CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership
חברות ואחריות
www.TorahLeadership.org
"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

PART-TIME ANGELS
by Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

The concluding verse of this week's haftorah appears to be description rather than prescription.

כִּֽי־שִׂפְתֵ֤י כֹהֵן֙ יִשְׁמְרוּ־דַ֔עַת וְתוֹרָ֥ה יְבַקְשׁ֖וּ מִפִּ֑יהוּ
כִּֽי מַלְאַ֥ךְ יְקֹוָ֖ק צְבָ֥אוֹת הֽוּא׃
For the lips of a kohen preserve knowledge and they seek Torah from his mouth
because he is an emissary of Hashem L-rd of Hosts

However, the Hebrew word "כי" famously has at least four semantically distinct meanings. The Amora Rabbi Yochanan translated the second occurrence of כי in our verse as 'if/when', which turns the first part of the verse prescriptive:

When the rav resembles an angel of Hashem L-rd of Hosts –
they must seek Torah from his mouth;
When the rav does not resemble an angel of Hashem L-rd of Hosts –
they must not seek Torah from his mouth

As an undergraduate, I argued that Rabbi Yochanan puts judging your fellow favorably at the heart of the teacher-student relationship. Teachers aren't really angels, so according to Rabbi Yochanan, students can learn from them only by finding ways to excuse their flaws. It followed, I thought, that teachers must similarly look to excuse their students' flaws.

One potential problem with this approach is that it might also lead teachers to excuse their own flaws, or how could they teach? I prefer to believe that Rabbi Yochanan conveyed some sense of irony when teaching this. (This is one of two shiurim that I begin with a caution that it may be forbidden for students to learn during them. The other addresses the position that it is better for a person not to have been born than to learn Torah not-*lishmoh*.)

I therefore suggested that the verse imposes a limitation on students, not on teachers; but that teachers have to maintain a public reputation good enough to enable their students to engage in willful suspension of objective character judgement.

This suggestion, however, risks generating hypocrisy, and in any case builds a certain disingenuousness into the relationship. Rav Kalman Kalonymos Shapiro (*Esh Kodesh*, Eikev, 5701) grounds an alternative in a passage from Shabbat 25b.

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב:
כך היה מנהגו של רבי יהודה בר אלעאי,
ערב שבת מביאים לו עריבה מלאה חמין,
ורוחץ פניו ידיו ורגליו,
ומתעטף ויושב בסדינין המצוייצין,
ודומה למלאך ה' צבאות,
Said Rav Yehudah said Rav:
This was the practice of Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai:
On Friday afternoon
they would bring him a bowl of hot water;
He would wash his face, hands, and feet,
and wrap himself seated in linen sheets that had (*tekhelet* wool) tzitzit,
and resemble an angel of Hashem,

Esh Kodesh deduces that Rabbi Yehudah bar Ilai did not resemble an angel during the rest of the week – and yet his students presumably learned from him during the week as well. So it's enough for a teacher to occasionally resemble an angel. Indeed Esh Kodesh argues there's no need to seek Torah from teachers while they resemble angels – Torah will just pour out of them in that state. The rest of the time, students must activate the angelic nature of their teacher by asking for Torah.

Interestingly, Esh Kodesh does not discuss the continuation of the R. Yehudah bar Ilai story, even though it directly portrays an intriguing interaction with his students:

and his students would hide the corners of the linen sheets (they were wearing) from him.
He said to them:
"My sons, did I not teach you thus –
A linen sheet regarding *tzitzit* –
Beit Shammai say – it is exempt;
Beit Hillel say; it is obligated:
and the halakhah follows Beit Hillel!
But they thought that there was a decree (against putting *tekhelet* wool *tzitzit* on linen sheets)

lest one put them on a night-garment (which is not obligated in *tzitzit*,
so that tying wool *tzitzit* on a linen garment would violate *shatnez* –
the combination of linen and wool, which is forbidden even according to Beit Hillel except for the sake of fulfilling the *mitzvah*).

Somewhat disappointingly, the standard commentaries as well seem exclusively interested in the halakhic content. Possibly they and R. Shapiro all assume that the students would have behaved similarly during the week had a similar situation arisen. But my first thought was that the students were hiding their *tzitzit*less sheets because they were afraid to confront their teacher when he resembled an angel. This would support Rabbi Shapiro's thesis that teachers need not resemble angels all the time. Indeed they must not, or students will never be willing to challenge them (and yet will not always obey them).

The Talmud cites Rabbi Yochanan in two contexts. On Moed Kattan 17a, it is treated as an authoritative justification for excommunicating a scholar who played an essential role in the rabbinic community but had become a person of ill repute. On Chagigah 15b, it is cited as a challenge to Rabbi Meir's willingness to continue learning from Elisha ben Avuyah after the latter had become the Lucifer of rabbis.

But Rabbi Meir, how could he justify learning Torah from the mouth of Acher!?
But Rabbah bar Bar Channah said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan . . .

Here the Talmud challenges the actions of a Tanna (Rabbi Meir) on the basis of an Amoraic statement, rather than using the actions of Rabbi Meir to disprove Rabbi Yochanan. This peculiarity is followed by another that may be intended to cancel it out. After two Amoraim defend Rabbi Meir by interpreting verses to imply that scholars are mere conduits for G-d's Torah who do not influence it in any way (implying that Rabbi Yochanan's concern was about the content of the Torah transmitted, and not about the character-influence of an unangelic teacher), the Talmud asks:

קשו קראי אהדדי!?
The verses pose difficulties to each other!?

In other words, the Talmud treats both Rabbi Yochanan and the responses as the clear meaning of the verses, rather than as interpretations. This puts Rabbi Meir in opposition to Scripture.

The Talmud resolves the contradiction by saying that one verse applies to a *gadol*, and the other to a *katan.* The standard interpretation is that Rabbi Yochanan's standard applies only to *ketanim* = immature or incompetent students, whereas Rabbi Meir was a *gadol*. This solution seems to me to have no basis whatever in Rabbi Yochanan's statement or his verse.

However, the first of the defenses for Rabbi Meir is offered by Resh Lakish, famed as the best and closest student of Rabbi Yochanan. The interactions of Resh Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan often bring out Rabbi Yochanan's very human character. I wonder whether the point isn't that if Rabbi Yochanan's statement stood as an absolute, how could anyone have learned it from him? So even though his statement appears absolute, it must not be

I would love to find a commentator who reverses the standard understanding of the gemara's resolution, so that the *gadol* is not the student but the teacher. In other words, Rabbi Yochanan's statement is true with regard to most scholars, but we can't ask Resh Lakish to forgo Rabbi Yochanan's incomparable Torah, and by the same token, we could not have asked Rabbi Meir to forgo Acher's Torah. Both of them were much more essential than, for example, the excommunicated scholar in Moed Kattan. Note that Resh Lakish himself defends Rabbi Meir without bothering to explain how his defense fits with Rabbi Yochanan's statement.

At the end of the sugya, Eliyahu Hanavi informs the Amora Rabbah bar Sheila that G-d Himself rejects Resh Lakish's defense, and refuses to cite Rabbi Meir's Torah. This puts the whole Tradition in peril, since our Mishnah is based on that of Rabbi Meir. Rabbah bar Sheila famously responds that "Rabbi Meir found a pomegranate: he ate the seeds and discarded the peel", and Eliyahu reports that G-d was convinced, and now cites Rabbi Meir. The tradition cannot survive if we require all our teachers to be angels, nor if we are required to pretend that all our teachers are angels. It is never safe or wise to assume that the traditions we receive are all fruit and no peel.

Shabbat shalom!

The mission of the* Center for Modern Torah Leadership *is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.