *zoche* to raise a family in which all his children remained *frum* – despite many other good people having children who strayed from the path?” Rav Moshe

Feinstein *zt”l* asked. “The answer is simple. Throughout his lifetime his children never heard him utter the words, *s’iz shver tzu zain a yid* (it is hard to be a Jew)”

## MAKE MITZVOS PLEASURABLE

One of the greatest motivators for good behavior is pleasure. A human being is comprised of a body and a soul. The body demands physical pleasure, while the soul yearns for spiritual connection and fulfillment. These two impulses are always tugging at us, and some of the most exceptional experiences that a human can feel is when the physical and the spiritual fuse together to create an act that combines both of these innate drives. Eating a good meal stimulates the body’s senses while doing *mitzvos* ignites the spirit. When the two drives are fused, for example, by having a scrumptious Shabbos meal, one has the opportunity for a sublime experience. This understanding is critical when it comes to giving our *talmidim* a love for *mitzvos*. *Mitzvos* are a way to connect to Hashem, but a *mitzvah* that taps into core human desires has a stronger *chinuch* impact than *mitzvos* that are purely spiritual activities. From a practical standpoint as an educator, one should always try to incorporate as many levels of experiential interaction as possible. *Mitzvos* are not just rituals and learning is not just an intellectual exercise. Try to incorporate added enjoyable dimensions to your lessons as often as possible. With a little creativity, it is easy to spot opportunities to

combine *gashmius* and *ruchnius* in your classroom. When this is accomplished, students absorb the feel of the mitzvah far better than if it was presented in a dry, exclusively spiritual format.

## CHAPTER 4: DEVELOPING A RELATIONSHIP

A *Rebbe's* job can be daunting. From the outside, it may seem simple: prepare *shiur* and advance your *talmidim's* ability to learn. But a *Rebbe's* job is so much more.

A *rebbe* is the living, link in the *mesorah* for his *talmidim*- he is the connection that ties them back to *Har Sinai*. It is HIS job to impart to his *talmidim* a love for learning. He must make them feel the vigor that comes from applying one's entire mind to understand a Tosfos; give them a sense of the bliss that accompanies cracking through a difficult Reb Akiva Eiger. A *rebbe* must transmit his own passion for *Yiddishkeit* to his *talmidim*. They must feel his love of davening and his connection with Hashem. Aside from this, he must also hone his *talmidim's* minds, strengthening them so that they can properly understand how to learn.

So how does a *rebbe* accomplish all this? Often his primary interaction with his *talmidim* is through *shiur*, a format that is not necessarily conducive to such demands. The

answer is simple: build a relationship with your *talmidim*. Love them, and they will love you. If you validate their feelings, encourage them, and let them know you value their positive traits, then you will earn their loyalty and trust. A *rebbe* who follows this advice will have incredible influence over his *talmidim*; they will want to emulate him. This is how a *rebbe* molds successful *talmidim*.

Building a relationship with your *talmidim* does much more than help you influence their behavior. *Talmidim* look to their *rebbeim* as authority figures and need their approval and love in order to thrive. When a *talmid* feels loved and respected by his *rebbe*, he gains the fortitude and courage to accomplish more than he ever thought he could achieve. Conversely, when a *talmid* feels that his *rebbe* looks down on him and views him as incompetent or troublesome, his self-esteem plunges. He feels worthless, and that loss of self-respect becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

So how does a *rebbe* go about developing a relationship with his *talmidim*?

There are four basic elements to creating a successful *Rebbe-talmid* relationship:

- 1 – View your *talmidim* with an *ayin tovah*.**
- 2 – Spend time connecting with your *talmidim*.**
- 3 – Be friendly and approachable.**
- 4 – Follow up on their problems.**

Let us discuss these ideas in detail:

## VIEW YOUR *TALMIDIM* WITH AN *AYIN TOVAH*

*Rebbeim* are human beings, and it is natural to like some *talmidim* more than others. But a *rebbe* cannot “play favorites,” and all his *talmidim* must equally feel that he appreciates their qualities. It is often precisely the *talmidim* that the *rebbe* finds grate on his nerves or aren’t particularly likable that need the most validation and positive attention. A *rebbe* must train himself to find and appreciate the positive qualities in all of his *talmidim*. If you look hard enough, you can find amazing and admirable traits in just about everybody. Children and young adults are perceptive and can quickly tell if a *rebbe* looks down on them or has no interest in them. This emotional dynamic can be devastating.

Being able to love and appreciate your *talmidim* is vitally necessary for being a successful *rebbe*. A *rebbe* must develop an *ayin tovah* and learn to view the positive qualities in those around him. A *rebbe* who is cynical and judgmental will ultimately fail to influence his *talmidim*, no matter how brilliant or knowledgeable he is.

This reality is perfectly expressed in the following quote, often attributed to Theodore Roosevelt: “*Nobody cares how much you know until they know how much you care.*”

# SPEND TIME CONNECTING WITH YOUR *TALMIDIM*

While learning to love your *talmidim* and view them with an *ayin tovah* is the basis of developing a relationship with them, engaging with them is what creates the relationship. This idea expresses itself in a number of forms, as we will explore below:

## INTERACTIVE *SHIURIM*

*Shiurim* should be interactive. From an informational perspective, it is a simple reality that *talmidim* have trouble connecting to a *shiur* that is a long uninterrupted monologue. The human attention span is not very long, and the best way to ensure that your *talmidim* absorb your *shiur* is by including them in the experience. The more interactive your *shiur*, the more engaged your *talmidim* will be, and the better they will remember and understand the material.

In addition to pedagogical reasons, having an interactive *shiur* is a vital way to connect with your *talmidim* and begin building a strong relationship with them. By including your *talmidim* - asking for their input and responding to their thoughts - you are engaging with them on a deep level. This creates a sense of connection that endures long after the *shiur* is over.

# INCLUDE THEM IN YOUR LEARNING

Many *rebbeim* divorce their own learning process from the content that they deliver to their *talmidim*, and wait until they have complete, prepared ideas to share. Including your *talmidim* in your own learning process - letting them work on your sefakos and help you build your *sugya* - is a great way of helping your *talmidim* develop. Aside from their growth, you will often be surprised at how much they have to contribute, as well as how much your own thoughts will crystallize as a result of being forced to present them to your *talmidim*.

By including your *talmidim* in your learning process, you are validating them and their intelligence. You are showing them that you believe in their capabilities and want to work together with them to explore the *sugya*. This sort of interaction can be deeply affirming and can help strengthen your relationship with your *talmidim*.

Additionally, when your *talmidim* approach you with their insights, show them that you are carefully considering everything they are saying. You do not need to agree with them, but try to flesh out anything of value that they say. Honestly discuss what you like and dislike about their thought process and show appreciation for the hard work they are putting into understanding the *sugya*. This too provides a basis for building a relationship with your *talmidim*.

## **SPEND TIME WITH YOUR TALMIDIM**

Make sure to spend some quality time with each of your *talmidim*. It may not be easy, but do not wait for your *talmidim* to approach you and ask for personal time; rather set aside a few minutes each day to schmooze with your *talmidim*. A good *rebbe* knows what is going on in his *talmidim*'s lives - what their challenges are and how they feel about themselves. Even a shy *talmid* often needs little prompting to open up and share how he is doing. Be accessible to your *talmidim*, take an active interest in their personal lives, and be available to help them with whatever they are struggling to overcome.

## **MAKE TIME TO DISCUSS HASHKAFAH WITH YOUR TALMIDIM**

There is a lot that can be gained by creating a relaxed setting in which to discuss the inner workings of *Yiddishkeit* with your *talmidim*. These sorts of sessions allow *talmidim* to discuss issues that may be bothering them, as well as afford them the opportunity to connect with their *rebbeim* on a deeper level.

## BE FRIENDLY AND APPROACHABLE

*Rebbeim* often feel that in order to gain their *talmidim*'s respect, they must adopt an aloof and unapproachable persona. The adage amongst older *Melamdin* was that an effective *rebbe* would not smile at his class until Chanukah, thus creating an appropriate sense of intimidation in his *talmidim*. This approach may have worked at one point in our history, but it absolutely fails in this generation.

This may be difficult for some people to accept, but if you want to have influence over your *talmidim*, you need to drop the *shtultz*, take yourself off any perceived pedestal, and make yourself as friendly and approachable as possible. Use humor with your *talmidim* to personalize yourself and help to create a warm and friendly environment. Talk to your *talmidim* like an equal and let them know that you generally value their opinion. Refer to yourself by your first name, and generally try to be an affable and warm presence.

To iterate, a *talmid* should not be scared of his *Rebbe*. The only fear he should have is a fear of disappointing his *rebbe* and hurting the relationship. All other forms of fear are unhealthy -for the teacher and the *talmid* – and are ineffective with today's generation of *talmidim*.

People are scared of adopting this approach because they are concerned that they will be turned into a 'doormat' by

their *talmidim*. Without fear, chaos will overtake the class and teaching will become impossible. These concerns are valid, and a balance must be struck.

Obviously, a well-established structure is important to the success of any classroom. A *rebbe* must lay down a few firm rules and expectations and establish the consequences for breaking them. These rules must then be enforced in a consistent manner with whatever consequences are appropriate. But the necessity of, having rules does not detract from the fact that a *rebbe* should always be as friendly and approachable as possible<sup>5</sup>. Drop the “*kavod act*” and be warm and loving with your *talmidim*. Even when you are administering consequences, be genuine and sympathetic. Applying this approach will engender loyalty and love in your *talmidim*. They will want to follow you anywhere and will be terrified of damaging their bond with you or of jeopardizing your respect for them. That is how a *rebbe* develops a relationship with his *talmidim* and influences them to develop a passionate *Yiddishkeit*.

## FOLLOW UP ON THEIR ISSUES

If you have a conversation with one of your *talmidim* in which they discuss an issue they are dealing with, follow up on that conversation. Calling your *talmid* over and asking him how he is managing with whatever issue

<sup>5</sup> One pithy way to remember this idea is the following formula: R-R=R. This stands for “RULES – RELATIONSHIP = REBELLION.

he had brought up previously will go a long way toward showing that you care about him. This form of follow up sends the message that you were thinking about him and are concerned for his success and well-being. Conversely, by never following up on their issues, you send the message that your *talmidim*'s struggles aren't important to you; that, even if you will listen to them the first time, it is only out of a sense of obligation and not due to a genuine feeling of concern.

A *talmid* once called Rav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg *zt"l* to ask him if he was allowed to wear leather shoes on Yom Kippur. He was feeling unwell, and it was going to rain heavily. He did not think that he could wear wet, soggy shoes the whole Yom Kippur. Rav Scheinberg rendered a halachic ruling for the *talmid* and wished him a good year. That *Motzei* Yom Kippur, the *talmid*'s phone rang. It was Rav Scheinberg. The Rav was calling to check up on how his *talmid* was feeling.

The memory of that simple phone call stayed with that *talmid* for years as an example of how much a *rebbe* should care for his *talmidim*.

## CHAPTER 5: GIVING A GREAT *SHIUR*

It is upsetting to look around at your classroom and realizing that no one is paying attention. You know how much effort you put into preparing high-level material, and it can be incredibly frustrating - and insulting - when your *talmidim* do not seem to be interested in what you have to say.

In most cases, though, the lack of *talmid* attention is not the fault of the *talmidim*; it is the fault of the teacher. Of course, sometimes *bochurim* simply are not interested, no matter how much the *rebbe* tries. But often enough, an adequately prepared and presented *shiur* will engage the *talmidim* and maintain their interest. It is relatively simple to transform a monotonous and unengaging *shiur* into one that will appeal to your *talmidim*. We'll now look at some things that can cause *shiurim* to fail and at some suggestions for correcting those failures.

## SPEAK FOR THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF TIME

One of the main mistakes that teachers make is speaking for too long. People don't have the attention spans to sit and absorb information for extended periods. This is especially true for people raised with access to the internet and digital entertainment. According to many prominent social scientists, the average adult's ability to maintain selective sustained attention during a lecture lasts between ten and fifteen minutes. After that time, the *talmid's* ability to focus begins deteriorating and it becomes increasingly harder for him to pay attention. This is especially true if the teacher is trying to deliver complex content such as a high-level *iyun shiur*.

In some *yeshivos*, *rebbeim* have become accustomed to giving two to three-hour long *shiurim*. This is ineffective if the teacher's goal is to help his *talmidim* grow through the *shiur*. It is deeply unpleasant for *talmidim* to continually be expected to sit through classes that drag on for too long. If a *rebbe* regularly makes his *talmidim* endure long *shiurim*, they will begin to resent him. They will also become conditioned to having difficulty focusing on him and will automatically "tune-out" whenever the *rebbe* speaks.

As a goal, try to make your *shiurim* as concise as possible. Keep your *shiurim* under an hour and aim for twenty-five to forty minutes as the optimal *shiur* length. This may require you to transfer part of what you planned to

talk about to a later *shiur*, but the gains in attention will outweigh any losses from having to stretch the material over an extra day. Experiment with different *shiur* lengths. You will likely be pleasantly surprised at how large a boost in interest and participation can be achieved by simply cutting down on the length of the *shiur*.

## ENGAGE YOUR *TALMIDIM*

Benjamin Franklin famously said, “*Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I will understand.*” The more interactive a *shiur* is, the better the *talmidim* understand and retain the material. The late educator Edger Dale wrote that students were almost four times better at remembering lectures that were interactive experiences than they were at remembering lectures delivered without any student participation. When you ask a question in your *shiur*, do not just proceed to the answer. Stop and ask your *talmidim* for their thoughts. When you present a theory, listen to and discuss any questions that your *talmidim* may have. Let them verbally spar with you; don’t just deliver the material without interruption. Here are some of the main reasons why an interactive style of delivery is superior to a long-form lecture:

- When you ask your *talmidim* for their feedback and thoughts, it challenges them and motivates them to think about the source material. They create connections and focus on the issues rather than passively being fed informa-

tion.

- Interacting with your *talmidim* gives them a chance to refocus their attention, something that is more difficult to do when the teacher delivers an uninterrupted monologue. Engaging with your *talmidim* slows down the pace of the information being presented, giving your *talmidim* a mental breather and allowing anyone who is struggling a chance to catch up.

- Getting someone to understand your thought process through dialogue is a particularly useful pedagogical tool to help your *talmidim* better understand the material. Sometimes *talmidim* have trouble understanding a particular concept and hearing you explain it to someone else enables them to properly process the idea.

- Different people's minds work in different ways. *Rebbeim* occasionally deliver a *shiur* that they think is clear and understandable, but is confusing to other people. By encouraging questions and discussion a *rebbe* can receive feedback from his *talmidim* that tells him how well they absorbed the ideas he is presenting. A *rebbe* can gauge the level of understanding through their questions and tailor his *shiur* accordingly.

- Participation builds your *talmidim*'s confidence and teaches them how to speak in a group setting. Speaking up can be a bit intimidating. By encouraging your *talmidim* to express their thoughts in front of everyone, you are building their confidence and teaching them essential commu-

nication skills

- By creating a participatory environment in your *shiur*, you force your *talmidim* to prepare the material before class. *Talmidim* know that they can be called upon at any moment to share their thoughts and will feel pressure to be prepared.

- Engaging with *talmidim* creates a bond and a sense of comradery that won't exist if you merely lecture. By bringing the *talmidim* into your thought process and allowing them to express themselves, you are creating interactions that help to develop a *rebbe – talmid* relationship. *Talmidim* feel appreciated when you acknowledge their thought process and they enjoy the stimulation that comes from an engaging dialogue.

- Participation allows you to focus on *talmidim* who would have otherwise been ignored. By calling on quieter *talmidim* you are inviting them to participate and are giving them an opportunity to integrate better into the class. Also, by showing that you value their thoughts in front of the class, you are doing wonders to build their self-esteem. Participation is also a way to redirect the attention of *talmidim* who are spacing out or engaged in a different activity during the *shiur*: asking them a question forces them to focus on the *shiur*.

- Engaging with *talmidim* allows the *rebbe* to enter the mind of his *talmid*; to influence his thinking process and to correct any errors. Only by engaging with his *talmid* can

the *rebbe* accurately diagnose where his *talmid* is getting confused and help to correct the situation.

Study after study shows that students score better when their teacher encourages them to participate in the class. Law schools have universally adopted this approach and make a point of having their students articulate, develop, and defend their positions during every lecture. This fosters the habit of rigorous and critical analysis of the arguments that they hear and trains them to rethink their approach if it is attacked.

## BE PREPARED

There are few things as useless as an unprepared teacher. The teacher's clear understanding of the subject material is crucial to successfully transmitting knowledge. Teachers may believe that they can “fudge” their way through a *shiur*, but they are wrong. *Talmidim* can instantly tell whether their *rebbe* has a mastery of the *sugya*. The need for preparedness manifests itself in two ways: mastery of the source material, and preparation for the *shiur*.

### *Mastery of the source material*

Always be ahead of your class in exploring a *sugya*. So that you can supply them with the background information that they need to approach the *sugya*. Take time to acquire a broad knowledge of the commentaries on the *sugya*. This is useful even if you intend to focus on a specific set

of *mareh mekomos* with your class. Having an extensive knowledge of the intricacies of the *sugya* will significantly enhance your presentation of the ideas you want to discuss.

### *Preparation for your shiur*

We can all remember a *rebbe* who could whip out a *shiur kilali* with little or no preparation. It's likely that *rebbe* was able to do this because he had spent many years studying the ideas he was presenting and so was already fully prepared. Most *rebbeim* don't have this level of experience and the mastery it brings, and so stand to benefit tremendously from planning the presentation of their *shiurim*. Take the time before the *shiur* to make bullet points of all the material you wish to cover. Think about how you can order the information for maximum impact. Consider the best way to effectively convey each point. Gain clarity about which points you want your *talmidim* to be thinking about after the *shiur* is over. This will help you determine which points you should spend extra time explaining and which points you should cover more quickly. Think about which *talmidim* you want to call on during *shiur* and the questions you want to ask them. Doing this pre-*shiur* preparation will significantly enhance the quality of your presentation and will help your *talmidim* grow from your *shiur*.

## BE CLEAR AND TO THE POINT

The hallmark of a great *shiur* is simplicity. Simplicity

does not mean simplistic: it does not mean that your ideas cannot be profound or intricate. Rather, it means that an effective teacher will present his thoughts in a clear, straightforward, and properly structured fashion. Some *rebbeim* have a habit of getting sidetracked in tangential ideas or of throwing around many *mareh mekomos* when giving over the material. This sort of mental disorganization may be excusable when giving a *chaburah* to well-trained peers, but it is toxic when present in a *shiur* for *talmidim*.

*Talmidim* need a focused presentation to absorb the material properly. When you prepare your *shiur*, always ask yourself, “Will including this piece of information or this *mareh makom* bring greater clarity to the idea under discussion?” If the thought is nice, but not entirely relevant to the main thrust of the *shiur*, save it for a different time or present it at the end of the *shiur* as a separate piece.

Additionally, make an effort to ensure that your *shiur* progresses through a logical hierarchy of ideas. Don’t jump around; rather, build your points from the ground up until they are fully formulated. This will help your *talmidim* follow your train of thought and properly process what you are trying to convey.

## BE ENTERTAINING

To maintain your *talmidim*’s interest it is essential to include lighter elements in your *shiur*. Don’t hesitate to make a joke or throw out a clever line. If your *shiur* is tack-

ling a particularly complicated issue, try to include a few more straightforward thoughts to break things up and to lessen the mental effort required to absorb the *shiur*. As mentioned previously, engaging your *talmidim* in discussion is also an effective way to break up the *shiur* into easier-to-digest pieces. Present your ideas in a friendly and unassuming tone and avoid an intimidating presentation. This will naturally help your *talmidim* better absorb the information. You can also occasionally pause your *shiur* to tell a relevant story or share a relevant *machshava*. These entertaining techniques will improve the presentation of your *shiur* and will help your *talmidim* focus and better absorb the ideas that you are presenting.

## MAKE SURE YOUR TALMIDIM ARE PREPARED

One of the main factors that prevent a *talmid* from focusing on a *shiur* is lack of preparation. Although the *talmid* is at fault for not preparing the source material before the *shiur*, the *rebbe* should do whatever he can to help him understand as much of the *shiur* as possible. It is a good habit to spend a few minutes at the beginning of each *shiur* laying out the background information in a simple and clear fashion. For example, if you are discussing a *Kitzos*, instead of diving into your thoughts about it, spend a few minutes laying out - in an easy to understand fashion - exactly what the *Kitzos* said. Only once you have presented this outline

should you go on to explore the issues you want to address regarding the *Kitzos*. The *talmidim* who had appropriately prepared will also benefit from hearing a straightforward *chazarah* of the information, and the unprepared *talmidim* will obtain the background information they need to follow the *shiur*.

## BE ATTUNED TO THE ATTENTION LEVEL OF YOUR *TALMIDIM*

A *rebbe* should constantly gauge how well his class is absorbing the material. Be ready to change plans if you see that you are losing the class's attention. Do not keep plowing forward despite the lack of interest or participation. Sometimes the *sugya* has grown too complicated or advanced to be understood by your *talmidim*. Other times, no matter how hard you try, it is just a tough day and your *talmidim* are having difficulty focusing. Don't hesitate to change topics or even end your *shiur* early if that is what the situation calls for. Talk to your *talmidim*; try to see why they are having trouble focusing and be ready to adapt your *shiur* to their needs and mental capacities.

## CHAPTER 6: *BITACHON*

When working with our *talmidim* it can become easy to get lost in the details of their growth. We want to develop their minds, teach them how to analyze a Gemara, teach them responsibility, and help them mature and grow in their *middos*. All these goals are important, but one of the most important gifts we can give our *talmidim* is an unshakable *bitachon* in Hashem. Life is full of unexpected twists and turns, and no one can escape trials and tribulations. As we progress through the stages of life, heartache and challenges are part of the human experience.

Imagine two people, the atheist and the *maamin*. The atheist finds himself in a cruel and capricious world. He is merely a collection of self-replicating chemicals lost on a tiny and insignificant speck of dust endlessly circling the cosmos. No one is guiding his life; his destiny is entirely determined by brute and unfeeling chance. Such a worldview is bleak and hopeless, and one pities the person forced to endure such an existence.

It is no wonder that America is in the midst of an anxiety epidemic, with 40 million adults — roughly 18% of the

population — having a clinical anxiety disorder, according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

Consider also that stress is one of the top health concerns for U.S. teenagers according to the American Psychological Association. Psychologists say that if high school students don't learn healthy ways to manage that stress, it could have serious long-term health implications.

Even more shocking is the revelation by the World Health Organization that depression is among the leading causes of disability worldwide

Our world can be grueling, pointless, and difficult for people without faith.

Compare this bleak and nihilistic worldview to that of the *baal bitachon*. The *baal bitachon* understands that Hashem created the world with the sole purpose of doing *chesed*. Hashem maintains total control over His entire creation and guides everything towards the fulfillment of His Divine plan. Life is not *hefker* - everything happens for a reason. When someone experiences pain, there is a reason. Hashem cares about his prayers and wants him to succeed in fulfilling his life's mission. He knows that if he puts all his faith and trust in Hashem, then Hashem will watch over him and care for all his needs.

Such a person will not lose hope when the situation seems bleak. He knows that his loving Father is watching over him. This sense of tranquility is priceless and can make

the difference between a happy life and an empty and anxiety-ridden existence. This can be clearly seen during the terrible years of 1941 -1945 when our grandparents experienced the crucible of hell on earth. Reading our grandparents memoirs, one fact becomes clear - the only way that our nation survived the torment of their German butchers was because they clung to their trust in Hashem. Someone who believes that Hashem is watching over him will refuse to give up hope even in the darkest nightmare. He may not understand the grand plan, but he knows that he has a Father who loves him and that everything is for THE good.

## THE REAL POWER OF ***BITACHON***:

*Chazal* made a remarkable statement regarding our faith in Hashem's goodness: not only does such faith give us perfect tranquility, regardless of life's tribulations, but it can even change the outcome of Divine decrees. The Chofetz Chaim wrote (*Machaneh Yisroel*, page 87) that, "According to the magnitude of the bitachon, so is the magnitude of the success." Consider these astonishing words. *bitachon* is THE KEY to success in life's challenges.

Our world is a mirage waiting to be revealed. It is not our boss who gives us our paycheck, nor the doctor who administers the cure to our illness, it is all Hashem, operating behind a thin curtain of natural order.

When someone breaks through the veil of causality in

this world and peers behind the curtain - realizing that it is in reality Hashem who controls everything - they enter a new dimension of existence. Gone are the standard rules of materialistic cause and effect; replaced with a direct connection with the Creator of the world. Once we genuinely sear the idea of Hashem's sovereignty and benevolence into our consciousness, our relationship with Hashem grows infinitely closer. Our lives lose the humdrum and angst of ordinary existence and we spend our lives building and fostering our connection to Hashem.

## **BUILDING *BITACHON*:**

So how does one work on developing an enduring trust in Hashem? The truth is that there is no easy solution, no magic button that can be pressed to fill us with *bitachon*. Furthermore, *bitachon* is not something that can be faked until we achieve the real thing. However, *bitachon* does have levels, and one can grow from a lower level of *bitachon* to a higher level. Developing *bitachon* requires a multi-pronged approach that includes study, contemplation, and focus.

## **STUDYING *BITACHON***

Whenever we sin, we are on some level denying Hashem's rulership over the world. The first step in developing *bitachon* is to make concrete our knowledge of Hashem's existence and His relationship with the Jewish people. Human beings are created with minds that can logically

process reality. As such, Judaism does not believe in taking a “leap of faith,” but instead encourages coming to belief through clear and rigorous analysis. Any idea that is arrived at without a clear logical foundation can be easily shaken<sup>6</sup>.

Studying the unique claim of public revelation to the Jewish people at *Har Sinai* and the numerous events in our history that unambiguously point to our relationship with the Creator of the Universe can shore up one’s foundation of faith in Hashem. Contemplating the remarkable survival of the Jewish people and our singular impact on world history will leave one with a clear sense of Divine handiwork operating behind the scenes of history. Studying the works of the rishonim and achronim on the topic of *bitachon* in-depth can help one cultivate insights and a deeper feeling of connection with Hashem. Additionally, the Torah and our tradition are full of prophetic statements and ideas that display a knowledge of our world that defies human explanation. Studying these concepts can help one strengthen his belief in Hashem’s existence and in our place as the Chosen People. See “Chapter 6: Answering Questions” for a more in-depth discussion of this idea..

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6 Obviously, there is a concept of *emunah peshutah* – simply embracing the truth passed down from our fathers as well as feeling the clarity that comes from connecting with Hashem, however, nowadays it may be unrealistic to expect this level from our *talmidim*. Many of our *talmidim* want a clear approach that can be understood in a reasonable and simple fashion.

# CONTEMPLATING THE UNIVERSE

The Rambam teaches us that faith in Hashem can be acquired by observing the world around us. Everything about our universe, from the mechanical ingenuity of the hummingbird's wings to the sheer complexity of the human immune system all point to a Master Designer. The analogy often used is that of a man who finds an intricate watch on the forest floor. Would the man ever conclude that nature somehow designed the hundreds of intricately connected gears and springs that comprise the clock? Of course not, yet almost everything in nature is infinitely more complex than even the most sophisticated watch.

The human brain contains over 100 billion intricately connected neurons that control its functioning. The human body is made of countless systems that must work in complete and delicate harmony at all times to function. We used to believe that single-celled organisms were somehow "simple," but the more we learn about the world more apparent its sheer complexity grows. The internal mechanisms housed inside even the simplest cell are so utterly complex and exquisitely engineered that they would put our most significant technological and engineering feats to shame. If one laid out the genetic code of the little Japanese flower Paris Japonica, it would stretch more than 328 feet long. The human genome contains approximately 3 billion base pairs in its 23 pairs of chromosomes, a copy of which

is housed in every single cell in our bodies.

All the marvelous design in our universe points to one inescapable fact: A Creator designed our universe.

## FOCUSING ON HASHEM'S *CHESED*

When someone closely examines their life, they can see the remarkable reality: Hashem is always present in our day to day life. He helps and guides us in subtle - and not so subtle - ways. If we open our eyes, we can see the many acts of *chesed* that Hashem does for us every day and can feel Hashem's *rachamim* and love in our daily lives. Look out for moments of *hashgacha pratis* and share them with your children and *talmidim*. Focus on them and make them part of your identity. By doing this one can develop firm trust in Hashem.

When you are struggling, see your struggles for what they are: a chance to have Hashem alleviate your burden. By connecting to Hashem even in hardship, you inculcate in yourself the awareness that the only thing you can rely on to help you is Hashem's kindness. Nothing else matters. Surviving a tragedy or challenge by clinging to your faith in Hashem is one of the best ways to supercharge your *bitachon* to make it part of your core identity and the bedrock of your entire outlook on life. In this sense, challenges are a great opportunity from Hashem to develop an intimate relationship with Him.

# CHAPTER 7: OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HASHEM

*Yiddishkeit* contains many facets, and it can be easy to lose sight of what it really means to be a member of the Jewish people. When one strips away the layers of Judaism and studies the core of what it means to be a Jew, one finds a passionate relationship between us and our Creator. Everything in Judaism distills down to this relationship<sup>7</sup>.

Unfortunately, this idea is often lost in the *chinuch* process. It consistently worries me when *yeshiva* educated people tell me that they breezed through *Mesivta* and *Bais Me-drash* barely ever contemplating or working on developing their relationship with Hashem.

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7 This idea is found in the famous quote of Hillel the Elder, “*Di’alecha sa’ani, li’chavrica lo savid*” – “That which you would hate done to yourself, do not do unto your friend.” Rashi (in his first explanation) understands this passage as referring to our relationship with Hashem. Everything about *Yiddishkeit* boils down to cultivating our connection and bond with Hashem as well as guarding that bond from any breach.

How does one foster a connection with Hashem? How do we reach a state where we continuously feel Hashem's presence in our lives? To answer these questions, it is worth taking a more in-depth look at the dynamics of our relationship with Hashem.

## HASHEM LOVES US

*Hashem* created the universe with a Master Plan to express His goodness, and His relationship with the Jewish nation represents the culmination of this Divine plan. Rashi in Shir Hashim describes Hashem's (metaphorically) uncontrollable love for all Jews, even the wicked amongst us. We are all descendants of Abraham and are imbued with a spiritual blueprint that makes us all rachmanaim, bishanim, and gomli chasadaim.

The reality that our Father in Heaven has a love for us that we cannot even begin to comprehend should fill us with happiness. We are never abandoned to the vicissitudes of fate. When properly appreciated, this idea influences every decision we make. Someone who is conscious of this fact will instinctively recoil from sinful actions. He has a precious relationship with the Creator and would never want to do anything to jeopardize this spiritual bond. According to the Orchos Tzaddikim (shar ha'ahavah) this is the definition of "Fear of Heaven:" the fear of distancing oneself from his Creator.

## WE LOVE HASHEM

One of the most reliable traits in every Jew is that no matter how low he falls, he never fully lets go of his connection with Hashem. Every Jewish soul was present at *Har Sinai*, and that experience left an indelible impression on each of us.

This idea is vividly illustrated in *Shir Hashirim*. Shlomo Hamelech compares our occasionally insolent interactions with Hashem to a man who pounds on his lover's door during a wet and dark night, begging for entry. Hashem is the faithful man in the parable who seeks to reenter his lover's chamber and heart. *Klal Yisroel* is compared to the woman, who, when confronted with her beloved's overtures, callously rejects his pleas, claiming that she cannot bother herself to get out of bed and open the door.

פְּשָׁטִיתִי אֶת־כִּתְּנֹתַי אֵיכָכָה אֶלְבָּשֶׁנָּה רַחֲצֵתִי אֶת־רַגְלֵי  
אֵיכָכָה אֶטְנַפֵּם

*“I had taken off my robe- How can I put it on again? I had bathed my feet- should I soil them again?”*

Suddenly, the man puts his hand through a hole in the door, and something stirs in the woman's heart. Old memories of her devoted husband fill her, and her entire viewpoint shifts.

דָּוִדִי שָׁלַח יָדוֹ מִן־הַחֹר וַיַּעֲיֵה מוֹ עָלָיו

*“My beloved sent forth his hand from the portal, and my*

*heart was stirred for him.”*

The woman jumps up to open the door, her apathy wholly transformed into the singular desire to connect with her formerly estranged husband.

What caused such a drastic change in this woman’s feelings? How did her response shift so rapidly from cold indifference to unrestrained desire?

I think that the answer to these questions is simple and astounding: The *pesukim* are highlighting of the overwhelmingly powerful bond between Hashem and His Chosen People. We all love Hashem, no matter how much we attempt to shed our relationship with Him. We may rebel and push Hashem away, but our soul still yearns to connect with its Creator. All it takes is one small spark to ignite the flames buried in the heart of every Jew.

## CULTIVATING A RELATIONSHIP WITH HASHEM

There are many ways that one can deepen his bond with Hashem. These include focusing on Hashem’s kindness, recognizing Hashem’s presence in your life, and learning to trust Hashem.

## FOCUSING ON HASHEM'S KINDNESS

The basis of our relationship with Hashem is recognizing the His generosity towards us every day. It is worth taking a minute to ponder the number of gifts we take for granted. As you are reading these words, over 127 million light-sensitive receptors in each of your eyes are simultaneously firing carefully controlled electrical impulses. These impulses travel down the optic nerve at approximately 170 miles an hour and are sent to the brain for processing. The brain then effortlessly decodes the signals it receives from each eye, first translating the flood of messages into a series of two-dimensional images. Then, by comparing the images received from each eye, the brain masterfully creates the illusion of depth, giving you the sense of viewing a three-dimensional world.

While all of this is going on in our eyes, our nose is busy detecting over 50,000 different scents in our environment. Our noses are so attuned to smell that humans can detect the chemical smell of an object in one part per trillion of air.

Meanwhile, each of our kidneys is using the 1 million filters embedded in them to clean around 1.3 liters of blood per minute - every drop of which contains 250 million blood cells.

All these processes happen without our knowledge. If

the slightest thing went wrong, we would experience incredible pain and eventually die. It is genuinely mind boggling to contemplate everything that Hashem does to keep us alive. Yet keeping us alive is only one of the things that Hashem does for us every day. We are given a family to cherish and enjoy. We have taste buds that allow us to experience pleasure every time we eat. We are all given talents and the ability to feel fulfilled and accomplished when we use them. All of these things are gifts from Hashem, and the more one focuses on Hashem's *chesed*, the more one feels a desire to connect with the Ultimate Benefactor.

## RECOGNIZING HASHEM'S PRESENCE IN YOUR LIFE

When Hashem created the universe, He created with it the laws of nature. Everything is subject to this system of natural order: to the laws of cause and to the physical constants that govern the universe. The universe was created to operate in a predictable pattern. But this reality is not true for the Jewish people. *Chazal* teach us that, as a symbol of love towards the Jewish nation, Hashem interacts with us to coordinate even the most minute details of our lives. From the moment we wake up until the moment we go to sleep, all of our interactions and all of the events that we experience are carefully coordinated by Hashem.

The implication is astonishing: Hashem is always with us, affecting our lives in both small and significant ways

and He listens and responds to our prayers. The more we recognize His presence in our lives, the closer we become to Him, and the greater His involvement becomes. The trigger for this powerful positive feedback loop is merely recognizing that Hashem is here, right now, in our lives, and that He wants us to interact with Him.

## LEARNING TO TRUST HASHEM

Life is full of trials and tribulations, but the more we learn to trust Hashem, the more responsive Hashem becomes to our needs. Trust Hashem. Spend a few minutes each day trying to internalize the reality that He is running the world. No matter what happens, understand that you are in Hashem's arms and that He is entirely in control of the world around you.

One of the most upsetting experiences humans face is anxiety in the face of uncertainty. This anxiety eats at us every time we are faced with things that are beyond our control. Once one learns to trust in Hashem, all one's angst falls away. Everything is being taken care of by Someone who loves us. This reality entirely obviates any cause for worry. Indeed, we find throughout Jewish history that our leaders were able to face the most punishing and desperate situations with calm tranquility. Nothing fazed them, because they understood that Hashem controls the universe and is the ultimate source of *Chesed* and *Rachamim*.

## CHAPTER 8: THE CHARACTER TRAITS OF A GREAT TEACHER

*Mussar* has become a difficult word to use. People do not like to hear that they need to “do *mussar*” or work on their *middos*, and typically associate *mussar* with attitudes and ideas that do not really represent what *mussar* really is. Let us put aside the word “*mussar*” and talk directly about the personality needed to become a great teacher.

When you are placed in charge of *talmidim*, you have a responsibility towards them. They look up to you for approval, friendship, and advice, and it is critical that you understand your obligations towards your *talmidim*. If you are having a hard morning, that does not give you the right to be short with your *talmidim*. They did nothing wrong, and it is your job to put your best face forward.

Being a *rebbe* is a position of power and influence. A *rebbe* whose character traits are deficient will hurt his *talmidim*. It is that simple. By becoming a teacher, you are accepting responsibility for the influence your personality

will have on your *talmidim*.

## A PLEASANT AND FRIENDLY TEMPERAMENT

One of the most important gifts you can give your *talmidim* is a friendly countenance. *Talmidim* look up to their teachers and seek validation and approval from them. A teacher's demeanor sets the tone of the *rebbe-talmid* relationship. Some people are simply unfriendly and do not have the capacity to give love to *talmidim*. Those people are incapable of giving *talmidim* the validation and approval they need and are not suited for *chinuch* – no matter how brilliant they may be.

This often becomes an issue when teachers act stern and cold in an attempt to gain respect from their *talmidim*. They believe that by acting aloof, they can instill fear in their *talmidim* – and that their *talmidim*'s fear equals respect. They insist on their *talmidim* maintaining the laws of *kavod* harav down to its smallest details and swiftly punish any perceived act of disrespect.

This strategy may have worked at one point in our history, but it is now obsolete. *Talmidim* today respect teachers who are loving, kind, and honest; *rebbeim* who engage with them in a real and open manner. Win your *talmidim*' hearts with love, not fear.

## HUMILITY

It is important for a teacher to be able to admit it when he makes a mistake. *Talmidim* often pick up far more than teachers realize. When a *talmid* sees that his teacher is unable to admit to a mistake, he quickly loses respect for that teacher. People often are afraid to admit their mistakes because they are afraid of looking weak. The reality is exactly the opposite. *Talmidim* will respect a teacher with the courage to admit that he has made an error. Do not think that your *talmidim* will not realize it if you stubbornly cling to an idea after it has been discredited. Be open minded and freely admit when you are wrong.

## SLOW TO ANGER

Anger is toxic to a *rebbe-talmid* relationship. Even if your *talmid* has done something to arouse your ire, it is critical to exert self-control and maintain a rational and balanced perspective.

When a teacher loses his temper with his *talmid*, he can cause irreversible damage – sometimes permanently altering the trajectory of the *talmid's* life. The story of almost every teenager who has abandoned *Yiddishkeit* begins with a teacher who did not treat them with basic human dignity and respect.

Remember that we are all human beings with human failings, and *talmidim* are often just beginning to mature.

Put yourself into your *talmid's* shoes: When you were their age, did you possess the qualities that you are demanding from them?

This does not mean that a teacher should never rebuke his *talmidim*. It means that anger is poisonous and will destroy any positive effect you hoped to achieve.

## DISCRETION

Knowing how to keep a secret is a basic requirement for entering the field of *chinuch*. All relationships begin with trust, and *talmidim* expect their teachers to maintain their silence when they share their troubles. A teacher who cannot keep a secret will quickly lose the respect of his *talmidim*.

## PATIENCE

Teaching is hard. Often *talmidim* seem to be deliberately trying our patience. But no matter how difficult, a teacher must not be curt with his *talmidim*. Their feelings matter, and even if you find yourself losing patience, it is critical to maintain your professionalism and respond in a diplomatic and friendly manner.

The critical point to remember is that your *talmidim's* feelings are not *hefker*. Think about how insulted you were the last time someone cut you off while you were talking, or were impatient with you. As an authority figure in your *talmid's* life, you have no right to make them feel bad by cut-

ting them off or acting impatient. Try to make your *talmidim* feel that they are not a burden to you; and that you enjoy spending time with them and hearing their thoughts. This will do wonders to boost their self-esteem and help them develop the tools they need to succeed in life.

# CHAPTER 9: ANSWERING QUESTIONS

## ADDRESSING HASHKAFAH QUESTIONS

Curiosity is a part of life, and at some point, many teenagers turn a probing eye towards *Yiddishkeit* and begin contemplating its fundamental underpinnings. Where did Hashem come from? Why does Hashem want our *tefillos* if He can read our thoughts? If Hashem is good, then why do people suffer? What happened before Hashem created the universe? As believing Jews, we understand that the human mind is limited and may not be able to fully grasp some of these concepts. A mature truth seeker understands that not every question must have an easy answer. Children, on the other hand, are still developing. These are deep and delicate topics, and addressing matters of *emunah* with your *talmidim* is a sensitive matter that requires wisdom and foresight.

One of the most damaging things a teacher can do is

to try to suppress his *talmid's* questions. “That question is treif,” is a statement that should never leave a teacher’s mouth. If you present *Yiddishkeit* as a religion that does not allow questions, your attitude will send a damaging message to your *talmidim*. They may perceive your discomfort and irritation as an indication that you have something to hide. If your *talmid* does not feel that his questions are being taken seriously, he will choke on them.

When your *talmid* asks hashkafic questions, he is typically looking for two things: validation that you appreciate that he is using his mind and applying himself to understand *Yiddishkeit*, and to satisfy his genuine curiosity about the world. Shutting down the discourse leaves your *talmid* hurt and baffled by your attitude.

The correct approach is to calmly and sincerely address your *talmid's* questions. If you have an insight, share it with confidence. If you do not know the answer to your *talmid's* question, tell your *talmid*, “That is an amazing question. I do not have an answer right now. I will think about it / ask someone and make sure that you have a satisfactory answer.” Make your *talmid* feel good about asking the question. It should be apparent to him that you value his insights.

Another important rule is to not offer a half-baked answer. If you are unclear on the subject, there is nothing wrong with saying that you do not know the answer and will try to find out. Your *talmid* will sense if you are answering thoughtlessly and will feel that something is wrong.

When *talmidim* experience a, “crisis of faith,” the root of the issue is often emotional. Family events, general discontent, or trauma can trigger an emotional resistance towards *Yiddishkeit*. This resistance manifests itself as “*emunah* questions”. When dealing with such a case, it is critical to address the core emotional issue that is triggering the questions. But even as one addresses the emotional aspect, one must also address the actual questions in an intellectually rigorous and satisfying way. It is useful to think of the questions as a buffer that the *talmid* has built around his heart, protecting his desires with a veneer of intellectual rigor. Unless one removes the buffer, it is difficult to get to the real emotional issue. *Mechanchim* must be prepared to confidently answer questions about *emunah*. In this chapter, we will present the basic framework to follow when explaining the rational underpinnings of our faith. By following this approach one can show *talmidim* that if one uses the basic tools of logic, he will find a preponderance of evidence that Hashem gave the Torah to the Jews at *Har Sinai*.

## HOW TO DEBATE RELIGION

### *DON'T GET DEFENSIVE*

When engaging students in topics of *emunah* it is important not to get defensive. My wife a”h would get very upset every time she heard someone stuttering excuses in an effort to defend our faith. The foundations for our *emu-*

*nah* are solid, and our attitude should be confident, not defensive.

On the other hand, when talking to a person with questions of *emunah* it is important not to be overconfident. People tend to magnify the severity of the problems presented by science to religious faith, and educators can often feel threatened when presenting evidence for the veracity of the Torah's position. This insecurity leads some people to compensate by overstating the strength of their position. They begin using statements like, "I can prove the Torah one hundred percent!" or, "I have absolute and irrefutable evidence for the truth of the Torah!"

These sorts of statements are deeply problematic for two reasons. Firstly, they aren't true. Nothing, except for mathematical propositions can be proven with one hundred percent certainty. Secondly, such blustering statements trigger a defensive reaction on the part of the listener. Let us briefly expand on these two ideas.

### ***ABSOLUTE PROOF VS REASONABLE DOUBT***

The goal of investigating reality is to discover the way that the world actually is. The problem that confronts a truth seeker is that discovering reality is difficult. We often cannot gather the necessary data to build an informed worldview and are instead left groping in the dark with incomplete information. Additionally, even if we could somehow ascertain all the facts about a particular issue,

our minds are not dispassionate computers that analyze the data and spit out the most likely result. Rather, we have biases, prejudices, and preconceived notions that cloud our judgment. Because of the limitations on our ability to collect and analyze data, when a person demands absolute proof of any proposition, they are automatically doomed to fail. Nothing about reality can be completely proven, and demanding such a level of proof for any issue is utterly unreasonable. All our decisions do not come from intellectual certitude, but rather from our minds ability to use the tools of reasonable inference and probability matrices.

To illustrate, consider how confident you are that your mother is your mother? Sure, she raised you for as long as you can remember, but perhaps you were accidentally switched in the hospital with another child, or perhaps your parents were unable to have children and secretly adopted you when you were an infant?

If someone would demand absolute proof of your parentage, you would be unable to supply it. Nevertheless, given the extreme improbability of the above scenarios, most people live their lives under the safe assumption that their parents are indeed their parents. This idea is especially important when discussing *emunah*. Hashem has given us the tools to strongly establish the truth of *Yiddishkeit* beyond a reasonable doubt. Can a *maamin* supply mathematical proof of G-d's existence? Of course not. That is not how Hashem created the world. A person who demands proof "beyond a shadow of a doubt" is doomed to spend their

entire life chasing shadows. As an educator, it is important to remember that it is disingenuous to claim that the Torah can be completely proven. After all, if the Torah could be proven one hundred percent, there could be no room for free choice.

When a questioner demands, “One hundred percent proof of the truth of the Torah,” it is important to point out to the illogical nature of his or her request. In no other area of a person’s life does anyone expect anything close to a hundred percent proof of a proposition before they act on the available data. When a person buys a house or invests in a business, they have no way of really knowing if they will see a return on their investment. All they can do is analyze the pertinent facts and make a decision based on a reasonable preponderance of evidence. To demand a higher level of proof for religious propositions is disingenuous.

### *THE WORD ‘PROOF’ IS DANGEROUS*

Newton’s third law states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. If you claim that you can prove your position with complete certainty, you will elicit an equal and opposite reaction from your listener. Instead of absorbing your point, they will strongly resist. They become hyper-attuned to any flaws in your logic and lose their ability to appreciate your position. All this resistance can be sidestepped by adopting a humbler tone and stating that you are simply presenting ideas that you find compelling. By avoiding the word “proof” - as well as any decla-

rations about the superior nature of your position - and instead framing your case as a reasonable argument, you stand a much better chance of having your position appreciated by the listener.

## THE TWO WAYS OF KNOWING THINGS IN THIS WORLD

Hashem has given us two powerful tools to verify the truth of the Torah: **eyewitness testimony** and **evidence**.

### EYEWITNESS TESTIMONY

More than 3,300 years ago a singular event occurred: Hashem Himself spoke directly to an entire nation of witnesses and gave Moshe the authority to give over the Torah. This event was seared into our national consciousness and the memory has been passed down faithfully from father to son and *rebbe* to *talmid* from those who stood at *Har Sinai* until today.

Ponder this idea for a moment. Hashem spoke in front of an entire nation of witnesses. This is Judaism's claim to truth. There are 4,200 religions in the world today. Not one of them claim that G-d appeared in front of a quorum of people, much less an entire nation. Islam claims Muhammad's revelation took place alone in the Hira cave where the angel Gabriel taught him the verses of the Quran. Mu-

hammed was charismatic enough to gather a following of people who were willing to accept his account of a private revelation. Christianity also makes no claims of Divine revelation. Jesus decided that he was the Messiah... and his followers believed him. Christianity's main "proof" comes from the claim of Jesus's resurrection and the subsequent "empty tomb." It is based on the testimony of two or three women (there are contradictory accounts in the gospels) who claimed that Jesus tomb was empty after he was buried, and on an account written by one man several decades later claiming that a number of mostly-unnamed people had spotted Jesus alive after his crucifixion.

That's it.

There was no Divine revelation to an entire nation of Christians. Just a written account of a few sightings by disciples and the testimony of some women who said that they had found an empty tomb.

Consider the following fact: there are sixteen million practicing Mormons alive right now. One would imagine that it would be difficult to fool sixteen million people into believing a story about a man in upstate New York who wrote a book claiming it is a translation of sixty-pound golden plates that he found after receiving directions from an angel. Oh, and where are the golden plates? He returned them to the angel after he finished transcribing them. Sounds crazy. But that is exactly what Joseph Smith

claimed when he published the Book of Mormon and began the Church of Latter-Day Saints. Conspicuously absent from this story is any sort of national revelation. Judaism is the only religion that claims that Hashem Himself spoke to an entire nation. Over the past thirty years the fields of anthropology, ethnography, and mythography have greatly expanded, and humanity has studied the origin stories and myths of thousands of cultures - from the Jackson Whites to the Vietnamese Ruc - and to this day we have never seen a similar claim. The claim of a national revelation is unique in the annals of history.

## A LIE TOO GREAT TO FABRICATE

Why are there no other claims of a mass revelation? Claiming that one's ancestors personally experienced a Divine revelation can do wonders to solidify faith in the hearts of devotees. So why do all religions start in lonely caves and private visions?

The answer is simple: lying about a national revelation is simply not feasible. A man can claim that he experienced all sorts of supernatural visions, and if he is charismatic enough, he may be able to convince people that he is telling the truth. But it's impossible to convince someone that they themselves experienced a Divine revelation when they have not. The question, "Don't you remember when Hashem appeared to you last week?" will always be dis-

missed as foolishness if one does not have a memory of the event. Similarly, making up such a lie at a later date is equally unfeasable. Imagine someone saying, “A hundred years ago all of your parents witnessed a Divine revelation.” This lie would be summarily rejected. Why did our parents never mention this remarkable event? How is it possible that you are the first one to introduce such a story to us? None of our parents ever mentioned anything about this earth-shattering revelation, and you are somehow the only one who knows anything about it?

Moreover, if there was a person who introduced the story of *matan Torah*, why is there no mention of him in any of our historical records? Moses is in the history books, yet this man remains missing.

Such a lie is impossible to get people to accept. The only plausible alternative is that our story is true. Hashem did appear to our ancestors at *Har Sinai*.

## PASSING ON THE TORCH

The Jewish people have created a chain of transmission that began with the momentous revelation at *Har Sinai*, and have passed on the torch, one generation to the next, from then until today. A scribe writing a Torah scroll is faced with an extensive list of rules that ensure that not a single word is misspelled. The Torah is read every week in synagogues across the Jewish nation. If even the smallest error is spotted, the scroll is wrapped up and must be fixed

within thirty days.

*Klal Yisroel* was forced into exile two thousand years ago and spread to the far corners of the earth. We have been persecuted in every generation and countless Jewish communities have been uprooted . Yet through all of that, we have clung to our *mesorah*.

The Yemenite community was cut off from the rest of the Jewish people for millennia. When they were finally reunited with the rest of *Klal Yisroel*, it was found that their *sifrei Torah* differed from ours by only nine letters, none which changed the meaning of the words. Consider: the Torah is an enormous text with over 300,000 letters, yet despite thousands of years of isolation and hundreds of scrolls written over the ages, their *mesorah* had diverged from ours by a mere nine letters! Even more telling, none of these changes had any impact on the meaning of the words.

By contrast, the Book of Mormon, which was released in 1830, - three hundred ninety years after the invention of the printing press - has already diverged into twenty-two different versions with hundreds of textual differences. The New Testament, 1700 years younger than the Torah, contains an astonishing 200,000 variants, many with significant differences in meaning.

I can trace my knowledge of the events at *Har Sinai* back my *rebbe* and his *rebbe* and his *rebbe*, going back to Moshe *Rabbeinu*. It is this knowledge that informs our relation-

ship with Hashem and confirms that we are His Chosen People. This reality permeates everything we do, from the moment we wake up until the moment we go to sleep. All our life events, from birth to death, are understood in the context of our sacred purpose in this world. This is our heritage, and we have faithfully passed it down through the generations since the moment Hashem revealed himself to us at *Har Sinai*.

## CHAPTER 10: EVIDENCE

In addition to our *mesorah* about *matan Torah*, with its unparalleled claim of a national Divine revelation, there is a preponderance of additional evidence that points to the truth of *Yiddishkeit*. From uncannily fulfilled prophecies in Tanach to statements of *Chazal* that reveal a knowledge of the universe that far surpassed the science of their time, we have countless phenomena that can only be explained by pointing to a Divine hand. The Torah also contains numerous *mitzvos* that only make sense if they were commanded by a Creator that has complete control over natural order, such as the mitzvah of *Shmitta*, *Aliyah Li'regel*, and the *parsha* of *Sotah* (See Section 13 below).

### PROPHECY

#### *THE PREDICTION OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SECOND BAIS HAMIKDASH*

One of the most valuable tools for verifying the truth of a proposition is to see if it makes accurate predictions. If one's hypothesis predicts a particular event that other theories do not predict, then should that unlikely event come

to pass, this indicates the truth of the proposed hypothesis.

This is critically important when trying to verify the truth of *yahadus*. Throughout Tanach, one finds numerous predictions about future events. If we analyze these prophetic statements in light of how history in fact unfolded, a strong case for Divine foreknowledge emerges.

Consider for a moment the Deuteronomistic Prophecies in chapters 28 to 30. These terrifying predictions lay out what will befall the Jewish nation if they abandon Hashem. Some of these predictions are cryptic and so are not subject to scientific analysis, but many are unambiguous and can be measured against history.

Hashem promises His people that because of their rebellion, they will be conquered by a distant nation who does not speak their language. He also promises that this invading force will not only kill the Jewish combatants but will pillage and destroy, killing young and old alike. Additionally, Hashem promises that the remaining Jewish people will be sent off to exile and dispersed throughout the world, where they will be forced to be submissive foreigners in the land of others. But there is a glimmer of hope in this litany of disastrous prophecies. Hashem promises that despite the harsh exile, the Jewish people will survive and not be annihilated or become assimilated into their host culture.

Every one of these prophecies were fulfilled in the year 70 BCE when the Romans destroyed the Second Temple.

While we often believe that in the ancient world invading armies slaughtered the inhabitants of their conquered territory, the truth is that such an event was exceedingly rare. Most conquests were ultimately fueled by economic concerns: subjugating and taxing colonies. Decimating the population would lead to a loss in tax revenue, and most armies not only spared their subject's lives, they even allowed them to keep most of their laws and religious beliefs. This policy of conquest was true for most Oriental Empires, Greece, the Hellenistic kingdoms, the Assyrian empire, and even the Romans. Yet, when the Romans destroyed the Temple, they utterly laid waste to Jerusalem, killing and exiling its inhabitants, and rendering it a shadow of its former self for the next two millennia.

The Torah also predicts that the Jews would be unable to speak the language of their conquerors. This is again quite unusual. Most small kingdoms know the languages of their surrounding neighbors – especially those possessing vast empires. Yet Jerusalem was destroyed by the Latin speaking Romans, possessing a language utterly unknown to the Aramaic and Hebrew speaking Jewish population. Even the supposedly cultured and Hellenized Jews spoke Greek in addition to Hebrew and Aramaic, not the foreign language of the Romans.

Additionally, Hashem promises that the conquerors will come from a distant land. This is again quite unusual in the ancient world, where most conquests were perpetrated by neighbors who were intent on expanding their territo-

ry. Yet Jerusalem was sacked by distant Rome, and Julius Severus, the general who overthrew the Jews, was the governor of Britain.

The fact that the Torah predicts a worldwide dispersal of the Jewish exiles is also remarkable. The dispersal of the Jewish people across the continents has no parallel in world history. Other nations have been exiled, but they usually resettle in a new homeland or are absorbed by a host culture. The Torah also predicts that we would survive the exile. This again has no historical precedent, and a human author would have had to be a fool to write such a statement.

Each of these prophecies is very unlikely to come true and offer a predictive test of the Torah's veracity. One or two unlikely predictions can be attributed to luck, but the uncanny ability for the Torah to repeatedly foretell future events points to a Divine Author.

### *THE MIRACLE OF THE WESTERN WALL*

Standing at 488 meters long and sixty meters high, the Western Wall is a massive edifice. The last remaining structure on the Har HaBayis from the era of the second Beis Hamikdash, the Western Wall has become a symbol of our hope for the ultimate redemption. As the prime symbol of the Jewish people, one would imagine that the Western Wall would have been destroyed long ago. In Bamidbar Rabbah 11:2 we find an astonishing prophecy:

הִנֵּה זֶה עוֹמֵד אַחַר כְּתָלָנוּ, זֶה כֹּתֵל מֵעַרְבֵי שֶׁל בַּיִת הַמְּקֻדָּשׁ  
שֶׁאֵינּוּ חָרֵב לְעוֹלָם, לָמָּה, שֶׁהִשְׁכִּינָה בַּמַּעֲרָב.

The *pasuk* in *Shir Hashirim* refers to Hashem watching us from behind a wall. The midrash understands this to mean that Hashem promised us that the Western Wall will never be destroyed.

Let us consider this claim for a moment. During its long history, Jerusalem has been attacked fifty-two times by invading armies, captured forty-four times, and destroyed twice. It was ravaged by the Arab Caliphate in 638 CE, again in 1071 by the Turkish warlord Atsiz ibn Uvaq, and then again in 1098 by the vizier al-Afdal Shahanshah. During the crusades, Jerusalem was captured by Godfrey of Bouillon for Christianity, only to reconquered for Islam by Saladin in 1187. Jerusalem was conquered and reconquered for hundreds of years until Suleiman the Magnificent captured the city for the Ottaman Empire in 1517. Many of these conquests involved razing significant portions of Jerusalem to the ground. Yet through all this, the Western Wall remained untouched! The Western Wall stands at the center of one of the most congested areas in the history of human civilization, and a symbol of the most hated people in history. Yet it has stood proudly for thousands of years – a testament to Hashem’s promise not to abandon his nation.

How could a mortal man confidently declare that the Western Wall will stand forever?! Only a fool would gamble that the Western Wall would survive dozens of sieges. It

is obvious that the information comes from Hashem Himself.

### *THE GERMANIC PROPHECY*

Every Passover the Jewish people acknowledge that our world is full of enemies. Over the generations, countless nations have stood up and tried to destroy the Jewish people - yet we always survived. Over three and a half thousand years ago, our forefather Jacob saw a dark force entering the world. This force was stronger and more destructive than almost any other force in existence, and it possessed the power to decimate the entire world order. The book of Psalms records our forefather's desperate plea for G-d to spare the world from this darkness.

So, what is this evil force that – if unleashed – would decimate the world? The Talmud (Megilla 6a-b) identifies the source of our forefather's fear:

זו גרממיה של אדום שאלמלי הן יוצאין מחרובין כל  
העולם כולו

This is the German nation, which borders Rome. For if the power of the Germans were unleashed, they would destroy the entire world.

The Talmud relates that over the ages, G-d kept the German people at war and in disarray to prevent them from uniting and setting their gaze on conquering the world. The Talmud relates that once the Germans unite, they pose

a deadly threat to the world order.

It is essential to understand how unusual this prophecy is. During the time of the Sages, the German people were little more than a cluster of Teuton, Swabian, and Gothic barbarian tribes that dwelt along the Rhine and Danube rivers under the shadow of the mighty Roman Empire. We have no record of these geographically distant tribes ever attacking the Jews. The rabbis of the Talmud had witnessed the greatest empires in recorded history sweep across the civilized world – they had lost wars to the mighty Egyptian Pharaohs and had bowed before the great king Alexander of Macedonia, they had been exiled by Roman Ceasars and became tributaries to Persian emperors – yet despite facing all these world powers, our Sages pointed to a tiny band of unknown wild illiterate tribes that had never previously threatened the Jewish people as containing the seeds of world destruction. At the time of its codification, this passage in the Talmud would have been deemed cryptic and inexplicable.

For the next 2000 years, our Sages guarded this prophecy and took pains to keep track of these wild tribes. Although many of these tribes eventually dispersed across the world settling in such places as distant as contemporary Russia to Iceland and from Norway to North Africa, throughout this time, our Sages kept careful records identifying the modern-day Germany as the descendants of the original Germanic tribes.

Since the time of the patriarchs, the forces of history did not allow the German people to unite, triggering the destructive prophecy. This continued until 1803 when the Napoleonic wars fundamentally restructured the borders of Europe and caused the final dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire. This gave birth to the 19th century quest for German Nationhood and the origin of German Nationalism. This movement reached its apex under the leadership of an Austrian-born politician who came to power under the slogan “Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer” (“One People, One Empire, One Leader”). This politician, Adolphus Hitler, ushered in the darkest period of human history with the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. This triggered a sequence of events that would last six years and cost the lives of 85 million people.

Over the ages, the Jews weathered all sorts of enemies, yet none of them threatened our survival like Nazi Germany. At the heart of German nationalism was the goal of destroying the Jewish people – it is the very glue that brought Germany together. Alfred Rosenberg, one of the ideological fathers of the Nazi party who was tried and executed during the Nuremberg trials, said, quote, “Anti-Semitism was the unifying element of the reconstruction of Germany.”

More than any other force, it was the desire to annihilate the Jews that united the German people. Years before he rose to power, Hitler viewed his real cosmic purpose – not merely as a conqueror or world leader, but as the torch-

bearer of his wicked ancestor – Amalek. He expressed this explicitly in an interview with a journalist in 1922, “Once I am in power, my first and most important task will be the annihilation of the Jews.”

Our forefathers fear was finally realized.

It is remarkable to consider that our Sages, living thousands of years ago – pointed to a tiny conglomeration of warring tribes and branded them as the containing the seeds of world destruction and the true threat to the Jewish people. Only people with access to a higher source of knowledge could have uttered such a statement

### *JEWISH SURVIVAL*

The story of the Jews is an improbable tale. The survival of the Jewish people from antiquity until today is historically unique.

When our nation was young, we were a small kingdom with values and beliefs that set us apart from our neighbors. While their neighbors believed in a pantheon of gods that anthropomorphized natural phenomenon, the Jews believed in a single supreme G-d that had Created the universe and everything in it. This idea was revolutionary. Hashem was not a corporeal petty vindictive tyrant, like many of the gods of Israel’s neighbors. He is instead the benevolent, omnipresent source of all of reality Who created the world to bestow goodness on humanity.

The Jews possessed a moral law code that is unique. We were different from other nations, and they treated us as outcasts, yet we still clung to our faith.

Then – with the destruction of the Temple – we were sent into exile. Every other nation in history that has lost their homeland has eventually disappeared leaving behind only their memory in the historical record. But the Jews persevered. We survived the Babylonian exile, and king Nebuchadnezzar’s attempt to force us to bow to his idols. We survived Haman’s genocidal attempt to wipe us from the face of the earth during the Persian exile. We survived when the Romans carted large numbers of our people to be sold as slaves or killed for sport in the gladiator ring.

Not only did we survive – we flourished. After the Romans razed the Second Temple to the ground, the Jews spread across the world and established communities in Europe, China, and the Arabian Peninsula. We flourished wherever we found ourselves, but we never assimilated. We remained distinct and, despite persecution, never compromised on the tenets of our faith.

Our refusal to assimilate angered those around us, and the Jews had to endure crusades, inquisitions, and discrimination by Christians and Muslims alike. Jews were often barred from most businesses and were forbidden to own land. In Europe, this simmering cauldron of anti-Semitism eventually bubbled over in the darkest period of human history – the Holocaust. From 1938 to 1945 Jews across Eu-

rope were hunted, tortured and killed by the millions – all while the world watched silently. Families tried to flee, but the countries of the world closed their borders, condemning millions of Jews to death at the hands of the Nazis.

And yet, the Jewish nation survived. We rebuilt our homeland and established strong communities around the world. Whether it is a Yemenite Jew who survived forty generations of mistreatment by his neighbors, or a Polish Jew whose ancestors died rather than kiss the cross - we survived

The survival of the Jewish people is historically unique and attempts at naturalistic explanations stretch the imagination. Hashem promised Avraham that He would establish an eternal covenant with Avraham's descendants. It is this promise that accounts for our nation's survival. All of the events in Jewish history are foretold in Torah: our exile from the Land of Israel, our eventual return to our homeland, and, still in the future, our ultimate redemption. – It was all written down in the Sinai desert over 3300 years ago. Our survival is an enduring testament to the unique nature of the Jewish people.

## SCIENTIFIC FOREKNOWLEDGE

### *FINS AND SCALES*

According to modern science, there are currently ap-

proximately 33,600 recognized species of fish. This number is constantly being updated as hundreds of new species are discovered each year. The oceans are so vast and deep that despite all of our research, most of the marine world is still a mystery. We know more about the moon than we know about the deep oceans. It would be foolish for a human being to make a broad claim about all marine life. Yet in mesechtas Niddah 6:9 we find just such a claim.

כל שיש לו קשקשת, יש לו סנפיר

*“All [fish] that have scales also have fins [and are thus kosher]”*

To understand the incredible boldness of this claim, it is important to understand that in the time of the Mishnah, fishermen were limited by their crude fishing implements - mostly basic nets, spears, and hooks - and they were only exposed to the relatively small number of fish species in their locale. They knew nothing of the thousands of freshwater fish in Africa or the strange and translucent fish of the deep ocean. Yet *Chazal* were confident enough to say that any fish with scales must have fins. This statement has halachic ramifications: should one encounter a scaled piece of fish; one may eat it even if one does not see any fins. This is true because, as the mishna asserts, one can be completely confident that since scales are present, the fish must have

had fins.

Since this statement was written thousands of years ago, ichthyologists have not found a species of fish that possess scales without fins. Of the estimated 3.5 trillion fish swimming in the sea, we have not encountered any fish that has scales but no fins. *Chazal* could have only made such a statement if they had access to Divine knowledge.

### *THE NUMBER OF STARS*

How many stars did the ancients believe inhabited the night sky? Without the use of telescopes, one is limited to the stars visible to the naked eye. For someone with perfect eyesight on an absolutely clear night, approximately 6,000 stars are visible from Earth. Of course, one's view of those stars will be restricted to the particular hemisphere he's in. Yet in antiquity humanity never imagined that the sky contained anywhere near 6,000 stars. Ptolemy in his *Almagest* writes that the sky contains 1,022 stars. This was the standard number accepted by the Greeks and adopted by Arab scholars. This number was later updated by the astronomer Tycho Brahe in 1598 when he reduced the number to 965 stars. This was later changed again by Johannes Hevelius in 1687, who wrote in his *Catalogus Stellarum Fixarum* that the sky contains 1,564 stars

All these scholars were obviously wrong. There are trillions and trillions of stars in the night sky. This fact was unknown until the advent of modern telescopes, yet, re-

markably, this reality is recorded explicitly in five lines in the Talmud.

The Gemara in *Brachos* 32b writes:

אמר לה הקב"ה בתי י"ב מזלות בראתי ברקיע ועל כל מזל ומזל  
בראתי לו שלשים חיל ועל כל חיל וחיל בראתי לו שלשים לגיון  
ועל כל לגיון ולגיון בראתי לו שלשים רהטון ועל כל רהטון ורהטון  
בראתי לו שלשים קרטון ועל כל קרטון וקרטון בראתי לו שלשים  
גסטרא ועל כל גסטרא וגסטרא תליתי בו שלש מאות וששים וחמ"ד  
שה אלפי רבוא כוכבים כנגד ימות החמה

*“The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Israel: My daughter, I created twelve constellations in the firmament, and for each and every constellation I have created thirty armies, and for each and every army I have created thirty legions [ligyon], and for each and every legion I have created thirty infantry division leaders [rahaton], and for each and every infantry division leader I have created thirty military camp leaders [karton], and for each and every military camp leader I have created thirty leaders of forts [gastera], and on each and every leader of a fort I have hung three hundred and sixty-five thousand stars corresponding to the days of the solar year. And all of them I have created only for your sake; and you said the Lord has forsaken me and the Lord has forgotten me?”*

Multiply  $12 \times 30 \times 30 \times 30 \times 30 \times 30 \times 365 \times 1,000 \times 10,000$  and you get just around 10 to the power of 18 stars (that’s

1,000,000,000,000,000,000 or one hundred thousand trillion / one quintillion). From a logarithmic perspective this is remarkably close to the current rough estimate of contemporary astronomers who put the number in this ballpark (at one septillion). Imagine, for almost all of recorded history, people believed that there was little more than 1,000 stars in the sky, yet *Chazal* understood the sheer enormity of cosmos. Such a radical departure by *Chazal* from the greatest astronomers of their time points to a higher level of knowledge than is available to the senses.

### *THE EIGHTH DAY AND BRIS MILLAH*

One of the Jewish peoples' most sacred rites is the ritual circumcision of our male children on the eighth day of life. Four thousand years ago Hashem commanded Abraham and his entire household to perform this rite of passage in order to forever commemorate the bond between Hashem and His Chosen People. Since then, the Jewish people have been faithfully carrying out this critical commandment no matter the obstacles.

For many years skeptics and scoffers have mocked circumcision as an ancient and primitive holdover from paganism. These claims have been proven false with the advent of modern medicine, and we have been given a glimpse of the infinite wisdom of the Creator.

Doctors have discovered that circumcision leads to a drastic lifelong reduction of the probability of contracting

various infections. In addition, it has been found to reduce the likelihood of contracting many deadly cancers to nearly zero. This has led the American Academy of Pediatrics to write that the benefits of circumcision outweigh any possible risks and the California Medical Association to endorse circumcision as an “effective public health measure.”

Although circumcision may seem like an invasive surgical procedure, the rate of complications is remarkably low. Researchers found that circumcisions performed by doctors had an astonishingly low rate of complications, hovering at 0.19%. This number dropped even lower when the circumcision was conducted by a Jewish mohel, making circumcision the safest surgical procedure in the world.

Why are these numbers so low? A closer look reveals the astonishing power of the Divine plan. When the human body is cut, a remarkable chain of events follows. First, the blood vessel contracts to limit the flow of blood. Then the body sends an army of sticky platelets to clump together and create a plug over the wound. Once there, these platelets begin a complicated cascade of chemical reactions, forming a fibrin clot that acts as a mesh to stop the bleeding. Two of the key elements that control this process are vitamin K and a protein called prothrombin.

Why is this important to know? Because when a child is born it takes time for the body to produce enough vitamin K to work correctly. For the first seven days, the body is deficient in vitamin K, and only by the eighth day is this agent

present at normal levels. This fact shows the wisdom of the Torah's commandment not to circumcise our children before the eighth day. But there's more.

The body's principal clotting agent, prothrombin, has a unique pattern in newborn children. During the first few days of life, the amount of prothrombin in the blood plasma drops steeply, and only returns to normal levels on the eighth day of life. Amazingly, for only one day of our entire life - the eighth day - prothrombin levels spike to 110% percent, a higher concentration than on any other day in a person's lifetime. Never again will the body produce such an abundance of coagulating agents. It is no wonder that the complication rate for circumcision is so low.

What ancient healer, with his primitive understanding of the human body, could have possibly known about this spike in prothrombin levels on this one day of life? Such wisdom points firmly towards a Divine source of knowledge.

### ***SHECHITA***

One of the hallmarks of Jewish law is its sensitivity to the pain of others. Our mandate to minimize suffering extends even to animals, and we are forbidden from causing any creature unnecessary pain - as evidenced in the halachos regarding kosher slaughter.

Every year over 60 billion chickens and over 4 billion farm animals are killed worldwide to satisfy humanity's

need for protein. Methods of slaughter vary: asphyxiation with nitrogen gas, stunning with a captive bolt pistol, or cutting of the animal's chest by the heart.

Jewish law demands that the animal's throat be slit with a sharp knife in one quick movement. For many years, various governmental bodies around the world have tried to ban Jewish slaughter on the grounds that it causes animals to suffer needlessly. A closer look at animal physiology reveals not only the human nature of kosher slaughter, but the Divine wisdom encoded in Jewish law.

All mammals have two main arteries carrying blood back and forth from the brain, the carotid artery in the front of the neck, and the vertebral artery located in the back of the neck. When an animal's neck is slit with a knife, the carotid artery is severed but the vertebral artery remains intact. This means that blood will continue flowing towards the animal's brain, keeping it conscious and in pain for a long time until it bleeds out. This is inhumane and an unacceptable way to process animals for food.

Remarkably, out of the entire animal kingdom, kosher animals - and only kosher animals - possess a unique physiological trait. In kosher animals, both the carotid and vertebral arteries are located at the front of the neck. During kosher slaughter both arteries are cut simultaneously, instantly ending the blood supply to the animal's brain. This induces unconsciousness and a humanely painless death.

How could human farmers living thousands of years ago

have possibly known that, of all the animals in the entire planet, only kosher animals have this unique physiological makeup. Such knowledge of our world points to a Master Planner and Creator as the source of our laws.

### ***THE GLOBE***

When standing on any spot on earth, our planet appears to the naked eye like a flat plane that extends in all directions. Intuitively, the world feels flat, and for much of humanity's history we had no idea that we were living on a globe. Most ancient cultures ascribed to a flat Earth cosmography, and this was the accepted model of the Greeks until the classical period. Most other civilizations including China and India clung to the concept of a flat Earth until much later.

According to Egyptian and Mesopotamian cosmology, the world was a massive disc floating in an endless ocean. Hindu mythology believes that the world is supported on the backs of seven massive elephants who stand on the shell of an enormous tortoise.

Long before most civilizations had any inkling of the actual shape of the world, *Chazal* correctly understood the spherical nature of the world.

The Zohar (ויקרא דף י עמוד א) quotes a passage written in the book of Rav Hamnana Saba which states unambiguously:

כל העולם מתגלגל בעיגול ככדור אלו למעלה, ואלו למטה, וכל אלו הבריות משונות במראיהן משינוי האויר, כפי כל מקום ומקום, וקיימים במקומם כשאר בני האדם, ועל זה יש מקום בעולם כאשר מאור לאלו, חשוך לאלו, לאלו יום, ולאלו לילה, ויש מקום שכולו יום ולא נמצא בו לילה, חוץ משעה אחת קטנה

*“The whole world revolves in a circle like a ball, some are on top and some are on the bottom, and the people in different places have different appearances from each other due to the different atmospheres. And this allows that while it is light for these, it is dark for these, for these days and for others it is night. There is a place where it is light all the time except for a brief period.”*

Such knowledge - so far ahead of most of the civilized world - points to a higher source of understanding.

### **THE LUNAR CYCLE**

One of the most beautiful sights in the night sky is the gray glowing orb of the moon. The moon has captivated the imaginations of astronomers and astrologers since time immemorial. The moon's cycle through the sky is also critically significant for the Jewish calendar and forms the basis for establishing when the yearly holidays are celebrated. How long does it take for the moon to complete its synodic cycle around the Earth? We all know that the moon renews approximately once a month, but figuring out the exact amount of time between each lunar cycle can be tricky.

When Neal Armstrong visited the moon in 1969, he left behind a small array of mirrors facing the earth. Using the most advanced laser technology available, NASA scientists were able to shoot laser beams at these mirrors and measure the returning photons. They used this data together with atomic measuring instruments to precisely measure the length of time between each lunar revolution. NASA discovered that the moon revolves around the earth one time every 29.530588 days.

Over 2000 years ago, *Chazal* calculated the length of the lunar cycle and came up with an almost identical number. (Rosh Hashana 25a)

אמר להם ר"ג כך מקובלני מבית אבי אבא אין חדושה של  
לבנה פחותה מעשרים ותשעה יום ומחצה ושני שלישי שעה  
וע"ג חלקים

*Said Rabban Gamliel - I am in possession of a sacred tradition from the house of my father's father: The monthly lunar cycle takes no less than twenty-nine and a half days, plus two-thirds of an hour, plus seventy-three of the 1,080 subsections of an hour.*

If one combines these numbers, it is determined that this tradition put the lunar cycle at 29.53059 days every month. This number is within a one-sixth millionth of a day from the figure that NASA recorded with the use of cutting-edge technology. This tiny differential is not due to a lack of precision on the part of the Sages, but rather due to the inherent limitation of the numerical system used to

record time as compared to scientific measurement.

How is it possible for *Chazal* to have measured the lunar cycle with such precision? Many astronomers over the ages have tried, but none of their numbers are even close to those possessed by the house of Rabbi Gamliel. One can only conclude that *Chazal* had access to a Divine source of knowledge.

### *THE DIMENSIONS OF THE ARK*

There are few things as dangerous as a stormy sea. Modern ships - built with reinforced steel plates - often break apart in storms from the force of the water hitting their hull. One can only imagine how dangerous seafaring was in antiquity. To survive the danger of the seas, humankind has spent millennia refining our shipbuilding skills, trying to find most buoyant and stable designs. For most of our recorded history, ships were just too fragile to survive the open ocean and were restricted to local bodies of water.

Only about a thousand years ago had nautical technology advanced enough to allow the famed Viking Longship to transverse the Mediterranean. In the Torah we find Hashem commanding Noah to build a uniquely shaped vessel to withstand the coming deluge. The length of the ark was to be 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high. *Chazal* (Berashis Rabbah 31:10) noted these dimensions and extrapolated from them the ideal proportions for a naval vessel:

בר חֲטָיָא אָמַר (תהלים קיט, טו): בְּפִקוּדֵי אֲשִׁיחָה,  
(תהלים קיט, טז): בְּחֻקֵּי אֲשִׁתֵּעֲשֶׂע, לְמִדְתֵּי תוֹרַה דְּרַדְּ  
אֲרָץ שְׂאֵם גַּעֲשֶׂה אָדָם סְפִינָה שְׁתֵּהָ עוֹמְדַת בְּלִמּוֹן, גַּעֲשֶׂה  
רְחֹבָה אֶחָד מִשְׁשֶׁה בְּאֲרָכָה, וְגִבְהָה אֶחָד מִעֲשָׂרָה בְּאֲרָכָה

*Bar Chitaya said... the Torah is teaching us the way of the world. Should a man desire to build a boat that can withstand the ocean - he should construct the ship's width to be one-sixth of its length and its height to be one-tenth of its length.*

As it turns out, these dimensions - 30 to 5 to 3 - are the perfect ratio for building large vessels. In 1843 British engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel made The Great Britain, a steamship with almost identical proportions to the ark. It was considered one of the most magnificent examples of maritime engineering of its day.

The ability of these dimensions to withstand the violent and unpredictable forces of the ocean were confirmed in 1904 in Denmark when a thirty-foot long vessel was made in the exact proportions of the ark. According to the Copenhagen newspaper, Dagbladet:

“The remarkable thing about the Torah’s measurements is that after thousands of years’ experience in the art of shipbuilding they must be confessed to be still the ideal proportions for the construction of a big ship... In a storm, the motion of the Ark would be reduced to a minimum... If the greatest living engineer in the world was given such a commission as this, to construct as large and strong a ves-

sel as to lie still upon the sea, and as simply constructed as the Ark, he could not make a better vessel.”

These findings have been confirmed by Korean naval engineers who published a study on the ark’s structural integrity in the April 1994 *Journal of Creation*. According to the study, which analyzed the structural safety, overturning stability, and seakeeping quality of a boat with the ark’s dimensions, the authors found that, “the Ark had a superior level of safety in high winds and waves compared with the other hull forms studied. The voyage limit of the Ark, estimated on the basis of modern passenger ships, criteria, revealed that it could have navigated through waves higher than 30 meters.”

After thousands of years of refining our shipbuilding abilities, we are only beginning to appreciate the wisdom that *Chazal* saw in the pesukim.

### ***THE GENDER OF THE EMBRYO***

One area of science that *Chazal* showed a tremendous mastery over was the field of embryology. The Talmud prohibits a person from praying for something that visibly violates the natural order of the world. For example, one should not pray for a piece of wood to turn into gold or for an empty cup to suddenly fill with water. Yet when it comes to praying for one’s child to be a specific gender, *Chazal* (Brachos 60a) made the following statement:

*“During the first forty days after conception, an expect-*

*ant parent is allowed to pray that their child develop into a specific gender. Yet, after forty days the gender is established, and such a prayer is invalid.”*

This statement by *Chazal* may seem puzzling. It is generally understood by modern science that gender is determined at the moment of conception. On a genetic level, gender differences are based on whether a zygote possesses an XX chromosome, making it a girl, or an XY chromosome, making it a boy. Because a woman does not possess a Y chromosome, the oocyte of the mother will always contribute an X chromosome to the fetus. The difference between an embryo developing into a boy or girl depends entirely on the genetic contribution of the father. If the father contributes a Y chromosome, the child will have the mother's X chromosome and the father's Y chromosome, making it a boy. If the father contributes an X chromosome, the zygote will possess two X chromosomes and will develop into a girl.

On the surface, this reality seems impossible to square with the statement of *Chazal* that one can pray for the gender of an embryo during the first forty days of conception. Yet, a closer look reveals the wisdom of the sages.

As the cells in a developing embryo divide, the fetus begins developing the essential features of human anatomy. At 18 weeks a baby's ears develop, allowing them to hear sound for the first time. By six months taste buds will develop, allowing the child to experience the sensation of

taste. For approximately the first forty to forty-one days of life, the genitalia of an embryo are undifferentiated and are anatomically identical for both males and females. Only after this forty-day period does the anatomical structure of an embryo begin a physiology cascade of events that results in establishing the gender differences between males and females.

It is worth considering Jewish law forbids performing routine autopsies, and *Chazal* had no access to the advanced medical knowledge available to us. Nevertheless, they correctly identified exactly when physiological differences in gender begin developing in an embryo. Such knowledge hints to Divine wisdom.

### *THE BEE'S HONEY*

According to Jewish law, one is not allowed to eat non-kosher animals, fish, birds, and insects. This includes the meat of the animals as well as anything produced by the animal's body, such as milk or eggs.

Interestingly, bees are considered a non-kosher insect, and it is forbidden for a Jew to eat bees. Included in the prohibition, one would imagine that a Jew would be forbidden from eating honey, just as it is forbidden to eat the milk from a non-kosher animal. Nevertheless, the Torah enigmatically allows the eating of honey despite it being produced by a non-kosher insect.

Amazingly over 2000 years ago, the Talmud (Bechoros

7b) addresses the reasoning for this law and makes a remarkable point about the gastro-anatomical makeup of the bee's physiology.

מפני מה אמרו דבש דבורים מותר מפני שמכניסות אותו  
לגופן ואין ממצות אותו מגופן

*For what reason did the Sages say that the honey of bees is permitted? It is because they bring the nectar from the flowers into their body, but they do not excrete it from their body as a bodily excretion.*

This anatomical point was confirmed thousands of years later when scientists began studying the alimentary canal of the bee species. What they found was remarkable. Bees suck up nectar through their long proboscis, but instead of entering their intestinal and digestive system, the nectar goes to a special stomach devoted to storing honey. This 'honey stomach' holds about 40 mg of nectar, or roughly 50% of the bee's weight, and requires over a thousand flowers and more than an hour to fill. Once full, the bee returns to the hive and – instead of digesting the nectar, begins regurgitating it in the formation of sugar bubbles. The process turns the nectar from a water-like substance into a thick syrupy concoction. This process does not happen alone; the bees pass the regulated nectar from one bee to another, each bringing it up and trying to evaporate some of its water content by forming surface rich bubbles between their mandibles.

It is quite remarkable that the sages of the Talmud - living thousands of years ago - understood the unique nature of

honey production and how it differed from typical animal by-products. Such knowledge hints to a higher source of knowledge than what is available through natural observation.

### *THE MISSING KIDNEY*

One of the most critical organs for sustaining life is the kidneys. The primary job of the kidneys is to filter the blood and control the fluid level of the body. Whenever living beings exert energy, toxins and waste products build up in the blood system. Although human kidneys are relatively small, no bigger than a computer mouse, each kidney contains over a million nephrons – tiny filtration systems that work 24/7 to clean and balance your bodily fluids. As each nephron fills with blood, an intricate chemical and biological process of filtration and reabsorption takes place. All the blood is broken down into its constituent parts and your kidneys then adjust the pH of the blood, removing acid buildup in the blood, as well as perfectly balance and control the body's supply of salt and minerals. Additionally, the kidneys contain hormones that regulate the body's blood pressure as well as the production of red blood cells. Your kidneys filter all the blood in your body over 30 times a day for your entire life.

Given its vital function, it is obvious why the kidneys are considered a vital organ. When the kidneys stop working, the human body is unable to clean the waste out of its system or control the fluid level of the body. Without

immediate intervention, it is impossible to survive without a functioning kidney.

This reality creates the groundwork to understand an astonishing statement by our Sages. It is forbidden for a Jew to eat the meat of an animal that is considered mortally wounded. The Talmud records several injuries that would render an animal unfit to be eaten, such as if the animal is missing a limb or has a puncture in one of its vital organs. Astonishingly enough, our Sages (Chullin 54a) record a tradition going back to Mount Sinai that a bovine that is missing its kidneys is not considered mortally wounded.

For centuries this statement of the Sages was mocked by scoffers; anyone with the most basic medical background knows that it is simply impossible to survive without functioning kidneys? If the kidneys are removed from a human or a dog, the effects are immediate, devastating, and fatal.

Remarkably, in 1971 Dutch researchers removed the kidneys from several bulls to study the effects of kidney removal on vital functioning. Although the study was short, lasting only a week before the animals were slaughtered, the researchers discovered something remarkable. Aside from a loss of appetite, the bulls seemed in perfect health, showing no signs of stress or rapid deterioration. Further studies revealed that ruminating animals had the unique ability to filter toxins out of their blood without the use of their kidneys. This was accomplished by using their rumen to filter toxins and expel them as waste. Although the study

only lasted a short time, it revealed an entirely new mechanism of blood filtration that allowed ruminants to survive without kidneys significantly better than non-ruminants. This find was utterly unexpected and quite remarkable.

It is astonishing to consider that our Sages, living thousands of years before the technology capable of conducting these tests existed, possessed a tradition from Mount Sinai that would only be understood in the light of modern veterinary science.

### *HEMOPHILIA*

The blood clotting process of the human body is remarkable. The human circulatory system, if laid down end to end, would extend for over 60,000 miles. The smallest breach anywhere along these thousands of miles of blood vessels triggers a cascade of events to plug up the wound.

For most people, this process is automatic. We are able to survive cuts and scrapes with little lasting effect. But one out of every 5,000 people suffers from hemophilia, a genetic mutation that derails the clotting process. This ailment has a unique genetic disposition: it is almost always passed from “carrier” mothers to “affected” male children.

Hemophilia develops due to a genetic mutation in the X chromosome. For a woman, who has two X chromosomes, a mutated chromosome is not a problem. Their body relies on the other, unmutated X chromosome to code the body's

systems, and that person will not exhibit the symptoms of hemophilia. Males are not so lucky. They have only one X chromosome, they inherit from their mother.

This situation creates a unique phenomenon. Women who carry a defective X chromosome do not display symptoms of hemophilia, yet they remain silent carriers. When they have children, their daughters may become carriers, and their sons may suffer from hemophilia.

This was not understood until modern times, when the theory of genetics was developed, and we gained a better understanding of what causes this blood clotting disorder. Yet, remarkably, in the words of *Chazal* (Yevamos 64b) we find they understood the mechanics of this genetic mutation:

*“For it was taught: if she circumcised her first child and he died, and then a second one who also died, she must not circumcise her third child; Once it took place with four sisters at Sepphoris that when the first [sister] circumcised her child, he died; when the second [circumcised her child], he also died; and when the third [circumcised her child], he also died. The fourth came to the Rabbis, who said to her, “You must not circumcise”*

Many hematology textbooks acknowledge that *Chazal* were the first people in medical history to record a description of hemophilia and how to approach such a genetically transmitted disease.

# THE MASTER PLANNER

## *THE AMAZING CLAIM OF SHIMITTA AND ALIYAH LIREGEL*

It is easy today to forget how difficult it was to survive in the ancient world. Two of the primary causes of death in antiquity were war and famine. Ancient kingdoms built high walls around their cities, maintained large standing armies, and constructed heavily armed forts at their borders to protect themselves from invaders.

Hunger was also a significant threat. Without modern fertilizer or agricultural equipment, farmers could produce only a small amount of food per acre. They were dependent on their yearly harvest for survival, and one bad crop could result in a deadly famine. Without refrigeration, farmers had to plant crops as often as possible. Any country that did not actively protect itself from invading armies or potential famines faced certain destruction.

We find two commandments in the Torah that directly contravene these survival necessities. Every seventh year, the Jewish nation was commanded to put down their plows and refrain from planting or harvesting for an entire year. By following this law, the Jewish people risked being without food for two years. Even if they sowed their fields in the earliest moments of the eight-year, they still would have had to wait a full season before the crops were ready for harvest. Such a law seems like complete suicide. Hashem directly addresses this issue in the pesukim:

*“And should you ask, “What are we to eat in the seventh year, if we may neither sow nor gather in our crops?” I will ordain My blessing for you in the sixth year so that it shall yield a crop sufficient for three years.”*

Hashem promises to bless the sixth year’s crop so that it would be bountiful enough to live off of for three years – until the eighth-year crops are ready for harvest.

What human being can make such a promise? After the first seven-year cycle, many Jews would have died, and the survivors would have had to face the reality that the Torah’s prophecy was a hoax. Yet for over eight hundred years the Jewish kingdom flourished, and there is no recorded resistance to this counter-intuitive commandment. If the Torah was a hoax, the authors would have had to be crazy to put a testable commandment into their text that guarantees that their religion would be doomed after seven years. This commandment points to Divine authorship.

The other remarkable commandment is the directive for the entire male population to gather three times a year in the nation’s capital.

Exodus 34: 23 states: *“Three times during the year shall all your male[s] appear directly before the Master, the Lord, the G-d of Israel.”*

Consider this law: The Jewish kingdom was relatively small compared to the mighty nations surrounding it, yet the Torah commands that three times a year, all men must

leave their posts and congregate for several days in Jerusalem. For more than three weeks a year, our borders would be defenseless, and our property would be ripe for plunder.

To quell this concern, Hashem unequivocally promised the Jewish people.

*“No one will covet your land when you go up, to appear before the Lord, your G-d, three times each year.”*

Hashem promised a miracle. Three times a year the Jewish men could all leave their posts, and no nation would attack their property. Consider how foolish a human author would have to be to create a commandment that virtually guaranteed the downfall of his kingdom. Such a commandment only makes sense if it was given by a Divine lawgiver.

# Appendix 1: What is Happiness

## THE PINA COLADA

I have a strange relationship with Pina Coladas. In fact, one of my most profound realizations came to me while sipping a Pina Colada. Around thirty years ago, a family friend invited myself and my wife a”h to an upscale restaurant named Sara’s in Hollywood, Florida. My friend insisted that I expand my palate and experiment with a dish that I had never tasted before. On a whim, I decided to order a Pina Colada.

As soon as I sipped the drink, I was immediately overwhelmed by the incredible blend of flavors. Sara’s Pina Colada recipe was perfect. The drink was sweet, creamy, and contained the exact amount of high-quality rum to perfectly balance the flavors. I had never tasted such a delicious drink. The rest of the evening was unremarkable. We ate, we schmoozed, we went home, and life resumed as normal.

The memory of Sara’s delicious Pina Colada would have

completely faded from my memory if not for a series of events that played a pivotal role in shaping my worldview. Several months later, I was at an upscale simcha with my wife when she noticed a fully stocked bar. My wife, remembering our night at Sara's, asked me if I was interested in tasting another Pina Colada.

"Sure," I said. "Why not?"

Yet, when the bartender mixed the drink for me, I was disappointed. While the basic ingredients were the same, the Pina Colada served at the wedding hall was far inferior to the one I vividly remembered from Sara's. The rum had an unpleasant aftertaste, and the entire concoction lacked the freshness and flavor profile of the one I had experienced in Florida.

A few years later, I was at another simcha with my wife when she noticed an open bar. Again, she ordered me a Pina Colada, and again I was disappointed. The conclusion was clear; no one knew how to make Pina Coladas like the master mixologist at Sara's restaurant in Hollywood, Florida.

Fast forward several more years and I found myself back in Florida for the weekend. Obviously, I made reservations that weekend at Sara's, intent on re-experiencing the world's best Pina Colada. The day came, and as I sat there drinking my coveted Pina Colada, I was stunned.

The drink tasted good, but it wasn't the great drink I

remembered. I noticed for the first time how even Sara's Pina Colada was a bit too syrupy for my liking and how the pineapple tasted just a touch too acidic.

What was happening? Sara's Pina Colada recipe had not changed since I had last been there, but my experience had. I realized that every time I had tasted a Pina Colada over the preceding decade, I had been chasing a deeply exaggerated experience. It struck me that no Pina Colada, no matter how well prepared, could ever get me to fully relive the excitement and thrill of tasting my first Pina Colada. I also realized that in my mind I had built up Sara's Pina Colada into this idealized picture of culinary perfection. My mind had glossed over the subtle inadequacies in the drink, leaving me with a false mental construction of the event.

I began thinking more deeply about the pleasures I experienced. The more I thought about it, the clearer it became that many of my life decisions were built around an elaborate illusion.

## THE PLEASURE TRAP

All humans are programmed to pursue happiness, but happiness is an elusive experience. As children, we pursue the endless acquisition of candy to stimulate our taste buds and toys to fill our interests. As we grow older, our sense of pleasure grows more refined. Candy and toys no longer interest us, and instead we turn to new cars and expensive steaks to fulfill our never-ending quest to experience hap-

piness. But somehow at the end of the day, all our trinkets and hedonistic experiences make us feel empty. We look enviously at the rich and famous, convinced that our lives would be perfect if only we could afford to indulge in a fancier car, a bigger, more luxurious house, and more exotic vacations.

But reality contradicts our fantasies. Few people are as unhappy as the rich and famous. In a 500-page study by the Boston College's Center on Wealth and Philanthropy, researchers found that those with a net wealth of over \$25 million were, "[A] generally dissatisfied lot, whose money has contributed to deep anxieties involving love, work, and family. Indeed, they are frequently dissatisfied even with their sizable fortunes. Most of them still do not consider themselves financially secure; for that, they say, they would require on average one-quarter more wealth than they currently possess." The children of the super-rich are also not spared the misery of wealth. In a multi-year study of over 1400 children, researchers found that children born to rich families are far more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and substance abuse than those who come from less affluent families.

We all desperately want happiness, yet we seem to be unable to figure out how to find it.

When I sat there for the second time in Sara's restaurant, I realized the futility of using physical pleasures to achieve happiness. Physical pleasure is an inherently self-limiting

experience. Nothing can replace the first “high,” and one becomes trapped endlessly pursuing a series of ever diminishing returns. When we indulge in an elaborate burst of base consumerism, splurging on a fancy vacation or a new trinket, we feel a profound, yet fleeting, burst of pleasure. We imagine that true happiness can be attained as long as we could maintain a continuous supply of such lavish indulgences. But as the rich painfully learn, this pleasure is an illusion.

Try to imagine what it would feel like to win the lottery. Immediately, our minds begin fabricating all sorts of tantalizing fantasies. We imagine that sudden wealth would exponentially increase our quality of life. But studies consistently show that the opposite is true. When granted our wish to endlessly satiate our base desires, our senses quickly dull, and once exciting activities quickly begin feeling humdrum and monotonous. In a seminal study of 2008 Dutch lottery winners, researchers found that people who became instantly wealthy did not become any happier. In fact, they found that lottery winners had a much harder time enjoying the basic pleasures in life and needed far more stimulation to achieve the same level of happiness than they have previously attained.

The explanation for this phenomenon gets to the core of human nature.

If one breaks down all the goals in their life, they all coalesce into five simple words: I want to be happy.

The problem we all face is that our intuitions regarding how to achieve happiness are deeply flawed. Without a clear understanding of what to do to produce the happiness we all crave; people quickly lose their way. They get sucked into pleasure traps that leave them less happy than they were before indulging themselves.

## DEFINING HAPPINESS

Happiness is an elusive concept, but if one studies Lashon HaKodesh, a remarkable concept emerges. Unlike other languages, where meanings are based on a group consensus that certain (arbitrary) audio and visual signals represent various objects and ideas, Lashon Hakodesh is the language Hashem used to create the universe. The Hebrew name for an object contains the blueprint for that object's true essence, and by studying an object's name, one can learn about its essential characteristics. Tanach uses the word "*osher*" for "the highest state of happiness" in numerous places. This word shares a root with the word "*ishur*" – validation.

This reveals a remarkable concept: one of the highest states of happiness a person can experience is the feeling of contentment that engulfs a person when they feel good about themselves. True happiness can only come when a person sees in themselves a worthy and valuable human being.

But we have not reached the end of the story. This truth

– that happiness stems from a feeling of worthiness - is only the first realization necessary to attain happiness. The next question that one must ask is: What makes someone feel good about themselves? Why do some people live in a state of inner contentment, while others are plagued by an inner lack of self-worth?

The answer is simple: a sense of meaning.

## FINDING MEANING

Victor Frankel, the famous Viennese psychotherapist, spent three years fighting for his life in four different concentration camps. In the hellish nightmare of the Auschwitz, Frankel found himself in the unique position to study what happens to human beings when they lose everything. Watching his fellow inmates struggle to cope with their new and terrifying reality, Frankel set out to answer a simple question; when someone loses their family, their children, their community, their wealth, their dignity, and their freedom, what remains? Frankel discovered that the core motivator of every human being – the engine that keeps us alive and sane - is a sense of meaning.

If one feels that they have a purpose in life, they can survive almost any hardship. As Frankel writes in *Man's Search for Meaning*, “Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how.’” Conversely, a person who feels that their life is purposeless should be placed on suicide watch. It is simply impossible to feel true happiness if one's entire ex-

istence consists of an utterly trivial pursuit of pleasure. A sense of self-worth can only develop inside a person once they begin the process of living their life with a clear sense of meaning. When a person acts in accordance with his purpose, he feels fulfilled and content. True happiness only comes when one feels that they are spending their life doing what they were created to do. But in order to achieve that sense of happiness one must first define the purpose of their existence.

## WHY ARE WE HERE?

As children, our lives are rigidly defined, and clear goals and expectations are imposed upon us. We are sent to school, given tests, and generally do not possess the independence or maturity to critically analyze the purpose of our existence. Some people retain this mindset their entire lives. They go to Israel, get married, have children, and build careers - Why? Because that is just what everyone does. These people drift through life, their entire identity determined by the social framework that they were born into. But a person who wants to experience true happiness must sit down and ask himself: Why am I here?

For religious Jews, the answer is simple: Hashem – the ultimate source of all reality – created us to exercise our free will and elevate ourselves to become as close to Him as is humanly possible..

# FREE WILL

The more one contemplates free will, the more one appreciates the greatness in every human being. The universe is full of wondrous creations; from quarks to galaxies, everything in our world is designed with intelligence and purpose - but *Chazal* teach us that the crown jewel of creation is humanity. *Chazal* tell us that Hashem would sustain the entire universe for the sake of a single person. The *Alter* of Slabodka adds that this is true even for the most wicked sinner. Human beings - even the worst of them- are Hashem's ultimate creation.

But why? From a reductionist perspective, we are simply a self-aware collection of organic chemicals, no different than any other assemblage of matter and energy. Our greatness lies in the fact that Hashem has placed a soul – a Divine spark – inside each of us. This soul gives us an ability not found anywhere else in creation – the ability to choose. Everything in the universe is determined by a host of pre-existing causative factors, but humankind possess the ability for self-determination. We can transform our souls and our character into anything we want. This means that even the wicked, as long as they are alive, have the ability to transform themselves; to raise themselves from the depths of depravity and become people worthy of the Tzelem Elokim. This is the remarkable power of free will.

## BECOMING G-DLY

Not only did Hashem give us free will, He also gave us the ability to become as much like Him as is humanly possible. Our job in this world is to transform ourselves from a bundle of reactive instincts into refined, G-dly creations. To help us achieve this goal, Hashem gave us the greatest treasure we can receive: the Torah, which guides us in our efforts towards achieving an everlasting connection with Him. Every time we do a mitzvah, we are refining an aspect of ourselves and emulating Hashem's revealed nature. This process brings us closer to Hashem and brings the entire world closer to its ultimate purpose.

## CONCLUSION

Happiness does not come from the pleasure of material consumption. Attempting to pursue a life of endless physical pleasures is the surest route to a miserable existence. Not only are physical sensations fleeting and illusory, the pursuit of physical indulgences damages one's sense of self-worth. The hedonist is trapped, forced to forever seek outside sources of stimulation in order to experience pleasure. It is impossible for a person in such a state to feel worthy.

True happiness comes from a sense of self-worth and validation. This feeling can only be achieved if one feels that their life has a purpose, and this purpose imbues their actions with meaning. In order to have this sense of meaning one must understand why they are in this world. *Chazal*

teach us that human beings are the crown jewel of creation; the only creations that Hashem imbued with free will and the ability to connect with Him. Our ultimate purpose is to exercise our free will and refine our souls in order to gain a permanent connection with the Rebono Shel Olam.

## OUR JOB AS EDUCATORS

I cannot stress enough how important it is for educators to imbue their students with this sense of our purpose in the world. If one doesn't understand why we are here, *mitzvos* can quickly become boring and burdensome. Without context, students may experience *Yiddishkeit* as a bunch of arbitrary rules and regulations. Compare this with the experience of a student who views every mitzvah as a chance to connect with his Creator. He will have a far more passionate and lasting commitment to *Yiddishkeit* than someone who was never exposed to the broader context of our role in the world. Externally, these two students may not seem that different, but one student is slowly dying inside, burdened with a *Yiddishkeit* based on rote and drudgery, while the other student's *Yiddishkeit* is vibrant, and gives him happiness and a sense of contentment.

Passion is like a virus; it spreads from those who have it to those who don't. A teacher who merely parrots what he has learned to say about the purpose of existence but does not feel passionate about *Yiddishkeit* will fail. In order to be an effective educator, teachers must inculcate in them-

selves a deep desire to connect with Hashem. Students are attuned to the subtle clues that indicate a teacher's true feelings. If you want your students to have an impassioned *emunah*, begin by working on your own relationship with Hashem. Try to enhance your excitement about davening, start bringing Hashem more into your life, and try to cultivate a greater sense of *chashivus haTorah*. By modeling a passionate relationship with Hashem for your students and by giving them the context to understand their role in the world you will ignite in them a passionate and lasting commitment to *Yiddishkeit*.

## Appendix 2: Science and Torah

### THE WEAKNESS OF SCIENCE

There are many people who are bothered by perceived contradictions between Torah and science. Without a firm core of *emunah*, it is easy to be dazzled by science. From cancer treatments to drone technology to the Mars rover to lab-grown hearts, scientists astonish the world with the feats of their profession. Because of the remarkable achievements of modern science, statements from the academic world are often viewed with a certain immutability. If scientists say that the universe is 14 billion years old and that we are all descended from great apes (which they do), well, who am I to argue with them? After all, these are the same people who figured out how to land someone on the moon over fifty years ago.

While intuitive, this worldview is mistaken for two reasons. Firstly, it conflates two very different branches of science, namely Empirical Science and its far less glamorous

cousin, Speculative Science. Secondly, it misunderstands the method by which scientific findings are presented by the media to the public.

## EMPIRICAL SCIENCE VS. SPECULATIVE SCIENCE

In order to understand the limitations of scientific inquiry, let's take a step back and examine the entire scientific enterprise.

For thousands of years humanity has looked at the world around us and attempted to understand the rules that govern it. It began with curious people who asked simple questions: Why is the sky blue? Where does thunder come from? Why do people get sick? And so on. For millennia wise men pondered these mysteries and came up with a myriad of ideas; some true, but many of them woefully misinformed.

Over the past two centuries, something remarkable happened. Humanity has developed a system of investigation into questions about the natural world that has proven utterly transformative: the scientific method. Using rigorously controlled experimentation, peer review, insistence on falsifiable hypotheses and replicable experiments, and meticulous documentation of all the factors present in every experiment and study, scientists have been able to make remarkable discoveries about the world and formulate theories - broad explanations for natural phenomena based

on the results of observations and experiments - that have proven to be enormously useful and resilient .

Out of this scientific method grew the field of operational science - the type of science that we witness every day. This field of study entails researchers collecting data and formulating rules and hypotheses to explain their findings. Empirical experimentation and the use of specific testable predictions are then used to confirm or deny the truth of those hypotheses. If a hypothesis repeatedly stands up to such empirical testing, it is embraced as a useful model to understand the regular process of nature. This methodology gives scientists the ability to describe the world around us with remarkable precision. It is this process that gives rise to the technological wonders around us, and to deny the utility of the scientific method is to foolishly deny the evidence of our own everyday experience.

The problem is that there is another type of science: historical/speculative science. This type of science uses a manifestly different methodology to discover reality, and as such, it deserves a very different level of credence.

Historical science uses the available data to speculate about the state of the universe and our planet in the deep past. This form of inquiry is inherently self-limiting. When asking questions about the far past it is impossible to run any empirical tests or to examine the world as it was then. We only have the present, and any attempt to pick up clues and build a picture of the past quickly devolves from rigid

science into mere speculation. Once a scientist stops describing objective verifiable reality and begins postulating theories about the past that cannot be verified, confirmed, or tested, he is no longer engaging in strict scientific inquiry. By setting aside the tools of empirical observation and the testing of data and instead engaging in unprovable speculation, the ideas scientists generate – while useful – do not carry the same weight as ideas generated from fields of inquiry such as chemistry and physics that deploy the full arsenal of scientific analysis.

Aside from being unverifiable, theories that use current data to extrapolate about the deep past contain the necessary assumption that all present conditions remained the same for as far back as the theory requires. But this assumption is unfounded. The Torah asserts that the entire order of the world operated under vastly different rules during the time of The Deluge as well as during the Six Days of Creation. One cannot use unfounded assumptions (the immutability of the laws of nature during the distant past) to disprove a worldview that does not share the same set of assumptions.

## SCIENTIFIC HUMILITY

People often use the odd phrase, “Science says XYZ,” as if to imply that there exists some ‘Supreme Court of Science’ that issues proclamations on everything from the antioxidant properties of beet juice to exactly how the uni-

verse began during the Big Bang. To further compound the confusion, people often assume that ‘science’ is fully confident in its conclusions and that only conspiracy theorists or hopeless Luddites would argue. Both these sentiments are deeply flawed and are the unfortunate byproduct of the way that the media presents scientific findings to the public.

The reality is that most scientists have good reason to be humble. The history of science is littered with theories that have been disproven. From Aristotle’s Eternal Universe to Newton’s Laws of Motion to Einstein’s Static Universe, scientific models that were once considered authoritative have since been shown to be mistaken or incomplete. This is particularly true in the recent past. The breakneck pace of scientific discovery virtually ensures that anyone who clings to the current formulation of a theory will quickly find themselves relegated to the dust heap of history. Additionally, scientists are a cantankerous bunch and many of them spend a large amount of energy looking for flaws in the work of their peers. Any scientist who petulantly asserts the absolute truth of his pet theory is courting public humiliation by his peers.

Most scientists understand this reality and present their findings with an appropriate number of qualifiers and disclaimers. Yet all those qualifying statements disappear when scientific studies are simplified and packaged by mass media for public consumption. Newspaper editors realized long ago that lay people aren’t interested in “tentative

conclusions” or “possible areas of investigation” - they want exciting discoveries and provocative statements. ‘Popular science’ reports often present tentative scientific research as if it is definitive fact. A tiny advancement in computer science will be breathlessly touted with headlines such as: “Scientists Build Fully Functional Artificial Intelligence,” or the discovery of a tiny fossilized bone fragment will be heralded as a find that will recategorize of the entire fossil record. When people read this overhyped misinformation, they develop a worldview that assumes that: a) scientists know everything; b) that scientists are utterly confident in their knowledge, and c) that there are barely any mysteries left for science to explore.

None of this is true. Scientists rarely know enough to express confident conclusions, and even when they do ‘take a stand on an issue, it often is accompanied by numerous qualifiers. If someone attacks the Torah based on something they read in a popular science book, it is always worth looking up the original sources. The difference between the actual evidence and how that evidence is hyped up in “popular science” books is always illuminating.

This is especially true when it comes to scientific topics that conflict with religion. When one looks at the source literature, a picture emerges that is very different than the one presented in the general media.

## SCIENCE: PART 2

One of the most contentious issues in Torah-science discussions centers on the theory of evolution. The world teems with exquisitely complicated creatures, each perfectly designed to survive in its ecosystem. Until Darwin formulated the theory of evolution by natural selection, one simply needed to open his eyes to be confronted with overwhelming evidence for a Creator. It was apparent that a Master Planner had carefully designed all life on the planet and placed the various species in a delicate interplay of survival. Darwin's theory changed everything. It became a point of major controversy between those who wished to maintain the traditional view that the complexity of life attested to a Divine Designer and those who wished to reject that view in favor of evolution by natural selection. To intelligently discuss this topic with your students, it is important that you understand the issues. We will look at the basic idea behind Darwin's theory and at some of the issues with it as an explanation for the complexity of life.

### WHAT IS THE STORY OF EVOLUTION?

The theory of evolution - as it is currently expressed contains - four separate ideas, **abiogenesis, random genetic mutations, natural selection**, culminating in **common descent with modification**:

**Part one: Abiogenesis** - At one point, the world was ut-

terly devoid of life. It was covered by vast oceans full of inorganic chemicals. At some point, some of these chemicals fused to create the first self-replicating molecule. This molecule was able to harvest the chemicals around it and use them to make more of itself. This self-replicating molecule is the origin of all life on this planet. The theory of evolution does not attempt to explain how this happened. It purports to explain only how, once this self-replicator existed, it developed into the many species we see today.

**Part 2 – Random Genetic Mutations** – As life reproduces, it does not create perfect copies of itself. Imperfections creep into the process, causing random mutations, small random changes that make the offspring slightly different from the parent. When a mutated child cell reproduces, all of its descendants inherit the mutated version of its genetic material. Those offspring in turn develop their own mutations, which are passed on when they reproduce, and so on. This happens on a massive scale as trillions of cells reproduce over billions of years, producing many different lines of cells with accumulated mutations that make them different from each other.

**Part 3 - Natural Selection** – Most random mutations are harmful, impeding the proper functioning of the organism and making it harder for it to survive. Therefore, the descendants of an organism with a random mutation are unlikely to survive or reproduce as well as organisms without the likely harmful mutation. Even if the disadvantage is tiny, over billions of years, the mutated organisms

will be out reproduced by their non-mutated cousins and will eventually disappear from the gene pool.

Occasionally though, something unusual happens: a random genetic mutation gives an organism a small survival advantage over its non-mutated siblings. For example, a mutation might make an organism less sensitive to temperature changes just as an ice age is beginning; or a mutation might allow an organism to consume slightly different materials; or it might cause the organism to be less affected by changes in the water's pH levels than its non-mutated siblings. Organisms with advantageous mutations will outproduce their unmutated cousins.

This is natural selection. Those organisms that are best adapted to their natural environment are the ones most likely to survive and reproduce. The natural environment “selects” those organisms for reproduction in the same way as a farmer breeding his livestock selects for certain desirable traits - for example, cows that produce more milk - albeit without the intelligent intent of the farmer. It's simply that those organisms that are better-adapted to their environment are more likely to survive to reproduce. Over time these favorable mutations gradually accumulate, producing organisms with ever-increasing complexity and survival advantages.

**Part 4 – Common Descent with Modification** - The theory of evolution puts all these ideas together and proposes that all life began as a single organism; that the pro-

cesses of random mutations and natural selection over billions of years produced ever-more sophisticated organisms; and that the development of the different lines of organisms with beneficial mutations accounts for the branching of the tree of life.

According to the theory, all life began with a single tiny organism which evolved in all directions, some lines of mutation developing into banana trees, others into lions, into bugs, into moss and mushrooms and all the other myriad forms of life. All life on this planet descended from a common ancestor. The human branch of the tree of life proposed by the theory of evolution through natural selection descended from African ape branch several million years ago - the same branch that chimpanzees descended from around the same time. Those apes descended from squirrel and tree-shrew like animals that lived 55 million years ago, and the distant ancestor of those tree shrews were marsh dwelling fish who eventually abandoned the ocean in favor of dry land.

## **THE SCIENTIFIC CONTROVERSY**

While initially ridiculed, Darwin's ideas eventually became accepted by the scientific community. As time progressed, Darwinism ossified into scientific dogma, and it became harder to point out its flaws. Nonetheless, eventually voices began to speak up. For all the bluster of the

scientific community, the story of evolution suffers from many crippling issues. To date, over a thousand doctorate level scientists have signed a document stating, “We are skeptical of claims for the ability of random mutation and natural selection to account for the complexity of life. Careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory should be encouraged.”

Some of the issues raised by various experts in evolutionary biology include macroevolution vs. microevolution, irreducible complexity, transitional fossils, and abiogenesis.

#### *MACROEVOLUTION VS. MICROEVOLUTION.*

Minor changes within individual species occur all the time. Many plants and animals can be observed to develop small changes over generations in response to outside stimuli. Examples of this include bacteria developing a resistance to antibiotics, or the peppered moth changing color based on patterns of predation. This is referred to as microevolution, and is an observable reality.

However, for the theory of evolution to work, something much greater must happen. There must be macroevolution: changes significant enough for the offspring to eventually be considered an entirely new species, distinct from the parent population. Examples of this would be whales evolving from land animals or apes evolving from tree shrews. This form of change has never been observed

and is simply assumed as an article of faith by proponents of evolution.

The problem with the macroevolution model is that while genetic mutation will alter the core gene, no beneficial mutations have ever been observed from the process. Dr. Spetner explains, “I really do not believe that the neo-Darwinian model can account for large-scale evolution [i.e., macroevolution]. What they really can’t account for is the buildup of information. ...And not only is it improbable on the mathematical level, that is, theoretically, but experimentally one has not found a single mutation that one can point at that actually adds information. In fact, every beneficial mutation that I have seen reduces the information; it loses information.”

### *IRREDUCIBLE COMPLEXITY*

One of the most significant attacks against the theory of evolution is its inability to account for interrelated and mutually dependent organisms. Darwin himself was aware of this issue and wrote in *Origin of Species* that it posed a serious challenge against this theory.

“If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down.”

The idea is simple: since evolution requires tiny gradual changes over long periods, it is impossible for this process

to form complicated, interdependent structures quickly. “Irreducible complexity” - a term coined by Michal Behe in his book *Darwin’s Black Box* - refers to a structure where the removal of even a single element would render the entire structure useless. Behe uses the example of a mousetrap; the removal of a single element would destroy the entire functionality of the mousetrap. Such a system cannot evolve gradually because it is utterly useless until all the pieces are in place. Scientists noted that the more we learn about biology, the more complicated the systems of life became. Many of these systems rely on numerous interrelated parts functioning in perfect harmony. Examples of these systems include the light-sensing system in animal eyes, the transport system within the cell, the bacterial flagellum, and the blood clotting system.

According to the theory of evolution, all these systems developed through a long, incremental processes, yet these systems would be completely non-functional until they were correctly assembled. The theory of evolution cannot account for the incremental development of non-functioning intermediate stages. Even the smallest cell in the body is comprised of hundreds of complex interdependent systems. To claim that these systems all evolved simultaneously is ludicrous, and to claim that they developed incrementally is also impossible. Irreducible complexity represents another severe issue with the Darwinian model.

## TRANSITIONAL FOSSILS

People often believe that the existence of ancient fossils represents a question on *yahadus*. If the world is only 5700 years old, how can there be there fossils that are millions of years old?

Rav Yisrael Lifshitz, the Tiferes Yisroel, addressed this issue almost two hundred years ago. He explained (Yachin uBoaz, sof *sefer* nizakin - chalek aleph), based on *Chazal* and various Kabbalistic sources that Hashem built our world on the remains of previously destroyed worlds. The gemara compares this to a king who built a palace on top of a dump. Fossils are simply leftover remnants of these destroyed worlds.

The fossil record itself presents us with another problem with the theory of evolution: the lack of transitional fossils. According to the theory of evolution, speciation was a slow incremental process, and one would expect to find countless transitional fossil forms in between each distinct species. While Darwinists occasionally claim to have found a transitional fossil or two, the incredible rarity of these finds is quite revealing. Darwinian theory predicts that tens of thousands of transitional fossils should be littered across the planet in far more significant proportions than completely formed species, yet almost all the fossils that are dug up end up being fully formed species. If one digs at a later layer, all one finds are different, but also fully formed animals. It is almost impossible to find fossils that indicate

transitional features between two species. Additionally, these fossils that are often touted as transitional fossils or “the missing link” are often riddled with severe dating and chronology issues. The lack of transitional fossils is another serious problem for the theory of evolution.

### **ABIOTIC GENESIS**

Even if evolution could be proven beyond a shadow of a doubt, those who want to deny the existence of a Creator are still confronted with an insurmountable issue: how did life arise from non-life?

At one point in history, this question would have seemed silly. People believed that the simplest life forms were just blobs of ectoplasm, and it is not hard to imagine such a compound being created from inorganic material under the right conditions. Yet, the closer we looked at bacteria, the simplest form of life on Earth, the more we were astonished at its complexity. Rabbi Moshe Averick, in his book *The Confused World of Modern Atheism*, makes the following point to illustrate the functional complexity of a single-celled bacteria:

*“A Xerox machine can make a perfect copy of a color photograph. What we are talking about here is a Xerox machine that makes another Xerox machine. What about an automobile that makes an automobile... these are feats that are beyond our wildest engineering dreams and yet is it happening all around us trillions and trillions of times a day on a*

*microscopic level.”*

Life has a threshold of complexity, and the simplest examples of life on Earth are astonishingly complex. How did this happen? Chance is not an option. A gust of wind blowing through a junkyard cannot create an intricately crafted airplane; so too, the chance mixing of chemicals cannot create a self-replicating machine far more intricate and complicated than any airplane on the planet.

This question is the focus of an entire field called “origin of life science.” The problem is that for all their bluster and overhyped finds, they have nothing to show for their work. The origins of life remain a complete mystery. Consider the following quotes from scientific leaders on this subject:

Dr. Harold C. Urey, Nobel Prize - Chemistry

*“All of us who study the origin of life find that the more we look into it, the more we feel it is too complex to have evolved anywhere. We all believe as an article of faith that life evolved from dead matter on this planet. It is just that its complexity is too great; it is hard for us to imagine that it did.”*

Sir Fred Hoyle, Physicist, Astronomer, and Mathematician

*“In short, there is not a shred of objective evidence to support the hypothesis that life began in an organic soup here on Earth.”*

Dr. Michal Denton, Biochemist, Geneticist

“Between a living cell and the most highly ordered non-biological systems such as a crystal or a snowflake, there is a chasm as vast and as absolute as it is possible to conceive of.

The more one contemplates this reality, the clearer it becomes that the whole evolution debate is a red herring. Scientists have no idea how life began on this planet. The more scientists study the world, the more impossible the task becomes. Even the smallest living organisms in the world scream out with complexity – pointing firmly towards a Master Architect who created them with His wisdom.”

## Appendix 3: The Impact of the Jews on World History

The Jewish people have had an outsized impact on the world. There are approximately 14.5 million Jews, which makes Judaism one of the smallest religions in the world; less than 0.2 percent of the world's population. Given these numbers, one would expect that the Jews would barely be known to the broader public. How many people are aware of the Brazilian Spiritists or the Punjabi Sikhists, both more populous religious groups than the Jews? These groups have no effect on the world stage – just as one would expect given their population.

The Jews are different. Our effect on world history has been so profound that it is impossible to envision our world without the influence of the Jews. Our influence can be broken down into two main groups: the introduction of radical concepts, and the cultivation of influential thinkers.

# RADICAL IDEAS

Many of the concepts that we take for granted today were unknown in antiquity. Thomas Cahill, former director of religious publishing at Doubleday, describes the Jews' contribution to the world:

*“The Jews started it all—and by ‘it’ I mean so many of the things we care about, the underlying values that make all of us, Jew and Gentile, believer and atheist, tick. Without the Jews, we would see the world through different eyes, hear with different ears, even feel with different feelings... We would think with a different mind, interpret all our experiences differently, draw different conclusions from the things that befall us. And we would set a different course for our lives.”*

## MONOTHEISM

The Jews introduced the concept of monotheism to the world. Until then, people interpreted world events as the result of squabbling among pantheons of gods. The Jewish concept was transformative. Everything in this world was being directed by a single G-d who had created the world with a specific purpose. Judaism was the first religion to introduce the concept of G-d giving humankind a code of laws, of G-d entering a covenant with his people, and of G-d revealing himself to an entire nation. Christianity and Islam, the two most populous religious groups, owe much of their spiritual legacy to ideas that they appropri-

ated from the Jewish people. These religions all fall under the umbrella of “the Abrahamic religions” because of their roots in Jewish theology.

### ***EQUALITY AND THE DIVINE NATURE OF HUMANITY***

Judaism introduced the concept of *Tzelem Elokim* to the world at a time when life was cheap, and people’s rights were depended on the social class they were born into. Before the Torah introduced the idea that all humankind was created in the image of G-d, - and therefore all people have inherent value - there was no concept of human rights that applied to all people, regardless of their status.

### ***THE SEVEN-DAY WEEK***

There is no natural reason to break up the days of the year into seven-day increments. The unit of the week does not correspond to any celestial or astronomical phenomenon. The concept of working for six days and resting on the seventh is an idea that appears for the first time in the Torah. And yet, the concept of a seven-day week and resting on the weekend has now become a universally adopted cycle for all humankind.

### ***PROTECTING THE WEAK***

The Torah is the first legal document to record laws that protect civilization’s sick and weak members. Additionally, until the Torah was introduced, virtually no laws existed in other civilizations to protect the rights of the stranger. The

Torah mandates that the poor receive loans, that the judges protect the poor's rights even against the rich, that the laborer must be paid on the same day that he worked, and that the Jewish community is responsible for the welfare of all who live in the land.

### ***REDEMPTION***

Judaism introduced the concept that history is a linear sequence of events leading to an ultimate prophesied conclusion. The polytheistic religions of antiquity saw history as the result of an endless cycle of the rise and fall of various gods. Time had no destination, and the world had no grand cosmic purpose. Judaism introduced the concept of the final redemption, the idea that history has an end goal that will be reached at some point in the future. This idea infuses life with hope and meaning and has been almost universally adopted.

These concepts were so radical that they reshaped the world order. A fair justice system, equal rights, a cosmic purpose, and an aversion to cruelty formed the basis of what would one day be called the Judeo-Christian value system.

## **INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO CIVILIZATION**

In addition to the Jewish people, as a group, introducing

new concepts of morality and goodness to the world, individual members of the Jewish nation have contributed to the betterment of humankind far out of proportion to our numbers. Whatever field Jews enter, they succeeded beyond all expectations. Despite being persecuted and reviled by the world, Jewish individuals have an outsized influence on the world. Albert Einstein, Dr. Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Edward Teller were all Jews. The founders of Google, Packard Bell, Facebook, Dell, Waze, and Oracle are all Jews. Jews invented the laser, the pacemaker, the polio vaccine, capitalism, stainless steel, Esperanto, the defibrillator, the flashlight, lipstick, the shopping cart, the ballpoint pen, vitamins, the Barbie doll, color photography, and nuclear bombs.

If Jewish people won Nobel prizes in the same proportion as general society, we would expect that 1.8 Nobels would have been awarded to Jews. But Jews win Nobels far out of proportion to what would be expected. Of the approximately nine hundred Nobel prizes given to date, Jews won one-hundred and eighty-one. Twenty-three percent of all Nobel prizes went to Jews, -101% higher than would be expected given our population.

Over half of all Pulitzer-prize-winning non-fiction writers are Jewish. Fifty-four percent of all world chess champions are Jewish. There are ten times more Jewish students enrolled in Ivy League colleges than one would expect given our demographics.

All this data points towards a one conclusion: Jews are special. G-d commanded us to be a light unto the nations, and throughout history, we have fulfilled that commandment. The Jewish people helped shape the world, just as G-d said that we would.

Mark Twain recognized that Jews have made an enormously outsized contribution to the world. He wrote:

” ...If statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world’s list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning are also away out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and had done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself and be excused for it.

*“The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed; and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting*

*no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"*

John Adams, the second president of the United States, expressed the same recognition:

*"I will insist the Hebrews have [contributed] more to civilize men than any other nation. If I was an atheist and believed in blind eternal fate, I should still believe that fate had ordained the Jews to be the most essential instrument for civilizing the nations... They are the most glorious nation that ever inhabited this Earth. The Romans and their empire were but a bubble in comparison to the Jews. They have given religion to three-quarters of the globe and have influenced the affairs of humankind more and more happily than any other nation, ancient or modern."*

It is worth ending with the words of Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Great Britain regarding the Jews:

*"Some people like the Jews, and some do not. But no thoughtful man can deny the fact that they are, beyond any question, the most formidable and the most remarkable race which has appeared in the world."*

## APPENDIX 4: MORALITY WITHOUT THE TORAH

It may not occur to a Jew who lives with the knowledge that a Creator is running and directing the world just how terrifying the atheistic perspective truly is. Dr. Peter Walker, a Physicist at Rice University, perfectly summed up the atheist position:

*“[Humans] are carbon-based bags of mostly water on a speck of iron-silicate dust revolving around a boring dwarf star in a minor galaxy in an underpopulated local group of galaxies in an unfashionable suburb of a supercluster.”*

Long before him, Sigmund Freud noted the implications of a godless universe:

*“The moment a man questions the meaning or value of life, he is sick, since objectively neither has any existence.”*

Atheists often point to religious wars and crusades as immorality inspired by religion. “How can G-d tell us to destroy Amalek?” they ask. Once the concept of an eternal, perfect

Lawgiver is removed from the equation, all moral reasoning descends into chaos.

Once one embraces the worldview that life is simply an accident, a quirk of the cosmos, life loses all value. Existence has no inherent meaning, and without meaning, there can be no objective right and wrong. Who is to say that torching a carbon-based child for warmth is any different than burning a carbon-based log? Most people are born with a basic sense of empathy and sensitivity towards the pain of others, but without any logical grounding for this moral impulse, it is all too easy to embrace the savage side of our nature

All sorts of evils have been propagated in the name of religion. The Crusades claimed the lives of 1.5 million people. The Spanish inquisitors tortured and burned thousands of people over three hundred years. Yet these numbers pale beside the violence that from those who have embraced the atheistic worldview. Hitler, Lenin, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao were all atheists and created ideologies that were predicated on turning evolutionary principles from scientific descriptions of the world into ideological prescriptions (fascism and the doctrine of racial superiority) or militantly opposed to religion (communism).

Hitler expressed his ideas in his raving autobiography, *Mein Kampf*:

*“The stronger must dominate and not blend with the weaker...only the born weakling can view this as cruel...for if this law did not prevail, any conceivable higher evolution of organ-*

*ic living beings would be unthinkable.”*

These atheistic leaders unleashed an era of death and suffering that dwarfed all other dark periods in history. If every zealot and religious extremist throughout history would band together, they could never hope to compete with the carnage they caused. Once one accepts that we are all simply evolved primates living in a brutal universe, our innate moral compass is easily corrupted by false and misguided ideologies.

The problem is that without G-d, there is no objective outside source of morality. Without an inviolate Divine foundation for moral principles, the atheist is forced to admit that any impulses he feels towards classifying right and wrong are simply mental constructs lacking any real significance. Believing that it is wrong to torture the innocent is simply his subjective preference, just as it is his personal preference to prefer vanilla ice cream over chocolate. Right and wrong, good and evil, justice and purpose are all meaningless concepts, simply quirks of our brain created by evolutionary pressure. It then becomes all too easy to overcome one's emotional rejection of violence and cruelty in the name of some selfish or pragmatic goal.

Compare this worldview with the tenets of Judaism. We believe that Hashem – the source and Creator of all reality – gave us the Torah to serve as a guide to living the perfect life. Every word of the Torah and of *Chazal* reveal exquisite sensitivity to human suffering and offer us a roadmap to cre-

ating a civilization free of the terrible self-created evils often caused by man's base instincts.

The Torah shows a unique moral sensitivity, as we can see from the following examples.

For most of history, concern for the pain of animals simply did not exist. Animals were regularly tortured for entertainment, starved, and beaten at their master's whim. The Torah, on the other hand, has a host of laws mandating the proper treatment of animals. From the obligation for one to feed his animals before eating his own meal, to the prohibition on causing animals unnecessary suffering and the impermissibility of muzzling an animal when it is working in the field, the Torah mandates moral treatment of animals that did not otherwise exist in antiquity.

Another example of the Torah's moral sensitivity is the *eglah arufa*: If a traveler or vagrant died near a city, the city's elders were considered responsible for his death.— The fact that he died indicates that the city was insufficiently hospitable and lacks concern for the well-being of others, a lack that its leaders need to answer for.

The Torah also provides guidelines for creating a moral society. Thousands of detailed laws were given to create ensure a fair and just society; both the society's economy and its judicial system. Widows and orphans are given a protected status in society. Their needs are to be tended to, and it is forbidden to degrade them in any fashion. Usurious practices are forbidden, fostering a spirit of brotherhood amongst

the Jewish people. One lends money to his fellow man not to enrich himself, but to help his fellow in a time of need. Overcharging for a product is forbidden. Gossip mongering is condemned in the harshest terms, as is embarrassing one's fellow man or causing him emotional pain.

This moral sensitivity pervades the entire Torah. We are told to emulate Hashem: just as He is merciful, so too, we are directed to be compassionate. *Chazal* (Megillah 31a) point out that whenever the Torah mentions G-d's greatness, it also mentions Him as the defender of the innocent and protector of the oppressed. The message is clear. G-d's greatness is inextricably linked to moral sensitivity; both His own, and the laws in the Torah that teach us how to behave morally.”

## Appendix 5: Advising Parents of At-Risk and Off-The-*Derech* Children

**(The Appendix below was originally published on *Yeshiva World News* as an op-ed in the form of a letter directed to parents of children who had left *frumkeit*.)**

There are few things as painful for a *frum* parent as watching your child abandon *frumkeit* R”l. We love our children, and it hurts to see them discard Torah u’*mitzvos*, the foundation we have inculcated in them since childhood for a good and meaningful life. Parents will stay up at night agonizing over where they went wrong: *Alternating* between states of denial, anger, grief, and helplessness. The instinctive reaction is to try to, cajole, plead with, and gaslight your child; to try to pressure and guilt your child back into the fold. Over the past thirty-plus years, I have met countless parents facing this challenge, and it is clear to me that none of these approaches work.

It is essential to understand that you are at a pivotal crossroads. One choice is to follow your gut instincts, lash

out, and potentially ruin your relationship with your child - and with it, the chance that they might return. The other option is to take a step back and ask yourself what the Torah expects from you.

The following ten points will hopefully help provide some clarity on how to act in these situations.

## 1. YOUR CHILD IS NOT INHERENTLY “BAD”

The first thing to understand is that your child is not inherently “bad.” Every neshama in *Klal Yisroel* is holy and yearns to connect to Hashem. In my personal experience, I have found that many of the people who go off the *derech R”l* are exceptionally bright, kind, and deeply sensitive individuals. Many were never shown the beauty of Torah and *mitzvos*. Instead, they were presented with a religion that, from their perspective, forced them to keep a never-ending set of rigid and unbending rules. Some had questions about *emunah*, but instead of being treated with respect, they had their questions shut down and were reprimanded for expressing heretical thoughts. Some left because they couldn’t tolerate the perceived hypocrisy or shallowness that they witnessed in their community. Still others felt ignored, stifled, and misunderstood; forced by our *chinuch* system to contort themselves into molds that they felt did not suit their personality and temperament. Many of these people are victims in one way or another, and it is a grave

mistake to victimize them yet again by responding to their actions by ostracizing them from their family and community.

## 2. LOVE THEM

When a child goes off-the-*derech*, they often desperately want to maintain their relationship with you and still actively seek your approval. A therapist involved with this population recently recounted the story of a child who was struggling with *Yiddishkeit*. She wrote her mother a heartfelt letter, asking to maintain a loving relationship that they had previously shared. The next day, her mother called her and told her, “*Hashem blessed me with nine wonderful children, [and] now I will have eight,*” and hung up, permanently cutting the child out of her life. This parent made a colossal mistake.

An off-the-*derech* child is in a disorienting, angst-filled, and often painful place in his or her life. It is your job as a parent to make them feel that you will always consider them part of your family and that you love them as a human being. They should feel that you love them because of who they are - for their sense of humor, for their kindness, for their creativity, for their honesty - that you love them just because, and that you will always want to have a relationship with them. Do not make them feel that you only loved them because they wore certain clothing or because

they acted in certain ways.

Even if your child seems to be actively rebelling or trying to distance you from their life, do not react with anger or rejection. Stay loving and do everything in your power to maintain and strengthen your relationship with your child. Their actions may seem cruel and unfeeling, but many times they are - consciously or subconsciously - testing the limits of your relationship. Deep down, they are desperate for your acceptance and love.

Parents sometimes react to this advice with indignation. How can I show my child love when they are actively betraying the Rebono Shel Olam and our entire *mesorah*? The answer to this is simple. Hashem does not want you to lash out or distance yourself from your child. *Chazal* teaches us (Yevamos 65b) that just like there is a mitzvah to reprimand wrongdoers if they will listen, so too it is a mitzvah to refrain from giving *tochacha* if the wrongdoer will not listen. The *Chazon Ish* (Hilchos Shechita, Siman 2) writes that nowadays, we must draw our estranged children back with thick cords of love.

You may quibble over your halachic requirements, but anyone in this field knows the simple reality: one of the best predictors of whether a child will eventually return or not is their relationship with their parents. By creating a hostile relationship, you are likely ensuring that they will never return. Even if you feel that you are not being true

to yourself, embrace your child, love them, and let them know that you will always cherish them for who they are.

It is worth noting that people often err when attempting to reprimand others for their behavior. *Mussar* should not make the other party feel attacked or belittled. Instead, it should make the person feel like someone who has made a mistake despite being a decent and valuable person. This point is made explicitly by the *Shelah* in his commentary on Leviticus 19:17. He writes that one must contextualize all reprimands with the preface that the sinner is a good and intelligent person and that his sin is out of character with his otherwise lofty stature.

Additionally, there is a remarkable exchange recorded in the gemara between Rav Yehuda HaNasi and Rabbi Yosi. Although Rabbi Yosi was the son of the great sage Rabbi Elazar, he did not follow in his father's footsteps. He abandoned *Yiddishkeit* and began living a life of extreme depravity. The gemara records that when Rav Yehuda HaNasi met the wayward Yosi, he did not react by belittling him or screaming at him for his actions. Instead, Rav Yehuda HaNasi treated him like a prince, clothing him in royal garments and giving him *semicha* and a prestigious position amongst the Sages (*Baba Mitzia* 85a). Because of Rav Yehuda HaNasi's wise and patient approach, Rabbi Yosi went on to become one of the greatest Sages in history. *Chazal's* attitude is clear: one has far more influence if one approaches someone with respect and validation than they do if they approach them with negativity and anger.

### 3. THEY ARE NOT BETRAYING YOU

Parents often feel that their anger towards their off-the-*derech* child is justified and *lishaim shamayim*, but one should take a step back and analyze his or her feelings. As parents we all want our children to follow in our footsteps. When they follow a different path, especially one that goes against everything we believe in, it is natural to feel betrayed and hurt. Your child's rejection of *Yiddishkeit* stings; it feels like they are rejecting you and everything you stand for.

They are not rejecting you. They are struggling to find their way, and are often dealing with enormous anxiety, disillusionment, and internal conflict. Even though your child is acting inappropriately, they are not responsible for your feelings. You must take ownership of your emotions and recognize that it is not your child's issue that you feel angry and betrayed – those are your own issues and you must work through them yourself. Parents who react with anger and rejection to their off-the-*derech* child are often simply lashing out over the perceived betrayal by their child. These parents are not standing up for *kavod shamayim*; they are simply expressing their sense of, “*How dare you not follow in my footsteps!*”

## 4. WHAT ABOUT SHIDDUCHIM?

Another reason parents often feel anger towards their off-the-*derech* child is because they feel that the child is ruining the family name. Parents worry that people will start whispering in shul, and that the child's actions will lower the family's standing in the community. They worry that it will make it harder for the child's siblings to find shidduchim. The response to that is simple. It is exactly this sort of attitude that pushes so many sensitive souls away from *Yiddishkeit*. Your child will immediately perceive if your anger at his actions is caused by fear of "what the neighbors will think" rather than concern for his or her well-being in this world and the next. They will see your harsh reactions as those of a "faker" rather than those of someone who genuinely cares about doing the *ratzon* Hashem. They will think that you do not care about them and are only trying to protect your image within the community. This will corrode your relationship with them and hurt your chances of reaching your child.

Stop for a moment and think about what really matters. Does it really matter what the neighbors think? Hashem is running the world, and your children's shidduchim have already been decreed before they were born. Trust in Hashem; recognize that the greatest thing you can do to secure rachamei shamayim is by rachamim on your child and showering love on the struggling neshamah that Hashem

has entrusted to your care.

Additionally, it is important to remember that you are not the first family with an off-the-*derech* child, and you will not become a pariah because of your child's choices. Over the years, I have dealt with so many of the “chashuver” families in our community who were struggling with an off-the-*derech* child. “*Ein bayis asher ein shom mais,*” truly applies in our generation, and it is a tragic reality that we need to learn how to properly approach.

## 5. DON'T KICK YOUR CHILD OUT OF YOUR HOME

Do not kick your child out of your home. It is their home too, and kicking someone out of their home is the ultimate symbol of rejection. Your off-the-*derech* child should feel welcome at home. They should feel that you love having them around; that you enjoy their company at the Shabbos table and around the house. They should feel like valuable members of the household and not be stigmatized for their struggles. They are part of your family and deserve to be treated with the same love and respect as any other family member.

Some parents send their off-the-*derech* child away out of fear of them influencing the minds of the younger children, but this approach can backfire. Siblings stick together, and by kicking your child out of the house, you may

galvanize your other children to sympathize with the off-the-*derech* child. You will also send a deeply toxic message to all of your children: that your love for them is conditional, contingent on them following your rules. Children are incredibly perceptive, and they may see the act of kicking their sibling out of the house as a declaration that all your relationships – even with your own children – do not rest on a solid foundation. It is difficult to imagine a more damaging message to send to a child.

If you are worried about your younger children being influenced, sit down with your off-the-*derech* child and have a frank and calm conversation. Discuss your fears and work with them to figure out a plan of action. You will likely be pleasantly surprised at how far your off-the-*derech* child will be willing to go to avoid influencing the other children. Additionally, your child will appreciate that you respect his or her input, as well as the fact that you consider them part of the fold.

Some parents feel the need to kick their child out because they cannot tolerate their child violating halacha in their home. They cannot stand idly by while their child is michallel Shabbos or walks around dressed immodestly. If you are such a parent, your pain at witnessing your child commit issurim is understandable, but it is worth asking yourself: What is your ultimate goal? Your child is committing these issurim whether you like it or not, and there is likely nothing you can do to prevent it. Of course, their actions hurt you, but this is exactly your nisayon: will you

simply react, or will you make decisions after calm and careful consideration of the costs and benefits? All that will be achieved by kicking your child out is permanently hurting your relationship with them, and that is exactly what the yetzer hara wants. Once upon a time, threatening to cut off family ties may have produced enough pressure to ensure proper behavior. Even entirely secular Jews refrained from intermarrying out for fear of being cut off from their family. But those days are long gone. Threatening to cut a child out of the family will do nothing to change their behavior, and it will destroy any positive influence the parents might have otherwise had on their child. Having your off-the-*derech* child in your life and building a strong relationship with them based on trust and acceptance will have a greater impact on the chances that they may return to *frumkeit* than will anything else.

If you truly cannot envision yourself bearing the emotional pain of witnessing your child's transgressive behavior, sit down with them and discuss it in a mature and loving manner. Do not give them a list of demands; rather let them know how much you would appreciate it if they refrained from various activities while in your presence. If you approach your child with the proper attitude, you will likely be surprised at how much they will bend in order to accommodate your feelings. It is important to remember that your child is going through a complicated and difficult stage in their life and to try to be forgiving if they do not live up to your standards. Not every war must be fought

to the death, and sometimes the greatest act of parenting is to know when to turn a blind eye and pretend that you did not see something. By adopting a positive *chinuch* approach, you will achieve far better results in your efforts to change your child's behavior.

## 6. MAKE YOUR OFF- THE-*DERECH* CHILD FEEL VALIDATED AND UNDERSTOOD

The process of a child abandoning *Yiddishkeit* is often traumatic for both the parents and the child. The process often involves pain, anger, and confusion, and the parent-child relationship may be deeply compromised by the end of the ordeal. As the parent, it is your job to begin the healing process. The most effective way to do this is to validate your child's feelings and make him or her feel appreciated as a human being. Talk to your child about their experiences and listen intently and sympathetically when they talk. If they criticize your parenting style, don't get defensive or hostile; rather, try to absorb what they are saying. Children who have left *Yiddishkeit* often have insights into problematic family dynamics, and it is worth taking their opinion seriously. Do not get offended; just listen and connect with them. Let them feel that you value them and, despite their decisions, see them as worthy human beings who deserve love and respect.

The reality is that many people who have left *Yiddishkeit* feel that they have been wronged and hurt by authority figures. The first step in helping your child heal is to validate their feelings. If they felt mistreated by a *rebbe* or *mashgiach*, listen with empathy to their points. If they feel mistreated by you, try not to be defensive. Whether or not you feel their criticism is accurate, recognize that what they are telling you is how they experienced it. Apologize for any pain they feel you've caused them and commit to doing whatever you can to repair the relationship. Even if you do not agree with their perspective, you can still validate their feelings and let them know that you are sorry for the pain that they are experiencing. Now is not the time to delegitimize their perspective or to try to show them the faults in their logic. Just be caring, real, and let them understand that you are sorry for their pain.

This does not mean that you must pretend that you are not pained by their actions. Be open and honest with them. Let them know that you are saddened by their life choices, but still love them for who they are as a person. Your off-the-*derech* child is still your child and needs to feel that you respect them and view them as a worthy individual. Only once your child feels that you validate them as a human being will they be open to hearing what you have to say.

## 7. DO NOT LET THEM FEEL THAT YOU GAVE UP ON THEM

Parents sometimes feel that in order to maintain their relationship with their child, they must actively allow or encourage them to commit avairos. This is misguided. Parents have a very fine line to walk. On the one hand, it is often profoundly counterproductive to actively express your pain and sadness about the decisions of your off-the-*derech* child. Such displays are often viewed as manipulative and rarely help. Most children are aware that their choices are causing their parents pain, and parents rarely need to say anything for the child to appreciate their position.

On the other hand, passively condoning forbidden actions can also hurt your child. Children are very perceptive, and adopting a *laissez-faire* approach will not fool them. All they will see is that their parents do not expect them to ever improve and have given up on ever getting *nachas* from them. It can be devastating to a child's self-image when they feel their parents' sense of defeat and faux acceptance of their situation. This approach often leaves the child convinced that he is helpless to control his situation and that his parents have given up on him. This realization can be crippling and can hinder any progress the child may be making. Your children should feel that while you love them, you are not ok with their actions. This is not an easy line to walk, and one must find a balance. Parents need to

emphasize that they love and respect their child, but they must also make it clear that they do not accept the child's new way of life.

## 8. MAKE THEM FEEL COMFORTABLE AROUND YOU

One reason that many off-the-*derech* people avoid spending time with *frum* people is that they feel uncomfortable around them. They sense that everyone is walking on eggshells in their presence, and every time they walk into a room, they feel a sense of awkwardness fill the space. When an off-the-*derech* child interacts with his or her parents, this discomfort is compounded. The child knows that their decisions are causing their parents pain, and they become attuned to even the most subtle expressions of grief or disappointment from their parents. Slowly, the negativity of these interactions builds up, and the child begins avoiding contact with his parents as well as other people from his former life.

The solution to this is simple. Treat your child like a regular person. Yes, your child is causing you tremendous pain, but why must this reality eclipse the rest of your relationship? Let your daily interactions resume as usual: eat supper together, laugh, schmooze, and work on building a healthy parent-child relationship. Your child's *frumkeit* does not need to be inserted into every interaction you

have with them.

It is also worth noting that it is generally not a good idea to debate religion with your child. The complexity of the parent-child dynamic as well as the inherent tension surrounding the topic of *emunah* often precludes any ability to have a fruitful conversation. Even if your points are valid, your child has a much better chance of accepting them if they are presented by someone else in a non-threatening environment. Additionally, sometimes bringing in another person can help reframe the dynamic and move it in a more helpful direction. Find friendly and warm *haskafah* experts who are willing to talk to your child and have those experts intellectually engage your child. If your child brings up *haskafah* issues, avoid the temptation to participate in long, protracted discussions. Instead, validate them for asking a good question and ask them if they are comfortable talking about these issues with a knowledgeable rabbi or expert. At Priority-1, we meet with teenagers and adults all the time, and we can have a much more significant impact than parents who try to influence their children alone. As long as you ask respectfully and do not overly pressure your child into meeting a Rav or *haskafah* expert, most children will be happy to have someone to discuss their questions with.

## 9. ASK YOUR OFF-THE- DERECH CHILD FOR

## ADVICE REGARDING THE OTHER CHILDREN

I mentioned this earlier, but it is worth revisiting. I often meet parents who are struggling with an off-the-*derech* child, and one of the pressing issues we discuss is how to protect the younger children from following in their sibling's path. I always tell parents that the smartest thing that they can do is directly ask their off-the-*derech* son or daughter for advice. Ask your child, "What can we change in our parenting approach to keep your younger brothers and sisters on the *frum* path?"

Not only may your child have valuable insights that are worthy of your consideration, asking them for advice is incredibly validating. You are showing your child that you are open to change and are interested in their perspective. That act of acknowledgment sends them the message, 'We respect your opinion and feel that we can learn from you.' It is often the first step in healing the relationship.

## 10. TAKE THE LONG VIEW

Often parents grow frustrated when their attempts to connect with their child do not result in the child returning to *Yiddishkeit*. These parents feel that no matter what they do, their child only seems to be drifting further and further away. The answer to these parents is twofold. Firstly, do not base your relationship on the expectation that your child will return. If your relationship is conditional, your child

will sense your insincerity and your overtures will fall flat. Just be genuine and loving and do not base your relationship on an implicit attempt to be mikarev your child.

More importantly, have patience. Life is very long, and you never know the impact of your words or actions. Your child was likely struggling with *Yiddishkeit* for years – long before you were aware of it - and it is unrealistic to expect the situation to resolve itself quickly. Think long term: be loving and real and realize that you never know what impact you are having on your child. Life is notoriously unpredictable, and it may take many years before your child is open to reflecting on his or her earlier life choices. When that time of introspection comes, the fact that you stood by your child's side during his or her most tumultuous stage in life can have an enormous effect on their outlook. It is also worth remembering that even if you are unable to influence your child to return, by staying in your child's life, you have a strong chance of having a positive impact on your future grandchildren. Be patient, daven, and understand that this process may be a long journey.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Rabbi Shaya Cohen has been the Rosh HaYeshiva of *Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh* and Kollel Ner Yehoshua for almost 30 years. Before that, he founded Valley Torah High School in Los Angeles and served as its dean for a decade.

Rabbi Cohen founded Priority-1 in 1987 to help at-risk teenagers and their parents and families. Using his experience of over 4 decades in Jewish education, Rabbi Cohen has developed a keen ability to identify and deal with issues that children face in our education system. He also has a unique ability to give over to others the ideas and tools necessary to prevent these issues in the future.

## WHAT IS PRIORITY-1?

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## WHAT IS PRIORITY-1?

Priority-1 is an organization that was created thirty years ago by askanim and educators to tackle the growing challenges in the field of Jewish education. Since its inception, Priority-1 has been a leading organization in the field of *chinuch*, expertly addressing the latest issues facing the Orthodox community. With a diverse range of programs, Priority-1 has helped thousands of parents, educators, and students with a wide range of issues. Priority-1's initiatives include *Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh*, the Teach to Reach training program, the Legacy Seminar Series, and Eliezer Institute.

# YESHIVA ZICHRON ARYEH

*Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh*, is a cornerstone of Priority-1 and was created with one goal in mind: to create tomorrow's leaders. *Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh* has earned a reputation as a happy, intellectually stimulating, *middos* based environment in which its students thrive. At *Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh* we are proud to carry the torch of Slabodka, and work to give our *talmidim* a powerful sense of self-respect by creating a vibrant, challenging atmosphere that encourages them to discover their unique talents and to grow into true *talmidei chachamim*.

An additional objective of *Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh* is the creation exemplary *Mechanchim*. Our goal was ambitious: to design a program that produced *talmidei chachamim* who are both and trained to reach today's youth. To achieve this goal, *Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh* created a six-year *chinuch* program for yungeleit, Kollel Ner Yehoshua. In addition to advanced learning that can be found in every kollel, students at the Kollel Ner Yehoshua receive first-hand, intensive training in *chinuch*, and provided the tools to confidently enter careers as world-class *Mechanchim*.

The *yeshiva* has expanded beyond its home in Far Rockaway with the creation of the Beis Midrash and Kollel Ohr Hatzafon in Israel, and has grown into a network of nearly one hundred and fifty students. Over the years, *Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh* has produced generations of educators and community leaders who credit their success to the educa-

tional system pioneered by Priority-1.

## TEACH TO REACH TRAINING PROGRAM

Our world is rapidly changing. Today's environment is radically different than the one we grew up in, and the educational system that worked thirty years ago will fail in today's world if we don't make the necessary adjustments. In a lengthy meeting between the Priority-1 leadership and Maran HaRav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv *Zt"l*, the Posek Hador stressed that creating a training program for *Mechanchim* that will give them the tools to effectively respond to today's bochurim is a matter of pikuach nefesh. Working with top experts in the field of *chinuch* and using proven methodologies, Priority-1 created a comprehensive teachers' training course to enable *Mechanchim* to instill in their students a passionate and lasting commitment to *Yiddishkeit*. The Teach to Reach Initiative is a resoundingly successful program and has been warmly received. The program has already trained over 450 teachers across the globe, positively affecting over 6,000 students.

In addition to hosting training workshops, the Teach to Reach Initiative is currently developing an extensive online resource center containing a vast repository of audio, video, and written educational material for *Mechanchim*. This will allow unprecedented access to Priority-1 training materials and give educators a powerful new *chinuch* resource.

# THE LEGACY SEMINAR SERIES

One of the tragedies of our generation is the degree of assimilation and intermarriage amongst the secular American Jewish population. Quelling this tide and drawing our brothers and sisters towards *Yiddishkeit* is the goal of kiruv in America. After much research, Priority-1 has concluded that one of the most empirically successful kiruv methods is the one employed by Arachim, an Israeli based kiruv organization. Using an approach that shows its participants the truth and the beauty of Judaism, Arachim has successfully transformed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Jews, and created an unprecedented *baal teshuva* phenomenon. Priority-1 launched the Legacy Seminar Series in America, which is based on the Arachim model. Using proven methods, Priority-1 hosts seminars that connect unaffiliated Jews with their roots.

## THE ELIEZER INSTITUTE

There are few things more devastating to a person's spiritual growth than a lack of *emunah* and *bitachon*. Unfortunately, in recent years a growing crisis of *emunah* has emerged in the *frum* community., Priority-1, along with Westwood Realty, created the Eliezer Institute to address this issue. The goal of the Eliezer Institute is to implement a broad range of approaches to help our communities tap into the tremendous power of *emunah* and *bitachon*. These

initiatives include weekly lectures, follow-up groups, yearly conventions, and weekly bursts of inspiration sent to all members.

Another component of the institute's efforts to strengthen the community is the online resource center at [eliezerinstitute.com](http://eliezerinstitute.com). This extensive collection of information, available from the comfort of your home, offers free lectures, books and other publications to strengthen visitors' *emunah* and *bitachon*.

Priority-1 has also become a leader in addressing the alarming issue of disaffected *yeshiva*-educated adults leaving the fold. With extensive experience in the field, our staff has been instrumental in averting numerous tragedies.







