

The Mastery of Submission

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman, in his inaugural address as the new president of Yeshiva University, placed “Toras Emes” — the Torah of Truth — as the unparalleled pillar of the Yeshiva University enterprise. I am honored to be asked to describe this principle as part of our celebration of the appointment of President Berman, and the chapter of Jewish leadership and scholarship that will be his. I humbly do so with my deepest prayers that Hashem continues to bless our new president with strength, wisdom, good counsel and good health as he steers us forward l’hagdil Torah ul’ha’adirah, to grow Torah and glorify it.

I can best describe the educational philosophy inherent in the phrase “Toras Emes” by sharing two vignettes of the Rav zt”l. Both are vivid in my mind and continually orient me.

The first one repeated itself many a time. The Rav would fall silent during



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a shiur, in the middle of developing an idea. My fellow talmidim and I remember it well. Sometimes the silence lasted but a few moments as he simply searched for the most accurate phrase, the most rigorous presentation. Sometimes it seemed well over 10 minutes, hard as it is to imagine so many years later. Often the silence was interrupted with what would become the first *nusach*, the initial iteration of his idea, only to be refined with greater precision following further moments of reflection. Sometimes it was a question that gave him pause. Most often, he soundlessly deliberated in order to weave together, with absolute consistency, the many texts on his

mind, for which he had inestimable reverence. There was to be no daylight between the responsibilities of the posek, who had to arrive at an actionable halachic conclusion and the teacher who had to present Torah with accuracy and excitement.

The clock was never of consequence. That was the same clock that may well explain the readiness of the young students to gloss over the Rav’s concern, but that readiness carried no weight.

It was during those silences, offered with no apology, that I learned to appreciate the *yiras Shamayim* (fear of Heaven) that demands rigor and

The Five Torot of Yeshiva University

TORAT EMET

TORAT CHAIM

TORAT ADAM

TORAT CHESED

TORAT TZION

integrity in understanding Torah, its texts, laws and precepts. Those moments of undisturbed reflection became the “Rashi,” the commentary, to the way we begin our days, “*reishis chochma yiras Hashem*” — the beginning of wisdom is the fear of Heaven (Tehillim 111:10).

At first glance, we may find this experience inconsistent with another vignette frozen in my mind, as it was the first time I merited to hear the Rav. It was 1975, and the RCA membership convened on our campus to hear the Rav reflect:

“... the study of Torah is an act of surrender. That is why Chazal stress so many times the importance of humility, and that the proud person can never be a great scholar, only the humble person. Why is humility necessary? Because the study of Torah means meeting the Almighty, and if a finite being meets the infinite, the Almighty, the Maker of the world, of course this meeting must precipitate a mood of humility, and humility results in surrender. What do we surrender to the Almighty? We surrender two things: first, we surrender to the Almighty the everyday logic, or what I call mercantile logic the logic of the businessman or the utilitarian person, and we embrace another logic — the logic *m'Sinai*. Second, we surrender the everyday will, which is very utilitarian and superficial, and we embrace another will — the will *m'Sinai*.”¹

The obvious deliberateness with which the Rav chose the word “surrender” portrayed submission, with the attendant rejection of attractive and meaningful intellectual alternatives. To be charged by the author of *The Lonely Man of Faith*, who conceived of “majestic man,” to surrender all of that divinely gifted majesty, became an enduring lesson in *yiras Shamayim* and the immutable truths of Torah.

Throughout the years, we would watch the Rav bring his powerful intellect to the fore to elaborate with unmatched clarity and from that elevated peak, humbly surrender to the requirements of halacha and mesorah. On the one hand, we are enjoined to use the keenest powers of human intellect to uncover G-d's truths. On the other hand, we are expected to submit that same intellect to truths revealed. Indeed, it is that ultimate acquiescence that validates and animates our tireless pursuit to comprehend the will of Hashem, in all its depth and complexity.

Thus, the Rav explained, the importance of the Rambam's statement:

מקדימין לקרות פרשת שמע מפני שיש בה יחוד השם ואהבתו ותלמודו שהוא העיקר הגדול שהכל תלוי בו.

The section containing Sh'ma Yisrael is read first because it contains the uniqueness of G-d, love for Him and study of His Torah, which is the main principle that everything is dependent on.
Rambam, Hilchos Kerias Sh'ma 1:2

Why does the Rambam include the study of Torah as part of the mitzvah of *kerias Sh'ma*? The Rav explained that sparing no effort in the pursuit of an accurate interpretation is an act of *kabbalas ol malchus Shamayim* — acceptance of the yoke of Heaven. To do so knowing that we will embrace the truths of Torah, irrespective of the discomfort or sacrifice or counter-cultural position that they may impose, is an expression of the “*ol*,” the yoke of *kabbalas ol malchus Shamayim*.

The concept of *Toras Emes* appears in the berachos that are recited during *Kerias HaTorah*, but after, not before reading that parsha of the Torah. Why is that? The public reading of the Torah was never the opportunity

to engage in the rigor of Torah study. Therefore, it is not introduced with *la'asok b'divrei Torah*, to toil in the words of Torah, but rather with our grateful recognition of the singular chosenness expressed through *matan Torah*. Nevertheless, as we step away from the public presentation of a parsha, we recognize that we embrace that parsha without compromise or apology, and hence recite *v'nasan lanu Toras emes*, He gave us a Torah of Truth.

The mindful pursuit of *Toras Emes* that lies ahead is as vital as it is daunting. All indications are that the minds of the future will be shaped or conditioned by a culture that has little patience for true curiosity or for the rigors of painstaking deliberation. All indications are that the hearts of the future will judge only by the unanchored standards of their prevailing culture. The *bais hamedrash* of *Toras Emes* will challenge all of that and continue to nurture the robust *tzelem Elokim*, image of G-d, with all of its magnificent discussion, noisy debate and silent reflection. The *bais hamedrash* of *Toras Emes* will test many millennials as it demands to be the center around which all else will be valued without apology or concession.

It may well be that the excitement of inquiry and the utter joy of discovery will only be found in that *bais hamedrash*. It is certainly the only address for experiences, which genuinely resonate with the Jewish soul.

Endnotes

1 Editor's note: Transcript of the speech is available at: <http://arikahn.blogspot.com/2013/03/rabbi-soloveitchik-talmud-torah-and.html>.