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TRAIN UP A CHILD IN THE WAY THEY SHOULD GO, (OR ANY OTHER WAY), AND WHEN THEY ARE OLD, THEY WILL NOT DEPART FROM IT

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

(Title text: Mishlei 22:6, revised from the Revised KJV)

Memorization is best done when young. This is the import of Abbayay's famous statement that "I wish I had learned this as part of my *girsā deyankuta*" = the things I studied by rote as a child.

At least, that's what I remember from being taught Talmud Shabbat in 8th grade. But looking now at Shabbat 21b, it seems clear to me that the phrase is said by the anonymous Talmud rather than by Abbayay.

Here is the sugya:

Said Rabbi Zeira that Rav Matna said;
or some say it:

Said Rabbi Zeira that Rav said:

"The wicks and oils that the Sages said 'One may not light Shabbat candles with them' – one may light Chanukah candles with them, whether on a weekday or on Shabbat."

Said Rabbi Yirmiyah:

"What is Rav's rationale?"

He holds that if (Chanukah candles) go out (before lasting the required half-hour) – one need not relight them, and that it is forbidden to use their light."

The rabbis said it in the presence of Abbayay in the name of Rabbi Yirmiyah – but he did not accept it;

When Ravin came (to Babylonia from Israel), the rabbis said it in the name of Rabbi Yochanan – and he accepted it.

He (=Abbayay) said:

"Had I merited – I would have learned this tradition from the beginning."

But he learned it!

The practical difference is for *girsā deyankuta*.

(Rashi comments: "which lasts longer than that of old age".)

How are we to take Abbayay's statement of apparent regret, "Had I merited etc."?

One possibility is that Abbayay

- genuinely regrets having rejected this tradition when it was first told to him, and
- sees his initial failure to accept this tradition as reflecting a personal spiritual insufficiency rather than a correct

epistemological position, and

c. as the Talmud explains his statement, sadly expects to have trouble remembering this tradition.

A second possibility is that Abbayay's statement is a self-effacing effort to diffuse the sting of his initial rejection, even though he would do the same again.

How might one choose among these possibilities?

A key point is recognizing that the Talmud has a subtle sense of humor. Or at least I think it does – I may be overreading. Let's consider the two other places in the Talmud where the phrase "If I merited" appears.

Here is Chagigah 13a:

Said Rabbi Yochanan to Rabbi Eliezer:

"Come, I will teach you of the Making of the Chariot".

He said to him: "I am not yet hardened (meaning: strawlike, hardened, aged enough to fear death, asexual)."

By the time he hardened – Rabbi Yochanan had died.

Rabbi Asi said to him:

"Come, I will teach you of the Making of the Chariot".

He said to him:

"Had I merited – I would have learned this from Rabbi Yochanan your teacher."

Here three alternative morals can be derived from "Had I merited":

- Never turn down a chance to learn mysticism from a master
- Rabbi Eliezer never wanted to learn the Making of the Chariot
- Rabbi Eliezer had mastered the Making of the Chariot from other sources but didn't want to embarrass Rabbi Yochanan or his students by revealing this.

The first moral emerges from reading the phrase straight; the latter two from reading it with a tinge of humor.

The upshot is that each sugya can be read both ways, and neither is proof of how to read the other.

Now consider Yebamot 64a-b:

A beraita:

If a man married a woman and stayed with her for ten years, but she did not give birth – he must divorce her and pay her the ketubah, as perhaps he did not merit having children from her . . .

Is it so (that men who don't merit having children with a first wife may merit having them with a second)?!

But the Rabbis said to R. Abba bar Zavda (after he was widowed):

“Marry a woman and have children!”

And he said to them:

“If I had merited, I would have (children) from my first wife!?”

There, he was just putting the Rabbis off, because R. Abba bar Zavda was made infertile by the public lectures of Rav Huna.

R. Gidal was made infertile by the public lectures of Rav Huna. Rabbi Chelbo was made infertile by the public lectures of Rav Huna.

Rav Sheshet was made infertile by the public lectures of Rav Huna.

Rabbi Acha bar Yaakov had a urinary blockage. They hung him from the cedar of Rav's house, and something green as a palm frond came out of him.

Said Rabbi Acha bar Yaakov:

Sixty elders we were, and all of us were made infertile by the public lectures of Rav Huna, except for me, because I fulfilled regarding myself “Wisdom will sustain the life of its master”.

Rav Huna's lectures were presumably of legendary length, on the order of Rav Soloveitchik's shiurim for his father's yahrtzeit, and at the same time sufficiently enthralling, or perhaps he was so intimidating, that men endured terrible urinary distress rather than leave in the middle.

One hopes that the Talmud here is exaggerating the longterm effects – surely someone would have intervened to suggest a bathroom break had Rav Huna's shiur really been a major health risk. And yet – I recall sitting in a shiur during the First Gulf War when a background sound began that might or might not have been a missile alert siren. The lecturer was famous for his disregard of such alerts – he would talk about using them as occasions to drive to visit his parents, since traffic was minimized. It took several minutes before a few of us had the courage to go outside to check (and discover that it was not in fact a siren).

However, the sugya's opening seemingly depends on taking the physical effects of Rav Huna's shiur literally. The Talmud explains that Rabbi Abba bar Zavda was merely deflecting his peers by attributing his failure to have children with his late wife to a lack of personal merit. The real reason was that he had been rendered infertile by Rav Huna's shiur.

Unless the Talmud is in on the joke, and the point is that Rabbi Abba had marked the demand that he remarry as inappropriately intrusive. A childless widower is not required

to confess impotence, among many other reasons that he might not be ready for remarriage. The Talmud specifically tells a story that it believes no one sensible would take literally.

Note that the use of “If I had merited” on Chagigah 13b can easily be understood as an effort to deflect an overbearing but well-meaning self-appointed mentor. In other words, “If I had merited” may be a polite, lightly humorous way of navigating a difficult social situation.

If this is correct, the Talmud's comment in Shabbat that “the practical difference is *girsā deyankuta*” can also be seen as in on the joke. After all, the gap between the initial rejected presentation and the second accepted presentation may have been only a few days!

The real issue is that the durability of childhood memorization is a double-edged sword. As Meiri to Pesachim 112a points out, it means that mistakes endure as well:

Some of (the great Sages) cautioned never to teach a child from a book that had not been thoroughly proofread,

because an error that enters into *girsā deyankuta* becomes rooted and engraved in the imagination so that even when he ages, he will not swerve from it.

Perhaps the Talmud's exposition of Abbayay's point is that the young should be choosier about what they learn than the elderly, but ironically, they don't have the experience to choose wisely.

I wonder what I would have made of that lesson if the sugya had been taught that way to me in 8th grade. Would I have appreciated the humor, and the inherent irony of the lesson?

I also wonder whether the bigger issue with childhood learning isn't error but rather narrowing. In 8th grade, I probably had no interest in whether the phrase was actually Abbayay's, and I don't recall rethinking the issue before last week (“Behold I am nearly 58 years old, but I did not merit . . .”). Our early education locks us into seeing possible interpretations as the only possible interpretations.

I don't think this is educationally inevitable. The problem is that we legitimately want childhood education to set boundaries and solidify core assumptions, and it's hard to do both kinds of teaching at the same time. Also, the adults with educational responsibility may strongly disagree about which possibilities should be left open and which foreclosed. Did your school wish you to understand the Talmud's irony in the long run?

Shabbat shalom!

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