Teachers Armed with Spiritual Might

The three weeks between the fasts of the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av is a time of mourning for the Jewish people. These days recall the calamities that befell us during this time – exile from the Land of Israel, destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. It is referred to as Bein HaMetzarim, a time when the Jewish people are “Between the Straits.”

The Shulchan Aruch brings down a curious custom for the Three Weeks: teachers should not strike their students during this time. Not that teachers are encouraged to hit students during the rest of the year either, but during these Three Weeks, they should be especially careful to avoid punishing students. This custom is apparently the source for Rav Kook’s dictum for the month of Tammuz:

“Our generation is an amazing, wondrous phenomenon. It is difficult to find a similar instance in all of our history – a generation composed of contradictions, a mixture of light and darkness. It is precisely the nation’s greatness that has brought about its spiritual decline. This generation finds that all it hears and sees from parents and teachers is beneath it. The morals [of the previous generation] fail to capture their hearts and quench their thirst. They fail to instill fear and trepidation. This generation has already risen beyond the stage when one runs away due to fear, real or imagined, physical or spiritual.

Great persecutions and upheavals have made them tough and intrepid. Fear and threats cannot move them. They will only rise and follow a path of life that is lofty and enlightened. Even if they wanted to, they cannot be bowed and bent, saddled with burdens and yokes... They cannot be motivated to return [to traditional Judaism] through fear. But they are very much capable of returning through love – a love bound to lofty awe... A great-spirited generation seeks and must seek, in every direction that it turns, great ideals.

This is not a generation of pettiness, but one of greatness and high ideals. The only way to reach out to such a generation is through spiritual greatness.”

Path of Pleasantness

A careful analysis of the wording in Rav Kook’s adage reveals an additional insight. The phrase “beating rod” does not appear in the legal code of the Shulchan Aruch. Rather, this phrase comes from a Talmudic statement in Sanhedrin 24a, where the Sages contrasted the Torah scholars of the Land of Israel with those living in Babylon.

The Babylonian scholars were sharp and caustic in their legal debates. Their method of Torah study was often like a “beating rod” – sharp and unpleasant. The scholars of Eretz Yisrael, on the other hand, would gently correct one another. Their gracious method of study was characterized as one of noam, pleasantness and mutual respect.

In short, a successful educational approach for this unique era of redemption must embrace two qualities:

It must contain a spiritual greatness that will inspire an idealistic generation.

It must follow the pleasant path of the gentle scholars of Eretz Yisrael, who have no need to resort to the harsh and strident methods of their colleagues in the Exile.

Adapted from Moadei HaRe’iyah.

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