

Torah Living – A Review Article

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Note: This article is a review of Rabbi Dr. Aharon Hersh Fried's *Is There a Disconnect between Torah Learning and Torah Living? And If So, How Can We Connect Them? A Focus on Middos*, that appeared in *Hakirah, The Flatbush Journal of Law and Thought*, Volume 6, Summer 2008, pages 11 – 56. The article is available at no charge at <http://www.hakirah.org/Vol%206%20Fried.pdf> . Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from this source. Quotes from this article are indented and given in this font.

How Not To Say Selichos

Rav Yisroel Salanter (1810 – 1883) pointed out that “Usually, when people are given the opportunity to perform one of the normally accepted and observed mitzvot, they become so eager and enthusiastic as to neglect taking precaution against infringing upon the rights of others, whether it be their money, honor, benefit, or anything else. Some even inadvertently ‘perform a mitzvah by means of a transgression,’ which retroactively nullifies the entire value and significance of the mitzvah.” (**The Mussar Movement, Its History, Leading Personalities and Doctrines**, by Rabbi Dov Katz, Volume I, part II, page 214, 1977. Translated by Leonard Oschry)

An example of this sort of behavior is:

“It is customary at the end of the month of Elul and during the Ten Days of Penitence to rise in the middle of the night or very early in the morning for the Selichot services. In their eagerness to perform the mitzvah, people commit many misdeeds. It is not infrequent for an energetic individual to make so much noise in rising from bed that he wakes his entire household and even the neighbors. Sometimes there are sick people or infants in the vicinity, and his behavior causes them pain and suffering. One individual might even have the housemaid rise and make tea for him. In most cases, she is a widow or orphan, and so he transgresses the prohibition, ‘You shall not afflict any widow or fatherless child.’

“When he enters the synagogue; he might discover that his lectern has been moved from its place. He reprimands the Shamash, and in this instance he is guilty of slander and publicly shaming his neighbor. Sometimes the one who has moved his lectern is a full-time student who has been awake all night engrossed in Torah study, and the owner now inflicts grief and humiliation upon a Talmid Chacham. ... blissfully unconscious that his loss outweighs his gain.” (Ibid. pages 215 – 216)

Disconnect Between Torah Learning and Torah Living

The natural question to ask is “How can someone who has spent time studying Torah behave in a manner that flies in the face of what he has studied?” To put it another way, “Is there a disconnect between Torah learning and Torah Living?” The answer has wide ranging implications for the manner in which our children are educated both at home and in school.

In a recent article [**Is There a Disconnect between Torah Learning and Torah Living? And If So, How Can We Connect Them? A Focus on Middos**] Rabbi Dr. Aharon Hersh Fried has dealt extensively with this topic. He points out

While this “disconnect” exists in many areas, I believe it is most starkly evident in the area of *middos* and דרך ארץ (character traits as expressed in one’s manners, demeanor, and behavior).

In the ever-stranger list of reasons for declining a *shidduch* (perspective bride), I heard one recently that truly shocked me. A young man declined to meet a girl because she had only one sibling, and he “was afraid of getting stuck with eventually having to take care of elderly parents.” He wanted to go into a family with more siblings who would help share the load.

I don’t know this young man’s family history and what experiences he may have had that prompted this approach to *shidduchim*, but to me this is a level of selfishness, accompanied by a lack of אמונה ובטחון that should be foreign to a בן תורה. Actually, I do not even know whether the story is at all true, and I certainly hope it is not. However, if such stories are being told in the community, they seem to reflect a feeling that such thinking exists and that “it could be true.” It is certainly not what he learned in the words of *Chazal* or in the *Sifrei Mussar*. Where does such thinking come from?

Bullying in Some of Our Yeshivas

Dr. Fried points out that some yeshivas tolerate behavior by some of their students that is not condoned by the Torah.

On many occasions I have sat with parents whose children were being beat up or systematically bullied in school. What is always most disheartening is the school’s response to these incidents. Many teachers, *rabbeyim*, and even parents have the attitude that there is not much one can do about it either because “you can’t be everywhere at the same time,” or because “boys will be boys, and you cannot legislate against human nature.” *Rabbeyim* who are less kind, sometimes ‘blame the victim.’ In a recent case that I recall, a *rebbe* told a mother who complained that her son was being beaten up, ‘Make him normal and the

others won't hit him.' Is training our *talmidim* not to hit a classmate who is somewhat 'nebbly' or 'nerdy' (i.e., socially awkward) too much to ask?

A few years ago I sat with a couple who had asked me to do a psychological assessment on their son who was having problems in school. As a prelude to the assessment I was reviewing their son's history with them. In the course of the conversation, they related the following: 'Our son, a very sensitive boy, attended a certain very *frum* yeshiva where he was being teased a lot. The *menahel* (principal) suggested that perhaps we should send him to a less *frum* school where children tease each other less. So we switched him to a less *frum* yeshiva where he continued to have problems with academics...'

They said this in a matter-of-fact manner, and with no sense of irony. I asked them, I ask myself, and I ask the reader, 'Is there not something wrong with this statement? Should we be accepting of the fact that the students of a 'less *frum*' school should be more caring and less cruel to each other?' Additionally, if it is unfortunately true, should we not be asking ourselves why?

Dr. Fried is quick to point out that Bullying is, of course, not unique to our schools. As I am writing this article, the New York Times is doing a series on bullying in public schools across America—unjustified, wicked, and violent bullying. Additionally, teachers and principals in the public schools often seem callous to this problem. Surely, no one would suggest that we use their problems to justify what happens in our schools.

Lack of Derech Eretz

And, of course, there is the problem of Derech Eretz. For example, how many times have you seen youngsters rush to grab the best seats at a Kiddush and completely ignore the fact that their elders have no place to sit? I personally have stopped a number of boys from pushing their way in front of me as they exit shul. When I confront such a youngster with, "Excuse me, Sir, I believe that I am older than you are!" he looks at me incredulously, seemingly incapable of grasping the point that I am trying to make.

This behavior carries over into our yeshivas, our Bais Yaakovs, and our homes.

At workshops that I give to teachers on Behavior Management in the Classroom, I hear teachers and *rabbeyim* complaining incessantly about the level of *chutzpa* (arrogance) they meet up with, and their feelings of helplessness in controlling it.

In one sixth-grade classroom a teacher asked one of her students to pick a sheet of paper up from the floor. The student's response? "I don't work here, you do!" What's worse is that the teacher had no response to this.

She was so flabbergasted by the student's *chutzpa* that she was at a loss regarding what to do.

In individual sessions with parents and their children, I hear children speak to their parents in ways I could not have imagined possible. The parents report that what goes on at home is even worse. Like the teachers, the parents accept this with resignation, chalking it up to משיחא חוצפא יסגא, בעקבות, the prediction in the Mishnah that in the end of days before *Mashiach* arrives we should expect an increase in *chutzpah*. Some are actually afraid to say anything, frightened as they are by all the talk of children becoming "at risk" and going "off the *derech*" because their parents were "too strict." They remain ignorant of the research literature that shows that the failure to give children guidelines amounts to 'neglect' and is even more harmful to children's development than strict authoritarian parenting.

An Inescapable Conclusion

Rabbi Fried is forced to come to an inescapable conclusion.

Having contemplated the history of the Orthodox community over the past forty years, as well as some of my more recent experiences in the community, I have come to what seems to be an inescapable conclusion. Namely, that *we have not fully connected our behavior (i.e., our middos) to the ideals of the Torah because we simply have not cared enough to do so.*

Mechanchim (educators) have in the last forty odd years brought about a sea change in the attitudes, aspirations, behaviors, and lifestyles of an entire generation of young people. Only one generation ago, almost every bachur in the chareidi world had to battle his parents about whether he should stay in yeshiva after high school or immediately go to college. This was not true in the chassidic world, but there the question for a not-insignificant minority was whether they should go to work at 18 or 19 or stay in yeshiva. In the Modern-Orthodox world, few even entertained the idea of putting off college and career plans for a few years of Torah study at a yeshiva. Today, virtually every bachur from chareidi high schools, chassidish yeshiva ketanos, and many if not most from 'Modern-Orthodox' high schools continue in yeshiva after high school. Almost every bachur graduating from a yeshiva high school today goes to learn in Eretz Yisrael (if not immediately upon graduation, then within three years); almost every girl goes to seminary, most in Eretz Yisroel, some in America.

Thus, in the course of one generation, or perhaps two, *mechanchim* have accomplished many of their goals. That is, the goals they cared about. The one area in which we have seen little or no change is in the area of

middos. Some claim that we have actually seen a decline in this area. Why is this?

In the Klausenburger Yeshiva in Williamsburg there was a Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Vilner, *ztz"l*. I heard from one of his *talmidim* (Reb Alter Burech Wieder, *olov hasholom*) that when walking on the street he would tell the *bachurim*, "It looks like it wants to rain," and then follow up with "Do you know how I know? Because it **is** raining." He wanted to impress upon his *talmidim* that the real evidence of someone wanting to do something (e.g., learn) is that he actually does it!

By these criteria I am forced to conclude that our community, *mechanchim* as well as parents, has failed to communicate that *middos* and *derech erez* are important values. We have accepted improper behavior with an air of disappointed resignation, one that we would not allow in other areas of our children's development. Our children picked up on our lack of resolve and have reacted accordingly.

Solutions

Dr. Fried suggests

... that the disconnect between [Torah] learning and [Torah] living in the area of *middos* needs to be addressed at four different levels.

1. Our understanding of the development of character, and the role of learned behavior.
2. Our awareness and understanding of the importance of Role Models as demonstrated by Social Learning Theory.
3. Our misunderstanding of how morality and ethics are taught. More specifically
 - a. The realization that cognition, understanding of morality, is not sufficient.
 - b. Understanding that teaching sensitivity is important.
 - c. Understanding that the role of emotion is crucial and requires
 - a. teaching empathic distress.
 - b. fostering intuitive judgment.
 - c. seeing דרך ארץ as *frumkeit*.
4. Connecting the learning to life."

He then deals with each topic in detail. This article will give a brief sampling of what Dr. Fried proposes. (**The reader will benefit greatly from reading the entire 46 page article.**)

Character Development and Learned Behavior

Although it is true that children are born with different temperaments, and therefore often require different approaches, negative behaviors, as such, are not “in the child’s nature.” Negative behaviors, no less than positive behaviors, are “learned behaviors,” and can be unlearned.

... we must recognize that despite children’s individual temperaments, children develop character traits that to a greater extent reflect the training they have received, and that ultimately *הרגל נעשה טבע שני*, habit becomes second nature. This is, after all, the foundation of education programs, of *חינוך* : the belief that man can harness and train his nature. Thus, we must insist that our children **engage in behaviors and actions that reflect concern and respect for others, so that such concerns become embedded in their very natures.**

Role Models: Focusing on How We Speak, What We Say, and What We Do

It is not only of our general behavior that we must be careful. We must also take care when admonishing or castigating our children for their improper behavior. Uncontrolled and unbridled anger, even when seemingly justified, usually fails to improve the child’s behavior. Instead it engenders contempt and disrespect for the admonishing parent or teacher. Even worse, it provides the child with a negative role model for how to communicate.

How We Teach Our Children about *Middos*

The **practice** of moral and ethical behavior, in a way that encompasses and envelopes the full life experience of the child, as an individual, as a member of his family, his school, and his community, is thus required if we are to imbue the child with an internalized intuitive feeling for ethics and morality. We manage this well in the area of ritualistic *mitzvos*, which are *בין אדם למקום*. Thus, all of our children, and all of us adults experience an intuitive reaction of disgust when it comes to *treifa* meat and the like. We pull our hands away as if from an electric shock when we inadvertently touch *muktzah* on *Shabbos*.

Chazal [as elucidated by the Rambam] say we should be disgusted by stealing, but not by pork. Most of us are disgusted by pork but not by stealing. This is something we picked up in our cultural environment, and will bequeath to the next generation unless we change the habitual responses to

אדם לחבירו in our culture. And we must do so if we are to bring about a change in *middos* in our children. Unless and until children see people as excited, as moved, as affronted by lapses in אדם לחבירו as they are excited, moved, and affronted by lapses in אדם למקום, we will not see significant improvement in the *middos* of our children.”

Summary

Rabbi Dr. Fried concludes his article with the following paragraph.

In summary, we can close the gap between Torah learning and Torah living if we really want to. It requires us to change our attitudes about מצוות שבין אדם לחבירו and מדות. We need to realize that מדות can be improved. We must attain the skills with which to do that, and we must become more conscious of the role models we offer our children. We must teach our children sensitivity to the feelings of others, and make them aware of the feelings of others, and immerse them in a web of communal and familial experiences that foster growth in this area. We must provide our students with an environment and a schedule that allow them to breathe and promote self-control. We must also do all of the above in a spirit of enhancing the קדושה of our people. Above all, we must connect Torah to life, and life to Torah.

This may seem like a daunting challenge to all of us, but, as Rabbi Fried points out, we must face this challenge if we are to raise a generation of observant Jews whose Torah knowledge is consistent with their commitment to Torah living.