



Volume 4. Issue 47

Becoming a Better Student

The *Mishnah* (5:12) lists four types of students:

- (a) quick to learn but quick to forget;
- (b) slow to learn but slow to forget;
- (c) quick to learn and slow to forget; and
- (d) slow to learn and quick to forget.

Buried in this *Mishnah* are important ideas about learning. We can also extract tips on how to become a better student.

Even the “weakest” student, the one who has difficulty learning and is also quick to forget, is still called a *Talmid*. This teaches us that even if someone does not have a natural ability to learn, as long as they make a sincere effort to toil in *Torah* they are still included in the same category as the best and brightest; they are still considered a *Talmid*. We learn from this the importance of effort, over which we have control (in contrast to natural ability).

The *Mishnah* states that for a student from category (a), the gain is offset by the loss and for a student from category (b) the loss is offset by the gain. This means, according to *Meam Loez*, that if there are two students, one from category (a) and one from category (b), the student in category (b) takes precedence. If there is only enough money to support one student, preference is given to the one who is slow to learn but slow to forget. Since that student has a good memory, they retain what they learn. The student in category (a) catches on quickly but then soon forgets what they learnt. The student in category (b) has to toil harder to grasp concepts. Again, we see the importance of effort.

The *Maharal* on this *Mishnah* states that the relationship is actually causative. The student in category (a) forgets the lesson quickly **because** they grasped it quickly. If one tries to digest the information too quickly then one’s understanding may be too shallow. On the other hand, a student who takes a long time to grasp the lesson needs to expend a lot of effort and needs to think slowly and systematically. Such a student has revised the material repeatedly and they may end up with a better understanding and therefore a greater chance of remembering.

There is a lesson for the scholar too. Even the best category of student is described as “slow to forget”. They may have an excellent memory, but they are still human and eventually do forget. We were introduced to *Rabbi Eleazar ben Arach* in chapter two of *Pirkei Avot*. The *Mishnah*

testifies that in some respects he was the greatest scholar of his generation. Yet he moved to a town that was not a place of *Torah* and after a while forgot his learning (*Shabbat* 147b). His former colleagues had to pray for him in order for his learning to be restored. This teaches us that even the best and brightest student has to constantly do *chazarah*.

Many of the *Mishnayot* in *Pirkei Avot* teach us the correct way to behave; what behaviour should be emulated and what behaviour should be avoided. However our *Mishnah* does not instruct us regarding good and bad *midot*. This is because we are born with natural intellectual capacities that are out of our control. They are a gift from *Hashem*.¹

Nevertheless, there are techniques that we can use to help us reach our potential. The *Chatam Sofer*, like many *Gedolei Yisrael*, was renowned for an amazing memory. When complimented on his memory, he would humbly state that *Torah* knowledge was so important to him and was acquired with so much effort that it was easier for him to remember. Perhaps the *Chatam Sofer* was touching on the notion that to improve one’s memory one needs to engage their emotions when studying. For example, if a person has an intensely emotional or horrific experience they will often remember the experience in great detail many years later. This is not because they have a photographic memory. It is because the experience had an enormous emotional impact on them and is personally important to them. When we learn *Torah*, if we keep in mind that we are learning the wisdom of *Hashem* and if we learn with tremendous *Yirat Hashem* or *Ahavat Hashem*, then we may find it easier to remember what we learn.

There is a *Midrash* which states that when *Moshe* was on *Har Sinai* he toiled but could not grasp the more complex parts of *Torah*. Eventually, as a reward for his efforts, *Hashem* granted him the wisdom as a gift. *Moshe* put in the effort but in the end his wisdom came from *Hashem*. We have picked up some lessons in how to become a better student. The most important factor in reaching our potential is *Hishtadlut* - we need to put in the effort. However if we want to break through our natural limitations and exceed our potential, *Chazal* recommend that we pray for divine assistance from the source of all wisdom. As it says in *Mishlei* 2:6, “*Hashem* grants wisdom; from His mouth comes knowledge and understanding”. *Hashem* Himself grants wisdom to those whom he loves (*Niddah* 70b).

Allon Ledder

¹ As an aside, we can learn from this that people who are endowed with intelligence should not feel proud, rather blessed and grateful.

Revision Questions

אבות ה': י"א-כ"ג

- Considering the four traits of man, what is considered that trait of: (ה': י"א)
 - An average person?
 - An *am ha'aretz*?
 - A *Chasid*?
 - A *Rasha*?
- Which of the above traits do some consider the trait of a person from *Sdom*? (ה': י"ב)
- What are the four different character traits regarding anger and appeasement and the *Tana's* assessment of each? (ה': י"ג)
- What are assessed in the same manner as the previous question? (ה': י"ד)
- What are the four types of people that:
 - Give *tz'daka*? (ה': י"ה)
 - "Go" to the *Beit Midrash*? (ה': י"ו)
- Describe the meaning of these types of people that sit before *Chachamim*: (ה': ט"ז)
 - *Sofeg*?
 - *Mashpech*?
 - *Mashmeret*?
 - *Nafah*?
- What is the definition of "eternal love" and what case is brought as an example? (ה': ט"ח)
- What is the difference between a debate that is and is not for the sake of Heaven and what examples are brought for each? (ה': ט"ט)
- What is the promise of one that guides the masses on the straight and narrow and who is brought as an example? (ה': כ')
- What is the promise of one that causes the masses to sin and who is brought as an example? (ה': כ"א)
- What three attributes characterises: (ה': כ"ב)
 - A student of *Aharon*?
 - A student of *Bilam*?
- Complete the following statement of *Yehuda ben Teima*: (ה': כ"ג)

"הוי עז _____ קל _____
 ורץ _____ וגיבור _____
 לעשות רצון אביך שבשמים"
- According to *Yehuda ben Teima* a person with which character trait is "to *Gehinom*"? Is "to *Gan Eden*"? (ה': כ"ד)
- What is expected at, or characterises the following ages: 5, 10, 13, 15, 18, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100? (ה': כ"ה)
- Complete the statement of *ben Bag Bag*: (ה': כ"ו)

"הפך בה והפך בה _____,
 ובה _____, ומהנה לא _____
 שאין לך מדה טובה הימנה"
- Who stated the following: "לפום צרה אגרא"? (ה': כ"ז)

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 10 minutes before mincha
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Next Week's Mishnayot...

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	שבת קודש
13 th April ח' ניסן	14 th April ט' ניסן	15 th April י' ניסן	16 th April יא' ניסן	17 th April י"ב ניסן	18 th April י"ג ניסן	19 th April י"ד ניסן
Avot 6:1-2	Avot 6:3-4	Avot 6:5-6	Avot 6:7-8	Avot 6:9-10	Avot 6:11 – Horayot 1:1	Horayot 1:2-3

