



think about reflection

Jewish learning

service opportunities

Sulam's Lesson on Educational Services/Mentoring

Jewish tradition places a great emphasis on teaching and on “team-study”. Here are a few texts from traditional Jewish sources that will help us understand the significance and value of teaching.

In Deuteronomy 6:7, we are told that we must “teach [the words of Torah] to your children”.

The Torah never mentions [professional] teachers, but repeats the command for parents to teach their children over a dozen times. Why do you think the Torah places such an emphasis on parents teaching children? What is it about that relationship that makes teaching and learning so central and crucial.

In the 2nd century rabbinic commentary “Sifri”, we read the following comment about “children”:

ושננתם לבניך – אלו התלמידים

You shall teach them intensely to your children – “children” refers to students

- Why are a teacher's students considered to be his “children”?
- In what way does a successful teacher perform the role of a parent?

Sanhedrin (a book of the Talmud) states (p. 99b):

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף צט עמוד ב
אמר ריש לקיש: כל המלמד את בן חבירו תורה מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו עשאו

Anyone who teaches Torah to his fellow's son is considered as if he created him

- Did you ever have a teacher who was so influential that you felt like he or she had “adopted” you? Did you ever want to be adopted by him or her?

The rabbis of the Talmud had particular admiration for R. Hiyya (3rd century) – and here they tell us why. See if you can identify what was so marvelous about his deeds. This passage is also found in the Talmud – Bava Metzia 85b

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף פה עמוד ב
אזלינא ושדינא כיתנא, וגדילנא נישבי, וציידנא טבי ומאכילנא בשרייהו ליתמי, ואריכנא מגילתא וכתבנא חמשה חומשי, וסליקנא למתא ומקרינא חמשה ינוקי בחמשה חומשי, ומתנינא שיתא ינוקי שיתא סדרי, ואמרנא להו: עד דהדרנא ואתינא - אקרו אהדדי ואתנו אהדדי, ועבדי לה לתורה דלא תשתכח מישראל. היינו דאמר רבי: כמה גדולים מעשי חייא!

I went and sowed flax, made nets [from the flax cords], trapped deers, whose flesh I gave to orphans, and prepared scrolls [from their skins], upon which I wrote the five books [of Moses]. Then I went to a town [which contained no teachers] and taught the five books to five children, and the six orders [of the Talmud] to six children And I bade them: "Until I return, teach each other the Pentateuch and the Mishnah;" and thus I preserved the Torah from being forgotten in Israel.' This is what Rabbi [meant when he] said, 'How great are the works of Hiyya!'

- What was so “great” about what R. Hiyya did?
- Which is greater – teaching others and teaching others how to teach?
- Why is “cooperative learning” the key to keeping knowledge and learning alive?

The Torah commands us to teach – as a matter of fact, there is no explicit command to study; rather, we are commanded to teach our children and, of course, we can’t do that unless we’ve first taught ourselves (or learned from others) and unless we keep studying.

Our tradition sees the main role of a parent as a teacher – a complete guide through life – and the role of a teacher as a parent. Moses, the master teacher of all, referred to himself as a “nursemaid” to the people, nurturing them and coping with all of their challenges. The first three sources in this section highlight the symbiotic relationship between teacher and parent.

Yet, there is a greater level of leadership that a great educator can generate: if he or she motivates others, through inspired teaching, effective modeling and a generally positive demeanor, to want to share what they’ve learned with others. This is far greater than “organized cooperative learning”, it is an enthusiastic response to being “turned on” in the classroom and wanting everyone else to share the enthusiasm.

Think about how we get excited about a song, book or movie that we’ve just encountered. We want to tell others about it and, once they’ve experienced it, to engage them in discussion, debate and analysis of the song, the characters in the book and the plot of the movie. Such is the response of students to effective teachers.

Sulam: The Center for Jewish Service Learning

Bureau of Jewish Education of Greater Los Angeles, 6505 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 300, Los Angeles, CA 90035
Office: (323)761-8607 Fax: (323)761-8640 Email: dgold@bjela.org