



RUDERMAN SYNAGOGUE INCLUSION PROJECT



TRAIN A YOUTH ACCORDING TO HIS OWN WAY: DIFFERENT LEARNING STYLES

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I. The goals of this text study

- A. Establish the supreme importance that Judaism places on Jewish learning being available to all Jews.
- B. Establish that, even in Talmudic times, this included students with learning disabilities.
- C. Establish that the accommodations for these students had the same level of priority as the teaching itself.

II. The primacy of education in the rabbinic tradition

- A. *“Anyone who deprives a student of being taught Torah is as if he robs him of his father’s legacy.”*
Bavli Sanhedrin 91b
- B. Unpacking the source
 1. Let’s understand this in its proper historical context. In today’s world, a legacy is often something that is nice to have, like a treasured gift that is left to us by our parents or grandparents. But in the ancient world, wealth was scarce, and families prospered only by accumulating it over generations. So depriving someone of their legacy would likely mean that they were facing a life of destitution.
 2. In most cultures, therefore, “legacy” refers to money, property, or title.
 3. In the Jewish tradition, however, learning Torah is seen as so important that it, not wealth, is the thing that sustains us and is passed down from generation to generation.
- C. Questions
 1. Do we see any exceptions to this statement in the text?
 2. Is there any reason to believe that this would not apply to people with disabilities?



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III. The obligation of the student with a disability to pursue their education

A. Let's now consider this quotation from Maimonides:

“A student should not say — I have understood when s/he has not understood. Rather, s/he should ask again, even several times. And, if the teacher gets angry and abuses the student verbally, she or he should say to the teacher, — Teacher, this is Torah, and I must learn it, even if my capacity is inadequate.” Mishne Torah, Hilkhos Talmud Torah, 4:4

B. Unpacking the source

1. Maimonides (the Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, or the Rambam) was a medieval rabbi, and he is still considered to be one of our greatest scholars.
2. At its most basic level, this source acknowledges that it's important for a student to continue to seek learning until the student feels that he or she understands.
3. More interesting, perhaps, is the idea that, even if the difficulty in understanding is because of a perceived difficulty that the student has in learning the information, the student is to disclose their difficulty and keep on going.

C. Questions

1. What do we think of the idea of an empowered learner who is open about the difficulty that they have in learning?
2. What do we think about the idea of the student holding the teacher to task if the teacher does not take sufficient patience and rigor in the instruction?

IV. The obligation of our teachers of Torah to teach people learn differently

A. *“Train a youth in his own way. He will not swerve from it even in old age.”* Proverbs 22:6

B. Unpacking the source

1. While this quote gives us the title of this session and is the most commonly quoted text about learning disabilities or different learning styles, it's important to note that there is no actual mention of disability in the quote.

¹ With grateful acknowledgment to Bonnie L. Gracer, MA, MSW, whose article, “What the Rabbis Heard: Deafness in the Mishnah”, published in the spring 2003 volume of Disability Studies Quarterly, was invaluable in the identification of these sources. The article can be found at <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/423/593>, and is available there free of charge as of June 27, 2017.



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2. That said, the ancient Jewish tradition of d'var Acher recognizes that the same text can have multiple interpretations and that each one of these interpretations is correct. For the purposes of this text study, let's assume that this quote is about different learning styles.

C. Questions

1. Do we agree that teaching someone in the particular style that they can learn best is more likely to create a lasting impression?
2. Does it also imply that the training is more useful, i.e., will provide better guidance, when it is delivered properly?
3. Given that we previously learned that such learning is the legacy of every Jewish person, what do we think about the idea that teaching people in the way that they can learn maximizes their legacy?

D. Here's another text to consider:

“Rabbi Preida had a student to whom he had to repeat each lesson four hundred times before he understood it. One day, R. Preida was required to leave and attend a certain matter involving a mitzvah. Before leaving, he taught the student as usual four hundred times but he still did not grasp the concept. R. Preida asked him, ‘why is today different?’ He answered him, ‘From the very moment that they told my master that there is a mitzvah matter that he must attend to, my attention was diverted, because every moment I thought that now the master will get up and leave, now the master will get up and leave.’ R. Preida said to him, ‘Pay attention, and I will teach you.’ He taught him another four hundred times.” Bavli Eruvin 54b

E. Unpacking the source

1. Setting the stage, we clearly are asked to consider a student with a different learning style than many other people and who requires each lesson to be repeated 400 times.
2. On this particular day, his teacher had to “attend to a certain matter involving a mitzvah.” This is code to tell us that the teacher had to do something very important that was probably time sensitive.
3. Still, the teacher taught the student the requisite 400 times.



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4. The student failed to grasp the lesson, and he explained that this was because of his justifiable anxiety that the rabbi, whom he knew to be in a hurry, might leave before the full 400 repetitions. I think we've all seen situations where anxiety has made a student less than fully attentive.
5. So the rabbi, whom we already know was in a hurry, taught the student another 400 times before attending to the other matter, even though (as the Talmud had told us in code) it was a matter of supreme importance.

F. Questions

1. Does anyone disagree that this appears to be a matter of accommodation for some kind of a learning difference? If you do, what else do you think is going on?
2. In telling us that the rabbi was willing to put an important, time-sensitive matter on hold for the 800 repetitions that his student required, what does the story tell us about the importance of accommodating different learning styles, so that no one is denied have their legacy?
3. We often think of modern education strategies and accommodation, especially around people who learn differently, as a recent innovation. Given that this story comes to us in a document produced in the early or mid-centuries of the Common Era, what can we infer about the place of accommodation for different learning styles in the Jewish tradition?