

The Respect We Owe Each Other— For the Sake of Our Children

By: AHARON HERSH FRIED

Introduction and Context

In the Summer 2008 edition of *Hakirab* I published an article on what I saw as a disconnect between Torah learning and Torah living in our communities. The article focused on the area of *derech erez* and *mitzvos bein adam le-chaveiro*. Most disturbing to myself, and many of our readers, was the lack of *midos* amongst our youth, the generation of the future. I suggested some causes for this disconnect and touched on some pointers for improving the existing state of affairs. I received much feedback regarding this article, most of it orally, some in emails and letters. One response to my article was a letter from a clearly pained parent who, in a letter to the editor, suggested that one of the causes of this disconnect in *midos* is the lack of respect for parents that, he alleged, is being transmitted to students in our yeshivos by their teachers and *rebbeyim*. I made an attempt at the time to respond to this letter, but found the topic and the issues it raised too complex to be answered in the narrow confines of a letter. I promised to write an article in response. This is it. In order to give the reader context I reproduce the letter here, with emphasis added to highlight the writer's main points.

Letter to the editor:

I would like to respond to a very important issue raised by Aharon Hersh Fried's article "Is there a Disconnect between Torah Learning and Torah Living" in the latest issue of *Hakirab*.

As a yeshiva graduate and father of yeshiva graduates, I contend that the yeshivos have a specific agenda—to keep the yeshivos filled. Whether a boy is capable of learning or not, the yeshivos want him to stay in yeshiva and "learn." They go to great lengths to undermine the authority of parents, sometimes even telling children to "stand strong" against their parents for the "sake of learn-

Aharon Hersh Fried teaches at Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University and works as a psychologist and educational consultant. He is most widely known for his work in Special Education.

ing Torah.” The yeshivos want to keep enrollment high for their own survival and aggrandizement. To the yeshiva authorities, these interests supersede the Fifth commandment “Honor thy Father and Mother.”

In my humble opinion, this may be a source of the “Disconnect Between Torah Learning and Torah Living.” In speaking to other parents, I have found that many have experienced tremendous strife between themselves and their sons. This “disconnect” has been fostered by the yeshivos, mostly centering on the area of secular education. Numerous parents have heard the same words offered as a reason for their rejection: “*Talmud Torah k’neged kulum*”—Torah comes first!

No one cares about the child more than his parents, but due to the yeshiva system, the child sees the parents as potential enemies. The yeshivos, albeit subliminally, put an “us” versus “them” mentality into the child. If the parents do not go along with the yeshiva philosophy, we become the “them” that must be fought, and the home becomes the battleground. It is the rare parent who can stand up against this kind of pressure. Out of love for the child and fear that they will alienate and lose the child, they surrender their authority and ultimately allow the yeshiva to take over and make these life decisions for the child. When this happens, I ask you—where does *derech eretz* for the parents come in? Subconsciously, boys are taught to express negative *middos* towards their parents and eventually others—all in the name of Torah.

Today’s *rebbe* hugs and even kisses the student to win his confidence and show how much he cares for the student. In my childhood, I never saw a *rebbe* kiss a child—that privilege was only granted to parents and grandparents. I know of a *rebbe* who makes a point in his class curriculum to teach that they do not have to listen to their parents when it comes to learning Torah, moving to Eretz Yisrael and getting married. The adolescent hears this and grabs unto it and uses it as ammunition against his parents. With this support of the yeshiva, the disconnect between Torah learning and Torah living begins. Even sadder, however, is the disconnect between fathers and sons, which the rebbeim and yeshivos have initiated *L’sheim Shemayim*—for the sake of Hashem.

I am deeply saddened by this state of affairs and I wish I had a solution to offer, but until the yeshivos elevate the parents in the child’s eyes and direct the child to his parents for guidance, I see no hope for change and the “disconnect” will continue.

A disheartened parent from the parents’ union

Let me now address the sensitive issues raised by this letter. Reading this letter evokes feeling for the disheartened parent, but almost simultaneously, also the reaction that there are two sides to this story, actually three. If the question of *derech eretz* would come up in the teachers' room of any of our schools, the opposite complaint would be heard, just as loudly and clearly, i.e. "Children lack *midos* and are often disrespectful to their teachers because of the derogation of their teachers and schools that they hear at home." Unfortunately, both complaints would be true, and here's the third side: they would both be true only some of the time. The vast majority of the time, parents, teachers, and *rabbeyim* do demonstrate proper respect to each other and deference to each other's feelings and needs. However, when problems or differences arise in regard to the education of a child, feelings tend to run high, and this mutual respect and care sometimes breaks down. Even in these unfortunate situations, overt and explicit statements of disrespect are surely rare, but subtler messages do get through. And when these breakdowns occur, the pain is so poignant that it makes all who are close enough to sense it, to feel as if this characterizes all of *chinuch*, all of our teachers, and all of our parents. It is of course not the case. Somebody once said that in schools 10% of the children tend to take up 90% of the educators' time. The same may be said of cases of parent-teacher interactions. A minority of these interactions, those that are less than satisfactory, seem to catch a majority of our attention. Since the problem does exist for a *מיעוט ניכר*, enough of a significant minority to make it a problem, whether by virtue of numbers or strength of impact, it should be addressed.

I believe that the problem, in most cases, lies not in the personalities or ethics of the individual parents or teachers involved (though at times it does). Conflict between the home and the school, in its nature and form, is not unique to the Jewish educational system. Conflict, or its potential, is built into any educational system or, for that matter, into any partnership, especially when the partnership calls for overlapping areas of responsibility,¹ as does *chinuch*. The content and context of the conflicts in the Jewish system are in some aspects dif-

¹ Lightfoot, Sara L. "Families and Schools: Creative conflict or negative dissonance?" *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, vol. 9 (1), Fall 1975, 34–44.

ferent and in some significant ways aggravated. I am of the opinion that the organizational structure, financing, and governance of our educational system contribute to the normative conflicts between parents and teachers, to the detriment of our children. Both teachers who work in such a system, and parents who have to deal with such a system, will often find themselves discouraged, frustrated, and hopeless at resolving problems. When problems involving the education of a child seem insoluble, and for the wrong reasons, those involved will lash out at those who are closest to the problem; parents will blame and strike at teachers, and teachers will blame and strike at parents.

In my experience, where there is a seeming disconnect between Torah teachings and practice, or between common sense and practice, it is almost always due to some misunderstanding of halachah or *hashkafah*—some “disconnect.” Here too, these bear examination.

Actually, this is clearly stated in a caustic remark by the Kotzker Rebbe. The *pasuk*² tells us that Shmuel HaNavi’s mother who was childless was relentlessly teased by Peninah, her husband’s other wife, for her failure to produce children. The Gemara tells us that this was done *לשם שמים*, for pure motives. Thus, she teased her so that she would cry and her tears would be heard and accepted by Hashem, who would then grant her children. “Fine,” says the Rebbe, “I hear the calculation. But how did *Chazal* know this?” And he answers, “Because such a level of cruelty could be initiated only by one who is doing it *לשם שמים*.” Yes, when something is cruel, or senseless, and we are at a loss to explain it, a good place to look is for some misunderstood or misapplied ideological motive. I believe the same is true here. Pure and good, but often misunderstood and misapplied notions about teachers’ and parents’ roles in the *chinuch* of children are at the heart of the problem. I will address first issues pertaining to the teachers’ roles, for that was the original impetus for this article. I will then follow with some comments on the role of parents in this situation. I beg both teachers and parents to read the whole article. I aim to be evenhanded and somewhat comprehensive in covering and commenting on the issues. Reading only half of what I write will give you just that, half an understanding of the issues.

² שמואל א פרק א פסוק ו

The Rebbe/Teacher: Motives, Roles, Behaviors

The problem raised, calls for us to contemplate the role of the *mechanech*, his motives, and his actions. How do we as parents see these, how do *mechanchim* see these, and what is it that we as a community really want?

In the late 1980s there was a very popular film (whose name I cannot recall) in which a very dynamic and passionate music teacher inspired a student from a working-class, “redneck” background to forsake his father’s goals for him to become a good, honest, hard-working laborer, and instead pursue a career in music. To this end, he arranged for a scholarship for the boy at a renowned music conservatory, gave the boy money for a bus ride to the big city, and thus not merely encouraged him, but actually aided and abetted him to run away from home and follow his passion for music. The film was loved, and its “dynamic teacher” lauded by all. Very few seemed to be troubled by the teacher’s interference in the boy’s relationship with his father. In fact, at the time, the only criticism of the film that I heard came not from a parent, but from an educator. This teacher decried the anarchy the film encouraged, giving teachers the freedom to interfere in people’s lives without regard for the totality of a student’s family and background. People were excited about the film and the teacher because of his passion for his subject and his dedication to his student’s success.³

Remembering the film and thinking of my topic in this article gave me pause. I asked myself, “Would and should Jewish parents wish for a teacher of Torah to be less passionate about his subject and his students than that music teacher was about his subject and student?” Surely not! We know very well the drawbacks of teachers

³ Some have pointed out to me that had the teacher in question been encouraging all students to pursue musical careers as a profession, there would have been a hue and cry. That may be true. However, my point here is that, regardless, there was no complaining about the teacher stepping in between the boy and his father. Nor, I might point out, was there any criticism of the dynamic teacher in another movie, “Dead Poets Society,” in which a teacher encouraged a boy to take up an acting career in spite of his father’s wanting him to excel in more traditional and more secure academic areas; and this, despite the fact that in the end the boy was driven to suicide.

who don't care enough for their subjects. The education they provide will perforce be dry and lifeless. So, do we want a passionate teacher whose passion does not flow over to his students? Again, surely not! What then do we want? We want a passionate teacher whose devotion spills over to his students, but whose zeal is constrained by halachah, rational thought, and common sense.

The teacher of Torah is enjoined, as was Moshe Rabeinu:

וְהוֹדַרְתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת הַתּוֹרָה וְהוֹדַעְתֶּם לָהֶם אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ יֵלְכוּ בָּהּ וְאֶת
הַמַּעֲשֵׂה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן:⁴

You shall caution them regarding the decrees and the teachings, and you shall make known to them the path in which they should go, and the deeds that they should do.

The teacher of Torah is not meant to be interested in his syllabus alone, in students' tests scores, and the grades he assigns on the report card. The teacher of Torah is enjoined to care deeply about how his students take Torah teachings to heart, and apply them in practice. This requires passionate devotion and reasoned thought. At times the passion will override reason and wrongs will be done. The פוסקים, when discussing a *rebbe's* stepping over the line in punishing a child who is not learning, speak of דאורייתא מרתתא ליה, "the Torah creating fear in him" (i.e., the teacher's concern for the *talmid's* learning and the great pain he feels when the *talmid* fails to pay attention) as a mitigating factor.⁵ The *poskim* do not "clear" the *rebbe* of all guilt when he does wrong, and do fine him, but they do see the emotional involvement as a mitigating factor.

Much as I am sympathetic to our letter writer's plight, I cannot accept his premise that "the yeshivos have a specific agenda, namely, "to keep the yeshivos filled," and that this agenda alone determines the advice they offer their *talmidim*, without regard for each *talmid's* needs or abilities. I feel this accusation is neither accurate nor fair. Most *mechanchim* sincerely believe that when a boy leaves yeshiva, even when he has not been learning well, his spiritual life is endangered. It is this agenda, of keeping boys and girls "in the fold" and *frum*, that underlies the advice *mechanchim(os)* give their *talmidim* and *talmidos*. This is an admirable and kosher motive, even if it is some-

⁴ שמות יח כ.

⁵ פתחי תשובה חושן משפט סימן תכ"ד ס"ק ד.

times applied from a very narrow and egocentric perspective, blindly to almost all *talmidim*, no matter their aptitude, interest, earlier successes or failures in learning, family background, and future vocational goals.

It should also be pointed out, that in times when the very survival and continuance of high-level Torah learning was in danger—as it was judged to be by almost everyone who cared in the period immediately following the second world war, both in America and in Eretz Yisrael—*Gedoloi Yisroel*, such as the Chazon Ish and the Brisker Rav in Eretz Yisroel, and Rav Aharon Kotler in America, saw fit to spearhead campaigns to fill the yeshivos, and have all *bachurim* learning, with little regard to the needs of the individual. There is in fact a story that circulates in yeshivos, about a father—whose son did not succeed in yeshiva and who suffered dire repercussions from it—who was told by one of the pioneering *roshei yeshivos* in America, “In a war, there are sacrifices. Your son was unfortunately a sacrifice in the war for saving Torah learning.” This sounds very harsh, but if we see the battle as they did, as a war for our very existence, then we accept it and swallow it, albeit like a bitter pill. Thus, there is precedence for keeping children “in the fold,” for the good of the klal, even if not for their own benefit.

I might add, however, to the above that when a parent sees that his son will be no more than a “קרבן” in this war, that he may opt to protect his son and get him an exemption from the “front.” This way he can assure his son of a productive life as a *שומר תורה ומצוות*. Yes, there are times when what is good for *Klal Yisroel* is not necessarily good for the individual *reb Yisroel*. At such times the leadership must look out for the *klal*, but the individual set of parents cannot be faulted for looking out for their own son, Yisroel. I am personally aware of a *Gadol beYisroel* telling a young man to obey his father and go to college, despite what he thought his Rosh Yeshiva would (or did) say.

Anecdotes cannot, of course, be used as *p’sak*. We are not fully aware of the context in which they took place, or of the circumstances taken into account in the advice given by the *Gadol*. But they do illustrate that situations and perspectives are not all alike, and that each one calls for its own plan of action.

A friend of mine, Reb Avrom Fishman אַרױם פֿישױמאן, at the time the *menahel* of the Mosdos Cheder in Cleveland, Ohio (later until his *petirah*, the

menabel of Yeshiva Bais Yehuda in Detroit, Michigan), once asked Rav Yisrael Yaakov Kanievsky אצל"ל (a.k.a. the Steipler Gaon) about the proper age for beginning Gemara at his school. The Steipler gave him a three-point answer:

First he said, "Why are you asking me, I've never taught elementary grades. You should be asking *mechanchim* with experience at that level."

Second, "Bear in mind that just as there can be a downside to learning too little with children, there can be a downside to learning too much."

Third, "Keep in mind that not everything that's right for Bnei Brak is necessarily right for Cleveland."

Every situation needs to be seen and judged in its own context. In yet another incident, Rebbe Yakov Kaminetzky אצל"ל advised a *menabel* who was adding a seminary to his girls' high school, that he not set the same goals for all girls.

There are some educators who approach their calling with a mindset of "saving children from their parents" on the premise of הרה דעת תורה כנגד דעת בעלי בתים with דעת בעלי בתים being read as "parents."⁶ This probably stems from the early years of *chinuch* in America when parents, themselves lacking a Yeshiva education, were far removed from Torah, and the goal of the yeshiva was to be *mekarev* the children and, so to speak, "save them from the ways of their parents." This attitudinal problem was not limited to parents who were non-observant. I still remember observant parents who told their children that General Studies are much more important than learning Torah; "Your grades in Physics will show up on your transcript, your grades in Gemara will not." This is less true today where many (and in some communities, most) parents are yeshiva graduates and *bnei Torah*, but the lingering desire of some *rabbeyim* to counter old attitudes may unfortunately still be with us. What is clear is that unfortunately, the partners in the *chinuch* of our children, parents and teachers alike, have been remiss in behaving like partners and have instead become antagonists. This has set up a vicious cycle of attack and counter at-

⁶ The original quote from סמ"ע שו"ע חושן משפט סימן ג לא תשב אצל הקהל בשום דין דידעת שפסקי הבעלי בתים ופסקי הלומדים הם שני הפכים. I don't know where and by whom this rather specific statement about *psak* came to be expanded to דעת הבעלי בתים in all areas of life.

tack, all *nebech*, to the detriment of our children, their learning and their *midos*.

Gedolei Yisrael had a different and wiser approach, as the following anecdote illustrates. They were careful to maintain children's respect for their parents, regardless of the parents' background.

In an Orthodox Jewish Day School in California an eight-year-old boy from a Conservative family took to heart his *rebbe's* teaching about the prohibition of riding in a car on *Shabbos*. Consequently the boy refused to get into the family car on Shabbos morning to go to the Conservative synagogue with his family. This caused much strife in the family. Their synagogue was too far to walk to, and they could not leave an 8-year-old home alone. As a result nobody in the family could go to synagogue Shabbos morning. The parents complained bitterly to the school, and as this was causing quite some strife, the principal asked Rebbe Avraham Pam אברהם"ל what to do. Rav Pam instructed the Principal to explain to his 8-year-old student that since he was still a קטן, not yet בר מצוה, and in the care of his parents, he should for now ride to shul with his parents on the Shabbos. When he became a בר מצוה he would need to do differently. The parents were extremely appreciative of the school's concern for their needs and the child went to *shul* with them in the car—for two weeks. When the parents saw how much pain this was causing their son, they relented, and began *davening* in the local Orthodox *shul*, for the sake of their son.⁷

Rav Pam אברהם"ל in his wisdom understood that once the antagonism and the battle for control were removed, the parents would go along with what was right. This exemplifies what I meant when I wrote above that the teacher's passion must be limited and channeled by rational reason and halachah.

As Rav Pam said, the role of the teacher of a בר מצוה is somewhat different from the role of the teacher of a קטן. Thus the role of the *rebbe* of a גדול is much broader and of much greater weight. While the *rebbe* of a קטן may be said to be hired by and working for the parent, this may not be true of the *rebbe* of a גדול. The latter enjoys an independent relationship with the תלמיד, and does not function as one

⁷ Related to me by the principal of the school.

hired by the parent.⁸ Be that as it may, one of the marks of a professional is knowing the limits of authority and competence in which one is expected and allowed to function. Even the *rebbe* of a תלמיד גדול has halachik strictures and rational limits and guidelines that he must keep in mind when working with his student. Allow me to address a few of these.

The Prohibition of *Lifnei Iver*: *Rabbeyim* and teachers ought to note and remember that when they denigrate and speak ill of a parent to his/her child, even indirectly and in a subtle way, they may be transgressing the לא תתן מכשול⁹ of לאו. *Mechanchim* need to be more aware and conscious of the Torah's admonition of אָרוּר מְקַלָּה אָרוּר מְקַלָּה, which Rashi explains as מזלזל. In other words, in addition to the mitzvah of כיבוד אב ואם¹⁰ and the איסורים of מכה אביו ואמו¹¹ and מקלל אביו ואמו¹², hitting or cursing one's parent, the Torah adds an איסור of מקלה, of making light of one's parent. Thus it is prohibited for a person to think lightly of his parents. Reb Chaim Shmulevitz in *Sichos Musar*¹³ writes: מקובלני שאין מצות כיבוד אב מתקיימת כהילכתה, אלא "I have it by tradition that the Mitzvah of honoring one's parents is not fulfilled properly unless the son holds his father in very high esteem." The Gemara¹⁴ tells us that a father may not hit a child who may in turn rebel¹⁵ and hit or curse his father, because he is causing him to transgress the prohibition of hitting or cursing one's father. If so, when a teacher or *rebbe* says something that would cause a child to think lightly of (be מזלזל) his

⁸ Although I'm not sure that would be the case where the father de facto does pay him.

⁹ ויקרא יט יד.

¹⁰ דברים ט"ו טז.

¹¹ שמות כא, טו.

¹² שמות כא, יז.

¹³ תשל"א מאמר כב דף עד.

¹⁴ מועד קטן יז ע"א.

¹⁵ Usually a בר מצוה גדול, somebody over בר מצוה, but the ריטב"א in *Moed Katan* says that it also applies to one younger than בר מצוה if he is likely to rebel and hit or curse his father.

parent, is he not causing the child to sin, and should s/he not be careful of transgressing ¹⁶לפני עור לא תתן מכשול?

This is not to suggest that a *rebbe* or teacher should not teach halachah out of fear that the children will wonder why their parents do not keep it as they should. We must teach Torah and teach it correctly, and the children who notice contradictions will ask their parents about it. However, we may not make a direct statement that denigrates a parent (including “that’s what *baalei batim* do”). It is, however, advisable when introducing a halachah that is a *חומרא*, to say so clearly. Calling a *חומרא* a הלכה may cause a *talmid* to go home and try to change how his mother runs the kitchen. This will surely lead to strife. It is well known that each time Rav Pam זצ”ל completed his *shiurim* in *Yore Deah* with a class, he reminded his *talmidim* that many of the halachos they had learned were *חומרות*, while *כיבוד* דאורייתא is a *חומרא*. Thus, he warned them not to go home and criticize their parents’ home and its *kasbrus*. We can certainly learn from him.

Rabbeyim and teachers need to be careful in what they say and teach in class. They should check their sources, i.e. the sources of the stories they tell, and certainly the sources of the *halachos* they teach. They have this responsibility toward the truth of Torah¹⁷ and also to themselves and the *כבוד התורה* that they represent. What is a parent to do when a child comes home with a patently erroneous statement that he quotes from his *rebbe* or teacher? When my third-grade son came home from *חדר* and told me his *rebbe* had said that “גזל עכו”ם is

¹⁶ What, I wonder, was going through the mind of the Rosh Yeshiva who, in a case I know of, told his 17-year-old *talmid*, “The problem with you is that your father is a Young Israel Rabbi. He thinks he knows everything.” The *talmid* was confused about what this was supposed to mean. But an older *bachur* who had overheard the exchange elucidated their *rebbe’s* words. The *rebbe* meant to say that “since he sees people coming to seek his father’s advice, he thinks that his father must know what he’s talking about. This may cause him not to listen to his Rosh Yeshiva when he gives him advice that runs contrary to his father’s. He will listen to his father instead. And that would be troublesome.” I am certain that this kind of exchange is rare. But unfortunately, it is not rare enough.

¹⁷ See בבא בתרא כ”א ע”א-ע”ב.

מותר, and that we don't do it *only* because of השם חילול," I tried to tell my son that he must have misunderstood his *rebbe*. I showed him the מהבר in שולחן ערוך who says differently. What was I to do when he came back the next day and said that he had asked his *rebbe* again, and his *rebbe* had reiterated the halachah as the child had heard it the day before, and not as I had shown him?¹⁸ חכמים הזהרו בדבריכם

In this vein, *rabbeyim* need to be careful in advising *talmidim*. While it is true, as encoded in *Shulchan Aruch* (*Yore Deah* 240-241), that there are times when a child does not have to listen to his parent, that does not mean it is always the wisest or most correct course of action. I know of cases where *Gedolei Yisrael* advised *bachurim* who came and asked them, specifically regarding situations in which the halachah allowed them not to listen, to listen anyway.

A father who himself had experienced difficulties with *parnassah* as a young man, and was at the time told by his *rav* (a highly respected *rav* and *posek*) to pursue a college degree and enter a profession, subsequently insisted to all his sons that, upon completion of high school, they pursue a college degree at night, while learning in the *bais midrash* by day. He told them that, after they had a degree, they could learn for as long as they wished (and years later, most of the sons are still learning). The youngest of those sons decided he would go ask a *Gadol* whether or not he was obliged to fulfill his father's expectations and go to college. He went to ask *Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky זצ"ל*. *Rav Yaakov* told him, "Fol^g dein taten; dein tate hot dich leib, mer vi dein Rosh yeshiva hot dich leib." ("Listen to your father. Your father loves you, more than your Rosh Yeshiva loves you.")¹⁹

The attitude of saving the *talmid* from his parents takes on other forms as well. The son of a close associate of mine was told by his *magid shiur* in Yeshiva High School, "Di Yeshiva is dein heim, di heim is dein shtub" ("The Yeshiva is now your home, you home is now your house"). To the parent this certainly sounded like an invitation to be-

¹⁸ I sent the *rebbe* what I felt was a respectfully written letter asking him to clarify the issue in class. There was no response; not to me, not to the class.

¹⁹ This anecdote was told to me by the father of the boy, himself a *yerei Shamayim* and a *talmid chacham*. For understandable reasons of privacy, I cannot divulge his name.

come somewhat estranged from the home.²⁰ In one of our popular magazines I read recently about the great accomplishments of a Rav and Rosh Yeshiva. The appropriately very complimentary article at one point noted, “The *bachurim* call the *rav* and *rebetzen* ‘tatty and mommy.’ What more need be said about the warm family atmosphere?” What more? That it is potentially an unhealthy atmosphere, I would suggest. I had heard of such a practice at one of the Israeli seminaries where our daughters are sent to “deepen their *hashkofos*,” but I had not seen it in writing till now. Many *mechanechim* might argue that this is actually as it should be. Does it not say, המלמד את בן חבירו, תורה כאילו ילדו, “he who teaches his friend’s son Torah is considered to have fathered him”? Reb Shlomo Zalman Auerbach did not see it so.

It is true that כל המלמד את בן חבירו תורה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו ילדו, but Rebbe Shlomo Zalman Auerbach זצ”ל was מדויק (inferred) from the phrasing of this מאמר חז”ל that it means only that the *rebbe* must see his mission of educating his *talmid* with the same sense of devotion and selflessness as in educating his own son. Thus, the *rebbe* must certainly care for his *talmid* as if he was his own son. However, it does not mean for the *talmid* to see the *rebbe* as his father, for he already has a father, the one at home:

רבינו נתן ביאור בדברים ואגב, גם התווה דרך בחינוך תלמידים, וכה הסביר:
אחת המטרות הנדרשות ממלמד דרדקי היא, לאהוב את תלמידו, כמו היה בנו.
ההתייחסות, המסירות והדאגה של המחנך כלפי תלמידו, צריכות להיות במדה
לא פחותה מאשר לבנו. אולם מאידך, התלמיד, אינו חייב לראות במחנך, דמות
של אבא. לכל תלמיד יש אבא אחד. הלא הוא האב האמיתי שבביתו.²¹

Rabbeyim and teachers are often called upon by their *talmidim* to advise them in important life decisions. Caution would suggest that the advisor should inquire about what the *talmid's* parents have to say about the issue in question, and also what circumstances in the home or family might influence the advice the *talmid* should be receiving.

²⁰ This is not necessarily the way it is understood by the more discerning *talmid*. My son told me that he had been told this as well, but heard it only as a statement emphasizing that as a *bachur* his place and mindset should now be fully in the Yeshiva.

²¹ ספר חכו ממתקים, אסופת עובדות הנהגות וכו' של הגאון רבי שלמה זלמן אוערבאך זצוק"ל חלק א' דף קצ"ה

This is not done often or thoroughly enough. Unfortunately, our community, including *mechanchim*, have been influenced by all of the pop-psych writings on the “*sturm and drang*” of adolescence, and really believe that their adolescent students cannot be enjoying a good relationship and open communication with their parents. From this perspective it is understandable that they feel the need to step in and save the day.²² Research actually shows that the supposed inevitability of the “storm and stress” of adolescence is much exaggerated. The conflicts adolescents do have with their parents are less prevalent than is popularly thought, and in most cases not long lasting, with mutual love and respect generally maintained.²³

When giving advice, a *rebbe* may want to ask himself whether he is willing to take responsibility for his advice. If it turns out wrong, will he be there to “pay the piper?” In the *sefer* ²⁴הכּוּ מִמֵּתְקִים there is an anecdote related wherein the teachers in a girls’ seminary in Israel concluded that it would be beneficial to distance one of their *talmidot* from her home, i.e., remove her from home. When they brought the question and described the situation to Reb Shlome Zalman Auerbach זצ״ל, he asked the teacher who was advocating the removal of the student from her home whether she would be willing to adopt the girl (i.e. take full responsibility for her). When the teacher did not answer, Reb Shlomo Zalmen declared, “Leave the girl in her parent’s home!” *Rebbeyim* and *Morot* must keep in mind that they have been given neither the responsibility nor the privilege of acting in *loco parentis* (in place of the parents), and should be careful of giving advice for which they cannot take responsibility.

This brings to mind another unfortunate issue affecting parent-teacher interactions. All too often when a child, a *bachur*, or a high school girl is experiencing problems in school, the school, well mean-

²² A young lady I know, upon graduation from high school was asked by her principal, why over the years she had never come to discuss any issues or problems with him or any other members of the staff. Being an intelligent young lady, surely she must have had questions and issues in *hashkafah*. When she told him that she had, and had discussed them with her father, he seemed astonished, and said that he didn’t realize that she had such a close relationship with her father!

²³ Arnet, Jeffrey Jensen. “Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered,” *American Psychologist*, 54, May 1999, 317–326.

²⁴ הלק א דף רז Ibid.

ingly, does not tell the parents about the problem. They figure that they will try to handle it themselves. When the parent asks how their child is doing, s/he is told, “B”H, okay.” The teacher thinks to her/himself “B”H, okay, given the child’s limitations” (which it is assumed the parent is aware of, because three years ago somebody had mentioned some difficulties to them). In far too many cases this attempt at kindness, i.e., saving the parents from the pain of watching their child suffer, backfires when ultimately the child’s problems grow too big to handle; when in the case of a graduating elementary school child s/he cannot get into a high school, or when, in the case of a child in high school, the parents are called to come in and “pick up their problem.” By then it is often very late, if not too late. Schools too need to remember that they are not functioning in place of the parents. The ultimate responsibility for a child is and will remain with the parents. They should thus be kept apprised of their child’s progress or lack of it, promptly and candidly. We should be strong enough to do this.²⁵

If *mechanchim* are to retain respect in the eyes of our *talmidim* and their parents, we need to be careful also to tell the children the “whole truth” in halachah. Many *mechanchim* teach their *talmidim* the Mishnah²⁶ of אֲבֵדַת אָבִיו וְאֲבֵדַת רֵבּוֹ, שֶׁל רֵבּוֹ קוֹדֶמֶת, שְׁאֲבִיו הֵבִיאוּ לְעוֹלָם הַזֶּה, of אֲבֵדַת אָבִיו וְאֲבֵדַת רֵבּוֹ, וְרֵבּוֹ שְׁלֵמִדוֹ הִקְמָה מִבִּיאוֹ לְחַיֵּי הָעוֹלָם הַבָּא, which teaches that a *talmid* should give priority to saving his *rebbe’s* property and even ransoming his *rebbe* from captivity, over saving his father’s property or ransoming his father, because although his father has given him physical (and limited) life, his *rebbe* has given him eternal (i.e., spiritual) life. Some *rabbeyim* use the Mishnah to point out the very lofty position of the *rebbe*, even higher than that of the father. True this is a Mishnah, and it is also codified as halachah in *Shulchan Aruch*. It behooves us, however, to teach the halachah in its entirety. Thus, firstly the halachah as

²⁵ One reason the school will not share the problem with the parent is that parents often get upset with the school for labeling their children or not doing enough for the child. Often parents will blame the school, and move the child from school to school, before realizing that the problem is inherent in the child. This does happen, but fear of the parents’ reaction does not free the school of its responsibility to communicate with and apprise the parents of that which they should know.

²⁶ בבא מציעא פרק ב משנה יא.

per the Gemara's conclusion is that this priority is given only to רבו מובהק, a rebbe from whom one has gained most of one's learning, not a rebbe who has taught one for only a short time.²⁷ We should also teach the words of the רמ"א in *Shulchan Aruch*²⁸ and further discussed in איגרות משה²⁹ that says:

י"א הא דרבו קודם לאביו היינו שלומד עמו בחנם, אבל אם אביו שוכר לו רבי ומלמדו, אביו קודם לכל דבר. (ספר החסידים) וכן נראה לי עיקר:
 "Some say that the *rebbe* having priority is only where he taught the *talmid* without being paid. However where the father hires a *rebbe* to teach the child, the father takes priority in all matters, and it seems to me that this is correct."

If we believe that Torah is *Toras Chaim*, a guide for life, we must lay out all the parameters honestly and clearly (letting the chips fall where they may). Only then can it serve as a true guide.³⁰

Mechanchim need to remember that, at least as far as קטנים are concerned (and if the parents are paying tuition, possibly also for גדולים), we are שלוהים of the parents in educating their children. At best, we are partners with the parents in this endeavor. If we wish to be truly successful, we need to respect this partnership. It is not ח"ו my purpose here to criticize anyone, least of all our מהנכים, the vast majority of whom are sincere יראי שמים who dedicate their lives to the חינוך of our children, with no small portion of self-sacrifice. I wish only to make available to those who wish to learn, and especially to young *mechanchim* at the beginning of their careers, a view of our

²⁷ See the פירוש המשניות לרמב"ם on this Mishnah.

²⁸ שו"ע יו"ד רמב ס"ק לד.

²⁹ יו"ד חלק ג סימן ס"ט.

³⁰ I was once invited to speak to the parents of students at a high school in California. One of the mothers came over and told me that her main reason for coming was that, being that all the teachers were also there, she could meet her son's *rebbe*. As she described it, "I want to meet the man whom, if he and I fell into a pool of water, my son would be obligated to save before saving me." She said this in a jocular way, but her underlying bitterness at the thought was palpable. And, since she was paying the child's tuition, and the *rebbe* was not her son's *rabbo munhak*, it's not even the halachah! Is it right to create a חילול השם of this sort? Is this not a case of פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה?

role as teachers. Too often, our view is muddled. To teach a true *Toras Chaim*, we must be clear in its prescriptions.

The disheartened parent's remarks about *rabbeyim* kissing and hugging *talmidim* today but not a generation ago puzzles me. It does not correspond to the reality that I have experienced. Years ago, *rabbeyim* were more likely to physically express their caring for a *talmid*. Today, in response to unfortunate incidents of inappropriate physical contact, *rabbeyim* in all of our yeshivos are being warned to be careful and refrain from any physical contact, lest they be accused of abusing children. The situation is unfortunate, but that is what it is.

Parents: Motives, Roles, Actions

Most of the parents in our schools are rational, responsible, caring, and sensitive individuals. Not all communicate at their best with the schools and with their children's teachers, especially not when they are concerned, worried, or terrified by contemplating an unsuccessful school career for their children, but most do enjoy good relationships with their schools. With all that, a sizeable minority experience a negative relationship with their children's schools, and with their actions engender a negative atmosphere in parent-teacher relationships overall.

Many parents see their role vis-à-vis the school as that of relatively powerless consumers. They feel, "If I want my son in this school, I had better toe the line, and grin and bear it." Many accept this as a *fait accompli*, a fact of life, and try to follow school rules and cooperate as much as they can. Others however, at least some of the time, deal with the school much as they would with a purveyor of goods in the marketplace. They will beg, threaten, bluff, and wrangle, to get as much "off" from their children's work-load or need to take responsibility for their actions. Often their demands will be contradictory and clearly self-serving, but it does not faze them. Thus a parent with a weaker child in one grade will demand that the teacher slow down the pace so her child can keep up, while simultaneously complaining about the *rebbe* of her intellectually stronger son not covering enough ground fast enough because of one or two weaker children in his class. Parents need to understand that although schools need to be concerned for and address the needs of each individual child, no school was built or is being maintained for one child only. Schools must perforce balance the needs of many children and

come up with solutions to problems that, because they seek the benefit of many, must compromise and fall short of perfection for some.

Not feeling that they had any say in writing them, and possibly as a result of their lack of input, and their not understanding or believing that the rules in their child's school were instituted for the benefit of their child's *chinuch*, some parents will freely flout school rules.³¹ These parents have little compunction about lying to *rabbeyim*, teachers, or the principals when they need a rule bent for themselves. They consider that easier than telling the truth and placing themselves at the mercy and kindness of the school authorities to understand their needs. Furthermore, if called on their lies, they will accuse the *mechan-ech* of having "acted unprofessionally" by embarrassing them.

Parents undercut the values and morals that a school teaches by taking their children places the school prohibits (such as a mixed swimming pool in Miami) and telling them, "don't worry, nobody will know." This undercuts more, much more than the school rules. It undercuts their child's understanding of right and wrong, of the moral and the immoral, of the ethical and the unethical. Is it really whether somebody knows that matters, or is there a right and a wrong?

Many parents shirk their responsibility to the school and to their child. Thus schools have to look for all sorts of unsavory methods to get parents to come to school events like Parents-Teachers Conferences and the like ("Your child will receive a prize if you show up. The poor kid won't if you fail to show up, and whose fault will that be?"). They will fail to do homework with their younger children, and

³¹ Schools, at times, feel the need to take on authority and write rules for more and more of their students' lives outside school. Thus they will send home letters regarding what sorts of entertainment the parents may take their children to on *Chol HaMoed*, whether they should go to summer camp, and if so, to which camps. Parents see many of these areas as their own territory, with the questions in these matters being theirs to decide. This especially becomes a "hot" issue where the rules are introduced after a child has been in a school for a few years, and they are introduced with the threat of expulsion for non-compliance. In these cases, parents feel like the proverbial person who is "midstream in a rowboat without a paddle." Where these intrusions into the home are truly necessary, education of parents for the need for these strictures is more in order than is legislation.

will pull children out of school on crucial learning days, sometimes for the flimsiest of excuses (a cousin's *שבע ברכות* tonight), and then wonder when the child falls behind.

Parents' feelings toward their child's teacher are most often guided by their child's success in his/her studies or lack of it. A child failing in school presents a very painful problem, one of the most painful known to us. A parent faced with such a problem will seek to blame someone for it. It is painful to blame failure on the child's natural lack of endowment, or even on his neglect to do his homework after school. These negatively reflect on the parent. The easiest culprit in sight is thus the teacher, who then gets the blame. (If the child is successful, however, the teacher is often still not credited. Then it's the child's natural abilities, *bli ayin bora*.)

As mentioned above, schools often do not openly and honestly report to parents about their child's difficulties, telling them that "he's doing okay, B"H." At the same time, parents who notice a problem with their child will often go for professional help but refuse to let the school know about the professional or his advice. Basically they do not trust the school's commitment to keep their child's difficulties and/or problems confidential. And the fear of their child's difficulties and need for therapy surfacing later at "*shidduch* time" inhibits some parents from being open with the school and its personnel.³² This creates further frustrations. The school, which is trying to work with the child, is under the impression that the parents are in denial and are ignoring the child's needs. The parent who is actively pursuing professional help for his/her child, in the meantime, with a straight face tells the school, "It's nothing. He'll grow out of it."

Parents alternately view themselves as less accomplished than their son's *rebbe*, religiously and in Torah learning, and in some cases (depending on the community), as more accomplished than their son's *rebbe*, professionally and/or in the acquisition of worldly goods. This feeling of professional superiority is not confined to parents with secular professional degrees and standing. It is also held by *rabbanim*, *dayanim*, and other *talmidei chachomim* who denigrate their child's

³² I have heard this often in my professional dealings with parents.

rebbe as “only a מלמד”³³ (an attitude that can unfortunately be found in historical documents).³⁴ Thus some are intimidated, while others are irritated by their son’s *rebbe*’s requests, rules, and demands, and sometimes teachings.

An illustrative anecdote told recently by a widely acclaimed and highly respected *rebbe*:

He was learning a Rashi with two *peshatim*. The second was difficult and, he felt, not age-appropriate for the students, so he learned only the first *peshat* with them. The next day a boy came to class and told him, “My father said you are lazy for not teaching both *peshatim* in Rashi.” The *rebbe* did not want to put down the boy’s father so he told him, “Your father is right,” and later found the occasion to discuss it with the father.

In both cases, whether feeling intimidated by or superior to the *rebbe*, parents often respond by deriding him and/or his rules, requests, demands, or teachings. I remember how common it was (and often it still is) for parents to ridicule and denigrate *rabbeyim* and teachers in front of their children. I know of more than a few cases in which students of “members of the board” came to school the morning after a board meeting and told other children and their *rebbe*, that he, the *rebbe*, had been discussed at the board meeting, and whether it was good or bad. In one case that comes to mind, a 6th grader told his *rebbe* who was disciplining him that his father could get the *rebbe* fired! I don’t think elaboration is necessary to explain how insidious and harmful such incidents are.

Rare as the situations I describe may be, they have a strong negative impact on our teachers and, what’s worse, on our children and their education. Parents, like teachers, need to be made aware of issues in this relationship.

Lifnei Iver: Every *talmid* has a חוב of כבוד רבו—of respecting his רבי, to the level of (אבות ד, יב) ומורא רבך כמורא שמים. The negative

³³ In *shul* recently, I heard a *rav* berating the *pesak* of another *Rav*. Part of his rant was, “Just a few years ago he was a mere מלמד, and today he *paskens shailos*.”

³⁴ See for example שמחה אסף, מקורות לתולדות החינוך בישראל חלק ג דף קיד הוצאת דביר, תל אביב תרצ"א.

repercussions of violating the כבוד of a רבי, not to speak of the כבוד of any תלמיד חכם, even one who is not one's רבי, are great as outlined in all of our sources.³⁵ Parents who cause their children to disrespect their רבי should wonder about לפני עור and more. Causing a child to denigrate a *talmid chacham* is a grave matter. Causing a child to disrespect his own *rebbe* is pulling the rug out from under one's own feet. A woman whose son went "off the *derech*" told me that her husband who is a great *talmid chacham* tended to put down anyone and everyone who was ever discussed or mentioned in their home, even at the Shabbos table. Eventually her son learned that "if nothing is to be respected, then nothing is to be respected." This came to include his father, mother, and everything they stood for. Rambam in הלכות³⁶ דעות says that our connection to Hashem is dependent on our connection to תלמידי חכמים. If we denigrate תלמידי חכמים to our children, we are in effect cutting their connection to Hashem Himself. We should be encouraging our children להדבק בתלמידי חכמים, to be connected to, nay to cleave to תלמידי חכמים. Often it is the תלמיד חכם outside the home that most inspires the child to elevate himself in Torah and יראת שמים. We should take care not to burn the possibility of such connections with our sarcasm and cynicism.

One of the goals of a school is to prepare children for life. If we demonstrate to children that school rules are not important, that authority is to be played with, lied to, and circumvented, they are likely to learn and apply that lesson throughout their lives. More immediately, they will lose all respect for the institution in which they are sent to learn, and for the Torah it represents. They will neither learn nor accomplish.

The Core Problem

But let us return to our main problem; the education of our youth by a duality, by parents and teachers, who fail to hold each other in as much esteem as they should, and often disparage each other.

Now, the reality is that in many areas of life, partners working on the same project often fail to agree. And, they may disagree in many ways. They may disagree on the very goal of their endeavor, or if they

³⁵ See for example רמב"ם יד החזקה הלכות תלמוד תורה פרק ה סעיף א.

³⁶ יד החזקה הלכות דעות פרק ו סעיף ב.

agree on the goal, they may disagree on how best to get there. However, the single most frequent factor contributing to conflict in any partnership is a lack of clarity about the respective spheres of influence, responsibility, and authority of each of the partners involved. We even have a name for this, “turfism,” and it has been found to be the source of unsuccessful partnerships in many areas of life,^{37 38} i.e., a clear picture of who is in ‘charge of’ or ‘responsible’ for what, and where the boundaries of his/her authority end.³⁹ We have a “proverb” in the English language that says, “strong fences make for good neighbors,”⁴⁰ meaning, that in order for neighbors to get along well it is important not to leave ambiguity as to where one’s property begins and the other’s ends, lest this serve as grounds for conflict. Fences can be put up to separate and keep the peace between neighbors, but not between partners. While Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch in an enlightening essay⁴¹ does try to delineate the major responsibilities of the school and the home, with the former being charged with teaching the academic material, while the latter is given the responsibility of building character and modifying behavior, he does not suggest that the areas can or should be surgically and cleanly separated. Par-

³⁷ For an example in the area of medicine see Lefkowitz, Paul M. “The continuum of care in a general hospital setting,” *General Hospital Psychiatry*, vol. 17, issue 4, July 1995, pp. 260–267.

³⁸ For a discussion of how this can be ameliorated in schools see: Epstein, Joyce “School and Family Connections: Theory, research and implications for integrating sociologies of education and family,” *Marriage & Family Review*, vol. 15 (1-2), 1990, 99–126.

³⁹ This clarity is further clouded when parents and teachers call on each other to “take care” of problems in their realm. Thus when a child misbehaves in school, the teacher will often call on the parent to discipline the child, and vice versa, when a child is uncontrollable at home, it is not unusual for the parents to call on the teacher to provide the control they can’t seem to instill in their child. While parents and teachers certainly should be supporting each other, they should not be stepping into each other’s roles.

⁴⁰ Frost, Robert in “Mending Walls.” The sentiment is older by a few hundred years, but this simple modern formulation is credited to Frost, who seems to have popularized it.

⁴¹ Hirsch, Rav Samson Raphael, “On the Collaboration between Home and School,” in *Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, vol. II pp. 101–120.

ents' and teachers' roles cannot be firmly assigned and separated; they must perforce be shared and, to an extent, overlap. This magnifies the chances for conflict.

The problem could be partially alleviated by honest and open discussion of the issues and parameters, but these discussions are almost never held by the protagonists involved, each for their own reasons. Parents feel the *rebbe* or teacher will “pull rank” on them, either as a professional educator, or as a Torah scholar, invoking a measure of authority that they will then be at a loss to counter, either for lack of knowledge, or because of the impropriety of getting into a debate about varied interpretations of halachah or *hashkefah* with their child's *rebbe*. Teachers feel they may not say anything that will hurt the parents or somehow disparage how they carry out their roles as parents,⁴² and for reasons of propriety will “hold their fire.” Parents and teachers most often meet at forced meetings, where all too often the atmosphere is so tense, the unarticulated differences so great, and with nobody willing to speak openly, that each side leaves the discussion feeling slighted, if not actually insulted, hurt, and angrier than they were before the meeting.

This lack of communication leaves each member of the partnership alone and frustrated. So teachers talk about the frustrations they feel in their dealings with parents in the teachers' room with like-minded teachers, and parents talk about their frustrations in dealing with teachers at communal *melava malkas*, *kadeishim*, weddings, and anywhere that people meet, also with like-minded parents. In the absence of parents and teachers openly and honestly talking to each other, the child, forlornly stuck in the middle, becomes the sole suffering conduit of their unannounced and unacknowledged “debate.”

This problem bears discussion, some clear analysis, some consciousness-raising, and maybe even some sane guidelines for parents, teachers, and the community at large. Research has shown that when

⁴² E.g. comment on the lack of order, discipline, or consistency in the home; and certainly not about any *shalom bayis* problems they may have become aware of from the child, and which are disturbing and distracting the child.

conferences between teachers and parents are properly planned and executed, improvements in children's achievements accrue.⁴³

Underlying Causes of the Problem

The above lines suggest that the parent-teacher conflicts may be due to our failure to clearly delineate goals, methods of achieving them, and most important, the respective roles of parents and teachers, and their boundaries. This is not a novel insight. I am certain others have noted this as well. Why then is this, in most of our school, not done?

In my view, the failure by schools to clearly define themselves, and the resulting atmosphere of distrust and disrespect between parents and teachers in our schools, stems from a more basic problem: that of the structure, funding, and organization of our schools. There is an old Yiddish expression, used to explain problems with *שלום בית*. It says *דאס דלות קריגט זיך*, "It's the poverty fighting." I think this applies to the lack of *שלום בית* in our schools as well. Allow me to explain.

For a school system to function and teach children right from wrong and personal responsibility, and for its faculty to feel competent and secure in their work, a number of things need to be in place:

1. A clear statement of the school's vision.
2. A clear statement of the school rules.
3. A clear statement of positive consequences for adhering to school rules, and negative consequences for breaking school rules.
4. A fair and consistent implementation of the rules and consequences (with no special treatment for VIPs).

The rules of a school, the need for them, and their purpose, should be openly and honestly stated, to show how they enhance the functioning of the school, its faculty, and its students. The process of introducing new rules should be transparent, with consultation and education of all parties to be affected as to the necessity for a rule,

⁴³ Markward, Martha J. "Enhancing conflict resolution through family and school staff alliances: Planning for parent or guardian participation in conferences" in Franklin, Cynthia (Ed.) et al *The school practitioners concise companion to preventing violence and conflict*, pp. 107–113, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008.

and proper channels of communication should be set up to allow for review of rules and changes that may become necessary over time⁴⁴ as circumstances change.

In addition, faculty need clear job descriptions, including a clear statement of their responsibilities and their boundaries. They need job security, a clear way to address grievances, and due process when a member of the faculty is faulted for having fallen short of his responsibilities or for having done something wrong.

Parents need to be apprised of the school's vision, goals, rules, and procedures, and also with clear guidelines of how and to whom to address their grievances. Every parent needs to feel that he or she deserves the ear of someone in the school who can help with a problem. Parents also need to know where their influence is expected to be dominant and where they should step back.

When such a system is in place and students, teachers, and parents have a sense that the system is being adhered to by all, fairly and equitably, with each knowing what they can and should be doing, it encourages compliance with the system, even when it is momentarily disadvantageous to an individual. Individuals will comply with a system that is for the greater good when they understand it, and when they are convinced that everybody is in compliance. The moment people suspect that the system is "more equitable" to some than to others, and that the rules do not apply to all equally, trust is lost, and compliance declines drastically. Nobody wants to be a "sucker."

Factors Militating Against Clarity

Unfortunately, the funding structure of our yeshivos (in many cases, if not in some of the few well-endowed schools), or lack thereof makes it difficult if not impossible for our Yeshivos to achieve these ends. To understand this, we need to have some knowledge of how

⁴⁴ I was once working with the administration of a school. We wanted to institute something in the school that all involved agreed would be beneficial, but it clashed with an old rule in the school rulebook. The problem was, the rule was 25 years old and nobody could remember why and for what purpose it had been instituted. They were thus afraid to change it. The head of the Vaad HaChinuch, a *Gadol BeYisrael*, ordered the rule changed.

our schools were meant to be structured, i.e. according to the *Shulchan Aruch*, and how what we have is discrepant from our ideal.

According to halachah our yeshivos (certainly the elementary schools) should be funded by communal funds. Historically communal funds in the Jewish communities were of two kinds, those collected via a user's tax and those collected via a "head" tax according to one's means. User taxes were assessed in the form of a tax on things like kosher meat, and paid only by those who ate meat. Other, more vital needs of the community were funded by a head tax. Everyone in the community had to pay for these needs. Nobody could say, for example, I don't feel I need a watchman at the town's gate, or I don't need a shul, we can daven in a private home. The education of children was considered a vital communal need, teachers were hired by the community, and paid for by a head tax. In other words, everyone in town, whether or not they had children who needed schooling, had to contribute (according to their means) to the education of all of the children in town.⁴⁵

Schools set up under such a communal system⁴⁶ were generally run by *gabbaim* appointed by the community, working according to a charter (or תקנות) approved by the קהילה and its רבנים, and ultimately answering to the rav or בית דין of the community. Such a system thus had a funding apparatus that was transparent, rules that were clearly spelled out, and were not dependent on the passing whims of any individual officer or employee. Such a system could more likely encourage trust and respect than what we have today.

Many of our present-day schools function in an atmosphere of fear and distrust, and on top of that, in an arena of unhealthy and unnecessary competition.⁴⁷ This stems from how the schools are es-

⁴⁵ See שו"ע הרב הלכות תלמוד תורה and also שו"ע חושן משפט קסג ס"ק ג ברמ"א א פרק א סעיף ג באריכות ובביאור רהב.

⁴⁶ As dictated by the *takana* of Yehoshuah ben Gamla recorded in *Baba Basra* 21a and in the *poskim*. See article by Rabbi Aaron Levine, *Hakirah*, vol. 6, Summer 2008, pp. 57–86.

⁴⁷ The Gemara says קנאת סופרים תרבה חכמה, "envy among scholars increases wisdom." Thus, competition amongst schools is a positive thing. Why then do I call it unhealthy? I would suggest, however, that the positive aspect of competition exists only when the competition is in the arena of scholarship, i.e., when schools vie with each other to provide a better education. Due to the scenario that I describe below,

tablished and funded. We, in most places, lack organized communities. Thus, rather than a communal tax, we have tuition and charitable contributions. The absence of a community-wide tax makes the tuition prohibitive to the parents⁴⁸ and the charitable contributions demeaning to the *mechanchim*.

The absence of a communal tax leaves our educational institutions dependent on a relatively small number of stalwart *anshei chayil*, laymen with financial means who of their own accord and initiative, voluntarily *שאין איש במקום*, “pick up the ball” that most other uninvolved members of the community ignore.⁴⁹ These community-minded *baalei batim* deserve tremendous credit and *הכרת הטוב*. Without them, our schools would be much worse off than they are. They might not even exist. Thus, with a degree of *צדק*, these *baalei batim* constitute themselves as the governing boards of our institutions where they exert power and influence. Unfortunately, being only human, they do, at times, extend this influence and power to areas beyond their expertise, and at times, they inappropriately interfere in the professional operations of our schools. Thus teachers and/or princi-

most of the competition that exists today is not of that sort. In fact, most of our *mechanchim* are not really in competition at all. It is the administrations that compete. To gain donors and to make their schools seem more desirable on every front except the quality of education, the administrations compete in who can project a “*frummer*” image, who can claim the “best” parent body, however that is defined, and who can claim that they have the least “undesirable” children and parents amongst their clientele.

⁴⁸ This burden on young parents has long-lasting repercussions for our schools. Young parents, who have struggled through the years to educate their children, feel a “release” from the burden when their children finally graduate. Thus, when the parents are older, more established, and financially more capable, they feel no connection to the schools and have no desire to support them—only a sense of resentment for their years of financial “servitude.”

⁴⁹ Members of our community need to be disabused of the persistent misconception that Jewish schools receive money from “the government” through various programs. This is a huge exaggeration (at most, schools may get some money for lunches, some pre-school programs, and, in some cases, transportation) and a misconception that just refuses to die, perhaps because it serves as a comfortable rationalization for those who wish to ignore the financial needs of our schools.

pals at our schools have been dismissed or hired at the insistence of a board member and without due process, and students have been and are accepted or refused admission to good schools, based on their “pull.” Benevolent and well-meaning as the intentions of these members of the board may be, this is unhealthy. It does not promote professionalism or a mode of operations that can be based on principle.

Some schools are established and run by one person who is willing to undertake the burden of funding for a school (which the community, abdicating its responsibilities, is happy to let him do—until, that is, he runs afoul of them in some way; then, belatedly, they demand control⁵⁰). This person usually puts together a pro-forma board, but in truth he “owns” the school. We’ll call him the “owner.” This “owner,” usually more of an “*askan*” than a *mechanech*, then hires educators to run his school. And, predictably, he behaves like an owner, having a say in all matters, regardless of his level of knowledge or possible personal *negius* (bias or conflict of interest). The owner’s level of interference is more frequent and more insidious than that of any board of directors.

Both of the above scenarios result in schools with educational administrations that live in fear of somehow putting off or insulting the owner, the board, or the donors. They avoid committing themselves to anything that may come back to haunt them on a later day. Thus they fail to clearly (if at all) articulate their vision statement, are fearful of stating clear rules and consequences, or to implement them equally to all. Many of our school’s rule books are replete with statements that read along the lines of: “X is not permitted in our school. Any student who does exhibit X may be subject to disciplinary action.⁵¹” We all know what “may be subject to disciplinary action”

⁵⁰ The spate of illegal activities in which some schools have allegedly been involved to gain funding, and which have led to tremendous “*chilul Hashem*,” is in no small measure due to this abdication of the community’s responsibilities toward its educational system. It is almost as if the community had appointed the “*askan*” as their “*shaliach*” to do “whatever it takes” to keep the school going. Then, when “whatever it takes” crosses certain lines, the very ones who sent them point fingers at their “*shaliach*,” angered as they are by his inappropriate behavior.

⁵¹ An example in many Day Schools, reflecting differences in value systems, would be: “Students may not be taken on vacations during times not scheduled by the school as vacation days (such as from the middle

means. Simply put, it means, it depends on who you are. I've asked principals why they don't categorically state "will be subject to" and also state what kind of disciplinary action will follow a specific transgression. One principal told me that "it allows me to be spontaneous" when problems arise. Unfortunately such "spontaneity" comes across as arbitrariness and undermines, if it does not totally do away with, any rule system that schools wish themselves, their students, their parents and teachers to abide by.

If principals feel that they cannot insist on fair and consistent implementation of rules, they should not set these up as rules. In *parshas* שופטים we are commanded to establish courts with שופטים—judges, and שוטרים—enforcers of the judge's rulings. The אור החיים הקדוש on the *pasuk* tells us that the two commandments are intertwined. Thus if you have no שוטרים, don't appoint שופטים. In other words, if you can't enforce your laws and rulings don't set them up in the first place!

וטעם השוטרים אמרו בפסיקתא, רבי אלעזר בן שמוע אומר אם יש שוטרים יש שופטים, אם אין שוטרים אין שופטים עד כאן. הדברים מוכיחים שאם אין שוטרים אין חיוב מצות שופטים, ומעתה כל שיודעים ישראל שהעם אינם נשמעים לשופטים, והשופטים אינם יכולים לכופם, אין חיוב במינוי השופטים, וכל שהעם נשמעים לדייניהם בלא שוטרים חייבים למנות שופטים וקוראים אנו בשופט זה שופט ושוטר.

To be sure, the inability to enforce rules does not necessitate getting rid of them completely. It requires only restating them as principles, goals, and aspirations that educators wish to imbue in their students by way of teaching, explaining, reasoning, and inspiring. This would be more open and honest, would probably remove some of the resentment on the part of those not yet convinced, and would serve as a guideline to the school faculty, urging them to teach the values they wish to propagate, rather than legislate them, and be ready for slower but possibly calmer and more authentic progress.⁵²

of December to the middle of January). Students who are absent during such times *may* be subject to disciplinary action."

⁵² It is interesting to note that in communities where the school actually arose from within to meet the needs of the community, such as in the schools of various chassidic groups, or the schools in some yeshiva communities, where the values of the parent body and those of the

When the school administration cannot enforce school-wide rules, they will certainly have difficulty backing up and supporting their teachers when problems arise in the classroom with the “wrong” student. This results in teachers being unsure of themselves and their ability to run their classrooms. Often they feel threatened. It sometimes takes no more than one member of the board to be unhappy with him to get a teacher fired. This makes parents and parent groups and their attempts at communication inherently threatening,⁵³ to the detriment of our children. Research has demonstrated that when teachers are unsure of themselves, it translates into weak classroom management and teaching,⁵⁴ and in the end into discomfort and dissatisfaction on the part of their very perceptive students.⁵⁵

When school rules remain deliberately unclear, they also perforce fail to be discussed, and certainly are not debated. This results in the rules also remaining unshared by those expected to adopt and comply with them. For school rules to be accepted and adhered to by a community, it is important that they be shared by all. This can come about only when they are openly discussed, debated, and then, after much healthy give-and-take and consultation with Torah authorities, adopted, by the faculty, parents, and administration and, after appropriate explanation, where possible, also by the students.^{56 57}

school are in almost perfect coherence, there is less overall conflict, and some of these issues are irrelevant.

⁵³ See Lightfoot Sara L. *op. cit.*

⁵⁴ Eccles et al, “Development during Adolescence: The Impact of Stage-Environment Fit on Young Adolescents’ Experiences in Schools and Families,” *American Psychologist*, 48, Feb. 1993, 90–101.

⁵⁵ The lack of job security in our schools and yeshivos also leads to strife amongst faculty vying for position and control. This does not go unnoticed by students, and leads to the diminution of children’s respect for *mechanchim*.

⁵⁶ The דרך חיים תוכחות מוסר פרשת ויצא in של”ה הקדוש *pasuke* וישלח יעקב ויקרא לרחל וללאה, writes that it is not appropriate for the head of a household to force the members of his household to do things he wants them to, even when he has the power to do so. Rather he should try to convince them with reason to see things his way, until they are themselves inspired to do what he thinks needs to be done. To illustrate this, he points to how much explanation Yaakov Avinu invested to convince Rachel and Leah to come with him to Eretz Yisroel,

In a system in which the rules are established through a clear and reasoned process, there will be less of a need for parents to flout school rules. It will also become much harder for parents to lie to the school and rationalize it by saying that they had no say in the system, or that the system is in any case not aboveboard and fair. It will also free teachers to conduct their classrooms better and to teach better. Teachers will have no need to treat some children with kid gloves and not others.

Unfortunately most of the above is but a pipedream so long as *menahalim* are dependent on fund-raising, and are at the mercy of donors. No school will run properly under the aegis of an “owner” who answers to no one.⁵⁸ So long as proper funding for our schools with

and this even though his reason for wanting to leave was that Hashem had commanded him to.

⁵⁷ Students do not need to know the reason for every rule or instruction they receive from their parents or teachers. There are times when they should be able to accept a simple “because I said so.” However this should be the exception rather than the rule. Adults who explain their rules and instructions to their charges most of the time will find that they will be able to sometimes say, “I cannot explain this one. Trust me and do it because I said so.” The adult who uses “because I said so” most of the time, will, in the long run, reap only rebellion.

⁵⁸ This phenomenon is not unique to America. It also prevails in Israel. In a meeting with teachers there, the following scenario was laid out for me, and I might add, with great bitterness. At the start when he sets out to found and establish a school, the owner, usually a politically well-connected “*askan*,” presents himself as extremely open and welcoming, seeking input from parents and teachers alike. Soon, as his school becomes known and he has registered a few children with important “*me-yuchasdike*” names, his institution has become a “brand name” and from then on he needs to listen to nobody, and in fact does not. Being officially a *ben Torah*, he must listen to a *Gadol*, but that’s okay; when he doesn’t like what one *Gadol* says, he gets himself a different *Gadol* (Eisav said, *יש לי רב*). His teachers are then at his mercy. Whenever there is a difference of opinion, he goes and gets a *psak* from his *Gadol*, to whom the politically unconnected *rabbeyim* have little direct access (in no small measure because of the gatekeepers at the *Gadol’s* home). This is not the case with *talmudei Torah* that answer to a *kehillah*, be it that of a town or a *chassidut*. This scenario can happen only because of the lack of communal oversight of our educational system.

responsible communal oversight is not established, somewhat along the lines of the halachah, with all members of our communities, those with and those without children in the schools, involved in a regular and regulated way, our schools will remain underfunded and dependent. Our faculty will not be given the freedom and self-respect they need to function.⁵⁹ We will thus by our own choice, by our abdication of our responsibility and our failure to act and take charge as a community, be the “beneficiaries” of a school system whose educators are not empowered to act as professionals, and whose parents do not feel they have anyone to speak to, because the educator is not really in control. Often he cannot help for reasons beyond his control, and what’s worse he is not free to explain why. This state of affairs will unavoidably result in disrespectful collisions; mind you, only when problems arise. Unfortunately that is often enough.

Some Interim Measures on the Way to Utopia

In the above paragraph I said that “most” of the above is a pipe-dream so long as *menahalim* are dependent on fundraising. I chose my words decidedly. There is much that can be done even without a utopia. In the year 2009, at a time when there is much research, with many proven rational and sane approaches to discipline in classrooms and schools available to learn, adapt and implement, the sad truth is that very few of our schools have instituted any school-wide systems. Many still express surprise to hear that such systems even exist. Others decry the work, time, and effort it would take to implement, and therefore do nothing. This is a grave sin of omission in our schools. It causes *mechanchim*, whenever there is a problem, to have to “reinvent the wheel” and without a blueprint for guidance. It creates many of our problems in schools: problems for children, for their parents, and for their teachers. This can be changed. I have seen it done. It requires only a willingness and concerted effort.

In my earlier article, I wrote about the importance of both parents and teachers serving as role models for *derech eretz* to their children/*talmidim*. The “disheartened parent’s” letter reminded me of

⁵⁹ Unfortunately, a first step toward this would be to require all yeshivas to open their books. This kind of transparency will, to an extent understandably, not be adopted by yeshiva heads without any guarantee of proper funding. Thus we are stuck in a conundrum.

how showing respect to others affects us at an even deeper level. We want children to give כבוד to their parents as well as to their *rabbeyim*. Well, the Mishnah in *Avos*⁶⁰ gives us a formula for gaining כבוד. The Mishnah says: אֵיזוֹהוּ מְכַבֵּד, הַמְכַבֵּד אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת (Who is deserving of respect? He who shows respect to others). The Mishnah is not merely assigning the title of “respectful person” to one who shows respect to others. The Mishnah is giving us practical advice for gaining respect. As the Bartenura explains, this Mishnah is speaking of one who is already intrinsically a “מכובד,” a person deserving of respect, because he has already attained the *midos* of ועושר, גבורה, חכמה (wisdom, strength, and wealth) as previously outlined in the Mishnah. The Mishnah now asks, מי שיש בו המדות הללו והוא נכבד בעצמו מה יעשה ויהיה “What should such a person do to earn the respect of others?”—and answers, יכבד את הבריות “he should show respect to others.” Thus, both parents and teachers need to understand and remember that when we show respect to others we are not only modeling respectful behavior, but rather, by the Mishnah’s formula, we are causing others to be respectful of us.

The malady of disrespect to teachers and parents by our children can be corrected only in a total, may I say, ecological effort, involving the whole environment: the home and the yeshiva, both parents and teachers. The present situation represents one more example of a “disconnect” between Torah Learning and Torah living that I wrote about in my previous article. This can be corrected. Our Torah is a תורת חיים. If we but follow its prescriptions we will flourish. ❧

⁶⁰ אבות פרק ד משנה א ובפירוש הר"ב שם