

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Teaching Talmud

In his article “Talmud Study: From Proficiency to Meaning” (Vol. 21) Prof. Yehuda Brandes writes:

This look at the commentaries of the Rishonim on Hazal’s division of fields of knowledge in study explains the Mishnah’s discussion in *Pirquei Avot* of the appropriate age to begin each type of study. Five years of age for the study of *Miqra*—this is the stage in the child’s development in which one can begin to teach him to read; in these years one should focus on teaching *Miqra* according to the cognitive and emotional abilities of the child. Ten years of age for the study of *Mishna*—this is a stage in a child’s development in which he is capable of reviewing knowledge and retaining it. This is after he has already acquired basic skills of reading comprehension in the first years of elementary school. Fifteen years of age for the study of *Talmud*—this is a stage of emotional and cognitive development in which it is appropriate to begin dealing with analysis, critical thinking, and in-depth study. As pointed out by many scholars who dealt with the curriculum in institutions of Jewish learning, study which does not follow this

order, and which is not tailored to the specific level and abilities of the individual student, is inefficient and even harmful.

Is not the child of today raised in today’s milieu different in many ways from a child raised 100 years ago, 200 years ago, a thousand years ago, etc.? I would contend that these differences affect the ways that children learn today. In my experience of teaching college mathematics for many years, I noted considerable differences in learning between the students I encountered in 1968 and those that I taught in 2014. Given this, I find it hard to believe that there are not huge differences in the students at which the learning program described above was aimed and today’s students. Thus, I ask, should we be applying the above guidelines to today’s students?

Let me point out that the recommendation “*shemone esrei l-hupal*” for young men is widely ignored today by much of the Orthodox world, including the right-wing yeshiva world. Why? Is it not because the 18-year-old of today is considerably different than that of the 18-year-old in the time of Chazal? If so, then doesn’t the same apply to the nature of younger yeshiva students?

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Prof. Yehuda Brandes responds:

Thank you for your careful reading of my article and for your important remarks.

There is no doubt that students today are different than students in the past and we must adjust the teaching system to their needs.

As in every other Halakhic subject, we do not necessarily interpret the Mishna literally but we should learn from the Mishna the basic ideas. Here, the main principle is to adhere to the correct order: to start with reading, then understanding and memorizing, and after that, to discuss with the students and deepen their understanding.

This is the correct and logical order, even if the age brackets are different.

My main argument is that reading and explaining the text of the Gemara cannot be considered Talmud study. Only the third stage, the discussion of the text, their interpretations and opinions equals learning Talmud. Unfortunately, many Talmud teachers do not teach this way.

As you are a Professor of Mathematics a comparison is appropriate. Studying Mikra and Mishna with students without the Talmudic discourse and discussion is like memorizing formulas and rules without practicing problem solving.

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