

## introduction and questions

**AS IN ANY POPULATION**, there are some students within the Torah community who excel academically, while others tend to be particularly challenged. Most, however, fall somewhere among the many levels within the broader spectrum of academic abilities and interests. This issue of *Klal Perspectives* invites leading *mechanchim* of teenage boys to consider whether the current approach is meeting the academic, religious and social needs of the vast majority of teenage boys who find themselves at neither end of the spectrum, and to either suggest changes that can be implemented within the current system or propose a new approach that could earn the support of Torah leadership.

**Torah study is the bedrock** of authentic Judaism. Its prominence pervades the life of many Orthodox families, and engagement in serious Torah learning provides both access to the deeper meaning and purpose of Torah Judaism, as well as the religious engagement and focus necessary to resist the onslaught of non-Torah influences. The Torah community's education of its children is, thus, expectedly and necessarily focused on imbuing our youth with an eagerness to master Torah study, as well as providing the skills and knowledge base necessary for a life of involvement in Torah study and observance. It is, therefore, also not surprising that we create for our sons a teenage experience focused significantly on Torah study.

To some degree, the contemporary approach to Torah education for most American teenagers, and particularly for high school boys, appears to

have become overly uniform. While the many yeshiva high schools clearly differ in certain respects, the distinctions among them are often minimal, particularly within the same religious/cultural segment of the community. Curricula tend to be relatively similar, with limited variation in the degree of emphasis on non-academic dimensions of Yiddishkeit, or in the approach to extra-curricular activities. While this system is extremely effective in many regards, some have suggested that there are numerous gaps and improvements that are begging for consideration. Most frequently noted is the need to break out of the "one size fits all" approach.

The urgent need for an honest and objective review of the boys' high school system is further compelled by the sense that the current system does not fully reflect the preferences of the community's Torah leadership. In fact, *gedolim* and leading *rabbonim* often lament that the community has failed to seek their guidance sufficiently in formulating the proper approach to educating high school boys. Clearly, the details of educational pedagogy are not, as one might hope, painstakingly crafted and designed by leading *gedolim* and *mechanchim*, but are often influenced by factors such as popular expectations, organizational expediency and fear of change.

**This issue of *Klal Perspectives*** seeks to review the community's current approach to the *chinuch* of teenage boys. We invite our contributors to address the questions below, considering both the realities of existing institutions and the theoretical opportunity to start from scratch and to develop an ideal yeshiva high school – with the ideal family and community support system - that would provide our teenage boys the foundation they need in order to live full and successful lives as *bnai Torah* in today's world.

1. **Curriculum:** The curriculum of boys' yeshiva high schools, particularly those within the right-of-center and right-wing communities, is focused almost exclusively on the study of Gemara. Some yeshivas place more emphasis on *bekius* and on "covering more ground," while others follow a slower pace, focusing on depth of analysis (*iyun*). But other than yeshivas specifically catering to academically challenged students, every yeshiva focuses intensively on Gemara study in some

fashion, to the almost absolute exclusion of other dimensions of Torah study.

This approach to Torah reflects a long tradition, and is a practice that has successfully produced legions of significant Torah scholars of varying degree. But is this almost exclusive focus on Gemara appropriate in an era in which yeshiva is attended by almost all of the community's teenage boys, and not just those who are particularly gifted, or otherwise likely to become Talmudic scholars? What percentage of contemporary teenage boys are intelligent and committed to Torah and *yiras Shomayim*, but do not find enough satisfaction within today's Gemara-only curriculum to keep them constructively engaged throughout their high school years, with obvious implications for after graduation? On the other hand, what might the impact of broadening the curriculum's spectrum be on those *bochrim* for whom it is not necessary?

2. **Identifying Each Student's Strengths and Talents:** The current system places significant value on a relatively narrow range of personal talents and interests. Only those teenagers who happen to enjoy these particular strengths are viewed as belonging to an upper echelon among their peers, or are ever afforded the opportunity to discover within themselves the individual blessings they enjoy.

Would it be appropriate to expand the array of talents that the community values, and to provide affirmative encouragement of the development of a broader range of strengths? If yes, how would that be accomplished? And, would such an introduction pose a threat to the Torah-study value system that has so successfully permeated our community?

3. **Ruchnius:** In a recent article in *Dialogue* ("Observant but not Religious", Fall 5774/ 2013) HaRav Ahron Feldman, *shlita*, of the Moetzes Gedolei Torah of America, addressed the paucity of *ruchnius* in our community. He lamented that "something so indispensable, so utterly central to our existence as Jews continues to go wanting in the lives of many: the emotion of the heart, the forethought of the mind, the commitment of the spirit." Addressing the high school years in particular, he opined that "Without an active nurturing of an appreciate for the inner mitzvos," immersion in the study of Gemara will not alone

create the connection to Hashem that will carry him on to responsible Jewish adulthood.

What do you believe we ought to be doing to sharpen and intensify our students' connection to Hashem? What should be done for them to appreciate *ruchniyus* more, and to find satisfaction with their personal stake in it? Does the community need to be wary of any changes contemplated in this direction, and how can such concerns be allayed?

4. **Free Time:** While certain unique teenage boys can successfully spend most of their day in Torah study and academic pursuits, most teenagers cannot. Even very bright and committed *bochrim* encounter difficulty in spending fourteen or fifteen hours a day in a classroom or *bais hamedrash*. Contemporary society, however, is saturated with distractions and opportunities that are quite harmful to the development of a Ben Torah and, absent appropriate diversions and preoccupations, represent allures to the typical teenager.

How should a yeshiva student be encouraged to spend his time outside the *bais hamedrash*? What are realistic activities that might capture a teenager's attention and interest, and also be appropriate? Is there a downside to suggesting that non-Torah study of any type is an acceptable endeavor, and how can such concerns, if any, be ameliorated?



## **EDUCATING THE EDUCATION CONSUMER**

**WHEN ADDRESSING THE SUBJECT** of challenges and possible improvements to the American *chinuch* system, the first challenge is to identify who should be the appropriate audience. Each constituency will readily suggest another to be in need of instruction. *Mechanchim* tend to find fault in the *bochurim*, and their poor attitudes, aspirations and performance. Parents readily place the weight of responsibility on the *mechanchim*, citing the need for improved educational skills, greater individualized sensitivity and an increased time commitment. *Bochurim*, of course, find both their parents and their rebbeim at fault, rarely connecting any personal shortcomings with personal responsibility. Who, then, should be addressed?

No doubt, every group within the *chinuch* family has room for improvements. But if fundamental, systemic improvements are to be considered, the most appropriate starting point would be the constituency with the greatest control of the system. In our capitalistic society, it is the consumer who is king, and the field of *chinuch* is no exception.

It is the parents who evaluate high school options for their sons and who create the demand for certain types of institutions. The *yeshivos* and their *mechanchim* must vie for *bochurim*, knowing they will not survive if they do not meet with parents' expectations. Thus, they fashion much of

their educational style and substance to attract the greatest number, and the most impressive group, of students. Parents are thus the true consumers of high school *chinuch*. Consequently, by their choices and articulated objectives, it is the parents who are in the strongest position to initiate and influence a process of improvement.

Imposing this responsibility on parents, however, is not a simple matter. In order for this to be effective, parents must recognize, acknowledge and embrace this role and its powerful influence, identify their goals and ascertain what changes would advance the system to such ends. And perhaps the greatest challenge to parents would be the manner by which each would be able to identify which *yeshivos* and *rebbeim* are actually implementing the changes that would influence their choice of schools.

How many parents believe that they have the skill or background to reliably ascertain the true nature of a yeshiva's culture and evaluate its implementation of curricula and emphasis? For one thing, parents are ill-equipped, in both familiarity and time availability, to conduct school inspections – particularly when their choices are from among multiple *yeshivos*. And finally, social pressures cannot be ignored. Parents, naturally and understandably, are inclined to send their children to the yeshiva whose student body most closely reflects their community's aspirations for its children, and will be hard pressed to "buck the system," potentially marking their son as "different."

The goal certainly should not be for the 'P.T.A.' of greater American Orthodoxy to change the system overnight. But if parents become sensitized to important problems and begin to ask the same questions when exploring *yeshivos*, *yeshivos* will begin to take notice, and real and positive change will inevitably be triggered. In fact, there are many *yeshivos* that already wish they could implement sorely needed changes, but are afraid of scaring off potential parents. At a minimum, such institutions would be empowered to implement the changes they already know to be appropriate.

The proper exercise of parental influence requires both a keener appreciation of the proper method of choosing a yeshiva, and clearer understanding of the criteria by which the selection should be made.

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- **There is No “Best School,” Only What is Best for My Child**

Each healthy parent enjoys a wonderful sense of attachment to, and pride in, his or her children. This magical connection is the source of the spectacular commitment of parent to child, and the resulting willingness to give limitlessly of one’s self, sacrificing almost anything to meet a child’s needs and best interests. But this same special connection imposes on parents a profound degree of subjectivity when observing their children.

Parents tend to see their children first as unusually cute, and then unusually talented and then unusually intelligent. To make matters worse, some parents view their own self-worth as dependent on the academic ranking and achievements of their children, only increasing the pressure to push them into a framework that is all-too-often not suitable for them. In any case, they will offer the typical rationales to overcome his record: “He does well when he’s around *shtarke bochurim*” (stronger boys), “I know that he is bright and will rise to the challenge,” “He has, alas, been influenced by the wrong friends,” “If only someone had pushed me when I was his age, I would have become a great *rosh yeshiva*.”

Imagine someone walking into a clothing store and trying on a size 38 suit that he finds too tight. He then tries on a size 40, but it’s still too snug so he moves up to a 42, which seems just right. Being quite the *lamdan*, he observes that as he increases the suit sizes, the fit improves each time. Inevitably, he concludes, a size 44 or 46 will be even more fitting, not to mention a 48 or a 50!

In *chinuch* terms, each child is a different “size” – academically, emotionally, culturally and socially – and should not be pushed past that place. When selecting a yeshiva, a parent should not be not choosing between a “better” or “weaker” school, but rather trying to identify the yeshiva that is best for their particular child. A “stronger” yeshiva may sound more impressive, and reflect elevated academic goals, but that might not necessarily be right even for an apparently intelligent boy. “Stronger” *yeshivos* typically have tighter discipline and greater competitiveness. While helpful for some, these dimensions of a yeshiva may be devastating for others, regardless of how intelligent they may be.

Parents must look beyond the standard measures to determine how good a fit each yeshiva would be for the unique needs of their son.

My brother-in-law, Hagaon Harav Binyomin Carlebach, once heard from R’ Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zt”l, that the mishna stating “זהי נזב לאריות – ואל תהי ראש לשועלים” – that one should rather be a tail of a lion than a head of a fox – does not apply to *chinuch*. In fact, while still attending school, the child who struggles at the bottom of a strong class will tend to achieve far less than the student who views himself as successful, even when in a much weaker class.

I was once privileged to hear this principle reiterated by R’ Yosef Sholom Elyashiv, zt”l. About seventeen years ago, I was in Eretz Yisroel with a group of high school boys who were considering *yeshivos* in Eretz Yisroel, and I took them to greet R’ Elyashiv. The Gabbai introduced us as, “a group of *bochurim* from America looking at *yeshivos* in Eretz Yisroel who want a *brocha* that they should get into the best *yeshivos*.” Rav Elyashiv nodded to the Gabbai but turned to the *bochurim* and said, “IY”H, you should get into the *yeshivos* that are *best for you*.”

A second error parents make is viewing *chinuch* as a single frame photo rather than as a lengthy movie. Comparing two *yeshivos* by considering their respective ninth-grade classes will provide an incomplete and therefore distorted view of what to expect. A yeshiva high school must be evaluated based on how the student body is transformed over the full four-year period. How do the *graduates* look, behave and learn? It would be even more accurate (especially if the high school *talmidim* typically go on to the *mosod’s yeshiva gedolah*) to see what they look like ten years down the road. Frequently, short-term, accelerated success is achieved at the expense of a more effective, natural and organic process.

- **The Current View of Gemara Study, and How to Assess a Yeshiva’s Appropriateness**

One of the greatest obstacles to a child’s successful *chinuch* experience is a mistaken understanding of the academic goals to be pursued. There is a garbled and misrepresented version of alleged ‘*daas Torah*’ that presents a picture of ideal Torah study for high school *talmidim* that would be funny if it were not so common. In a rather satirical summation of the attitude, the view can be summarized as follows:

We all really know that only studying Birkas Shmuel constitutes authentic Talmud Torah. The more Birkas Shmuel one learns, and the less time he spends on the Gemara itself, the greater *talmid chochom* one will be, וכל המרבה הרי זה משובח. In fact, it is well known that R' Yisroel Salanter taught that learning in any manner other than *b'iyun* is actually *bitul Torah*, and therefore Birchas Hatorah should preferably be said over a Birkas Shmuel. *B'dieved*, a Kovetz Shiurim of R' Elchonon Wasserman will suffice.

While people may be bemused by this extreme portrayal, sadly, it is not as far off as it should be.

What, then, should authentic Talmud Torah look like? While specifics are beyond the scope of this article, there are three principles that deserve priority, which we can call the three C's – Clarity, Cumulative knowledge, and Creative analysis:

- **Clarity** – If the *bochurim* in the *shiur* have not mastered the שקלא וטריא (give and take) of the Gemara, they are failing, even if they can work their way through a '*shtikel Torah*' (analysis of a point). The student may introduce the greatest innovation or *chiddush*, or repeat a thorough presentation of conceptual theses, but these accomplishments do not compensate for the inability to recount the basic give and take of the flow of the Gemara. Before all else, a *bochur* must be able to read the Gemara thoroughly, his inflection and pronunciation reflecting complete comfort with the material. He should then be able to articulate the central point of the *sugya* (topic), including how it is reflected in the basic give and take. This applies both to the study of Gemara as well as to Tosfos.

Unfortunately, parents are often allured by the attractiveness of *lomdus* (advanced analysis), and fail to give full weight to these far more basic cornerstones of learning. Consequently, many *yeshivos* are full of very bright *bochurim* who can impressively feign *lomdus* but who hardly understand the basics of the Gemara, with devastating consequences to their future learning. Even a parent who is not very advanced in his own learning should be able to keep this in mind in the development of his son's learning and in choosing a

*yeshiva* that supports this critical value, upon which all future success in learning is based.

- **Cumulative knowledge** – The most basic component of being a *talmid chochom* is not analytical ability but knowledge of Torah. Moreover, the sense that as one learns more and more, he knows more and more is a great stimulus for passionate learning. If a *yeshiva's* curriculum does not include a fixed amount of *dapim* (pages) (depending on the *mesechta*), accompanied by written tests that allow the student to gauge his own advancement, the *bochur* will not develop an ongoing desire to learn.

In many *yeshivos*, the study of *bekiyus* (i.e., covering ground) has disintegrated into either a "lite" seder, accompanied by little or no *chazora* (review), or, in some cases the opposite, with little ground covered and even *chaburos* for in-depth research. Similarly, there is often no testing or accountability regarding the material covered, and no emphasis on accumulating real knowledge. The student in a proper *yeshiva* should accumulate much Torah knowledge throughout his years in the *beis medrash*.

- **Creativity and analysis** – While mastering the basics of the Gemara and the accumulation of Torah knowledge is the foundation of all learning, *lomdus* is its heart and soul. Tragically, however, the very concept of *lomdus* has been corrupted. True *lomdus* is the ability to learn a *sugya*, identify its core principles, ask the questions that emerge from the material, and use these questions as the tool to correctly define the relevant terms. Using these terms, the student will be able to use *lomdus* to outline the various categories of the halacha and understand the implications of the various alternative approaches.

The pedagogical crimes committed in the name of *lomdus* include (i) neglecting the preliminary mastery of the basics; (ii) diverting to topics barely relevant to the *sugya* (sometimes just to avoid the appearance of advancing too quickly); (iii) imposing advanced *seforim*, such as Birkas Shmuel and Shaarei Yoshor, that are inevitably too sophisticated for younger boys; (iv) adopting terminology that is alien to the students, thereby frustrating their

ability to express their thoughts meaningfully; and (v) piling on numerous opinions and alternative approaches, turning the *sugya* from an educational experience into an “anything goes” arena.

My Rebbe, Harav Nochum Partzovitz, zt”l, was the Rosh Yeshiva in the Mir. Rav Nochum, as he was affectionately called, was viewed by many as the preeminent *lamdan* of his generation, and his *shiur* was widely considered “the” opportunity to become a true *lamdan*. *Talmidim* journeyed from all corners of the world (in the days when travel was still difficult) to learn from him.

Rav Nochum’s *shiur* reflected the true nature of *lomdus* (as does that of his son-in-law and successor, *ylcht”va*, Hagaon R’ Asher Arieli). In each *shiur*, he stuck to the main points of the *sugya* with total mastery of *pshat*, which he employed frequently (and expecting his *talmidim* to do the same). He did not dazzle us with many alternative approaches to each *sugya*, but rather focused his *shiur* on developing what he felt to be the preferred approach to the *sugya*. For Rav Nochum, *lomdus* was not the goal of learning; it was rather the tool for understanding the *sugya*.

When a distant relative of mine once opened a Yeshiva, he asked Rav Nochum if he could present his *shiur klali* (a *shiur* delivered to the entire Beis Medrash by the Rosh HaYeshiva) to him each week for prior approval. Rav Nochum graciously consented. My cousin was learning Baba Metzia, and the first week he presented his *shiur* on the *chazaka* of two people simultaneously holding onto an object. Rav Nochum listened and nodded assent.

My cousin returned the second week and presented a *shiur* on the topic of “the *ne’emanus* (trustworthiness) of a merchant,” a rather incidental topic that arises on the next page. Rav Nochum stopped him and said, “Just as it is a rebbe’s job to draw his students’ attention to the important issues in the *sugya*, it is also his job to keep their attention where it belongs. The topic you picked this week would serve as a distraction from the primary considerations that are relevant here, and would not be appropriate material for a *shiur*.”

True *lomdus* must be taught by a masterful *lamdan* who is capable of introducing concepts that will be understood by the class, expressed in language they can appreciate. The rebbe must be able to convey an

analysis of the issue at hand and introduce solutions that address the heart of the issues, rather than an arbitrary side point, however interesting it may seem.

R’ Yoshe Ber Soloveitchik zt”l, Rosh Hayeshiva of Yeshiva University, was an extraordinary *lamdan* and *talmid chochom*, yet was able to keep *baalei batim* riveted for hours with a *lomdishe shiur*. He did so by selecting topics with which his audience was familiar, and by presenting an extraordinary formulation of *lomdishe* concepts in layman’s language. A rebbe who is a true *lamdan* and a true pedagogue will have both the inclination and the ability to translate *lomdus* into a language that can be thoroughly appreciated by his *talmidim*.

While there are certainly other areas of Torah that must be addressed as part of a yeshiva curriculum, the success of a *chinuch* system lies in the subject that is at the heart of a yeshiva curriculum: Gemara. If we succeed in doing this right, we will have progressed immeasurably.

### Choosing Appropriate *Mechanchim* for our Children

Once a parent understands that the goal is to find the type of yeshiva that is the best fit for their child, the next step is to identify the criteria by which to identify appropriate individual *mechanchim*. This inquiry properly begins with two fundamental questions:

- Are the *rebbeim* of the yeshiva individuals whom we would like our children to emulate? After all, a natural response of a healthy child to proper *chinuch* is the inclination, whether consciously or not, to emulate the *mechanech*.
- What is the fundamental role in which the *rebbeim* see themselves? Do they view themselves as *mechanchim* or as *roshei yeshiva*? B”H, the *hanhalos* (administrations) of today’s *yeshivos* are filled with wonderful *talmidei chachomim*. A natural inclination of a *talmid chochom* is to wish to share with others his *chiddushim* and scholarly insights. Quite frequently, he views being a *mechanech* as an extension of his learning. In fact, many significant *talmidei chachomim* elect to enter the field of *chinuch* with the expectation that this choice will allow them “to stay in learning.” While the sharing of one’s brilliance and

insight may be appropriate when presenting a *chabura* amongst peers, or when one is a great renowned Rosh Yeshiva whose shiurim are presented to the most senior of budding *talmidei chachomim*. But this is far from true and appropriate for almost any other rebbe.

When entering a classroom, the rebbe must focus solely on the needs of his *talmidim*, not the content that he has so lovingly prepared. The Torah must be taught to fit the children's needs, not the opposite. He must ensure that the *shiur* is appropriate, in every regard, to the age and academic level of the *talmidim*. Rather than allocating the bulk of preparation time to the amassing of substantive material, the time should be spent on thinking through the appropriate structure and presentation of the material. In fact, significant pedagogical skills do not appear automatically, nor are they the natural outgrowth of the *talmid chochom's* persona.

When a friend of mine was opening his Yeshiva many years ago, R' Wolbe, zt"l, the famous *Mashgiach* and noted educator, advised him: "You must stand every day in front of a mirror, and repeat, 'I have been created solely for the sake of my *talmidim*.'"

- **Who is a *Mashpia* on the Student?**

Finally, and no less important than the learning per se, is exploring who the *mashpiim* on the *talmidim* will be.

In past eras, it might have been thought that just sitting and learning *shtark* is sufficient to mold person's character. R' Yisroel Salanter, z'tl, founder of the Mussar movement, strongly disagreed. Although his *talmidim* varied greatly in their application of his principles, their common axiom was that the deliberate shaping of a person's *middos* and *hashkafos* is essential to his development as a Ben Torah. While everyone today gives lip service to this axiom, many *yeshivos* continue to consider *mussar* and a *Mashgiach Ruchani* as simply a means of getting everyone into the *beis medrash* on time.

Simply listening to a small selection of *shmussen* within a yeshiva will quickly illustrate to a parent whether the yeshiva is simply seeking to reinforce *beis medrash* discipline, or whether there is a deliberate effort to build *bochurim*. A thoughtful parent can quickly discern whether the yeshiva's messages will be relevant to a *talmid* who eventually enters the world of commerce and whether there is a message regarding basic building blocks of a Ben Torah - thoughts regarding 'הצנע לכת' (a modest life) integrity, responsibility, empathy and much more. Is the yeshiva conveying thoughtful insights into the most basic, as well as the more subtle, concepts that provide *talmidim* with the understanding and insights needed to face life's inevitable challenges? Is there inspiration? The sought after *hashpaah* need not be provided within a yeshiva by the formal '*mashgiach*.' It may come from the *rosh yeshiva*, from one or more of the *rebbeim*, or even from someone else in the *beis medrash*. The main requirement is that such a personality exists. After all, much of what a *talmid* will become will be the result of that *hashpaah*.

## Conclusion

Yeshivos, like all institutions, seek to fill their rooms and garner supporters. Those who decide whether the rooms will be filled possess the key to instigating the implementation of necessary changes. In the area of *chinuch*, parents play that critical role. By selecting schools for children based on the fundamentals of effective teaching, inspirational guidance and student-focused *mechanchim*, parents can dramatically alter the character and nature of contemporary *yeshivos*. This is an opportunity that should not be squandered.

