

משנה מסכת אבות פרק א:ד

יוסי בן יועזר אומר: יהי ביתך בית ועד לחכמים, והוי מתאבק בעפר רגליהם, והוי שותה בצמא את דבריהם:

רוח חיים לאבות א:ד

1. יהי ביתך בית ועד כו'-
2. יתכן לפרש כי במ"ח דברים שהתורה ניקנית בהם, כמבואר לקמן, א' מהם הוא המחכים את רבותיו ע"י שאלותיו החריפים וממילא רווחא שמעתתא
3. והנה הלימוד נקרא מלחמה, כמ"ש "מלחמתה של תורה";
4. א"כ גם התלמידים לוחמים יקראו
5. וכמו שאמרו חז"ל "לא יבשו וגו' כי ידברו את אויבים בשער
6. אפילו אב ובנו הרב ותלמידו נעשו אויבים זא"ז ואינם זים משם כו'
7. ואסור לו לתלמיד לקבל דברי רבו כשיש לו קושיות עליהם
8. ולפעמים יהיה האמת אם התלמיד, וכמו שעץ קטן המדליק את הגדול
9. וז"ש יהי ביתך בית ועד לחכמים.
10. והוי מתאבק מלשון "ויאבק איש עמו", שהוא ענין התאבקות מלחמה
11. כי מלחמת מצוה היא
12. וכן אנו נגד רבותינו, הקדושים אשר בארץ ונשמתם בשמי מרום המחברים המפורסמים וספריהם אתנו -
13. הנה ע"י הספרים אשר בכתנו כתינו הוא בית ועד לחכמים אלה, הוזהרנו ג"כ וניתן לנו רשות להתאבק וללחום בדברי' ולתרץ קושייתם ולא לישא פנים לאיש רק לאהוב האמת,
14. אבל עכ"ז יזהר בנפשו מלדבר בגאווה וגודל לבב באשר מצא מקום לחלוק, וידמה כי גדול הוא כרבו או כמחבר הספר אשר הוא משיג עליו, וידע בלבבו כי כמה פעמים לא יבין דבריו וכוונתו. ולכן יהיה אך בענוה יתירה
15. באמרו "אם איני כדאי אך תורה היא וכו'"
16. וז"ש הוי מתאבק כנ"ל אך בתנאי "בעפר רגליהם", ר"ל בענוה והכנעה ולדון לפניהם בקרקע.
17. "והוי שותה בצמא את דבריהם" . . . ר"ל שותה ועדיין צמא.
18. או יאמר יהי ביתך בית ועד כו' – ואף אם אינך מבין בעצמך
19. ומשל ליכנס לחנותו של בושם שקולט את הריח
20. ואף אם אינך מבין והנך מתאבק אך בעפר רגליהם, עכ"ז תהיה שותה בצמא את דבריהם

Mishnah Avot 1:4

Yose ben Yoezer said: Your house ought to be a meetinghouse for the sages, and wrestle in the dust at their feet, and drink their words with thirst.

Ruach Chayyim (R. Chaim Volozhiner) to Avot 1:4

1. "Your house ought to be a meetinghouse for the sages" –
2. It is possible to explain (this by saying) that among the 48 things by which Torah is acquired, as is made clear later (in Avot Chapter 6), one of them is by adding wisdom to one's teachers through his sharp questions, so that the content of Torah inevitably expands.
3. Now the study (of Torah) is called combat, as in the expression "the combat of Torah";
4. Therefore the students too must be called combatants,
5. as the Sages said: "They will not be shamed etc. when they speak with enemies in the gate –
6. even a father and his son, a rav and his student, become enemies one to the other, but do not move from there (until they love one another),
7. and it is forbidden for a student to accept the words of his teacher when he finds difficulties with them –
8. and sometimes the truth is with the student, as when a small branch that kindles the larger –
9. and this is what is meant by "Your house ought to be a meetinghouse for the sages".
10. "Mit'abek" is from the same root as "And a man was mit'abek with him", which refers to
11. the hit'avkut of combat, for this is a combat of mitzvah.
12. We are situated similarly with reference to our teachers,
13. the holy ones whose bodies are in the ground but whose souls are in the exalted heavens, the famous authors, whose books are with us –
14. Now via the books which are in our houses, our house becomes a meetinghouse for those sages, we are also commanded and given permission to wrestle and engage in combat with their words and to resolve their difficulties and not to show favoritism to any man, rather to just love the truth,
15. but with all this one must be cautious for the sake of one's soul lest he speak with arrogance and expansiveness because one has found a basis for dispute, and imagine that he is as great as his teacher or as the author of the book which he is challenging, rather he must know in his heart that sometimes he has not fully understood the author's words and intent. Therefore he should take an attitude of great humility, saying "Although I am not worthy, nonetheless it is Torah etc."
16. This is the meaning of "wrestle", just on the condition that it is with "the dust of their feet", meaning with humility and submissiveness, arguing in their presence while sitting on the ground at their feet.
17. "And drink their words with thirst" - . . . this means drink but always remain thirsty.
18. Or perhaps the meaning of "Your house ought to be a meetinghouse for the sages" (is that that you should do this) even if you yourself do not understand (their conversation).
19. A parable: To enter the store of a perfumer, because you absorb the aroma.
20. Even if you don't understand, and you are only engaged/even encrusted with the dust of their feet, despite all this you must drink their words thirstily.

The popular minhag of learning a chapter of Avot each week between Pesach and Shavuot may have begun as a way for rabbis to avoid having to address Sefer Vayikra, and I will put it to that purpose this week.

R. Chaim Volozhiner's translation of "mit'abek" as "wrestling", and subsequent unpacking of the wrestling metaphor, is justly famous, and generally accurately so – my goal this week is largely to put this reading in the context of his full comment here, and to cast some light on a few of its lesser-known elements.

One issue that should leap out is that R. Chayyim, despite being the disciple of the Vilna Gaon, does not sharply distinguish between actual and literary teachers, which means that he does not see it as essential for teachers to have the right of reply to their students. What is necessary is the attitude of humility, not the formal expression of it, and students are entitled – even obligated - to hold their opinions against those of their teachers even when the teachers are not present to defend themselves. It seems clear to me that the context here is practical halakhah. R. Chaim would presumably set standards of minimum competence here, and of relative competence, and I doubt that he genuinely means to forbid accepting the psak of one's rebbe when one has minor but outstanding intellectual difficulties with it, but nonetheless the rhetoric is striking.

On the other hand, R. Chaim begins by speaking of students' contributions as valuable because they enhance the learning of the teacher, rather than independently worthwhile. They are the small twig that kindles the larger – their flame in and of itself would just go out. Here he comes from Rav Yochanan's description of Resh Lakish's role on Bava Metzia 84a – "He would ask 24 challenges, and I would give him 24 resolutions, and the content of Torah would inevitably expand" – and it's not clear that this framing applies well to dialogues with books.

One way of pushing this question is to focus not on the wrestling metaphor, but rather on Yose ben Yoezer's first charge, to make one's home the meetingplace of sages. R. Chaim understands this, in contemporary terms, as encouraging one to assemble a library. If one reads this only as the precondition for wrestling, very well, but it seems to me that the form of the Mishnah requires it to be independently worthwhile. But is there a point in assembling a library of books with which one does not engage?

This issue is perhaps highlighted by R. Chaim's less famous alternate reading, that one should make one's house a meetingplace for sages even if one will understand nothing of what they say, and merely be covered with their footdust, and drink their words thirstily even if incomprehendingly. Here he introduces the metaphor of the perfumery, but while one might argue that simply experiencing the sages in their home territory is of great value, it's hard to say that of books.

At the same time, the mere presence of books does have an impact on the children of the house, and there is value – a value always in tension with our horror of idolatry – in having visible and tangible symbols of our values. Furthermore, books are less likely to let us down badly, especially once we have come to know them well. With tales of rabbinic corruption rampant, there is a real temptation to retreat into dialogue with books.

Here is one way of expressing the tension I'm trying to convey. R. Chaim imposes a serious charge on students – they must challenge their teachers. This is what Rav Yochanan valued unto death in Resh Lakish, and when students fail this responsibility, they share the blame for their teachers' failures.

But R. Chaim does not, at least not here, create a similarly dynamic responsibility for teachers toward students. Teachers can wait for students to challenge, and then simply react. Students who never challenge will simply never grow.

This may not be problematic when the relationship is human – it is in the nature of students, perhaps part of the definition of authentic discipleship, to seek correction from their teachers, and everyone has the obligation to find a teacher, "aseh lekha Rav",

But what happens when teachers prefer to see themselves as students? When rather than opening themselves to challenges, they feel accountable only to deceased authors, and thus spend their time in one-way dialogue with ancient books? Here humility can become an impenetrable screen for arrogance, and books cannot call them to account.

Shabbat Shalom!