

# Reflections on a Presidential Chavrusa: Lessons from the Fourth Perek of Brachos

There is a photograph that hangs between the Gottesman Library and the Glueck Beit Midrash that shows President Richard Joel, former Vice President Jeff Rosengarten and me sitting at a table on the upper floor of “the beis.” At one point, rumor had it that it was a posed picture, set up to make it look like we were learning; in fact, however, we had opened a volume of Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* and were experiencing, for the moment, the bracha that so many of our students



Rabbi Dr. Josh Joseph

Senior Vice President, Yeshiva University

get on a daily basis: the overwhelming experiential gestalt that inheres Torah study in such an awe-inspiring place, surrounded by the melodic cacophony of several hundred chavrusa pairs alternately yelling at or with their study partners, mentors and Rebbeim.

I do not recall whether it was immediately after that study session or soon thereafter, but the President and I committed ourselves to finding whatever time we could to learn together *be-chavrusa* in the newly-consecrated beis midrash. We chose to start with the fourth perek of *Brachos* for a variety of reasons, and the lessons that we shared about Torah and life could fill volumes. There are a number of lessons President Joel has taught us over the years that find resonance through this chapter as well. For now, in honor of the yom tov that celebrates matan Torah, and in honor of my mentor, friend and chavrusa, I present the following six *divrei Torah*.

## 1. Ask questions

One of the lessons President Joel constantly taught was the importance of asking questions. When we approach a Mishna, we use the same



technique; so for example, the first four words of our first Mishna beg understanding:

מתני' תפלת השחר עד חצות.

*Mishna: According to the Rabbis, the morning prayer may be recited until noon.*

תפלת—Which prayer in the morning is being referenced? The entire morning service? Are we continuing the discussion in the previous *perakim* about the Shema? The berachos before and after? Yes, the third perek parenthetically discusses some details surrounding tefillah, but it is not made clear at the outset what it signifies until we arrive at this perek.

השחר—What does morning mean? Is it until the fourth hour or midday as the Mishnah debates? Moreover, when does the morning begin?

עד—Even a seemingly unassuming word, “until,” must be examined, as the Gemara later wonders whether it means “up to” or “up to and including.”

חצות—What is the definition of midday? How do we even understand time? Can an hour mean something different from one season to the next? Is time truly fixed or can it fluctuate depending on the month and time of year? Moreover, why must prayer be delimited to a set time? Might there be a chance for a do-over?

## 2. It's not enough to ask questions; recommend solutions

The very first words of the Gemara on the aforementioned Mishna present a challenge: *ureminhu*, a citation that seems to contradict the Mishna, or at least introduce a dialectic not at first apparent in the earlier text. According

to the challenging statement, tefillah begins with sunrise in order to connect *geula*, redemption, with tefillah. The question, then, in and of itself provides solutions to two of our questions above: a) it sheds light for us that tefillah refers to the Amidah, or Shemoneh Esrei, not the Shema; and b) that the day begins at sunrise.

Although the Gemara seems to be challenging and questioning, it is simultaneously fleshing out the halachah and ironing out the details by suggesting and proposing solutions! Though President Joel always welcomed questions and enjoyed parrying through give and take, he also insisted that we question, look for answers, and focus on solutions and not just the problems.

## 3. It's not enough to be right

The Gemara in *Berachos* on 28b, details several provocative incidents between Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Yehoshua, where the former, the *Nasi* of the Sanhedrin at the time, forces the latter to admit his erroneous opposition, thereby embarrassing him. The situation grew so intense and dire that eventually Rabban Gamliel needed to be deposed from his position. As President Joel points out, “Ok, so you're right. It's not enough.” It is not enough to be right, one must act righteously as well. Often people are blinded by their drive to win, to be accurate; the lesson we can learn from The Gemara, as emphasized by President Joel, is that one needs to also focus on how to work toward a united goal, not to fracture the whole in the process of working toward a better answer.

## 4. We can both be right, even though we disagree

The Gemara details a lengthy debate as to the source of the daily tefillos, whether they were established by our ancestors, *tefillos avos tiknum*, or whether they derived from the sacrificial services, *tefillos keneged tmidim tiknum*. Proofs are cited in support of both sides, but in the final analysis, *both* answers are accepted: our ancestors established the tefillos and the Rabbis related them to the sacrificial services.

This combination of the two sides, however, need not have been necessary. At one point, the question is raised for the position supporting the ancestors' origination: “from where do we get Mussaf (the additional service)?” In our study, we suggested that it seems one could posit a linguistic parallel between this additional prayer, Mussaf, and Yosef, one of the descendants of Yaakov, as they seem to share the same root. Later, we found that the *Or Gedalyahu* on Moadim (page 146) suggests the same idea — that perhaps we can learn about Mussaf from Yosef. Thus, we might have truly been able to derive all of the tefillos from the Avos. However, the Gemara did not give such an answer, possibly preferring to teach that at times, a beneficial solution might derive from approaching a dilemma via two directions and solving it while providing the opportunity to benefit from both sides. Thus on a daily basis, we hearken back to the original prayers of our ancestors while also connecting our actions and service to the Beis Hamikdash.

## 5. With respect

President Joel has always promoted a harmonious approach in discourse, as he says, “to disagree agreeably.” We can profoundly disagree on major issues, but we must do so in a respectful manner, appreciating the *tzelem Elokim*, the Godly image of all those with whom we engage. The Gemara in *Berachos* 27b, explains that a person cannot daven behind his Rebbe, as this would perhaps make the Rebbe wait for the student to finish praying before the Rebbe may finish his own Amidah. In fact, the Gemara says that a person who would daven behind his Rebbe causes the Divine presence to be distanced from B’nei Yisrael. Thus, not just one’s intentions, but one’s actions matter, and respect and consideration must be given to the context within which one stands.

Based on this and a series of related discourses in the Gemara, we discussed the dialectic between those who are b’nei Torah and those who are b’nei yeshiva. The former is to be lauded for his dedication to Hashem’s timeless Torah teachings and ideas; but the latter attains an even higher plane, as a ben yeshiva also recognizes the prerequisite respect for a Rebbe and his place within the context of the place of study, the place of prayer. As we find ourselves leaving the period of Sefiras ha-Omer — a period when we mourn the lack of respect of the students of Rabbi Akiva *for each other* — and as we head to the yom tov of our acceptance of the Torah, we must note the importance of this notion of *kavod*, respect. And as President Joel would often begin his rejoinders, it is worth emulating his guidance, “with respect...”

## 6. Tocho Ke-Varo

President Joel often comically quotes a UJA fundraiser who once remarked, “The absolutely most important thing to develop is a sense of personal integrity. Once you can fake that...” This approach, which certainly was meant in jest, is not often lived in jest. Especially when we contrast this notion to the Gemara (*Berachos* 28a) that states that Rabban Gamliel only let someone who was “*tocho ke-varo*” (literally “his inside is like his outside”) into the study hall. President Joel would often posit that an essential leadership quality is to be honest with yourself about who you are — and to share that wholeness with others; to make yourself vulnerable is to make yourself truthful. In order to lead, people must see you as genuine. In order to advance a cause, your team must trust that you are wholeheartedly committed. In order to affect others, people need to believe in you as you truly are. This sixth lesson represents the value of a role model. By taking time to learn in the beis midrash, President Joel showed that the role model of “*lay kodesh*” that he so often spoke about is best exemplified by President Joel himself.

With these few and humble lessons, my intent is to display some of my world, having merited a deep and meaningful relationship with a man who has been a mentor, a friend, and a source of inspiration for many years. As our professional relationship evolves I will cherish our chavrusa even more, as we continue to try to find ways to learn together. Thank you President Joel, not just for transforming Yeshiva into the beacon it is today, but also for who you are and for allowing me to greatly benefit from a relationship with such a remarkable person — and chavrusa.

## Deriving Ethical Messages from Talmud Study

R. Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg *HaDarom* (Vol. 19, pg. 178), writes that until R. Yisrael Salanter, ethical development and the study of Gemara were treated as two separate realms. R. Yisrael Salanter stressed the importance of finding ethical messages in one’s study of Gemara, the *mussar bahalacha*. This idea is consistent with R. Yisrael Salanter’s general approach to studying Torah. In *Ohr Yisrael* (no. 27), he writes that the mitzvah of mastering Torah supersedes the mitzvah to constantly study Torah. The mitzvah to constantly study Torah would not provide an allowance for someone to seek out a means of improving the quality of one’s studies such as travelling to a yeshiva in another town or sleeping more in order to focus. It is only because of the mitzvah to master Torah that one can spend less time studying in order to focus on the quality of one’s studies. However, this is only true when the individual is someone who is working on ethical development and *yirat shamayim* (fear of heaven). If one has mastered the Torah but did not use that as an opportunity to become a refined individual, it would have been better to focus on quantity. *Talmud Torah* is not simply a means of collecting information. It is part of a process of becoming a complete individual who lives the ideals of the Torah.

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