

Know Thyself: Student at the Center of Learning

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Roger Schank, founder of the renowned Institute for the Learning Sciences at Northwestern University, points out a fundamental truth about teaching and learning: “The students that you have may not want to learn what it is that you want to teach.”¹ No doubt, student interest is an important ingredient in learning—but is it the foundation on which successful learning is built? John Hattie’s groundbreaking book *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*² provides a detailed breakdown of 138 different influences on achievement. Each influence, organized by domain (i.e., student, teaching, teacher, school, curricula, and home), is analyzed for, and rank ordered by, its impact on student learning. Hattie discusses each influence in turn, providing us with a detailed explication of the factors that impact achievement.

Pirkei Avot 6:6 appears to provide us with a similar list. While analysis of the order of the delineation of influences on Torah acquisition might bear interesting lessons for teaching and learning, we will focus our attention on other aspects of the *beraita*. Reading the *beraita* with Hattie as a framework shows a striking feature—our *beraita* provides a list of characteristics of acquisition of Torah that almost exclusively fall on the student. Indeed, the *beraita* pays scant attention to the rebbe (teacher), to the student’s peers (whether classmates or merely friends according to different commentaries), or to God—and even when it does, it seems to be directing its attention to the student or learner. Further, there is no mention of the home, no mention of the specific curriculum other than the generic “Torah,” and no mention of specific teaching methodologies per se. Rather, the focus is on acquisition by the student. The focus is on learning. Remarkably, while it took until the 20th century for educational philosophers such as John Dewey to note the active role that students must play in his/her learning, our Sages already understood the reality that it is the student who actively *acquires* Torah, not merely passively absorbs a teacher’s wisdom.

¹ Schank, R. (2011). *Teaching minds: How cognitive science can save our schools*. New York: Teachers College Press. Page 1.

² Hattie, J.A.C. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. New York: Routledge.

Like Hattie, our *beraita* provides us with “inputs” through which Torah is acquired. That is, the 48 characteristics through which Torah is acquired are not descriptors of outcomes for those who acquire Torah. As Hattie says: “Many teachers believe that if achievement is enhanced, then there is a ripple effect to these dispositions. However, such a belief is not defensible, as such dispositions need planned interventions and may indeed become precursors or barriers to further learning.”³ Our *beraita* captures this notion; it isn’t that the characteristics emerge when one learns Torah—these aren’t outcomes of learning. Rather, these are all characteristics/behaviors through which Torah is acquired. These are influencers—the result of our Sages’ own “meta-analyses” of studies of achievement.

The underlying key dispositional ingredients in the student domain according to Hattie relate to a child’s openness to new experiences, their perception of the value of investing in learning, and the sense of self that they develop through the learning process. These are motivational factors. Our *beraita* itself delineates such motivational factors too—a set of dispositions that shape a learner’s sense of self that influence his/her motivation to put forth effort in learning.

Let us explore a specific example—that of *anava*, humility, the eighth characteristic on the list.

In his published letters, in response to a student asking about his developing a sense of self that remains “in check,” Rav Shlomo Wolbe discusses the fine line between haughtiness and humility:

Rabbi Yisroel Salanter said, “I know that I have the head of 1,000 people and therefore I have the responsibility of 1,000 people.” We learn from this that a person must know the abilities and talents that God gave him/her.

Igrot U'ketavim (#93)

רבינו ישראל סלנטר זי"ע אמר "אני יודע שיש לי ראש של אלף אנשים, ולכן יש לי עבודה של אלף אנשים!" אנהנו לומדים מזה: אדם חייב לדעת את כוחותיו וכשרונותיו שהקב"ה נתן לו.
אגרות וכתבים ס' צג

For Rav Wolbe, describing oneself as such without minimizing or exaggerating one’s characteristics is actually the definition of humility. Likewise, for Hattie, accurate understanding of one’s own achievement levels is a significant influence on his/her achievement. In fact, this has the greatest influence.

How do we develop and teach such a disposition? This is especially challenging in a world that promotes immediate gratification with tools that easily measure “success” through YouTube hits, Facebook “likes,” and Twitter followers. Dan Piraro depicts this sad truth in a 2012 cartoon depicting a funeral scene in which a couple reflects on the minimal attendance, and one of them says, “He had over 2,000 Facebook friends. I was expecting a bigger turnout.”

In today’s world, in which everyone is a winner because winning is more important than playing the game, what can we do to promote the process itself? How do we promote the value of struggling to learn beyond test grades? How do we ensure that our children do not lose interest in an endeavor when signs of success are not immediately forthcoming? This is a serious challenge in today’s world, which stresses the final product and producing it bigger, better, and faster. Of course, we know that successes and failures are part of what determine our religious and personal fortitude in embracing the next moment of challenge. Indeed, stepwise individual

³ Hattie, p. 40.

growth, not only big picture expectations, contributes to a healthy sense of self and thereby leads to greater student achievement. Too often we forget this lesson ourselves and struggle to pass it along to the next generation. We need to re-envision our definitions of success. What we tell our children is important.

While our *beraita* teaches us similar advice about contributors to success close to 2,000 years ago, Dr. Carol Dweck provides us with what she depicts as “new” approaches to success in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. Dweck helps us answer our questions about developing student interest in learning and motivation to succeed. She depicts two different views that people have on intelligence. The first is an entity view, in which the person considers intelligence and ability to be fixed and stable. Students with this view of intelligence may be overly concerned with looking smart. These people tend to develop goals based on performing better than others and avoiding failure. They are prone to learned helplessness—they cite circumstances that are beyond their control and give up easily. They try to avoid challenging activities and sometimes attempt outrageously difficult tasks as they have a built-in excuse for failure. Following failure they may switch to an easier task or stop trying altogether. Perhaps ironically, students with long and continuous histories of success can be most vulnerable to learned helplessness and may accept the entity view of intelligence more readily.

In contrast, Dweck presents the incremental view of intelligence. These individuals believe that intelligence and ability are malleable and changeable. They cultivate their intelligence through ongoing effort, task involvement, and strategy development. They develop mastery goals with respect to achievement and are interested in learning and mastering challenges, not just looking smart. Following failure, they remain confident that they can succeed by revising strategies and increasing efforts. They believe that effort will actually increase their intelligence.

Dweck’s research suggests that the way we talk with our children about success and failure makes a difference in their perception of it. Her diagnosis: only telling the end of the story, focusing only on the successful outcomes and cutting out the challenges along the way, instills a fixed learning disposition with reduced motivation and sense that effort matters. Such a person does not have an accurate sense of self. Dweck prescribes the following antidote: shift the focus of narratives to the process, discuss the ups and the downs, reflect on the challenges that were overcome and how a successful outcome was achieved. This, according to Dweck, will create a disposition of motivation and an accurate sense of self.

For the sages of our *beraita*, Hattie, Schank, and Rav Wolbe, such humility is a prerequisite for the acquisition of Torah. Yet we do not communicate these messages to our children. In fact, we often communicate the opposite message. Consider the numerous stories about gedolim which portray them as infallible angel-like humans almost from the day they were born.

In contrast, Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner, in his famous letter to a struggling student, cautions us not to leave out the struggles of our great leaders:

It is a terrible problem that when we discuss the greatness of our gedolim, we actually deal only with the end of their stories. We tell about their perfection, but we omit any

רעה חולה היא אצלנו שכאשר מתעסקים
אנו בצדדי השלימות של גדולינו, הננו
מטפלים בסיכום האחרון של מעלתם.
מספרים אנו בצדדי השלימות שלהם,

mention of the inner battles that raged in their souls. The impression one gets is that they were created with their full stature ... For example, everyone is impressed by the purity of the Chofetz Chaim's speech. However, who knows about all the wars, the battles, the impediments, the downfalls, and the retreats that the Chofetz Chaim experienced in his fight with the evil inclination?! ... As a result [of this gap in our knowledge of gedolim], when a young man who is imbued with a [holy] spirit and with ambition experiences impediments and downfalls he believes that he is not planted in the house of Hashem.

Pachad Yitzchak: Igrot U'ketavim (#128)

בשעה שאנחנו מדלגים על המאבק הפנימי שהתחולל בנפשם. הרושם על שיחתנו על הגדולים מתקבל כאילו יצאו מתחת יד היוצר בקומם ובצביונם. הכל מושחחים, מתפעלים ומרימים על נס את טהרת הלשון של בעל החפץ חיים זצ"ל, אבל מי יודע מן כל המלחמות, המאבקים, המכשולים שלו עם יצרו הרע ... התוצאה מזה היא כשנער בעל רוח, בעל שאיפה, בעל תסיסה מוצא בעצמו מכשולים, נפילות, ירידות הרי דומה בעיניו כבלתי "שתול בבית השם."

פחד יצחק, אגרות וכתבים ס' קכז

We know that successful people struggled through challenging times before they realized success. Rav Schach writes in his *Michtavim* that the Chofetz Chaim was a “schmooser.” That is, he worked to not speak *lashon hara*—he didn’t avoid speech but struggled through the challenge, the same challenge we confront, perhaps (although perhaps not) with a different scope and order of magnitude. We know that Beethoven’s music teacher thought he was “hopeless” as a composer. Louisa May Alcott’s editor told her that her writings would never appeal to the public. While college chemistry students must now study Louis Pasteur, he was given a rating of “mediocre” in college chemistry. Even the newspaper editor who fired Walt Disney because he had “no good ideas,” had the opportunity to work through that failure by reflecting on how to identify the qualities of creative geniuses. Of course, everyone makes mistakes. However, it is how we deal with these errors, whether we have a mindset that leads us to work to improve, and the extent to which we invite others in to learn from us, that can help us achieve personal success and allow others to learn from us, as well. A teshuva from Rabbi Shlomo Aviner stands as a model of this.

Question: *Do you ever make mistakes?*

Answer: *I certainly make mistakes, though they are rare because I carefully research each question [I receive] ... There have been a number of times that I publicized that I erred.*

Am K'Lavi no.5

שאלה: האם לפעמים אתה טועה?
תשובה: בודאי שלפעמים אני טועה, אמנם זה נדיר, כי אני בודק כל שאלה ... וכמה פעמים פרסמתי שטעיתי.
עם כלביא ס' ה

As we have seen, our *beraita* recognizes the role of the learner in achieving success. Among a series of many characteristics/behaviors, humility remains a prerequisite for achievement, substantiated by today’s research that it is a foundational disposition that contributes the most to learning. While our *beraita* does not address the role of the home or the school, no doubt it would agree that we need to recognize and highlight each step in our children’s growth. We must teach them to focus on the process, noting and reflecting on the successes and failures along the way, not just the outcome. We must not fall into the trap of expecting immediate gratification from our children. Instead, we must recognize the effort and time it takes to develop a healthy and accurate sense of one’s own learning abilities, as well as the other dispositions highlighted by the *beraita* and our other modern sources.