

CHOOSING A TEACHER

Parshas R'ay

By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

The story of Elisha ben Avuya, Achar, the Tanaite turned heretic and informer, is a fascinating one, comprising a full Daf in the Talmud (Chagigah 15a,b), with additional data quoted in Tosfos from the Jerusalem Talmud. Some of the anecdotes have mighty relevance to the present picture of Torah scholarship, and the advancement of proper attitudes on the part of the laity.

Achar is a perfect example of one who reaches the highest levels of Torah insight, yet plunges to the lowest abyss of agnosticism, recalcitrance and cussedness. As the rabbis point out (Ethics of the Fathers 2:5), "Trust not in yourself until the day of your death." All of life one must climb the ladder of faith and G-dliness. Never can one rest on his laurels of past achievements in matters of spirit and Torah intellect, lest he falls into decay.

The first episode recorded from the Jerusalem Talmud, is that Achar willfully caused the death of some Torah scholars, and FURTHERMORE, he entered a Beth Hamedrosh and saw young students learning with their Rebbe, and said: "For what purpose are these sitting here? They should pursue other careers. This one can succeed as a builder, this one as a carpenter, and the third as a tailor." As a result the young students became dissuaded and discouraged and left their Torah studies to pursue those careers. Upon reflection it is evident from the use of the adverb "furthermore" that Achar's evildoing of causing students to leave the Beth Hamedrosh to pursue other careers, at an age when further study would have given them the desperately needed Torah background, was a crime more serious than that of causing the death of Torah scholars. The one adverb speaks volumes of inspiration to enhance our appreciation of Torah students who dedicate extra years to this sacred cause. From time to time one

hears a negative remark about even the finest college and graduate age students who devote day and night to Torah research, adding the slur "bank kvetcher." Such a phrase smacks an Achar-like attitude, and should be erased from the Jewish lexicon.

Despite these and other despicable practices of Achar, the Tana Reb Meir, who was originally his disciple, continued occasionally to learn from him. And the Talmud wonders how it was permissible for him to do so, since such intellectual contact could be dangerous and deleterious to one's religious health. Says the prophet: "For the priests lips are to keep knowledge, and Torah shall they seek from his mouth, for he is a messenger, MALACH, of the L-rd of hosts" (Malachi 3:7). "If the teacher can be likened to an angel one may study Torah from his mouth; and if not, one should not study Torah from his mouth" (Chagigah ibid.). The Talmud, in reply, makes a distinction between a regular student and an established scholar like Reb Meir, the latter being permitted to learn even from one like Achar, being able to distinguish between what to accept and what to reject. The general public, however, is to shun a teacher of that category.

In this week's portion, the Torah urges, "Shamor V'shomato..." "Observe and hear all these words which I command thee..." (Devorim 12:28). Commentators are puzzled by this order. The procedure is in the reverse. First one studies and then he observes. According to the Ohr Hachayim this passage offers guidance in choosing a teacher. First comes "observe", i.e. the teacher's observance, and then follows the learning. Only when one is "angelic", fully observant of Torah and Mitzvoahs, may he be designated as a Torah teacher.

Reb Shraga Feivel Mendelowitz, z.l. (Torah Vodaath, founder of Torah Umesorah) observed: The responsa of last century, pertaining to Yoreh Deah, is replete with questions about a Shochet, ritual slaughterer, who was found lacking in some aspect of Yiddishkeit. The Sanzer Rav, in Divrai Chaim, is lenient in most such cases, inclined to find some merit in favor of keeping the Shochet. However when a

question arises regarding a teacher of Torah, even the slightest deviation, of even an instructor of Aleph Bais, he takes the most stringent attitude, suggesting the disqualification of the person in question. For the appointment as Torah instructor there must be absolute certainty of his sincerity, piety and honesty.

The main focus of the above context is the Yeshiva world. Yet its vital lesson is likely applicable, perhaps even more seriously, to colleges and universities. Large percentages of Jewish youth attend universities throughout America and Israel. They and their parents (who pay the tuition) should be aware of the tragic fact that some of the universities are infested with apikorsim (agnostics), professors teaching Jewish subjects. These are dangerous to the spiritual religious health. College age youth often do not have enough stamina to counter the negative influence of such professors. Utmost precaution is a requisite in choosing the right class, the right college. Two examples:

- a) When Rav Dr. Shmuel Sprecher became rector of Bar Ilan University in Ramat Gan, the first performance he accomplished was the removal of some professors whose EMUNA (faith) was faltering. This was in keeping with the original Bar Ilan policy to create a religious university.
- b) Years ago a delegation of the Rabbinical Alliance of America met with the chairman of all city colleges of New York City, discussing the negative influence of some professors at Brooklyn College upon Jewish students, especially in philosophy-psychology departments. The meeting did not result with complete success.

The Ohr Hachaim interpretation of SHEMOR (regarding the instructor) as a precondition to V'Shomato (joining his class) is a forceful guide at all times, especially at new semester seasons.

