

The Klal Perspectives Journal

A Forum for Discussion of Challenges Facing the Torah Community

Winter 2015 Questions: The Ben Torah Baal HaBayis With the Rabbi Zupnik's Response: The Simple Jew is not Simple

QUESTIONS

How should the *baal habayis* undertake the myriad competing demands on his time, energy and focus? Since each person is extraordinarily unique, how is each individual to determine his own appropriate allocations of time and energy?

How should he cope with the internal feelings – or the external messages – that he is failing or inadequate due to his inability to master any or all of the many spheres of obligations and goals?

How can he come to recognize that unfulfilled goals may just as likely be a path to growth as a path to despondency and failure?

What can be done to support the *baal habayis* in the face of his *nisyonos*?

What challenges – other than those listed above – should be on this “short list”?

How is the *baal habayis* to be properly prepared to continue to grow spiritually in the context of these demands, and *nisyonos*?

When should preparation for these challenges begin?

Are there adequate human resources for guidance and *chizuk* in all of these issues?

How can the community, its *mosdos* and its rabbinic leadership create the environment and the relationships that will not only assist the *baal habayis* to cope, but also allow him to thrive and grow during every stage of life?

Rabbi Menachem Zupnik

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The Simple Jew is not Simple

The questions addressed in this issue of Klal Perspectives are serious and significant, and the prospect of attempting to answer them is daunting. In addition, since the particular challenges people face tend to vary in both degree and kind, the preferred approaches to these concerns can differ significantly from individual to individual. Accordingly, meaningful advice tends to be rather personalized. Since sweeping statements have little

value, I will instead highlight certain broader issues that frequently undermine even the most sincere efforts of a *ben Torah* in the workforce to maintain his level of Torah commitment and *yiras shomayim* (fear of heaven).

The yeshiva system introduced to American Jewry during the 20th century has been revolutionary, its impact far reaching. It is a system that has facilitated an almost indescribable renaissance of Torah and *Yiddishkeit* for both its *talmidim* (students) and for the broader community. Despite its glory and success, like most broad-based efforts, the yeshiva system cannot fully address all segments and needs of the community, and unwittingly fails to fill every void.

One group of individuals whose needs have not been fully addressed is the group who ultimately leave yeshiva and kollel to enter the work force. Nonetheless, those whose needs are not fully addressed cannot lay blame for every challenge at the doorstep of an educational system, but must rather assume personal responsibility. It is, therefore, incumbent on each individual who enters the work force to address the personal vacuum experienced, if any.

Let me begin by recounting a discussion I overheard one Shabbos afternoon between two friends in the *beis medrash* of Yeshivas Ponevezh more than 45 years ago. One was a European *bochur* (young man) from a *Chassidische* background, who was planning to eventually return to Europe and work in his family's business. Although many miles away from home, he was totally committed to the *derech hachaim* (way of life) that he had been taught by his family and native community. He viewed his years in Ponevezh as an opportunity to grow in Torah, but he had no intention at all of altering his *derech*.

By contrast, the other *bochur* was focused on hearing the words and lessons of Rav Yechezkel Levenstien, *zt"l*, the sainted *Mashgiach* and remnant of the great *Mussar* movement of Eastern Europe. This *bochur* was eagerly absorbing the *Mashgiach's derech* and hoped to establish his own future *derech* based on the *Mashgiach's hadracha* (guidance). Not surprisingly, the divergence between the respective expectations of the two *bochurim* often led to very lively debate.

During the heated conversation that Shabbos afternoon, the *Chassidische bochur* claimed that his worldview had been validated by a remark of the *Mashgiach*, himself. The *bochur* reported

hearing the *Mashgiach* lament how former *talmidim* frequently return to the yeshiva years later and are unrecognizable due the great diminution they had suffered over the years in their overall stature as *bnai Torah*. The *Mashgiach* reportedly concluded, however, that the *Chassidishe bochurim* tend to return years later substantially unchanged, remaining steadfast where they stood while still in yeshiva. Supposedly, the *Mashgiach* acknowledged that he could not identify the cause of this distinction, but observed that it was certainly apparent.

I never verified the accuracy of the quote from the *Mashgiach*, but, over the many years since overhearing that conversation, I have found some credibility to the suggestion reported by the *Chassidishe bochur*.

Over several decades of serving as a community Rav, I have repeatedly noted three central weaknesses in the non-Chassidic community that tend to make it more difficult for *bnai Torah* to maintain the intensity of their commitment and passion after leaving the confines of their yeshiva or kollel. I have observed three missteps that, in fact, often cause *bnai Torah* to slip in their level of Torah commitment, *yiras shamayim* and general

enthusiasm for all עניי קדושה (matters of holiness). Interestingly, the Chassidic community and its educational systems have, to a degree, successfully avoided these three particular pitfalls.

Self Image: The Cost of Striving for Greatness

A source of one of the challenges is simultaneously the source of our community's great success – we strive for greatness. We are a community of lofty aspirations, teaching our children from their youngest age that nothing should be viewed as a barrier to great achievement. The *bracha* often proffered to a bar mitzvah boy is that he should grow up to become a “*gadol b'Yisrael*” (a great leader in Israel).

For each *bochur*, simply learning Torah is lovely – but insufficient; the message he invariably receives is that he must strive to become a truly outstanding *talmid* *chacham* (scholar) or *tzaddik* (righteous person). The *bochur* is also taught that it is not one's innate intelligence or skills that deem one qualified for Torah greatness, since many have accomplished this feat with lesser qualifications. Hard work and commitment are all that is required to achieve objective and observable greatness. The message, of course, is that if one fails

to evolve into a *gadol*, there is no one to blame but oneself.

Notwithstanding the apparent downsides to this educational approach, I have actually developed a profound appreciation both for its goals and its effectiveness. For example, I tend to agree with the argument that aiming high will result in students maximizing their potential, and that tolerance of mediocrity would only ensure disastrous results. Whether the benefits outweigh the costs, however, is beyond the subject of this article; one dimension of its impact, however, is relevant to this discussion.

In my view, our community's cultural glorification of the "exceptional few" has compromised significantly the proper appreciation and respect for the privilege of being a regular, "ordinary," *ehrliche* (honest) member of the עם הנבחר (chosen people). In fact, not only has such an appreciation been compromised, it has been thoroughly, if unintentionally, denigrated. A generation has been produced that is filled with young men who are unable to come to terms with the person they have turned out to be, tragically failing to appreciate the privilege they enjoy in being an *ehrliche Yid*.

I find it unimaginably painful when a *baal habayis* confides in me, in a clearly deflated emotional state, that he is unable to identify anything meaningful that he has done in his life. He observes how he has failed to achieve greatness in *Torah* and *yiras shamayim*. He is neither a *talmid chacham* nor a *tsaddik*. He can discern in himself no major, tangible achievements in any other realms. His despair is authentic and profound. Though I understand the disappointment he is expressing, I find it almost unbearable to hear of such low self-esteem coming from a person who invariably leads a life saturated with *Torah* and *mitzvos* and dominated by an acute awareness of *Hashem's* existence. Nothing meaningful in his life??? Alas, his experience is not a reflection of a personal psychological failing but rather, a product of the *hashkafah* and general worldview he has been taught.

So, rather than respond with the typical *היזוק* lecture about how he can “still” become a great *tzaddik* and “still” become a *talmid chacham*, I’ve changed course. I now suggest that we start at the beginning. “You are a Jew who believes in *Hashem*, keeps His *Torah*, is raising a *frum* family, gives *tzedakah*, learns *Torah* daily and performs *mitzvos* whenever possible. How can such a life

possibly be meaningless? Consider what a *zechus* it is to put on *tefillin* every day? In fact, would it not be worth being born just to put on *tefillin* even just once in a lifetime, and you do so every day! Certainly it is understandable that one desires to excel, but how can a life of such richness and import be, *chas veshalom*, meaningless?”

The response of one *baal habayis* was so painful, yet a sincere reflection of his honesty and innocence: “You don’t really believe that, do you?” His words were both a question and a challenge. With equal sincerity I responded that yes, I absolutely do believe it.

A product of our community, this *baal habayis* had simply not been taught to have the proper appreciation for the *gadlus* of simply being a G-d fearing Jew. Of course, he had heard the idea on occasion, but it was not a value that he had been trained to embrace as a personal reality. Perhaps he had been too preoccupied with his quest to become someone akin to a Chazon Ish.

The Gaon of Vilna, a paradigm of exceptional greatness, is said to have declared, while lying on his deathbed and holding on to his *tsistis*, “What a tragedy it is to leave this world, where but for a few coins one can acquire *Olam Habah*.”

Even the greatest of men, and perhaps most particularly the greatest of men, fully appreciate that the loftiest of privileges is to perform even the simplest mitzvah. *Chazal* teach us that even Moshe Rabeinu himself, who was the unparalleled *navi*(prophet), had a great desire to perform even a partial מצוה. This core value of *avodas Hashem* has been lost on our community, and must be reinvigorated with renewed passion. Not only is it a value of great truth and authenticity, it is a view that is critical to achieving and maintaining meaning and fulfillment in being a *frum* Jew.

And if the performance of even one simple mitzva is incredible, how much more so are the incredible feats of *avodas Hashem* achieved by the typical *baal habayis*: raising a family, being *mechanech* his children, learning Torah himself – of any amount – amidst the whirlwind of making a *parnassa*, being honest and leading a life of *kiddush Hashem*. It is critical that one has a deep understanding of the tremendous privilege it is to be an עובד השם (servant of G-d) and member of *Klal Yisroel*, and particularly one who is raising the next generation of Jews and bringing the era of *Mashiach* a bit closer.

There are many distinctions between the approaches taken by the Chassidic and yeshivish communities. Chassidim may not focus their youth on the urgency of exceling. They may sooner accept what the yeshiva system might consider mediocrity. The members of the Chassidic community, however, have a far greater appreciation for the exquisite beauty of simply being a *frum Yid* and performing *mitzvos* each day. They are not likely to perceive the role of a *frum baal habayis* as being inferior or inadequate. They are taught the importance of every Jew and of every struggle to be an *ovaid Hashem*. In order for a *Ben Torah* to thrive in today's working environment, he too must learn and embrace this truth, and he must teach it to himself if no one else has done so.

The Critical Role of *Chevra* and a Rav

The norms of contemporary living have created impediments to the fulfillment of the simple dictum of Chazal, as articulated in a *mishna* in Avos:

“Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachia says: Make for yourself a Rav and acquire for yourself a friend and judge each person favorably.”

If there was ever an era in which there was a particularly acute need for both a Rav and a *chevra* (social group) it is surely today. Alas, it is easier said than done. In the eyes of *Chazal*, one's

Rav and *chevra* play central and rather specific roles. Unfortunately, certain dimensions of contemporary הינוך and its resulting mindset actually undercut the capacity of a *ben Torah* to find an appropriate type of Rav and *chevra*.

Chevra

The benefits of belonging to an appropriate *chevra* are wide ranging, and certainly cannot be viewed as simply a luxury. For the American *ben Torah* engaged in the broader society, it is critical to be a member of a group of individuals who share his moral and ethical standards. Such an association establishes expectations and support among its members, both in *shimras hamitzvos* and *limud Torah*. Having spent one's earlier years in a particular yeshiva is simply an insufficient connection to fortify one's long-term resolve; and even ongoing contact with one's Rosh Yeshiva is, on its own, not enough. I have yet to meet a *ben Torah* who can honestly claim to have sustained his level of *yiras shamayim* absent a close *kesher* (connection) to at least a small group of *bnai Torah* peers.

Inevitably, a person is influenced by his surroundings and by those with whom he associates. Not only does one mimic the behavior of those around him, one begins to adopt their thinking and

attitudes. Despite widespread protestations to the contrary, even the most thoughtful and independent-minded person begins to adopt the frames of reference and subtle tendencies of those with whom he is constantly interacting.

The vulnerability of slipping into the mindset of those with lesser or no commitment to true Torah values is often intensified by a common tendency of *bnai Torah* leaving yeshiva to lower their expectations for continual growth in *ruchnius* (spirituality). They frequently believe that personal growth is no longer expected by others, or even by HKB”H. This attitude is spiritually toxic, and inevitably leads to not only a cessation in growth, but to a downward spiral in religious focus and identity. The Gaon of Vilna teaches in *Mishlei* that in *ruchniyus*, there are only two options. If an individual does not choose to grow, he is making the *de facto* choice to atrophy. The human being simply is unable to remain in a static state.

This lesson is frequently conveyed to young yeshiva students as a prod to growth and to discourage complacency. Often, however, appreciation for this truism is left behind as the *talmid* leaves the yeshiva. That is not to suggest that an absence of vigorous growth will translate into an absolute

abandonment of *frumkeit* or even Torah study. But without an intensive striving for growth, it becomes difficult if not impossible to retain a strong connection to *frumkeit*.

The only effective antidote to this ubiquitous threat to ongoing *shteiging* (growth) is to connect to – in fact cling to – a *chevra* of similarly-minded *bnai Torah* collectively committed to growth in all circumstances and through all stages of life.

Unfortunately, however, this goal is not easily achieved, and the obstacles are both practical and cultural. On the practical side, maintaining associations with like-minded *baal habatim* is far more elusive than associating with an appropriate *chevra* while still in yeshiva. As adults, it is difficult to identify others who actually share one's aspirations in *frumkeit*. Finding others with similar interests and personalities is also much easier among young *bochrin* while in yeshiva. In fact, there is no assurance that like-minded individuals actually live in one's neighborhood. Moreover, a *baal habayis* is typically preoccupied with a myriad of other demands competing for time and attention – not the least of which is family. With hardly sufficient quality time for one's children and wife, the barriers to a *baal*

habayis allocating time to nurturing a *chevra* are all the more imposing.

The culture of today's frum community also introduces challenges to developing a *chevra*, not only for the individual, but also for the frum family. For example, the role of the shul in a family's identity, which has historically been the linchpin to a family's social context, has been substantially marginalized. Too often, the *baal habayis* davens everywhere and belongs nowhere. And for the more community-conscious *baal habayis*, who joins multiple shuls within his community, this dispersion of affiliations, though laudable in a charitable sense, can undermine his connection to one shul, in particular. Even the tendency to join a yeshiva davening on *yomim noraim* (high holidays) compromises the important investment of the *baal habayis* in a communal *chevra* of peers.

The yeshiva community tends to downplay the important role that a shul can play in the lives of a *baal habayis* and his family. The shul is intended to provide the context for the development of the *chevra*, so critical to the *baal habayis*. By connecting to the correct type of shul as a source of identification and affiliation, the *baal habayis* embraces its members as a frame of reference in developing values and formulating life style choices appropriate to the *ben Torah baal habayis*. Instead

of being recognized for the pivotal role it should play, shuls are commonly regarded merely as a place to find a *minyán* or host a *kiddush*. Consequently, the age-old benefits of associating with a *kehillah* are lost, with great cost to the *baal habayis*.

Too often, the new *baal habayis* continues to identify with a specific yeshiva, and resists accepting his new identity within a traditional shul. Too many *baalei batim* are simply unwilling to integrate into their new society, preferring to cling to their former identity as a yeshiva student. In actuality, the *baal habayis* faces challenges and confronts needs that are quite distinct from those facing yeshiva students, and the failure to ensure ongoing growth within the context of that new reality poses a serious threat to the vitality of their growth.

In this regard, again, the Chassidic community has been particularly successful. That community understands the yeshiva to be a place and time for enjoying the privilege of an intense focus on learning alone, but not as the sole source of growth in *ruchnius*, nor the only period in life when such growth is to occur. The Chassidic community also enjoys a far greater respect for the culture of *chevrashaft* (peer groups), and the fruit of these peer-based associations is a bedrock of growth.

A Rav

The third aspect of the *baal habayis'* set of challenges is the community's limited appreciation for the enormous benefits of having a close relationship with a Rav. Moreover, even those *baalei batim* who recognize the importance of such a relationship frequently find it extremely challenging to nurture it. For one thing, the *baal habayis* often hesitates to interact with the local Rav, as he is unsure what type of rabbinic figure would be appropriate to fill this important role in his life. A second dimension of this challenge is the communal role that many *rabbonim* seek to play, and the restrictions they impose on the breadth of their own responsibilities.

There are several factors in the *baal habayis'* perception of the role of a Rav that affect the likelihood that a healthy and meaningful relationship with a Rav will be developed. One of the key, more contemporary, influences is the *baal habayis'* familiarity with, and often access to, *gedolai hador* and widely known *poskim*.

In earlier times, when communications and travel restricted easy and immediate interaction with individuals in distant locations, the Jew related to the local Rav as the premier source of Torah authority and guidance. The wisdom and

attractiveness of the particular Rav would, of course, influence the degree of commitment he enjoyed among community members, but in all cases when the Rav was essentially appropriate, deference to the Rav was common, as was reliance on his guidance. Today, it is not uncommon for the *baal habayis* to fly to Israel to pose a significant personal question to a world-renowned *gadol*, or call a well-known Rav in a different city with ever more basic *halachic* or *hashkafic* questions.

Many *baalei batim* fail to appreciate the cost of forfeiting a relationship with a local and accessible Rav. In most instances, the local Rav is more than equipped to address the issues at hand. The Rav's familiarity with the broader circumstances of the *baal habayis*, including the environment of his home and community, his history and personality, and the broader context of the question posed, often enable the local Rav to be the most appropriate source of guidance. Moreover, most *rabbonim* are fully capable of identifying queries that are beyond their expertise and are accustomed to reaching out to more experienced *rabbonim* when appropriate.

More importantly, an ongoing personal and intimate relationship with a Rav is far more valuable to the growth and development of the *baal habayis* than

are the perceived benefits of hearing directly from a famous *posek* or *gadol*. All significant relationships, including a relationship with one's Rav, develop with an investment of time and effort, and with frequent interactions. Confronting dilemmas that require rabbinic input, and other instances when rabbinic guidance is called for, are actually precious opportunities to develop this most valuable relationship with one's Rav.

Sometimes a *baal habayis* might consider posing questions to a world-recognized *gadol*, but when such access proves to be more time consuming than anticipated, or a response is delayed, the *baal habayis* will neglect to seek any guidance at all. This risk is significantly reduced when one's Rav is encountered every morning at *Shacharis*.

Many *baalei batim* decline to pursue a relationship with a Rav for lack of trust in those who might play that role. The *baal habayis* might view himself as a significant *talmid chacham* in his own right, and assume that few *rabbonim* qualify to serve as his guide. Alternatively, he may have an unrealistic expectation of *rabbonim*. In any event, the *baal habayis* is encouraged to consider the *mishna* and explore no further than the *Bartenura*, who quotes the Rambam:

“Make a Rav for yourself: The Rambam explained that [the term ‘make for yourself a rav’ means that] even if [the best candidate] is not worthy to be your Rav, make him a Rav above you and do not just learn on your own.” – Rav Ovadia of Bartenura

As a general rule, the importance and benefit of having a Rav significantly outweigh any deficiencies a *baal habayis* may see in the Rav. This requirement is mandated because a person is only likely to grow when in an “other-focused” mode; a mode in which he is seriously listening to others, weighing their words, and taking their advice seriously.

As we know, *Chazal* define a *chacham* as one who is לומד מכל אדם (who learns from every person). Rabbenu Yonah explains that a person can only acquire wisdom if he is willing to learn from anyone – regardless of position, rank, or stature. We are required to allow ourselves to listen and be humble, vital prerequisites to being open to the ideas of others.

While the attitudes of *baalei batim* frequently inhibit the development of a valuable relationship with a Rav, the attitude of certain *rabbonim* can sometimes impose a similar barrier. Many *Rabbonim*, do not consider it to be part of their job to be a personal influence on the lives of their *baalei batim*. These *rabbonim* either fail to acknowledge that the role of a Rav must reflect the needs of his *kehilla*, or they

don't appreciate the great need that exists today for personal guidance from a Rav.

In other cases, it is the shul that seeks a Rav who is more aloof from the *kehilla*, and who expects this of him. This arrangement may be appropriate in some communities, but too often, this is the result of poor judgment about the needs of today's *baalei batim* and their families.

The needs of adults are not that different than those of yeshiva *talmidim*. Over the past several decades, the *chinuch* world has learned to accommodate the increased non-academic needs of *talmidim*. Consequently, the effective *mechanech* is now expected to be more than a transmitter of knowledge, he is expected to be the purveyor of attitudes, values and expectations, as well. A dedicated educator is expected to guide children and infuse them with a proper world view. With force of personality and evidence of authentic caring, the *mechanech* empowers the *talmid* with religious commitment and provides the tools needed to face the world. The most effective *rebbeim* need not be *gedolai Yisroel*, but are qualified in their craft and committed to their responsibilities and their *talmidim*.

Though adults may be far more advanced in their learning and maturity, they need a source of guidance and inspiration today no less than their children do. While an individual's *chevra* and *kehilla* are natural sources of *chizuk* and direction, *rabbonim* must embrace the critical role they need to play in providing the *baal habayis* with the guidance and inspiration they require to retain a passion in *ruchniyus* as they confront the challenges of everyday life.

In considering the question raised by this issue of *Klal Perspectives*, it is clear that confronting all of these challenges necessitates having a close relationship with a Rav.

Make no mistake – the application of Torah to actual life is an art form, not an exact science, as some are inclined to believe. It takes understanding of Halacha, *yiras shamayim*, wisdom, foresight, planning, and the ability to balance all considerations. There is no *Shulchan Aruch* or *sefer mussar* sitting on the shelf that can delineate the perfect solution for each individual. This comes only from the heart and mind of a human being who is infused with the values and teachings of the Torah and who is honestly trying to get it all right. I have yet to meet anyone who knows so much and is so

wise as not to need a person in their lives to help them sort all of this out.

Several years ago, Rav Matisyahu Salomon, *shlit"a*, the *Mashgiach* of Bais Medrash Govoha of Lakewood, undertook to share a message with *rabbonim* across the United States. On a series of occasions, the *Mashgiach* advised the *rabbonim* in his audience, "If you all fail to go into my business, that of being a *mashgiach*, you are placing the entire *Klal Yisroel* in grave peril." His message was clear. *Rabbonim* must view their job as including a deep concern about the overall *ruchnius* of their *baalei batim*, and the personal challenges they face. He must strive to advance the constant growth and well being of their *kehillos*. Most certainly, there are increasing numbers of *rabbonim* who assume these responsibilities and attitudes, but there remains a need to ensure a broader assumption of this role and the encouragement of *kehillas* to seek such commitment of their *rabbonim*, particularly when a new Rav is being retained.

This realm is yet another instance in which Chassidische communities function particularly well. *Baalei batim* in such communities more often seek, and are accepting of, direction provided by their Rebbe. This might explain the observation that

was reportedly made by the *Mashgaich* of Ponevezh, *zt"l*.

Conclusion

In many ways, the problems raised in this issue reflect causes for rejoicing. Our community has successfully produced American *bnai Torah* with high religious standards and expectations, and with a deep fidelity to the idealism of the Torah. It is this accomplishment that imposes the tension in implementing these goals even when entering the outside world. Nonetheless, we must not underestimate the vulnerability of many of today's *baalei batim* and their families, and how urgently they need more support. There is a great opportunity today to make a difference – it is one we must not ignore.

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