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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

LESSONS FOR JEWISH EDUCATION FROM KING YEHOASH'S RELIGIOUS ARC

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

How responsible are teachers for their students' souls, and for how long? When I taught high school, I told students that I would evaluate myself as a teacher by the condition of their souls ten years after graduation.

That was a semifacetious reaction to a real problem. Teachers, schools et al often evaluate success and failure by what they see from students while they have power over them. Thus when a day school or yeshiva/seminary student doesn't turn out shomer/et Shabbat, or tzanua, or ethical, it's the fault of their "secular college". That is wrong empirically because nonconforming students hide their true beliefs and practices, whether out of fear or out of love (not wanting to hurt their teachers).

I think it is also wrong pedagogically, because our goal should be to create autonomous commitments that can stand independently. But that may be too harsh, or too focused on an environment which makes choosing not to be from a "live option" for many students. It is true that only "love that is not dependent on anything" endures forever; but does that mean that dependent love has no value? Doesn't that position run the risk that almost no one will get married? Maybe autonomous spirituality can happen only after a long process of growth, ala "mitokh shelo lishmoh ba lishmoh".

This week's haftorah – and its darker version in Ketuvim – offers an opportunity to consider these questions.

Background: The infant prince Yehoash was rescued from Queen Atalyah's attempted extermination of the Davidic line and hidden in the Temple. Seven years later, Yehoyada HaKohen produced him as the legitimate heir and ended Atalyah's reign.

2Kings 12:1 tells us that

“Yehoash did what was straight in the eyes of Hashem
all his days
that he was shown/mentored/paskened by Yehoyada HaKohen
וַיַּעַשׂ יְהוֹאָשׁ הַיְשָׁר בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה
כָּל-יָמָיו
אֲשֶׁר הוֹדָהוּ יְהוֹיָדָע הַכֹּהֵן:

Yehoash launched a major refurbishing of the Temple during his reign. However, a threatened invasion from Aram led him to strip the Temple of its valuables in order to successfully buy

off the Aramean invaders. A court revolt then led to his assassination.

That is the story as our haftorah from the Book of Kings tells it. Verse 20 helpfully adds that more information can be found in the Chronicle of the Kings of Judah.

2Chronicles Chapter 24 informs us that Yehoyada predeceased Yehoash; that Yehoash's servants persuaded him to idolatry shortly after Yehoyada's death; and that the stripping of the Temple to buy off Aram took place after this regression. Moreover, Yehoash's later actions were condemned by a series of prophets, culminating in Yehoyada's son Zekharyah, whom Yehoash executes, with Zekharyah calling G-d's judgment on him while dying. The Arameans soon invade again and plunder. Yehoash is then killed by the same or a different set of servants.

With Chronicles in mind, Chazal understand 2Kings 14:1 to say that Yehoash acted properly only **while** being mentored by Yehoyada. But a naïve reader of Kings would be shocked by Chronicles. Regardless, the intent of Kings plainly is to present an overall positive image of Yehoash and his reign, whereas Chronicles presents it as tragic and justly ended. Why does Tanakh preserve both?

One entirely reasonable approach is to expand the question outward – why does Tanakh include two histories of the whole monarchic period, one much more favorable to the Davidic line than the other? But my focus this week is on the Yehoash sections as stand-alones. In that context, the core issue is how to evaluate a life that starts well and ends badly, with the fulcrum being the death of a core teacher.

Let me emphasize that Kings and Chronicles are not disagreeing factually, only about how to interpret, and therefore how to present, the agreed reality. One possible explanation of their perspectives is this: For Chronicles, Yehoash's piety was always shallow, because it was rooted in subordination to Yehoyada. That subordination was unhealthy; the discomfort it causes leads inevitably to the killing of Zekharyah. For Kings, Yehoash, like all human beings, was constantly exercising free will. His eventual bad choices were not in any way inevitable, and did not diminish the meaningfulness of his earlier good choices.

Mesilat Yesharim Chapter 23 seems to me to take the second approach:

Another eroder of humility (in people) is joining together with or using human beings who are flatterers, who to advance their own interests will praise and exalt him in order to steal his heart with their flattery, by expanding whatever positive traits he has infinitely, or ascribing to him (positive traits) that he lacks entirely, and sometimes his character is the opposite of what they are praising him for. Bottom line, the human mind is susceptible, and his nature is weak and easily seduced, especially in matters that he naturally inclines to. Therefore, when he hears these things spoken by someone by someone he trusts in, they enter him like venom and poison, and he falls into the domain of arrogance and is broken.

Here is our paradigm: Yoash, who acted well all the days that he was mentored by his teacher Yehoyada HaKohen, but after the death of Yehoyada, his servants came and began to flatter him and to magnify his praises, to the point of deeming him a divinity, and then the king heeded them.

See this clearly, that most officers and kings, or anyone with ability, of whatever spiritual level, stumble and are corrupted because of the flattery of those who serve them.

By contrast, Kovetz Teshuvot HaRAv Elyashiv 3:18, citing Rav Yehonatan Eybescheutz, blames Yehoyada's naivete:

Chazal said (Midrash Rabban VaEira 8:3) regarding Yehoash King of Judah:

"From when Yehoyada died, the officers of Judah came to bow to the king and made him a god.

They said to him: "One who enters the house of the Holy of Holies even for a moment is in danger of death, and you were hidden in it for seven years! You are fit to be a god, because if you were not a god, you would not have survived seven years in the house of the Holy of Holies!"

They said to him that it was so (or: He agreed that this was so), and he accepted being made a god.

Rabbi Yehonatan author of the Tumim was astonished by this: Yehoash has consistently done what was straight in the eyes of Hashem, following all that he had been instructed by Yehoyada his teacher, so how, in his old age, after Yehoyada's death, did he reverse and decline? **Why was the influence of his teacher ineffective?**

He replied:

Everything that Yehoyada taught him – endured, but he never consider teaching him about Avodah Zarah, since he did not think that Yehoash could read such a level (at which Avodah Zarah would be a live option), and since "his teacher did not teach him", therefore when his teacher died, he descended wondrously.

We might take Rav Elyashiv far beyond his intent by comparing Yehoyada to teachers that seek to hide intellectual challenges to the standard Orthodox narrative and worldview from students who will inevitably be exposed to them.

Malbim offers a different critique:

All the days that he mentored him,

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meaning the whole time that Yehoyada was mentoring, because he sinned after Yehoyada's death, and in Chronicles it explicitly says *All the days of Yehoyada the Cohen*.

I distinguish between *horaah* and *limmud*, as I wrote in my commentary to Vayikra.

This means to say that Yehoyada did not teach/*lamed* well, rather *horah*, he showed him, and when the *moreh* (Yehoyada) died – he (Yehoash) strayed from the path, which would not have happened had he learned to understand well using the method of *limmud*.

Malbim's reference is to his commentary to Vayikra Parashat Metzora #117:

A melamed habituates his student, whether in a matter of practice or in a wisdom-discipline, while a *moreh* merely shows it to him once.

Limmud is sometimes related to things that emerge from the emotional wisdom of the teacher and his mind, whereas *horaah* is only about things that exist in reality or that he received from his teachers or from Hashem, not things generated by measured judgment.

For Malbim, Yehoyada failed because Yehoash's education – despite having every possible advantage of charisma and circumstance – was never internalized, never became something that he could use independently to reach conclusions that were truly his own.

Including the tension between Kings and Chronicles in Tanakh, without seeking to reconcile them, is a useful warning against the belief that any educational method is foolproof. We cannot fairly blame all religious personality outcomes we dislike on religious education methods we dislike.

But I think it is worth examining the extent to which we are willing and able to confront the full gamut of temptations to which our students are exposed. And I think we need the toughness to be willing to face our students' skepticism while we have them in our classrooms and institutions, in the hope and belief that more often than not, this will yield autonomous commitment.

We do not have the option of hiding our students in the Temple forever – certainly not if that deprives them of the opportunity to become king, but the same is true of many other opportunities to accomplish worthwhile things in the world.

Shabbat shalom!