A Parent's Perspective on Torah Education

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In his *Yad haHazakah*, Rambam writes:
If someone is bitten by a scorpion or a snake it is permitted to recite a charm over the wound, even on Shabbat, in order to calm the patient and give him encouragement. Although such a thing is of no [objective] benefit whatsoever, since a life is in danger they [the rabbis] permitted it lest the victim suffer mental anguish [should it appear that not every effort was being made]. (*Abodah Zarah* 11:11)

This ruling of Rambam was adopted by Rabbi Yosef Karo (*Shulhan Arukh, Y.D.* 179:13)—to the great annoyance of the Vilna Gaon, as evidenced by his following comment:
This opinion is the Rambam's [as expressed in the latter's *Laws of Abodah Zarah* 11: 11–16]. He also wrote [similarly in] *Perush haMishnah*, A. Z. 4:7. But all subsequent authorities disagreed with him because of the numerous charms recorded in the Gemara. He, however, was drawn by the accursed philosophy, and that is why he wrote that witchcraft, names, charms, demons and amulets are all deception. But he has been thoroughly refuted on the strength of the innumerable stories found in the Talmud such as that of the matron who uttered words and immobilized a ship [*Shabbat* 81b, *Hullin* 105b] ... or that of the rabbis who every Friday studied the halakhot of creation, and would create a "tertiary calf" [*Sanhedrin* 67b] and R. Joshua who pronounced a name and was suspended between heaven and earth [*Bekhoroth* 8b] ... But philosophy with her blandishments misled him to explain all such stories allegorically and to uproot them from their literal meaning. As for myself, Heaven forefend that I should accept any of those allegorical explanations..." (*Biur haGra Yore De'ah*, 179:13).

The foregoing dispute reflects an age-old clash between two worldviews. Rambam reads the texts of the Talmud in a manner that does not violate reason or contradict the results of empirical knowledge. Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, on the other hand, prefers to uphold a literalist reading of the same texts. Indeed, his evident commitment to literalism propels him to accept superstition! As for the

"accursed philosophy," Rabbi Elijah blames for Rambam's metaphorical interpretations of difficult *aggadot*, we cannot be sure what he had in mind. Certainly Rambam himself shows no awareness of being a victim of philosophical deception when he expounds his opposition to literalist readings of improbable *aggadot*. No, if Rambam is to be believed, his anti-literalism arose from deep convictions regarding the Sage's essential rationality:

Know that the words of the Sages of blessed memory, are understood differently by three groups of people.
Regarding the first, from observing them, reading their books and hearing about them, they are the largest [group]…. They understand the teaching of the Sages only in their literal sense, in spite of the fact that some of their teachings, when taken literally, seem so fantastic and irrational that if one were to repeat them literally, even to the uneducated... their amazement would prompt them to ask how anyone in the world could believe such things true, much less edifying.
The members of this group are so poor in knowledge that it pains one [to think] of their folly. Their very effort to honor and to exalt the Sages in accordance with their own meager understanding actually humiliates them! As God lives, this group destroys the glory of the Torah and darkens its light, for they make the Torah of God say the opposite of what it intended. God said in the perfect Torah, "The nations who hear of these statutes shall say: 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deut. 4:6). But this group expounds the teachings of our Sages in such a way that when the other peoples hear them they say, "How foolish and worthless is this insignificant group of people!"
The worst offenders are preachers who preach and expound to the masses what they themselves do not understand. Would that they keep silent about what they do not know, as it is written: "If only they would be utterly silent, it would be accounted to them as wisdom" (Job 13:5).
The second group is also a numerous one. It too consists of persons who, having read or heard the words of the Sages, understand them according to their simple literal sense and believe that the Sages intended nothing else than what may be learned from their literal interpretation. Inevitably, they ultimately declare the Sages to be fools, and hold them up to contempt...
There is a third group. Its members are so few in number that it is hardly appropriate to call them a group—except in the sense in which one speaks of the sun as a group of which it is the only member. To this group the greatness of our Sages is clear. They recognize the superiority of their intelligence from their words, which point to exceedingly profound truths.... The members of this group understand that the Sages knew as clearly as we do the difference between the impossibility of the impossible and the existence of that which must exist. They know that the Sages did not speak nonsense....Thus, whenever the Sages spoke of things that seem impossible, they were employing the style of riddle and parable, which is the method of truly great thinkers. (Rambam, *Hakdamah lePerek Helek*. Cf. Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, West Orange, NJ: Berman House, 1972, 407–409)

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi shared Rambam's fear of the threat to Torah posed by excessive irrationality.
See that we are not any different than our ancestors. If the details of ancient idolatrous practices were widely known today, we would also be lured astray—just like we are [at present] by other popular vanities such as astrology, incantation, talismans, and other actions [alchemy?] that mean to change physical nature—despite the fact that the Torah has commanded us to stay far away from these practices! (*Kuzari*, end of 4:23. Cf. *Sanhedrin* 102b; Rambam, *Guide*, III:37)

It is meet to come clean and state up front that I incline toward the Maimonidean position. That is to say, the Sages' acknowledgment of nature's basic predictability and their manifest scientific curiosity do not allow me to think of them as irrational. It is hardly necessary to add that such keen study of nature's laws in no way debars a person's openness to miracles and the power of God to change the world. That holds for the Sages, for Rambam, and for us humble latter-day folks. Yet, because they studied nature so closely, the Sages were in the best position to recognize miracles for what they are—the exceptional intervention on the part of the Creator for God's own moral purposes.

You may be wondering what this literalist debate has to do with the topic I've been invited to write about, namely Torah education from the perspective of a parent. Answer: the debate *per se,* nothing; its ramifications, plenty. A major pedagogic disappointment I have encountered over and over again is the seemingly indiscriminate way teachers in many Day Schools introduce young children to material far above the average child's intellectual and emotional age. I know that some parents read Grimm's fairy tales to their kids in the hope that a child will understand it as mere fancy. Be that as it may, sacred texts are another story. It seems to me that because the child approaches these texts with a different level of receptiveness, the educator needs to exercise extra care about what material to teach. Particular perturbation is caused to children when hard *aggadot* are set before them in the raw.

Let's take the following text from *Megillah* 12b as an example:
"And Queen Vashti refused" (Esther 1:12). Since she [too] was immodest, as the master said above, that both of them had an immoral purpose, why then would she not come? Rabbi Jose bar Hannina said: This teaches that leprosy broke out on her**. In a Baraitha it was taught that Gabriel came and made her a tail.**

What goes through a teacher's mind before deciding to share such an *aggada* with his or her class? Surely the teacher has considered at least the obvious questions it raises: Why did this great miracle of the tail occur—even if Vashti's vanity was off the charts?! Or was the tail's advent something less than a miracle? We recall that in the rabbinic corpus, a human changing into an ape is not precluded.
Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Elazar said: They [*dor haPalagah*] split up into three parties. One said, 'Let us ascend and dwell there;' the second, 'Let us ascend and serve idols;' and the third said, 'Let us ascend and wage war [with God].' The party that proposed…'Let us ascend and wage war' were turned to apes, spirits, devils, and night-demons… (*Sanhedrin* 109a).

So maybe our Sages believed that humans were created with the potential to turn into (revert to?) apes—but back to the question about Vashti. What was the size of her tail? It would have to be imagined as too long and voluminous to hide under the normal train of a queenly robe. What was it about Vashti's sin that merited so vile a metamorphosis? If, on the other hand, humans were not endowed with simian latency, then why would the Creator choose to revise creation?
Unless the teacher has thought all this through, surely he or she is ill-advised presenting it to impressionable children, even if he or she emphasizes its sociological aspect. (There are those who see this *aggada*'s point as an attempt to downplay non-Jewish Vashti's virtue in order to boost our collective Jewish ego.) Still, whether presented as entertainment, myth, or anthropology, this *aggada,* with its inescapable grotesqueness, is best saved for advanced students who are able to articulate any problems they might have with it.

Another *aggada,* though seemingly innocuous, can cause considerable bafflement. Noah is told to provide the Ark with a "*tsohar*" (Genesis 6:16). This rare word, *tsohar,* is generally understood as a porthole by writers ancient and modern. However, one *aggada* identifies *tsohar* as a light-giving gemstone. Now, although jewels can sparkle and reflect light, they cannot generate it. Therefore telling children that stones can be luminous is plain wrong.
Besides choosing their material wisely, teachers would do well to prepare themselves both intellectually and emotionally for questions their students might throw at them. Years ago, my daughter was paying attention to a lesson about *kapparot* that her elementary school teacher gave in advance of Yom Kippur. When the teacher had finished explaining the mechanics and purpose of that practice, my daughter asked, "If all the sins of a person went into the chicken, was it not unfair to give the chicken to the poor? They would be inheriting all those very sins that had been purged from the first person!" The teacher gave the child a blank stare, and without any response, moved on to another topic.
Of course one is not advocating the sanitization of texts—or even an avoidance of charged ones. Most teachers are responsible, but often labor under the notion that anything found in our sacred literature

must be edifying for all and sundry. The Mishnah thought otherwise: “[A child of] five years [is ready] for Scripture, ten years for Mishnah…fifteen years for Talmud…” (*Aboth* 5:21). Entrusted with the stewardship of Torah for the next generation, it behooves every one of us educators to rethink many current pedagogic practices.