

## You shall teach them to your children to discuss them. (11:19)

The words, *l'daber bam*, “to discuss/speak in them,” are a key to understanding the essence of a father’s obligation of *limud haTorah* to his son. In the *Talmud Bava Basra* 60b, *Chazal* relate the story of two litigants that came before Rabbi Yanai – with a *halachic* dispute. One litigant insisted that Rabbi Yanai require his disputant to cut the branches of his tree which were encroaching on his property. The sage heard their arguments and asked them to return the next day for his rendering of judgment. As soon as they left, Rabbi Yanai quickly ran home to cut the branches of **his** tree, whose branches were growing out into the public thoroughfare. The next day, both litigants presented themselves before Rabbi Yanai. He then ordered the owner of the tree to cut the offending branches. Upon hearing the verdict, the litigant said to Rabbi Yanai, “His honor also has a tree that hangs over the public thoroughfare.” Rabbi Yanai immediately countered, “I have already cut it down.” This is what *Chazal* mean when they interpret the *pasuk* in *Tzefanyah* 2:1, *Hiskosheshu va’koshu*, “Improve yourselves and improve others.” **First** improve yourself – only then, are you prepared to improve others.

Perhaps we know this concept as, “People in glass houses should not throw stones.” In any event, we are being taught that self-improvement is a pre-requisite to teaching others. For the student to respond to the lesson, he must respect the lecturer. If one finds fault in his mentor, he will have a problem accepting his lesson. In his *sefer K’ayol Taarog, Horav Abitbul, Shlita*, interprets this idea with the above *pasuk*. If one wants to succeed in teaching his son Torah, he must first be *m’daber bam* – the father himself must discuss Torah, be conversant in Torah, demonstrate his own love for the Torah. He does this when he sits in his home, his office, on the road – wherever he is. When a child sees how valuable the Torah is to his father, he will also accept it. When a child sees how his father toils in Torah, expends every extra minute studying Torah, he will follow suit. Thus, they will both – father and son – achieve longevity.

The story is told concerning a wealthy man who sent his son off to study Torah with a prominent *Rav*. One day, the *rebbe* taught the young boy the responsibilities regarding *mitzvos* which would be incumbent upon him once he became *bar-mitzvah*. It was the last day that the student showed up for class! After that lesson, the boy was finished and wanted no part of his *rebbe*’s teachings. The *rebbe* was shocked with the boy’s reaction to his lesson. It did not make sense. This boy studied Torah with an uncanny thirst to imbibe as much as possible. Why did he suddenly drop out?

The *rebbe* turned to the boy’s father. Perhaps he could explain his son’s unusual behavior. The father was visibly upset and responded, “That day when you taught my son about his responsibilities as a *bar-mitzvah*, he came home and asked **me** when I was celebrating **my** *bar-mitzvah*. I looked at him incredulously and asked, ‘What do you mean?’ He replied, ‘My *rebbe* taught me that following one’s *bar-mitzvah*, one puts on *Tefillin* daily. When are

**you** going to put on *Tefillin*? When you have your *bar-mitzvah*, we will both put on *Tefillin* every day.’ I had no response to that question!”

If a father wants his children to follow in his footsteps, he should see to it that **he** is walking in the right path. “Do what I tell you – not what I do” does not work. On the contrary, children tend to respect what their parents value and disdain what their parents deprecate, either actively or subtly – by omission. A Jew once approached the *Kotzer Rebbe, zl*, and asked for a blessing that his young son learn Torah. The *Rebbe*, not one to coddle his petitioners, said, “If **you** will study Torah, then your son will follow your lead and also study Torah. If you will be satisfied with seeking blessings, rather than actually studying, in all likelihood, your son will do the same.”

Children are quite attentive to, and intuitive about, what they hear and see at home. A Jew who was himself a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, asked *Horav Shlomo Zalmen Auerbach, zl*, why he did not merit to have sons who were *talmidei chachamim*. His sons were fine upstanding laymen, but Torah learning was not their forte. This was in contrast to his neighbor, who was not as learned as he, but had raised a family of distinguished Torah scholars. How did **he** do it?

*Rav Shlomo Zalmen* asked the man, “Tell me, when you heard a *shiur*, Torah lecture, with which you did not agree. What remarks did you make concerning the speaker?” “I probably commented that he did not know how to learn,” the man replied.

“What would be your response when your *Rav* rendered a *halachic* decision that was unacceptable to you?” *Rav Shlomo Zalman* asked.

“I probably had a similar reaction, disparaging his ability to render a *halachic* decision,” the man answered.

*Rav Shlomo Zalmen* looked up at the man and said, “This is the difference between you and your neighbor. When he heard a *derashah*, lecture, he returned home all excited, lauding the *Rav* who gave the lecture. Likewise, when the *Rav* issued a *p’sak, halachah*, he never complained. He accepted the decision with reverence, acquiescing to whatever was asked of him. His children grew up in a home where respect was accorded to *rabbanim*, where rabbinic leaders, teachers, and whoever was involved in Torah dissemination were revered and cherished. This motivated them to strive likewise and pursue such a venerable life’s work.

“Regrettably, your children did not fare as well, because you acted in a manner unbecoming a *talmid chacham* of stature. Your children heard your complaints, your *bitul*, nullification, of the revered status of other *rabbanim*. Like “good” children, they emulated their father. When they saw no respect, they followed suit and similarly showed no respect. Why would they want to pursue Torah scholarship if they had no respect for its disseminators?” In other words, “What goes around comes around.”

*Rav Abitbul* concludes with a poignant *mashal*, analogy, from the *Chafetz Chaim* which goes to the very crux of the problem: A terrible illness was plaguing children. The toll was rising daily, as more and more children became very ill. One doctor was able to come up with a medicine that would cure this ravaging disease. He was a good and kind man and produced the serum himself, at his own expense. He then traveled from town to town administering the drug, literally saving thousands of children from the jaws of death. One day, his journey was tragically interrupted by a thief who, after beating him, stole his satchel, which contained the vials of life-saving serum. When the doctor arrived in the next city, he was besieged by hopeful parents who each wanted the medicine that would save their sick children. Alas, with tears in his eyes, he informed them that he was unable to help them. His medicine had been stolen.

Suddenly, a man carrying a very sick child pushed himself through the throngs of people surrounding the doctor. He cried bitterly to the doctor, "You must save my son. He is all that I have. Please do not allow him to die. Give me the medicine to save him!" The doctor looked intensely at the man, and realized that he was the thief who had beaten him earlier and stolen the medicine! The compassionate doctor said to the thief, "I forgive you for what you did to me, but you must give me back my satchel. All of my medicine vials are in there." The thief was regretful and apologetic when he responded, "They were of no value to me, so I threw them away into the river."

The doctor looked at the thief with great sorrow as he told him, "You threw away the only opportunity to save your precious child. Now I cannot help you. You have only yourself to blame."

The lesson is quite simple. The rabbinic leaders, *rebbeim*, all have the therapeutic vials of Torah that offer a way out, a cure for the maladies plaguing society, and by extension our children. When a father – or mother – disparage those who devote their lives to our children, they are, in fact, impugning the integrity of the **only ones** who can help their children. They are essentially stealing the medicine from the physician. How can a parent hope that his child will behave a certain way when **he** has undermined any opportunity for success?

Many fathers put in a long day of difficult labor, returning home in the evening, physically exhausted and emotionally drained. Yet, they put themselves together and go to a *shiur*, or learn with a *chavrusa* – even if they fall asleep during the learning, out of sheer fatigue. A fellow in *Eretz Yisrael* had such a habit. He came to *shiur* every night – after a long, hard day – and, after sitting down and propping up his *sefer*, proceeded to fall asleep. At first, his friends would nudge him awake, but, after a while, they realized that he really needed the rest. Consequently, they encouraged him to join an early-morning *shiur*, which he could attend after having had a decent night's sleep. Why did he insist on attending a *shiur* at night if he could not stay awake?

The man's response should give us something to think about. He explained that every night his children saw him leaving the house with his *Gemorah* in hand on his way to the *bais ha'medrash* to learn. This is the image that they had of their father, and he wanted them to savor it and always remember. We must ask ourselves: What image do **we** project to our children? Is it one

of learning with dedication, of *davening* with devotion, or is it something very much the opposite? We must never forget that what children see in their youth is what they think we are sanctioning for them to emulate.