Student. Scholar

by

Rabbi Eliyahu Safran

Not long ago, a prominent matchmaker replied to a request for *shidduchim* by writing that she has many, many wonderful young ladies looking for a successful match. What she was lacking, she went on to say, was some young *gentlementches*.

I was surprised to learn about this. The community was not lacking for young men just as much in need of a match as the young women. More, there were so many prominent yeshivas in the community filled with bright, committed young scholars. Certainly, I thought, that would make matchmaking simple.

“Oh, scholars we have plenty of,” the matchmaker conceded with a sigh. “They are fine students of *Gemara*.What we *don’t* have are enough young men who match their scholarship with *mentschlichkeit*. How can I, in good conscience, make a match that *seems* good on the outside, but on the inside, I know it will not bring joy to the home?”

R’ Bachaya writes that the very name of the Ark, Aron, is derived from ora, light. It not only stands as the repository for that which lights the world, but it should exude that powerful and holy light itself. In the same way, a talmid chochom must not only take in the light of Torah but he must give off that sacred light as well. He must shine as bright as the source of his wisdom and learning.

Bezalel, builder of the Mishkan, questioned whether the Ark should be made before its “home”, the Mishkan. In answer and throughout *Parshat Teruma*, Moshe speaks not simply as an architect of structures but as a teacher, a teacher of values. He speaks first of the Ark and its composition and then of the building. By extension, he speaks of our own institutions, shuls, yeshivas, and schools. In other words, the schools exist for the Torah and its students, *not* the other way around. If we focus on the edifice before the value of what it houses, then the building is nothing but bricks, a façade. Likewise, if the *talmid chochom* is not humble, sensitive, and caring, if he lacks *derech eretz*, then his scholarship too is a façade.

In fact, though we praise our best students as *talmidim chochomim* when they have demonstrated their grasp of their studies,it is impossible to speak of a genuine *talmid chochom* if he is not a *mentsch*. Lacking *mentschlichkeit*, the student – even the student whose grasp of texts is impressive – is vulgar, one who uses the power of his learning and intelligence to elevate himself, not the Torah, and certainly not others.

No wonder the matchmaker was so disheartened.

Talmidim, be learners, but do not hold up your learning above your decency!

\* \* \*

Chazal teach us [Yoma 21a] that the physics of space did not apply to the *Aron*, that the *Aron* did not occupy any space in this world even though it was a physical vessel constructed by human hands. “*Aron eino min hamiddah*” – the *Aron* was not included in the measurements of the *Kodesh HaKadoshim*. *Moreinu* Rav Belsky goes even further, “Just as it is not part of space, neither is it part of time; the *Aron* will endure for eternity.”

This insight teaches us that if a *talmid* wants to be like an *Aron* – emitting the light of Torah – then he needs to rise above the metrics, and limits, society uses to measure “worth.” Those who are consumed with social and political measurements of worth get bogged down in their own thinking and consequently cannot make room for others. Their implicit and explicit message is, “You are not good enough. You are not observant enough. You can’t be part of our school, our community…”

It is not how genuine *talmidim chochomim* think and behave! Genuine *talmidim chochomim* emphasize that they are *talmidim* and do not ever presume for themselves *chochomim*.

When the Satmar Rebbe, zt’l, came to America after World War II, Rav Shraga Feivel Medelovitz, the Principal of Yeshiva Torah VaDaas invited him to come to the yeshiva to present a Torah lecture for the students. The Satmar Rebbe gave a well-received *shiur* and afterwards the students surrounded him to engage in a vigorous Torah discussion.

After the boys left, Rav Medelovitz went to the Rebbe and asked, “Nu, what did you think of that? Wasn’t it beautiful?”

The Satmar Rebbe conceded that it had indeed been an impressive experience but, inverting the classic Talmudic teaching on being a *talmid chochom*, he hoped that the students would be “on the outside like they were on the inside.”

In his reply, the Satmar Rebbe not only turned our conventional understanding on its head, he also called attention to the need to be in balance on the inside and out – for our scholarship to be an expression not just of our intellect but our spirituality as well.

In our communities, there is often too much emphasis on appearances, on the color of suits and *kapotes,* shapes and colors of hats and *shtreimels* we wear*.* Such emphasis blinds us to the inner qualities that make a person truly pious, qualities that are essential to a Torah scholar. This is not to suggest that our outward appearance isn’t important. It is by our external selves that we shine the light of the Torah to the world and, so we should not be oblivious to “outer beauty” either.

Balance.

Act like a *mensch*. Look like a *mensch*. Be a *mensch*!

The inner self and outer self must be in balance.

Because being a Torah *chochom* is, by definition, a humbling experience – never one that is achieved, only striven toward – we understand that being a Torah scholar should not be goal oriented. That is, the reward is not overt, or external. Unlike in worldly matters, where reward is meted out based on completed tasks, on results rather than effort, in Torah study the opposite is true. Reward is granted *for effort*, even more than for achievement. The Torah student who wrestles with a tractate of Talmud but does not comprehend every line and nuance of the discussion and analysis extols God at a *siyum* celebration*: Heim amelim veinam mekablim sechar, anu amelim* *umekablim se­char –* “They exert effort and receive no reward; we exert effort and receive rewards.”

We seek to understand that which cannot be fully understood. Therefore, our reward *must be* for our efforts. We are always “striving for” but never achieving full knowledge and understanding.

Beneath the *Aron*’s gold covering inside and out, its construction is acacia wood. What does this teach us? Why would the receptacle of our Torah, our greatest gift, not be fashioned exclusively from the most precious metals? The wood teaches us that Jewish knowledge and scholarship should not – cannot – be not be associ­ated only with wealth, riches, or exclusivity. Our inner and outer selves must be equally “gilded with gold” but we must remember that that inner and outer gold cover plain wood, which one day will rot and return to dust.

Knowing where we come from and whence we go – dust – teaches that the heart of the *talmid chochom* must be filled with overwhelming love, compassion, and humility.

Sometimes it seems that some well-meaning contemporary Jews, who strive ear­nestly to become *talmidei chochomim,* forget the purpose of their pursuit. They think it has a result – an award, recognition, the applause of peers. They think it elevates them. They indeed become *chochomim* but somehow forget to remain *talmidim.*

Balance. On the one hand, the essence of Jewish learning and knowledge is unpretentious. It is simple wood, available to all. On the other hand, we cover that wood in gold because the repository of the Torah, the *Aron*, should reflect the value we place upon the treasure it holds, the Torah.

The *talmid chochom* must know it is not enough to acquire learning. He must demonstrate respect, reverence, and *derech eretz* to the Torah. *Chazal* teach that *derech* *eretz kadmah l’Torah*, *derech eretz* must precede actual learning. We Jews must appreciate not only the contents of Torah, but also embrace an approach and attitude toward learning, one that bespeaks the path of learning, and not just the destination.

The *Aron* was built to be beautiful inside and out, but its physical beauty was only external representations of an inner reality. The true scholar knows from whence he comes and to whence he goes. Along the path of that journey, he seeks balance in his inner and outer self. In this way, he remains respectful, normal and humble, he is a *mensch*.

He would be a most wonderful match indeed!