

The midrash famously describes the Torah as being given under threat, with a mountain literally hanging over Bnei Yisroel. I believe Rabbi David Silber has pointed out that this is a dramatic metaphor for the reality that the Jews are in the desert and incapable of surviving without Divine intervention.

The war with Amalek that concludes this week's Parashah is often seen as a step toward weaning the Jews away from that extreme dependence; G-d insists that Mosheh send Yehoshua to fight, rather than disposing of the Amalekites Himself, as He had done to the Egyptians.

But that reading is difficult to square with the great Mannah experiment, in which the Jews are consigned to absolute dependence for food throughout their desert sojourn. If independence is the goal, why didn't Hashem "teach them to fish"?

Now the term used for that experiment is אנסו, from נסיון, test or experiment. It may be fruitful to note how starkly the intent here contrasts with the intent of the two most famous נסיונות in Tanakh, namely Akeidat Yitzchak and the whole story of Iyov. Those nisyonot were intended to determine whether it was possible for G-d to be loved/served entirely for His Own Sake, without any consideration of reward and punishment; this was accomplished by putting Avraham and Iyov into situations in which their inevitable future suffering, real or imagined or potential, was so great that no consideration of consequences could possibly affect them. Here, by contrast, care is taken to ensure that every choice about whether to obey Hashem is made under immediate substantial threat.

Each of these is an educational model of character building through stress – here, the stress is fear of starvation, whereas in Bereshit and Iyov, the stress is the possibility of meaninglessness.

The War with Amalek is also education through stress, but here the stress is internal – will I decide properly, as opposed to will He decide I am not worth preserving, or will it turn out that He was never worth serving ,

Which of these methods is successful, if any? Why was the mannah discontinued when we approached Israel, while the war with Amalek was made eternal for both Jews and Hashem? Is the message of the Akeidah Avraham's willingness to proceed, or Hashem's unwillingness to? I trust the connections between these questions and the following will be fairly clear.

Last week I promised a fuller discussion of the educational tactics of Rabbi Aharon Bina, head of Yeshivat Netiv Aryeh, after a Jewish Week article reported on his many ardent alumni admirers as well as on a significant minority who accuse him of emotional abuse, and in one case of slapping as well. After numerous intense discussions with friends, students, and colleagues – many thanks for putting up with my persistence – here's what I'm currently, somewhat tentatively, comfortable saying, and I look forward very much to strong responses.

- 1) There is no question that the Jewish Week acted properly in reporting on the accusations. In essence, no one denies that Rabbi Bina regularly and publicly insults individual students – their character, intelligence, physical appearance, and sexuality – and that some students experience this behavior as abuse, with concomitant psychological and spiritual damage. Potential students, and

their tuition-paying parents, certainly have a right to know that this tactic is a normal and expected, although not inevitable, element of the experience at Netiv Aryeh, and that some students react to it very badly. For that matter, the information that at least some parents and children choose Netiv Aryeh despite, or even because, they are aware of this, is important for anyone seeking to understand the spiritual condition of our community, and therefore the information needs to be publicly available.

- 2) The Jewish Week did not have the resources to conduct the kind of sustained investigation that this information warrants. We need to know whether the tactics, and perhaps the mistakes and failures, are accelerating as Rabbi Bina ages; the true extent of the minority that reacts badly, and the consequences of that reaction; whether the allegations that the rich or meyuchasdiike students are not treated in this way are true; whether physical boundaries are crossed; whether the students who adore Rabbi Bina and go into education use these tactics themselves, and for that matter whether they parent that way; whether the claims that many kids are saved from drug addiction and the like are literally true; and so on, if we are to properly react. Such an investigation should include sustained, qualitative interviews with selected alumni from both groups, and its report should include, and make public, sample video of the controversial Halakhah shiur, with the students' faces obscured. YU is the obvious candidate to investigate, and I think whether and how they do so will rightly have a significant impact on the public perception of the institution.
- 3) Prima facie, Rabbi Bina's tactics have viable educational precedents, both within and without Judaism. Military training – "Boot Camp" – uses the same tactic of "breaking someone down in order to rebuild them", employing the same genre of insults. Many classical models of intense male mentorship relationships – think Karate Kid, or Resh Lakish and Rav Yochanan – take similar risks for similar aims. And based on the deeply antagonistic description the Yiddish novelist Chaim Grade's memoir-as-fiction, The Yeshiva, gives of the mussar yeshiva in Navaredok, these tactics were essentially theirs as well, and had the same negative effects on at least some students.
- 4) Now Navaredok was also strongly condemned for its tactics, and so far as I can tell, its methods did not survive in its successor institutions. Furthermore, American Modern Orthodox education has moved very much in the opposite direction, with public shaming no longer seen as an acceptable educational method even in a semikhah shiur—the Rov's shiur in the early years, for example, would likely be seen as ethically problematic nowadays – and with stress-relief seen as a major public mental health goal in high schools, rather than the deliberate imposition of stress as a character-building exercise. I myself have been in one shiur which used public shaming as a tactic, and one class which imposed stress as a training tactic – the shiur was the best intellectual experience of my life, and the class has had a positive lifelong impact despite causing serious trauma at the time. So I am ambivalent about the near-universality of the shift away from such methods. At the same time, I find it fascinating that parents who in any other context would share the social disapproval of such methods, or at least their relegation to the defined areas of military training and addict reclamation, voluntarily send their children to Netiv Aryeh, and the children go voluntarily. The revelation of the article to me was not that Rav Bina teaches that way – as the article point out, this was widely although not universally known—but that Netiv Aryeh is nonetheless the largest Shanah Alef program. Why is this so?

- 5) I think there is a broad sociological phenomenon that needs to be properly understood as background.

In the Charedi world, as I understand and to some extent remember it, high school is the time for experimentation, not least because it involves time set aside for childish things, i.e. general education. The transition to Beit Midrash is expected to be accompanied by increased focus, responsibility, and accountability, not least because how one advances intellectually, and is perceived personally by one's teachers, will have a direct effect on future job, education, and marriage prospects.

In the Modern Orthodox world, by contrast, high school is a time of great seriousness and high stakes, with a very structured environment and the constant recognition that how one does will affect what college one gets into, and how much one will receive in scholarships, all of which matters a great deal. Beit Midrash – which is constructed as “the year in Israel”, and “shanah bet”, rather than as the beginning of a longterm, even lifeterm, commitment – is an opportunity to “find oneself” and experiment in a consequence-free environment, as nothing that happens to one in yeshiva, or that one does in yeshiva, has objective or inevitable academic or for that matter even social consequences.

Now this leads to Modern Orthodox “gap year” students behaving very immaturely and exhibiting behaviors that would be developmentally worrisome in the charedi world, and when set against that context, makes them seem shallow and unserious and at-risk. They look, in other words, like candidates for spiritual boot camp.

And perhaps they are. But it is also possible that they are just “acting out”, and will naturally revert to a cultural norm, to being very much like their parents. In which case boot camp is necessary only if one sees their parents as unacceptable.

The year I spent at Gruss, a program called BMT still shared the premises. BMT's strategy, which also ended up with kids who were radically more serious at the end of the year than its start, was, as explained to me, simply to let the kids wear themselves out partying for the first few months, and as that slowly got boring, make sure that the kids found their way to the beit midrash and felt deeply cared for there. Some kids never had that epiphany, never found partying boring, and would gently or otherwise be eased out. But most eventually chose to learn seriously, to take religion seriously, etc. and I have no reason to believe that Netiv Aryeh is more successfully transformative for a higher percentage of the same kind of students than BMT was.

Adolescence may be a disease, but like many diseases, aggressive treatment may have little impact on outcomes, and the side effects are serious. Certainly one should not treat without fully informed consent, and there should be ongoing and comprehensive studies of effectiveness and results.

Shabbat Shalom

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