

## Ahavas Hatalmidim in Practice

### Introduction

Rav Yechezkel Sarna said:<sup>1</sup>

*Chazal taught us... that the teacher doesn't (merely) teach Torah to his students, rather he has to be like an actual father to them...*<sup>2</sup>

In his following words, Rav Sarna goes on to give us an understanding of what that actually entails:

*He needs to be like an actual father to them. What is fatherhood? Fatherhood means knowing all the needs of each student, recognizing all his strengths and to be successful in gaining the trust and confidence of the bochur to the point where he can talk to his rebbi as a son talks to his father...*<sup>3</sup>

Let us take a more careful look at his words and use them as a guide on how to be a parent to our students.

### Short-term needs:

**"Fatherhood means knowing all the needs of each student..."**

The word "מחסור," used by Rav Sarna, is used both in Tanach and in the vernacular to indicate needs or wants in the physical sense. Just as a parent always looks out for the physical needs of their children, so must a teacher.

One of the first questions which Rabbi Aaron Brustowsky asks his new students on the first day of the school year, is whether they ate breakfast yet. He shows them that there is a cabinet in the classroom where there is always breakfast available for anyone who didn't have time to eat it at home. And there are always snacks there for anyone who forgot to bring a snack from home for recess.

Breakfast? Snacks? Are those the teacher's responsibility? Isn't that the parent's responsibility?

Absolutely. And therefore Chazal and all our gedolim tell us that teachers are parents as well. If one of our students is hungry, that is one of our children who is hungry. Rav Sarna is telling us that we have to see to all the needs of our students.

The sefer Birkas Shalom tells the following amazing story about Reb Lipa Zilberman ע"ה, who was the principal of Talmud Torah Kamenitz in Jerusalem for about thirty years:

*On one of the rainy winter days, he saw a student who apparently had been jumping in puddles of water and had gotten wet. Rabbi Zilberman was concerned that the student might catch a cold and first advised him to go home and get a dry pair of socks. But then he immediately said, "Actually, there may be some extra pairs of socks in the office for this purpose, so you may not have to go back home." He told the student to wait while he goes to check in the office. He came back a few minutes later saying, "Baruch Hashem, we did indeed have socks!" and handed the student a pair of socks and a towel so he could dry his feet. When taking the socks, the student realized that they were warm, and that Rabbi Zilberman had given him his own socks! He felt bad and told the principal he didn't want to take his socks, but the principal just smiled and said, "What's the problem? The responsibility is on my shoulders to make sure every student is kept warm, so I should have had dry socks in the office for that purpose. Being that I didn't, the responsibility was mine!"*

Short-term needs also include emotional needs. A teacher should always be on the lookout for a student who seems to be out of sorts and talk with them. As Rabbi Sarna says: until he can talk to his rebbi as a son talks to his father.

Every child goes through difficult times. It can be trouble at home, fights with his peers, difficulty with schoolwork, or even some concerns which to us seem childish, but which to them loom large in their lives.

Different children react differently to adversity. Some may seem more sullen or quiet than usual. Some may act out in class. These are indicators to the teacher that there may be something there which he can help the student with. And the first step in helping them is talking to them. See the article "How to have a successful conversation with your student."

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in sefer יצחק זכרון. Many other seforim and students quote this pshat in the name of Rav Sarna.

<sup>2</sup> "אלא שלמדנו חז"ל... כי הרב אינו מלמד תורה לתלמידיו, אלא הוא צריך להיות להם כאב ממש..."

<sup>3</sup> "...הוא צריך להיות להם כאב ממש. מהי אבהות? אבהות פירושה לדעת את כל מחסורו של כל תלמיד, להכיר את כל כוחותיו ולהצליח לרכוש את אמונו ובטחונו של הבחור עד שיוכל לדבר עם רבו כדבר בן אל אביו..."

Furthermore, unless you feel it may be counter-productive for some reason, it is important to call the parents to discuss what you're seeing and to collaborate on how to help the student with what he or she is going through.

## Long-term needs:

### "Knowing all his strengths..."

The Nesivos Shalom writes:<sup>4</sup>

*The mechanech must learn and become well acquainted with the character traits of each of his students...*<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the Chovas Hatalmidim writes in his introduction:

*The chinuch is not equal for all boys, it depends on each boy according to his nature, knowledge, character traits, etc., and it is up to the mechanech to recognize these.*<sup>6</sup>

In order to successfully teach every student and take care of all their needs, it is crucial for us to get to know each student as well as possible. We will be one of their main caretakers for an entire year. Who is this child really? What are his strong and weak middos? What are his learning abilities and challenges? Are there family issues you need to be aware of? These are all questions we need to know the answers to in order for us to take care of each student and help them learn their best, act their best, and feel they are understood and taken care of. How can you get to know your students as well as possible? Here are some ideas on how to start the process even before the school year begins:

- Mail a letter and form to each student during the summer. In the letter you can introduce yourself and express how excited you are that he/she will be your student. Tell them that you care deeply for your students, that you will always be available for them, and whatever else you think would be helpful. The form should include questions which will help you get to know the student as well as possible. You can find a sample form in Appendix C.
- Follow it up with a phone call to the parents. Children won't always give you the information you need to know, especially because they don't know you yet. But the parents can share invaluable information with you which

can make the difference between a great year and a not-so-great year with that student.

- Once the school year begins, you can have a daily "family time" slot (see further on).

## Let them know you're like their parents.

### "To be successful in gaining the trust and confidence of the bochur..."

To be successful in gaining the trust and confidence of your students, it's not enough to just love them, you need to express it to them and make them aware that you consider them your children. Rav Nissim Karelitz says:<sup>7</sup>

*... he is required to love them and show them his love, for this is essential for the success of the students.*<sup>8</sup>

Ensure that they know you care about them, that you're there to take care of their needs, and that they can always talk to you about anything that's bothering them. Actions aren't always enough; children need to hear it.

Keep on mentioning these things as often as practical. Even if they are initially skeptical, they will soon realize you're serious and learn to trust you. Of course, if their previous years' teacher was one they also had this relationship with, it will be all the easier for them to accept what you're telling them!

Rabbi Binyomin Ginsberg writes the following:

*"When I was a teacher, I put all the children's last names in my rollbook as 'Ginsberg'. It was a powerful visual reminder, which I saw multiple times a day, that each of these children should be viewed as my own child. Additionally, it helped me deal with extra sensitivity with failing students. After all, it's difficult to put a failing mark next to your own name! Thus I was inspired to do whatever possible to help each child succeed.*

*Later, when I worked as principal in Minneapolis, I jokingly told students that they were my children and often called them with my last name. Once, when my mother came to visit, I took her for a tour of the school. I stopped some children in the hall, introduced her to them, and then asked them to share their own names.*

<sup>4</sup> נתיבי החינוך עמ' ח

<sup>5</sup> "המחנך חייב ללמוד ולהכיר היטב את תכונות הנפש של כל אחד מחניכיו..."

<sup>6</sup> "לא בכל הנערים שזה הוא החנוך, תלוי הוא בכל נער ונער כפי טבעו, דעתו, מדותיו וכו', ואותם על המחנך להכיר."

<sup>7</sup> ספר ומצדיקי הרבים – הלכות מלמדים

<sup>8</sup> "חייב הוא לאוהבן ולהראות להן אהבתו, כי הוא הכרחי להצלחת התלמידים."

*"Shlomo Zalman Ginsberg," a boy said with a straight face.  
"Nice to meet you."*

*"I'm Avigayil Ginsberg," another child piped up.*

*"Really?" my mother asked. Then, turning to me, she added,  
"Do they spell it the same way?"*

*"Yitzchok Ginsberg," another student said with a grin.*

*My mother smiled when she caught on. "They are all my children," I explained."*

In addition, you should show them your interest in their lives on a daily basis. As a sixth grade rebbi, I used to start my class with a ten-minute period of "family time". I would ask the students how their previous day was, whether there was anything going on with them or in their home that they would like to share with the class, and I would share with them anything interesting that had happened to me. We would spend ten minutes just schmoozing. The feeling of warmth and achdus was one that went a long way in forming my relationship with my students.

Several years later, I started wondering whether this "family time" was the right thing to do? Perhaps I was guilty of bittul Torah? When asking this question to Rav Aharon Feldman shlita he assured me there was nothing wrong with it, and that to the contrary, it was a good idea. Anything that strengthens the relationship between teacher and students is an investment in their chinuch.

Similarly, Rav Gershon Edelstein said:<sup>9</sup>

*And another very important thing, is that the relationship with the student should not only be with matters of Torah, rather he should also be interested in the student's well-being, to ask how he is doing, and what's going on at home, so that he (the student) knows that people are thinking about him and are interested in him, and even if he is a well-behaved child who doesn't cause any problems, the fact that he doesn't cause problems isn't enough; it's necessary that he should also have a relationship with his mechanech.<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> הובא בקונטרס דרכי החינוך גליון 300  
<sup>10</sup> "ועוד דבר חשוב מאד, שהקשר החינוכי עם התלמיד יהיה לא רק בדברי תורה, אלא גם להתעניין במצבו של התלמיד, לשאול מה שלומו, ומה נשמע בבית, שיידע שחשובים ומתעניינים עליו, ואפילו אם הוא ילד ממושמע שאינו עושה שום בעיות, לא מספיק מה שאינו עושה בעיות, וצריך גם שיהיה קשר עם המנחך."

<sup>11</sup> אייר תשע"ג, Said in his name at a chinuch convention in Bnei Brak.

See also the words of Rav Berel Povarsky and Rav Mattisyahu Solomon quoted in our article "How To Develop Ahavas Hatalmidim", both of whom make the point that the teacher has to make sure the student knows that the teacher loves them.

## Davening for them

Throughout the ages, parents have davened for their children, beseeching the Borei Olam to protect them, to provide for their needs, and to help them grow up to be G-d-fearing Jews. We, as their spiritual parents, should do no less! Indeed, according to our gedolim, davening for our students is not just a good idea, but an obligation. See Appendix D for multiple sources on this topic. We will quote just a few of them here. Rav Chaim Kanievsky said the following:<sup>11</sup>

*It is the obligation of mechanchim to pray for every student in order to see him grow and excel in the path of Torah and Yirah. In the face of difficulties and trials, it is important to know that without prayer and supplication it is impossible to succeed in chinuch. This prayer belongs to the parents, but also to the mechanchim in Talmudei Torah (elementary schools) and Yeshivos, to see blessing in their toil. Along with strengthening the ways of chinuch, they will merit Siyata DiShmaya for success.<sup>12</sup>*

The previous Erloyer Rebbe said:<sup>13</sup>

A teacher must daven every day for his children in the classroom, that they should be successful to understand, comprehend and learn, therefore it is appropriate that he should have the child's name and the name of the mother, thus he will be able to daven for him as if this were his son. The future of the children is in the hands of the principals and mechanchim. One has to daven a lot that the chinuch will indeed succeed and yield blessed fruit.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the Boyaner Rebbe combines the aspect of prayer and the point we raised in the previous chapter about "wanting" to succeed in the chinuch of our students.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> "חובת המנחנים להעביר בתפילה עבור כל תלמיד כדי לראותו עולה ומתעלה בדרך התורה והיראה. מול קשיים וניסיונות חשוב לדעת שבלא תפילה ותחינה אי אפשר להצליח בחינוך. תפילה זו שייכת להורים, אך גם למנחנים בתלמודי התורה ובישיבות, לראות ברכה בעמלם. ביחד עם חינוך דרכי החינוך יזכו בסיועא דשמיא להצלחה."

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Savri Maranan – Chinuch p. 317

<sup>14</sup> "מלמד חייב להתפלל כל יום על הילדים שלו בכיתה, שיצליחו להבין ולהשכיל וללמוד, ולכן ראוי שיהיה לו את שם הילד ושם האימא, כך יוכל להתפלל עליו כאילו היה זה בנו. בידי המנהלים והמנחנים נמצא עתיד הילדים. צריך להתפלל הרבה שאכן החינוך יצליח ויניב פירות ברוכים."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid p. 320

*The main thing is tefillah, like the saying of Chazal: "If not that the Holy One, Blessed be He helps him, he can't overcome him," and "would that a person would pray all day long!" Prayer is the great Siyata DiShmaya to succeed in the chinuch of the children and the students. And the prayer (should be) together with the desire (to be successful in his chinuch), which is a great principle, because when there is desire to succeed, the Holy One Blessed be He helps. And one should never give up.<sup>16</sup>*

## What is the Gadol Hador telling YOU

In closing this article, let us consider for a moment the following words of Rav Michel Yehuda Lefkowitz:<sup>17</sup>

פעם כשהתלוויתי למרן החזון איש זצ"ל [זה היה בחזרתו מלבקר את אמו ע"ה שהיתה גרה בבני ברק והוא היה מבקרה מידי יום] אמר לי את דברי התנא באבות אוהב את הבריות ומקרבן לתורה, וביאר מרן זצ"ל שאם רוצים להצליח עם תלמידים היסוד צריך להיות אוהב את הבריות ועל ידי זה אפשר לקרבן לתורה. אם חסר אהבה לתלמידים לא יועילו כל מיני עצות ודרכים. לא יועילו בזה צעקות וגערות...

*Once, while I accompanied Maran the Chazon Ish zt"l (he was returning from visiting his mother a"h who lived in Bnei Brak, and he used to visit her every day), he repeated to me the words of the Tanna in Avos (1:12) "loving the people and drawing them close to Torah," and Maran zt"l explained the meaning that if one wants to succeed with students, the foundation has to be "loving the people," and through that, it is possible to draw them close to Torah. If there is a lack of love for the students, all kinds of advice and methods won't help. Shouts and rebukes won't help...*

The obvious question is: why did Reb Michel Yehuda have to give all the details and circumstances of his walk with the Chazon Ish? He was accompanying the Chazon Ish, who had visited his mother... Why do we need to know all this? Why not just tell us that he heard a pshat in the Mishna from the Chazon Ish, and what that pshat was? Perhaps the explanation is as follows: We always hear quotes on different aspects of chinuch. In this and other articles we quote various mekoros on the chiyuv and importance of loving talmidim. You may read other articles and books, and they'll give you various mekoros for other important principles in education. One of the challenges in education today is that there is so much information in books, articles, courses and so on, that it

becomes hard to distinguish between what is really crucial and what is less so.

But let's use our imagination for a moment! Imagine that you're actually walking next to the Chazon Ish. You're in Bnei Brak. You just met the holy Chazon Ish on the street. He tells you that he just came from visiting his elderly mother, which he does every day, and how happy he is to be able to fulfill the great mitzvah of Kibbud Eim. From your side, you're happy to have the zchus to walk next to the Gadol Hador! And while you're walking next to him (the Chazon Ish!), he turns to you, looks you in the eye and says to you: "Remember! If you want to be matzliach in chinuch, you have to love your talmidim!"

It's not something you saw in one of hundreds of books, it's not something you heard in someone's name, it's the Chazon Ish himself telling it to YOU. Is there any doubt that each one of us would take that to heart, and that it would change the way we look at teaching for the rest of our lives? Or if it was R. Michel Yehuda himself who we were walking next to, and he said it to us. Or R. Aharon Leib Shteinman or R. Moshe Feinstein or R. Yaakov Kamenetsky...

Perhaps this is why R. Michel Yehuda gave those details. He wanted to use imagery, to help us use our imagination, in order to convey to us that Ahavas Hatalmidim is truly, absolutely, the most important cornerstone of chinuch.

He wanted us to realize that it's not something abstract. It's something he heard straight from the Gadol Hador, while standing next to him: You can't be matzliach in chinuch if you don't love your talmidim!!!

<sup>16</sup> "העיקר הוא התפילה, וכמאמרי חז"ל: "אלמלי הקב"ה עוזרו אין יכול לו", "ולוואי שיתפלל אדם כל היום". התפילה היא הסייעתא דשמיא הגדולה להצליח בחינוך הילדים והתלמידים. והתפילה יחד עם הרצון, שהוא עיקר גדול, כי כאשר יש את הרצון להצליח הקב"ה עוזר, ולעולם אין להתייאש."

<sup>17</sup> הובאו דבריו בקובץ גליונות – תשע"ח ג ויקרא