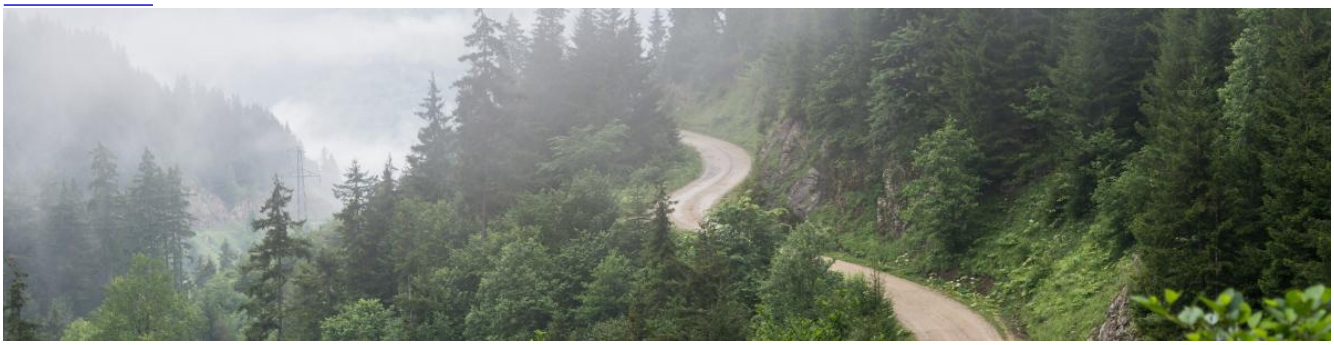
The Educational Imperative

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The current religious educational system encourages people to accept the authority of the major Torah scholars of the generation and to obey them unquestioningly, thereby creating a culture of dependency and submission. We must return to and deepen appreciation of independent thought, personal freedom and individual empowerment. Talmudic tradition and adjudication teach us that no Rabbi, no matter how great, is sacred nor should he be revered as a Lord over us.

Today’s religious community suffers from a lack of confidence and a perpetual fear in the face of the compelling outside world and its influences. This inevitably gives rise to a search for protection and dependency upon role models who will show the way and protect our children from any doubt. As a result, the religious educational system encourages obedience to the Torah sages and their authority.

But this search for great leaders capable of guiding us in a world laden with doubts and quandaries has led to weakness, and submission to the opinions of a handful of charismatic leaders.

Many of our children have become dependent on role models in yeshivot and midrashot due to the fact that Religious Zionism has sought to emulate the Hareidi doctrine, which is increasingly dominating the religious way of life and

outlook. The message of this essay is to encourage education toward independent thinking, individual empowerment and personal freedom through the wisdom of the Torah and its sages. Independent thinking is not innate; therefore, it must be patiently and laboriously nurtured in our homes and schools so that upon maturity our people will be capable of carrying the burden of human independence in which responsibility and authority are so deeply intertwined.

Armed with the knowledge that no single person is omnipotent-- that no one, however great, is as “holy” as the Torah itself or is meant to lord over us--we must encourage every teacher and every parent to free our children of this heavy burden. They must be given the tools to recognize and fortify their own strength. We must once again imbue the acceptance of responsibility and decision making in our children; granted, their surroundings are complex and the temptations are great, but there is no other way. It is impossible to flee from freedom and choose slavery in its place.

In the spirit of personal integrity and individual freedom Rabbi Kook wrote: “The virtuous man should believe in his life, and in his feelings which take the path of the righteous because that is how his spirit directs him. Because these are good and honest feelings, they naturally lead towards a path of righteousness.” This is a most important lesson: have no fear, you need to have faith and trust in yourself. When it comes to most decisions in life, there is no need to consult with a Rabbi or a Rebbe. Individuals, couples and families should make their own decisions in regard to themselves. These are the parties that should make such resolutions. External entities should not and cannot control a person’s private life.

Common decency is the basis of the social infrastructure. There is a general code of conduct and legitimate norms of behavior, as well as conduct that is considered unacceptable. So when the sages instruct us to “blunt the teeth” of the wicked son, it is in the sense of education and refinement - to remove the barbs and sarcasm from his speech. But the truly problematic son is the one that “does not know how to ask” or perhaps thinks that it is forbidden to ask.

The Haggada instructs us: “It is up to you to discuss this with him,” or in the words of Rabbi Shelomo Alkabetz, (a Kabalist of 16th century Safed): “You must be confident in him” – thanks to your trust in him and his strength, his ray of light will burst forth."

“Find yourself a Rabbi and remove all doubt” – is a teaching of Rabban Gamliel. This statement is a main source of education to almost blind obedience and heeding the Rabbis’ teachings without criticism. As it is specifically stated in Avot

of Rabbi Natan (Version A, Chapter 22): “Rabban Gamliel states: Choose for yourself a Rabbi and acquire for yourself a friend to remove yourself from doubt, and do not overly often do your tithing by estimate.”

I have chosen this version of Rabban Gamliel’s words because it has three main components:

A. “Choose for yourself a Rabbi” - This is the categorical imperative for every religious individual who strives to be a normative member of the religious world and does not know how to choose between different alternatives in the world of halakha.

B. “Acquire for yourself a friend”- This is what distinguishes between the person as an individual and the person as part of the community. R. Gamliel seeks to establish a kind of collective responsibility, which is the basis for a God worshipping community.

C. “Remove yourself from doubt” - This concept is the reason for the two preceding statements. In a world of doubt, the individual seeks meaning and direction. The choice of a Rabbi and being part of a community relieve a person of doubt; he is then free of this onus and can make his way through the world without questions or errors.

.If in the days of R. Gamliel - the time of the rise of Christianity and differences of opinions - there lurked a fear of the prevalence of doubt, then what are we to say when it comes to the modern world, or even more so in the post-modern world? Indeed, it is due to this awareness that the words of R. Gamliel have been given the utmost importance.

Take for example the teaching of the Ramhal in his famous parable from “The Garden of Confusion,” which appears in Messilat Yesharim. The Ramhal describes a man who has lost his way in the garden’s mazes until his eyes are opened by a sage who knows his way through the garden.

Most of the religious community’s instruction books are based on this approach. Instead of getting lost and wandering along the dusty paths in the thick forest, it is best for us to latch on to the great trees and to let others who are familiar with the path guide us.

This model is also used by Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, one of the great leaders of the yeshiva world of the previous generation. In his book “Letters from Eliyahu” he writes: “From this comes the foundation of faith in the sages. He who chooses to

have faith in them can make use of their clear vision, which will serve as their own eyes. From their teachings we acquire a true image of the hashkafa of the world and practical leadership. And because of this the sages of our generation possess a vast measure of this direct and true reflection to the point that their teachings – even if they lack a clear source and even if they are expressed in bits of advice - are clear and true. 'When a man asks about his Creator's message' - this we witness in this generation as well, thank God."

Rabbi Dessler's concept of the term "faith in the sages" reflects the classical approach of the Lithuanian yeshiva world, and certainly the Hassidic courts as well. This approach places the sages on a higher spiritual level, like prophets. As Rabbi Dressler summarizes: "'When a man asks about his Creator's message' - in each generation the individual must turn his eyes to the great leader' of his generation, to shut his own private eyes and to try and see through the eyes of the great scholar. If he is blessed, he will be able to share the view of the scholar and adhere to his thoughts."

In my humble opinion, this is the stage where faithful students and believers turn into mindless and unquestioning masses. This type of education leads to slavery due to the dread of the garden of confusion.

"Acquire for yourself an understanding heart", said R Elazar ben Azariah.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the approach of R. Gamliel's successor, R. Elazar ben Azariah. R. Elazar's teachings serve as an alternative to those of R. Gamliel. One of the very first steps he introduced when he took over was to dispose of the "selector" from the entrance of the House of Study who during R. Gamliel's day would stand at the entrance and say: "He whose heart is flawed dare not enter." (Berakhot 28)

Rabbi Gamliel sought to introduce discipline and obedience to the House of Study and the world of Torah, fearing the forces that might shatter the existing hegemony.

R. Elazar's teachings stand in direct opposition to this approach - he strove to fill the House of Study with as much strength as possible, to occupy it with all those who wished to enter and to cope with any doubts that might arise in the House of Study in other ways.

"The words of the sages are like goads, and like nails well planted (are the sayings) of the masters of the assemblies, given from one shepherd. Why are the words of the Torah likened to a goad? To teach you that just as this goad directs

the cow along its furrows in order to bring forth order to the world… But if the words of the Torah are likened to nails, one might think that just as the nail diminishes and does not increase the object or wall into which it is driven so too the words of the Torah diminish and are not increased among those who observe them. To teach otherwise Scripture states: well planted. That is, just as the plant is fruitful and multiplies, so too, the words of the Torah cause one to be fruitful and multiply.The Masters of Assemblies are the wise scholars who sit in various groups and occupy themselves with the study of Torah. There are those scholars who declare a thing ritually contaminated and there are those who pronounce it clean; those who prohibit and those who permit; those who disqualify and those who declare fit. Perhaps a man will say: how can I ever learn Torah and understand it precisely, when every issue is subject to debate and disagreement? To allay this concern, Scripture states that all the various rabbinic opinions are given from one Shepherd- one God gave them. Moses proclaimed them from the mouth of the Master of all, blessed be He, as it is written: and God spoke these words. Hence, you are to make your ear like a funnel, and acquire yourself a discerning heart--to hear intelligently the words of those who declare a thing impure and the words of those who pronounce it pure; the words of those who prohibit and the words of those who permit; and the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare fit. ”

The above mentioned citation from Ecclesiastes describes the Torah in agricultural terms. A goad is a stick with nails attached to it that is used by farmers to prod a working animal so that it will move faster and continue walking in the furrows. As a metaphor, the goad is the “teacher for the cow”; although the goad hurts the animal, its true purpose is to ensure that the animal actually does what it is supposed to do. The nail that is affixed to the end of the goad represents the “leaders of the community”, those who guide the community in the service of God and keep them on the path of righteousness.

In simple terms, it is possible to understand this parable as a justification for the use of the discipline which Torah teachers espouse. The words of the sages are not always pleasant but they are intended to improve humankind and the human condition, which is to say that they guide them into the “furrow”, the furrow being the path of serving God. This is a good parable for any farmer who has had the experience of having to direct livestock. But R. Elazar is seeking to add another dimension of understanding. According to his explanations, the nail is not a static object. He likens it to a tree that is planted in the ground rather than simply hammered into place; he is trying to communicate that with the proper care, this “goad” can blossom and grow and in this way he is portraying the world of

halakha (religious law) and its enormous complexity.

Just as a nail affixes two things to each other, so to halakha affixes the Torah to our life and does not allow people to stray off its path, thereby protecting them from the perils of the journey. Torah evolves with the path and is not static, constantly being renewed. It is nailed, and it is “planted”-- which means it has the opportunity to grow and does not allow the journey to tear us apart.

The passage goes on to describe the planted nail as “Masters of Assembly” (scholars of the community). Rabbi Elazar uses the expression “Masters of Assembly” as a colorful description of the new world he envisions for the House of Study after he has taken over, where students are coming by the hundreds and thousands to learn Torah, without any fear of conflicting opinions or pre-existing notions. “They sit as groups, and in those groups they learn Torah. (All positions will be respected). Some will say that something is ritually pure, and some say it is impure. Others will say that something is permitted and some will say that it is not permitted; or (some will say that) something is fit and (others will say that) something is unfit.” This is the vision of the house of learning in the eyes of R Elazar.

Now we have a question which begs to be asked: “Perhaps a man will say “How can I ever learn Torah” (and understand it precisely when every issue is subject to question)? When a person enters the world of open learning, he realizes that there are many variations, and it is possible to “lose one's head”. How is it possible to guide a person with questions in a world of plurality? The answer that comes from the house of study of Rabbi Gamliel is: “Choose for yourself a Rabbi and remove yourself from doubt.” In a world of uncertainty, the only way for a person to find his way is to ask a guide and then adhere to what he says.

However R. Elazar provides an alternative response to that of R. Gamliel. R. Elazar seeks to place the burden of responsibility on the individual him/herself. Instead of saying “choose a Rabbi for yourself,” he cites another teaching which says “Make you ear like a funnel”, where a lot of grain can be poured in at one time but little can come out. The source of the word “afarkeset (funnel)” is from Greek, meaning a funnel that is wide open to receive, but has only a narrow opening at the end. The wide end is able to receive many voices which are sailing through the void. The funnel receives and absorbs all of the voices without censoring them. R. Elazar seeks to free your ears from its bonds and tells you to make them open to receive all of the voices. This includes the opinions of those who forbid and those who permit; those who find guilt and those who relieve from guilt; those who declare something impure and those who declare it pure. All of the

voices of dispute or disagreement in the House of Study have their source at Mt. Sinai. Only when you are able to listen to all of them, is it possible to begin seeking the right path.

Objection to Admiration and Adoration

In many places in the Talmud, we come across glorification of the image of sages by their pupils and the surrounding community, as well as explicit criticism of this phenomenon. One of the significant figures exalted in his own time was Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi. There are numerous illustrative stories concerning the criticism of scholars who disagreed with this cult of personality. One of the most famous is the story of the visit to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's House of Study by Rabbi Yishma'el – son of Rabbi Yossi ben Halafta. The Talmud describes the pupil's entrance into House of study. Everyone is seated, the Sage takes his place, and only Rabbi Yishma'el – who was very large – is still pacing slowly from one edge of the hall to the other to find a place. In his pacing, it looked as if he were walking over the heads of the other pupils. Rabbi Avdan, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's assistant, was furious and he objected.

R. Avdan said: Who is the person walking over the heads of the holy congregation?

R.Yishmael answered: It is I, Yishma'el son of Rabbi Yossi who has come to learn Torah from the Rabbi.

R. Avdan said to him: Are you worthy enough to learn Torah from the Rabbi?

R. Yishmael answered: Was Moses worthy enough to learn Torah from the mouth of the Almighty?

R. Avdan said: Do you think you are Moses?

R. Yishamel answered: Do you think the Rabbi is God? #_edn1" name="_ednref1" title="">

Here we have a precise description of the House of Study of the time (at least from the viewpoint of the Talmudic author). The scholars sit in rows and the sage sits in front on a dais. Those closest to the sage advance to the front to find their seat. Rabbi Avdan's condescending attitude toward Rabbi Yishma'el exemplifies an elitist and insulting atmosphere in the House of Study.

The gap between the level of a student and the level of a teacher is not a reason to prohibit entrance into the House of Study. When R.Avdan continues to insult

Rabbi Yishma'el by asking arrogantly "Do you think you are Moses?" Rabbi Yishmael answers pointedly "And is your Rabbi God?" The atmosphere around Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi had turned him into a God-like figure, but Rabbi Yishma'el pointed out how faulty that environment was.

A similar pattern is evident in the story of Rabbi Hunah's passing. Rabbi Hunah was the most prominent among the Sages in the second generation at the yeshiva of Surah, and held the position of head Rabbi for forty years.

In a number of places in the Talmudic literature, we learn of a disagreement between Rabbi Hunah and Rabbi Hisdah, one of the Rabbi's prominent students. Based on this disagreement we can understand what unfolded at Rabbi Hunah's funeral, when Rabbi Hisdah arose as the new leader and most prominent Rabbi in his generation.

When Rabbi Hunah passed away, there were those who wanted to place a Torah scroll on his bed.

Rabbi Hisdah stated: This was a practice with which he did not agree when he was alive and now you want to do it to him (when he is dead)?

His bed could not exit the front door. Some thought of taking it out through the roof.

Said Rabbi Hisdah: “Indeed I learned from him (Rabbi Hunah) – a sage is honored by exiting through the front door”.

They wanted to change his bed to another.

Said Rabbi Hisdah: “So I learned from him – a sage is honored by staying in his first bed.” (So) they broke the front door and took him out from there.

Rabbi Abba exclaimed: It was appropriate for the Divine spirit to be bestowed upon our Rabbi (Rabbi Hunah), but his location in Babylonia made him unfit.

Said Rabbi Nahman bar Hisdah, and some say Rabbi Hanan bar Hisdah: “And it was that God spoke to Yehezkel ben Buzi in the land of Kasdim (Ezekiel 1).”

His father slapped him with his sandal and said: Didn't I tell you not to annoy the public? Whatever has already happened – happened.#_edn2" name="_ednref2" title="">

Serious infighting screams out from this story. Placing a Torah scroll on a deathbed underscores the connection between the deceased sage and the Torah,

and attributes excessive sanctity to the sage.Rabbi Hisdah protests against the action: “Any man, sagely as he may be, can never be a Torah scroll; he can be adored and admired but not sanctified.”

In the ensuing discussion, Rabbi Hisdah maintains that they must stick to the procedure of taking the deceased out of the house, insisting he be taken out properly like a sage through the door and not through the roof, on his first bed and not after moving him to a second one (something he deduced from the Ark of the Covenant).

Rabbi Hisdah's sons are also at the funeral, and children are known to repeat what they hear at home. When they hear Rabbi Abba lamenting that the only reason Rabbi Hunah did not “receive the divine spirit” (i.e. prophecy) was due to the fact that he lived outside the land of Israel in Babylonia, they retort that the prophet Ezekiel was living in Babylonia when he received his prophesies.

In other words, Rabbi Hunah was not a prophet. He was a sage, no more and no less. Rabbi Hisdah scolds his sons by saying “There are things you say at home which you don't repeat outside – leave the mourners to mourn the sage according to their way.”

There are many other stories about the relationship between parents and children, and between teachers and pupils. In many instances, they carry an overt or covert message about the importance of the empowerment of the child or the pupil, discouraging their subjugation to the image of the father or teacher.

For example, there are a number of stories about the personality of Rabbi Yehuda bar Yehezkel – the head of the Pumbedita yeshiva, and his relationship with his father, his rabbis and colleagues. Rabbi Yehuda is described as a person who did not hesitate to contradict his father or rabbi when he believed they erred in their teaching or deeds, and even to banish one of his scholarly friends who had “gone bad”.

There is a well known story of the destruction of the House of Study in Tiberius, following the terrible argument of Rabbi Yohanan with his son-in-law and student Resh Lakish. The story vividly describes the ideal House of Study as seen by Rabbi Yohanan. Rabbi Yohanan believes that the proper decorum in a House of Study is that the rabbi speaks, the pupils ask questions, and the rabbi concludes by answering all the questions. This is an idyll of authority which recognizes the position of the student only as one who understands and repeats the words of the teacher.

The moment a pupil dares to challenge this scenario, Rabbi Yohanan has no tolerance for him and says "Robbers know only to rob".

The rabbi is ready for questions but not for opposing ideas. The clear message of this story is that when a rabbi suppresses the pupil's independent thinking and development, then he is destroying the very school he teaches in.

In sum, we may assert that the Talmudic tradition clearly upholds the opinion of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah. The Rabbi should demand each of us to develop his/her own judgment and knowledge, and to grow in defining and realizing the image of God which is in each and every one of us.

The culture of arguments by the early and later sages

The traditional literature of the early and later sages encourages independent thinking and enables development of self judgment and knowledge even at the price of disagreement with "Gedolim" (scholarly leaders). Below are a few examples.

The Ramban, in his introduction to Sefer HaMitzvot of the Rambam, describes the awe he feels toward those before him, yet he does not shirk from contradicting them in places where he feels that his knowledge demands this of him. His concluding paragraph is written poetically:

"And I am here with my desire to be a pupil of the early sages, to abide by their rules and to wear them as bracelets and necklaces, and not to be a simple donkey carrying books. I will judge according to the way I see fit and according to the clear religious law, I will not prefer one over the other in the name of the Torah, because God will provide wisdom in all times, and will not hold back the good from those who walk in His footsteps with an honest heart."

Among the scholars of our times it is worthwhile to read Rabbi Ovadia Yosef's introduction to the Responsa book "Yabia Omer" in which he sums up the importance of independent thinking and argument as an integral part of Torah learning:

"I want to address people who speak out about how one shouldn't contradict the books of the sages, and when they see a new book that has opinions that differ [with earlier opinions of sages] they immediately start to squawk like a bird. Any person who is well versed knows that arguments are the way all our rabbis debated since the early days and till the last of the judges…And Rabbi Yeshayah Mitrani said in the Responsa Harid (no. 62) 20: Anything which I

don't agree to, I don't hesitate to speak my opinion according to my limited knowledge, and I will speak up against kings and not be ashamed. And I rule according to my knowledge just like philosophers, who once asked one of their most prominent: we acknowledge that those who came before us were greater than we are and yet we contradict their sayings in many places and we know the truth is with us; how can this be? He answered: Who can see further, the giant or the dwarf? You might say the giant, since he is taller and so can see further. But if you put the dwarf on the giant's shoulders, who will be able to see further? You must say the dwarf, since his eyes are now higher that the giant's. So are we, dwarfs standing on the shoulders of the giants who came before us, since we learned from their wisdom and we add to it from our own perspective; it is not because we are greater than they are.And I have also seen written by the Gaon Reb Haim of Volozhin in his book Ruah Haim (chapter 141 of Avot, mishna 4): "And a pupil is prohibited to accept his rabbi's view when he has questions about it, and sometimes the truth will be with the pupil just as a small twig can light up a mighty tree…"

One cannot read these words without feeling frustrated over the culture of silencing and subjugating Torah scholars which is rife today. There are scholars who are afraid to voice opinions which contradict the leading decision makers of our time. Even Rabbi Ovadia himself did not say a word against the Lithuanian extremism on the issue of conversions. He did not come out against the ridiculous idea of moving the new critical ER wing for the Barzilai Hospital in Ashkelon far from the hospital due to dubious pagan gravesites on the premises. Also he did not voice his opinion in any vital matter of religious law which contradicts the rulings of Rabbi Elyashiv and his followers.

The silencing of Torah scholars is spiritual violence. It breeds shallowness and dependence that affect our religious lives in every way. The Hareidi violence against anyone who does not abide by the rulings of the “leaders of the generation” reached new and shocking heights in the matter of canceling the conversions done by officials in the Religious High Court (Beit HaDin Hagadol). Rabbi Sherman's outrageous ruling defined Rabbi Drukman and the official religious court as a "court of criminals" just because he would not yield to the rulings of the so-called “leaders” of the Hareidi community who supposedly "speak in the name of the Torah". We have reached an ugly abyss of Hareidi leadership and there is nothing left but to rise up against it. This is not the Torah we know, this is not our viewpoint and these are not our leaders.

Our children need to hear us cry out against the violence and the silencing of opposing opinions. We need to shout: “This is not the way of the Torah! We believe in God and His Torah and we refuse to bow down to this dreadful "papacy". We must strengthen each other in our belief in God and the Torah, and strengthen our trust in honesty and the righteousness of our children.

Bavli Yevamot, 106; Jonah Frenkel in his book "Insights into the Spiritual World of Agada Stories" (Tel Aviv, 1991, pages 78-82), analyzes our story. Amongst others he brings the Halacha which states "sons of sages and pupils, when the public needs them, they step over the heads of the leaders".

#_ednref2" name="_edn2" title="">Bavli, Moed Katan, 25 page 1. Translated to Hebrew according to Steinzaltz.