Rav Aharon Lichtenstein’s zt”l Educational Philosophy
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When I was a child My calendar was built in such a way that between Purim and Pesach was The Yeshiva Dinner. And why was it important that my father go to the dinner? Because he bought us new clothes for the Seder. Over the years and with the maturity that came with them, I learned to understand and appreciate the important place that the Yeshiva community in the United States, its alumni and supporters, had in My father's life and energies. It is, therefore, a painful honor for me to participate in this year's dinner.

I was asked to talk about the guiding principles of my father's educational outlook. I will consider principles that apply to all who are involved in education be they parents or teachers. I will not evaluate his educational approach based on "results," nor do I presume to present an objective view. I assume that different people experienced him differently, and perhaps they were really treated differently. On what will I base my presentation? On personal experience, on oral discussions with my father about educating students and children, and on his public statements at various events and in relation to various educational issues.

I would like to preface my remarks by noting that My father commented at various occasions that not every area of life is addressed by Halakha. The Halakha has left exceedingly significant areas wide "open." In discussing the relationship between the mitzva of fearing one's parents and the mitzva of respecting them, he wrote:

To the best of my knowledge, there is no place where we can find a halakhic ruling... regarding the question whether a father should be, in the words of Oliver Wendell Holmes, "the autocrat at the breakfast table," or perhaps -- if he prefers -- he can and even must adopt the approach of a close adult friend who laughs with his children while they make fun of him. (From: "Ha-Rabbanut-Etgar" – "Memshal Kehilati Ezrachi ve-Rabbani: Sekira Kelalit").

In an article on children's education, he says something similar and adds:

These things are not in textbooks; you will not find instructions about what kind of mixture to have between the assertion of authority, on the one hand, and warmth and love, on the other. People often presume that Halakha has the answer to everything. Press the right key, push the right button, open up to the right page, look it up, and it is there. And if it is not there, it is only because we have not gotten around to it yet; you have the misfortune of being born twenty years before somebody will write the answer.
to your question. But if you wait twenty years, the answer will be there. This attitude is absolutely incorrect!

This is the framework of our discussion which is not meant as a "halakhic ruling," but rather, as the delineation of a path and direction that each person must adapt for use in his personal life.

The Source of Authority and Obligation

What is the source of the parent's or teacher's authority to educate? In the Rambam, the obligation to teach one's children, grandchildren and others as well, precedes the obligation to learn as you can see at source no. 1.

My father dedicated his life to the fulfillment of this halakha. He understood his parental role not only as concern for our psychological and physiological welfare, but also for our spiritual Torah well-being. He never thought that it was the task of the institutions in which we studied or the society in which we lived to "raise" or "educate" us, although he was aware of the power that they have. He spared no effort or time learning with us – with each one of us individually. However, along with his parental duty, he also considered himself obligated to teach all his students, even though they were not his children. For him, a Rosh Yeshiva was first and foremost a person who teaches Torah rather than one involved in public activity, community work or personal guidance.

I think that My father viewed this obligation to teach one's children and students as unique among the מצוות תרי, in that it is not only a fulfillment of God's command, but also an opportunity and possibility given to man to be a real "partner" of God in Creation. It involves the molding of a person, be it he or she, son, daughter, or student. Therefore, there is nothing greater or more important than education.

In this context I have included as Source 2 and 3 some of My father's statements related to this issue from the perspective of both parents and teachers.

This perception of the parent as God's partner and representative when he teaches his children Torah has many ramifications:

- The level of the teacher's commitment to the task in relation to other commitments.
• The amount of energy to be invested in this in light of the fact that it is not a personal choice, but part of a moral-religious obligation.
• The need to focus upon and delineate the goal carefully. What are the objectives I would like to achieve?
• The level of risk that I can accept upon myself. Which objectives become secondary if I decide that there is risk in pursuing them?

In light of his deep sense of privilege and commitment since he viewed himself as God’s partner, we can point to a basic approach that I think characterized My father’s educational path, both at home and at the Yeshiva, and demonstrates certain general traits of his personality.

I would like to read something My father wrote in relation to the performance of גמילות חסדים, which I think was at the core of his approach to education as well.

First and foremost, גמילות חסדים must be infused with a deep feeling of כבוד הבריות. To respect each person by virtue of his being a human being. To understand the full significance of creation in אצלם - לוקים and to relate to it with all the reverence and caution arising from the concept. At the root of it, the feeling of "כבוד הבריות" demands that a person relate to his fellow as God Himself.

My father's educational starting point was profound respect for the person, for the student standing before him, no matter what his age. The demands you make upon the student or child attest to deep respect for the other, for the image of God in him. Abba believed in students. He saw in them the image of God from whom he must demand the maximum.

How does this respect find expression?

• **Honesty** – "exposing" all the "truth." My father was very intolerant of teachers whom he felt "hid" information from their students in order "to protect" them from complexity. For example, certain circles among Religious Zionists in Israel did not want to each the fact that the Rambam does not count settling the Land of Israel as a mitzva, for fear that settling the Land would become less important for their students. My father viewed this as a lack of intellectual honesty, and as a belittlement of the student. He considered this approach poor tactics (surely the student will discover this on his own), and as a misguided strategy (the student was created in the image of God and he can deal with
it). If this was true of what he thought of teachers, he certainly felt that parents needed to be honest and forthright.

- **Presenting problems and a complex world** – In the **שמיטה** of **תשע”ג** he wrote an article that is more relevant than ever, in which he bemoans that the **שמיטה** is a halakhic tragedy, owing to the gap between the world of values underlying it and the ability to fulfill it in a modern economy. Such a statement by a Rosh Yeshiva reflects exceptional honesty that enables students to identify and live with dissonance, without casting all aside. He taught them to understand that even the world of Halakha has its questions and difficulties that should not and need not be swept under the rug.

- **Taking students “seriously”** – My father took his students seriously. He started each **’Tלמידים** with an introductory class on the **מסכת** that was to be studied, in which he presented the different **ראשונים** on the **מסכת**, with the existing editions. He finished the **’Tלמידים** asking the **תלמידים**: What do they want to study next **’למידות**, while explaining the differences between the various options.

- **Offering tools** – A systematic attempt to provide students with the tools to learn, rather than delivering “brilliant” lectures was central to his educational method. My father saw his role as a teacher who is interested in providing his students with the ability to learn on their own. This was reflected in his systematic way of teaching, and certainly in his classes on methodology.

- **The desire to “interest” and challenge students.** Central to my father’s educational philosophy was the assumption that what motivates a student to study is not that the material is easy, but rather that it is interesting. The decision not to accept short cuts in order to receive a higher rating from students was central to his approach. He believed in the student. A person receives his reward from interest, from meaning, and it is for that that one must strive all the time, rather than for the easy or the more pleasant. In short, my father had trust in his students, in their motivation and in their capabilities.

These ideas come across in Sources 5 and 6 where he discusses teaching Gemara in high school and an alternative curriculum for **Torah She-be-al Peh**.

This respect leads to my father’s first and foremost demand of a child or student to be aware of himself. In the sense of what the Rambam, writes in **Shemoneh Perakim**:

..”**sheirah he’amod shokel peulotav temid.**”..”

"That a person should weigh his actions at all times." And he expounds the verse:
To him that orders (ve-sam) his way will I show the salvation of God – read not ve-sam, but rather ve-sham; whoever appraises his ways in this world merits seeing the salvation of the Hebrah.

My father wrote in his article Le-Darkho shel Ben Torah:

First and foremost, what is required is awareness. Awareness of needs, of goals and of objectives... The objective is to develop the personality, and not to be a nut that floats on the water. A nut floats, a person must learn to swim. Anyone who enters a Yeshiva must clearly understand: A Yeshiva is not a place for nuts, or for cheftza's – objects. What is needed here are gavra's – people! People who are prepared to build and to act, First and foremost – to act on their own. This, of course, requires a personality, spiritual effort in all areas, quantitative and qualitative. (Alon Shevut 3, p. 120)

The Goals of Education

I have explained that a parent and a teacher are essentially God’s partners in the Creation. They must approach the task with respect for and trust in the child/student, and with challenging him or her to live up to his or her potential as expressed in the צלם-לוקים in them. But there is another, very significant derivative from this partnership with God, namely, the fact that one dare not fail. My father clarified that the goal that must be achieved is שמים-יראת. In the words of the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot, a person’s yir’at shamayim and deeds must exceed his wisdom. In various places, he emphasizes that the goal of all Torah instruction, and his goal as an educator, is his students' yir'at shamayim. Focusing on this goal affects the entire enterprise.

My father is absolutely clear. Our goal as parents and teachers is to be God's partners in the building of His spiritual world. And as such, we must sharpen the goal for ourselves, and build all of our tactics around it. This goal generates the dialectical tension between the desire to aim high, to strive high based on that same trust in people that was already mentioned, and the fear of aiming too high and losing the child or the student. My father testified about himself that in his own education, his parents and Rebbeim aimed "high" and succeeded, but there are no guarantees. And the prospect is not worth the risk. My father himself related to this tension in a lecture that he gave on the educational philosophy of my grandfather, the Rav, ztz"l. In Source 6 he describes the value and price of rigor in education.
In the same lecture, My father goes on to describe as shown in Source 7 the rigor upon which he was raised in the Rav's Beit Midrash. He describes situations in which, according to him, he came out "bruised and battered." However, his desire for Torah knowledge overcame the insult. He deeply identifies (and speaks about himself) with the setting of standards, but he is not prepared to take the risk.

Relating to bringing up children My father writes:

Parents must ask themselves to what extent they want to “swing for the fences”....I saw other contexts where a steep price had been paid for swinging for the fences, and I said that a double is also enough. But it is a personalized, individual decision.

He goes in and relates to the educators' dilemma:

A teacher in the classroom must also decide: He can be tough and get results, but at what cost? The student may know the material well, but he will not develop a love towards it – and in the same way, he will not develop a love towards you as a teacher, and not towards God whom you represent. Alternatively, you can be a gentle and pleasant teacher: The student may love you, but he might not know very much. As an educator, I always felt this tension, and I never know whether the mix that I create is correct or not... When I headed the Kollel at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary in the 1960’s, Vince Lombardi managed the Green Bay Packers football team. The results that Lombardi achieved were unprecedented, absolutely astonishing! But the players hated him. Perhaps, if you are hated as a football manager that is one thing. But if you are hated as a parent, that is something else; and if you are hated as a teacher, that is something else entirely.

This caution was particularly suited for My father and the way he thought and lived his life. Abba thought that a person must conduct himself with wisdom. Every action should be examined in accordance with long-term gain rather than short-term profit, especially when educating children. A parent must respond not only from his feelings, but with thought. The parents must be careful to adjust educational methods to the values that they wish to instill in the child, the particular child, and the generation in which the child lives.

In that same lecture on the educational philosophy of the Rav, zt''l, my father cites Rashi's comment about why Yaakov rebuked Re'uven only near his death, "כד שאל נוהן, "אחי בעשיו ותדבק ותלך" so that you not leave me, and go and cleave to Esav my brother." Abba testified about the Rav that he suffered insults and rigor from his father, but he remained strong, and I can testify about Abba that he too was treated with strictness by his rabbeim, and
he remained strong. But he had doubts about the strength of the students arriving today to learn Torah.

Abba deeply identified with the desire to set very high standards. Indeed, there is truth, and this truth is bigger than we are. However, because of this, we are like messengers who received precious cargo that must move forward, and in no way may we allow it to fall and become damaged. And therefore we must avoid taking risks, and not be overly harsh.

These words related to the world from which Abba came. There the standards were clear, and the novelty in his position was the love and acceptance that he deemed necessary in order not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. However, in our world, I think that the voice that must also be heard is the voice of truth that the teacher and the parent must pass down to the child. We are God's messengers, and as such we cannot only give in, only embrace, only accommodate, but we must also make demands.

A parent or teacher, who is God's representative in this world, must make this mission a top priority. Parenting is a combination of justice and mercy, *chesed* and *gevura*. Because of our trust in the child and our love, we must make demands upon him or her; and because of this very love we must not fail. Out of respect for the child, we must adjust the goals to his capabilities and his inner world.

My father talked a lot about the need for ד瑁יאו אידערתא in raising children and in education in general. He especially liked to quote Mr Cohen from Cardiff Wales who said that in order to raise children you need ""שכל and ""ד瑁יאו אידערתא", but in order for you to have ""שכל, you also need"" ד瑁יאו אידערתא."
Source 1:

A father is obligated to teach his son Torah while he is a minor, as it is stated (Devarim 11:19): "And you shall teach them to your sons to speak about them." Just as a person is obligated to teach his son, so, too, is he obligated to teach his grandson, as it is stated (Devarim 4:9): … [Furthermore, this charge is not confined] to one's children and grandchildren alone. Rather, it is a mitzva for each and every wise man to teach all students, even though they are not his children, as it is stated (Devarim 6:7): …..." The oral tradition explains: "Your sons," these are your students, for students are also called sons. (Hilkhot Talmud Torah 1:2)

Source 2

In relation to parents: A parent is not just a playmate, an older sibling. The parent represents values, represents the world of Judaism; a parent is to the young child, and subsequently to the adolescent child, God’s plenipotentiary. He represents the Ribono shel Olam in his home! Parents represent moral, spiritual, and religious values. As such, to some extent, one must speak with a voice of authority. (On raising children).

Source 3

In relation to teachers: Caring stems from a religious reason. Responsibility and caring not only for the content that I wish to teach, but also responsibility towards the Almighty. One who teaches Torah, meriting thereby learning, keeping and teaching Torah, sees himself among other things as a trustee, a guardian and a keeper of the Torah. Whether as a paid bailee, or an unpaid bailee, sometimes a hirer, and sometimes a borrower. (Ha-Kapdan ke-Melamed)

Source 4

Any effort to market the study of Gemara with another wrapping, runs the risk of misinterpreting the words of the Torah. Gemara is not mental excitement. I do not know whether Ravina and Rav Ashi were capable of editing a collection of curiosities; but it is clear they did not want to do that. Moreover, the effort is also doomed to failure. Anyone looking for intellectual entertainment will find more amusing sources. At the same time, one should not get carried away with inserting historical material, reality notes, etc., into the study… Anyone who does not relate to Bava Kama out
of interest in the four primary categories of damages, will not be interested in it as a source for the history of Babylonian Jewry. (*Hora’at Gemara bi-Yeshivot Tikhoniyot*)

**Source 5**

It is not my intention to ease the burden of the students. On the contrary, it is important that there be a burden, that they should work hard, that they should toil, but a slightly different menu is necessary. (*Mevakshei Panekha*, p. 252)

**Source 6**

He looks for precision. And if the standards that he adopted for himself and he wishes to impart to his students and instill in their minds, are not achieved by them, he suffers pain and distress. Almost physically. Anyone who maintains high standards is liable to suffer this pain, in any area, when the results do not meet expectations. It is disturbing. A person with a musical sense, a connoisseur, might get angry if he hears a single note out of place. And this is not because the phenomenon itself is terrible. It is the very deviation from the standard that is so disturbing. A picture that does not hang straight on the wall annoys him. What upsets him? Are we dealing here with geometry? But nevertheless it is disturbing, annoying. The same is true in areas that are not intellectual, but where the attempt is made to convey an orderly system of education and discipline. So in the field of music, and so in the game of football. Failure to comply with strong and firm discipline, with high and demanding standards, is disturbing, and leads to strictness on the part of one who is not ready to give up on them. There are criteria; there is knowledge. There is a wonderfully constructed world that he wishes to bequeath to the next generation. If he fails to do, he feels that something has gone wrong. The heritage that he wishes to teach, to bequeath to his students, is impaired, and this hurts him. (*Ha-Kapdan ki-Melamed. Alon Shevut Bogrim* 21, p. 77)

**Source 7**

We, as educators, must see reality with open eyes and a realistic perspective. We need to know and learn what is needed, and how to make demands, with the aim of not lowering standards or criteria, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, constantly making sure that the benefits of this rigor, regarding the demands we make upon our students, not be outweighed by the losses. At times we must slightly soften and tone down our ambitions, with the emphasis being placed on raising existential awareness, perhaps even at the expense of scholastic ambition. The value of rigor and setting standards is great, but the value of loving the Torah and *yir’at shamayim* is even greater. (*Ha-Kapdan ki-Melamed*)