

”הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף”

## A Precious Gem that Has Personal Significance Associated with the Education of Our Young Children

Next Shabbas, which is Shabbas Shuva, when we read in the Torah parshas Vayeilech, it is appropriate to discuss the mitzvah of "hakheil," which is observed in the shemita year during the festival of Succos. This is especially relevant to us this year, because we had just concluded of the shemita year. Here are the pessukim (Devarim 31, 12):

”הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף וגרך אשר בשעריך, למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו ויראו את ה' אלקיכם ושמרו לעשות את כל דברי התורה הזאת, ובניהם אשר לא ידעו ישמעו ולמדו ליראה את ה' אלקיכם כל הימים אשר אתם חיים על האדמה אשר אתם עוברים את הירדן שמה לרשתה”.

**Gather together the people—the men, and the women, and the small children, and your stranger who is in your cities—so that they will hear and so that they will learn, and they shall fear Hashem, your G-d, and be careful to perform all the words of this Torah. And their children who do not know—they shall hear and they shall learn to fear Hashem, your G-d, all the days that you live on the land to which you are crossing the Yarden, to take possession of it.**

Rashi provides the following clarification: **”האנשים, ללמוד. —the men, to study; and the women, to hear; and the small children, why did they come? To reward those who brought them.** The source for Rashi’s comment is the Gemara (Chagigah 3a):

”תנו רבנן מעשה ברבי יוחנן בן ברוקה ורבי אלעזר בן חסמא שהלכו בהקביל פני רבי יהושע בפקיעין. אמר להם מה חידוש היה בבית המדרש היום, אמרו לו תלמידיך אנו ומימיך אנו שותין. אמר להם אף על פי כן אי אפשר לבית המדרש בלא חידוש, שבת של מי היתה, שבת של רבי אלעזר בן עזריה. ובמה היתה הגדה היום, אמרו לו בפרשת הקהל. ומה דרש בה, הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף, אם אנשים באים ללמוד, נשים באות לשמוע, טף למה באין, כדי ליתן שכר למביאייהו, אמר להם מרגלית טובה היתה בידכם וביקשתם לאבדה ממני”.

**The Rabbis taught: There was once an incident involving Rabbi Yochanan ben Berokah and Rabbi Elazar ben Chisma, who went to visit Rabbi Yehoshua in Pekiin. He said to them: What novel teaching was taught in the Beis-midrash today? They replied: We are your disciples and we drink your waters. He said to them: Even so, it is impossible for there not to have been a novel teaching in the Beis-Midrash. Whose week was it to lecture in the Beis-Midrash? It was the week of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah. And on what subject did he lecture today? They replied to him: On the portion discussing "hakheil." And what did he expound on this subject? Gather together the people—the men, the women and the small children. If the men come to learn, the women come to hear, why do the small children come? In order to give a reward to those who bring them. Rabbi Yehoshua said to them: You held a precious gem in your hand, and you wished to withhold it from me?!**

Both the Meshech Chochmah and the Techeiles Mordechai (4) provide us with wonderful explanations concerning Rabbi Yehoshua’s excited reaction to Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah’s elucidation—expressed by his statement: **”You held a precious gem in your hand, and you wished to withhold it from me?!”** We will expand somewhat on their explanations, because they contain a vital principle concerning the education of young children—as attested to by Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai concerning his pupil Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah (Avos 2, 10): **”אשרי יולדתו”—praiseworthy is she that gave birth to him.**

The Bartenura explains based on the Yerushalmi (Yevamos 8b) that when the sages came to Rabbi Dosa ben Hurkines, he extolled the virtues of Rabbi Yehoshua. He cited the passuk (Yeshayah 28, 9): **”את מי יורה דעה ואת מי יבין שמועה גמולי”**

**”מחלב עתיקי משדים—to whom shall one teach knowledge? To whom shall one explain a message? Those weaned from mother’s milk, removed from the breasts.** In other words, HKB”H imparts knowledge and conveys His message to children who have been weaned and removed from their mother’s milk; so that they could enter the Beis-Midrash and hear the voices and sounds of Torah.

Seemingly, this is puzzling. What benefit accrued to Rabbi Yehoshua from hearing divrei-Torah in the synagogue, while he was still an infant lying in his crib? Why did Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai find his mother’s actions so commendable as to proclaim: **”Praiseworthy is she that gave birth to him?”** After all, he was incapable of comprehending the divrei-Torah. Nevertheless, it is evident that merely having the words of Torah enter his ears sanctified his body and enabled him to rise higher and higher in his Torah studies and reverence.

### **A Precious Gem that Has Personal Significance for Me**

Yet, Rabbi Yehoshua spent his entire life searching for a proof from the Torah that it is extremely valuable to have small children hear words of Torah, even if they do not understand a single word. Therefore, he was elated and overcome with joy to find support for this notion from Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah’s elucidation: **”Gather together the people—the men, the women and the small children. If the men come to learn, the women come to hear, why do the small children come? In order to give a reward to those who bring them.”**

Now, from the statement: **”In order to give a reward to those who bring them”** and not to the children themselves, implies that the children do not deserve any reward, because they do not understand a single word. In fact, they did not make any effort whatsoever to hear the words of Torah; their parents brought them and they heard the divrei-Torah inadvertently. If so, this begs the question, why do those who bring them deserve a reward? After all, their actions did not serve any purpose for the small children. Thus, we must conclude that even though the children are yet incapable of understanding, nevertheless it benefits them tremendously to hear and absorb the sounds of Torah; it sanctifies their bodies. Consequently, their parents deserve a reward for bringing them and allowing them to reap this benefit.

It is now quite clear why Rabbi Yehoshua was so elated upon hearing this elucidation. It helped him realize that his tremendous Torah knowledge and acumen stemmed from his mother’s actions—taking him while still in his baby cradle to the synagogue to hear words of Torah. Therefore, upon hearing this elucidation of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah’s from his students, he immediately proclaimed: **”You held a precious gem in your hand, and you wished to withhold it from me?!”** He says specifically **”from me,”** implying that this elucidation has personal significance for me.

### **The Incredible Connection between Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah**

I was struck by a wonderful idea concerning this divine Tanna’s exuberant reaction to Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah’s elucidation: **”You held a precious gem in your hand, and you wished to withhold it from me?!”** It relates to the great revolution that transpired in the world of Torah thanks to these two holy Tannaim—Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah.

First, let us present a story told by our blessed sages in the Gemara (Berachos 27b, 28a). When Rabban Gamliel was the Nasi, he once required Rabbi Yehoshua to remain standing throughout his entire discourse. He imposed this punishment, because Rabbi Yehoshua had issued a halachic opinion concerning tefilas Arvis contrary to his own opinion. The other Torah scholars viewed this action as an insult to Rabbi Yehoshua and his Torah. As a consequence, they deposed him and appointed Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah as the Nasi in his place—although he was but eighteen years old.

These events created a tremendous upheaval in the Torah world at that time. They began allowing students into the Beis-Midrash that were previously considered unworthy—whose sincerity was in question. The events are depicted by the Gemara as follows (ibid. 28a):

”תנא אותו היום סלקוהו לשומר הפתח, וניתנה להם רשות לתלמידים ליכנס, שהיה רבן גמליאל מכריז ואומר, כל תלמיד שאין תוכו כברו לא יכנס לבית המדרש. ההוא יומא אתוספו כמה ספסלי, אמר רבי יוחנן פליגי בה אבא יוסף בן דוסתאי ורבנן, חד אמר אתוספו ארבע מאה ספסלי, וחד אמר שבע מאה ספסלי.”

**It was taught in a Baraisa: That day they removed the doorkeeper and permission was granted to all students to enter. For Rabban Gamliel would proclaim and say: Any**

**student whose inside is not as his outside may not enter the Beis-Midrash! That day many benches were added. Rabbi Yochanan said: Abba Yosef ben Dostai and the Rabbis disagree about the matter. One says four hundred benches were added and one says seven hundred benches.**

Let us explain Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah's reasoning based on what we have learned in the Gemara (Pesachim 50b): **"לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה ומצוות אף על פי שלא לשמה, שמתוך שלא לשמה בא לשמה"** - a person should always engage in the study of Torah and the performance of mitzvos even though his actions are not purely motivated; because from these activities that are not purely motivated he will eventually come to learn Torah and perform mitzvos for its own sake, with the purest of intentions.

We learn that engaging in any form of Torah study elevates a person to ultimately learn Torah for its own sake. Thus, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah concluded that by allowing everyone into the Beis-Midrash to study Torah, where they would hear the words of Torah of the Tannaim engaging in Torah "I'shmah," they would ultimately benefit and be elevated. They would learn and act with sincerity—their inside would match their outside, **"tocham k'varam"**—and they, too, would learn "I'shmah."

Let us return to the continuation of the story in the Gemara. After Rabban Gamliel came to appreciate Rabbi Yehoshua's greatness, he went to his house to appease him for having tormented him. Rabban Gamliel said to him: **"I harassed you; forgive me." Rabbi Yehoshua paid him no heed.** Rabban Gamliel continued to plead with him: **"Do it for the sake of the honor of my father** (his great-great-grandfather Hillel the Elder, a descendant of King David's)." **Rabbi Yehoshua was appeased.**

Subsequently, Rabbi Yehoshua approached the sages to return Rabban Gamliel to his previous position as Nasi. **They said: "How shall we act? Shall we remove him** (Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah)? **We have a tradition that we ascend in matters of kedushah but do not descend. If one master should lecture one week and the other one week, it might lead to jealousy** (on the part of Rabban Gamliel). **Rather, allow Rabban Gamliel to lecture three weeks and Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah one week." And this is the meaning of that which was said: "Whose week was it?" "It was the week of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah."**

## **It Was Heavenly Ordained that Rabbi Yehoshua Should Cause An Upheaval in the World of Torah**

We have a basic principle that every person is sent into this world to fulfill a particular mission, loyally and with devotion solely to Hashem. We see from this story, that HKB"H arranged for Rabbi Yehoshua to cause the appointment of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah as Nasi in a roundabout manner. This led to an upheaval in the Torah-world at that time. Suddenly, everyone who desired entry into the Beis-Midrash was allowed in. For, insincere actions ultimately lead to sincere actions—"I'shmah." This teaches us that this was one of Rabbi Yehoshua's missions in this world.

Thus, we can appreciate why HKB"H provided Rabbi Yehoshua's mother with super-intuition, prompting her to do something that was uncommon among the other Tannaim. She brought his baby crib into the synagogue while he was still an infant, so that his ears would absorb words of Torah. This deed constituted the corner-stone for the upheaval he was to cause in the Torah-world.

We see that an infant, who lacks understanding, is nevertheless influenced by words of Torah that penetrate his ears—enabling him to attain Torah-knowledge for the duration of his life. How much more so, will words of Torah affect someone who enters the Beis-Midrash to study Torah alBeis insincerely?! In the merit of hearing the words of Torah from holy Tannaim and Torah scholars engaging in Torah-study "I'shmah," they will be purified and ascend spiritually. Ultimately, their inside will match their outside; what was initially insincere will become sincere—"mitoch shelo I'shmah ba I'shmah."

We learned that in the end, Rabban Gamliel succeeded in appeasing Rabbi Yehoshua. As a consequence, he was restored to his position as Nasi and lectured to the Torah scholars three weeks out of four. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah also maintained his position as Nasi and lectured one week out of four. Now, on the one hand, Rabbi Yehoshua was pleased that he was able to bring peace to the world—acting as a catalyst to arrive at a peaceful arrangement between these two Torah giants. On the other hand, he feared that perhaps after Rabban Gamliel returned to his position as Nasi, he might force the younger Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah to change his mind—to no longer allow people into the Beis-Midrash with less than optimal intentions.

Hence, when Rabbi Yehoshua's students came to visit him, he inquired: **"What chiddush was presented in the Beis-Midrash, today? . . . Whose week to lecture was it?"** When they replied: **"Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah's week,"** he asked: **"And what did he discuss, today?"** He thought that this might allow him to discern whether or not he had changed his mind regarding his edict. **"They replied to him: On the portion of "hakheil." And what did he expound on this subject? Gather together the people—the men, the women and the small children. If the men come to learn, the women come to hear, why do the small children come? In order to give a reward to those who bring them."**

This convinced Rabbi Yehoshua that Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah remained steadfast in his position to allow all comers into the Beis-Midrash. Just as the small children are elevated merely by hearing words of Torah, so, too, in the merit of hearing the words of Torah of Tannaim learning "I'shmah," all students who enter the Beis-Midrash will be elevated to a state of "tocham k'varam"—their inside will match their outside.

As a result, he became filled with joy and pronounced excitedly: **"You held a precious gem in your hand, and you wished to withhold it from me?!"** After all, HKB"H arranged for my mother to bring my crib into the Beis-Midrash, so that my ears would absorb words of Torah. This led me to cause an upheaval in the Torah-world. Because of me, Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah was appointed as Nasi; he issued the edict permitting all comers into the Beis-Midrash—even those whose motives were not sincere. In view of all this, how could you have considered withholding this precious gem from me?!

### Rabbi Reuven Margalios's Precious Gem

Let us conclude this essay with another precious gem. This lofty idea is often quoted without knowing or mentioning the name of its author. Notwithstanding, we will fulfill the mitzvah of "hashavas aveidah" by revealing the original source for this idea—the sefer Nitzotzei Ohr, authored by Rabbi Reuven Margalios, z"l. He was a tremendous "talmid-chacham," well-versed in all realms of Torah. He passed away childless; hence, it is a mitzvah, an act of true kindness, to state this chiddush in the name of its author.

In his comments on the Mishnah (Orlah 1, 7), he notes astutely that we find numerous times in Shas that Rabbi Yehoshua would often remark regarding a particular halachah: **"שמעתי"**—meaning I heard—without mentioning who it was that said the halachah. Additionally, he notes that we find three instances where Rabbi Yehoshua presents a halachah with the word **"שמעתי"** and then adds either **"ואין לי לפרש"** or **"כך"** **"שמעתי סתם"**—indicating that he did not comprehend the reason for the pronouncement he had heard. In these instances, Rabbi Akiva ultimately came along and said: **"אני אפרש"**—I will provide an explanation.

This is seemingly very curious. Having heard the halachah in the Beis-Midrash, why didn't Rabbi Yehoshua pay attention to identify the author of the pronouncement—which would have allowed him to repeat it in the name of the one who had said it? Even more puzzling, however, is that if he was unable to explain the reason for the halachah, why didn't he simply ask the actual person who made the pronouncement to explain his reasoning and logic for him? Here is Rabbi Reuven's answer:

**"יתכן כי שמועותיו אלו הן מאותו הגיל, שהוליכה אמו עריסתו לבית הכנסת, כדי שידבקו אזניו בדברי תורה, ואז לא היה בר הכי לדרוש שיפרשו לו. ואין זה מפליא כלל, דכן מצינו (ירושלמי כתובות לו:), שאמר שמואל מכיר אני את המיילדת שלי, שבצאתו מרחם אמו כבר היתה בו דעת הכרה, ורבי יהושע בן לוי אמר, מכיר אני את המוהל, כשמל אותו, ורבי יוחנן אמר מכיר אני הנשים שהיו עם אמי בשעה שרעה לילד אותו."**

It is quite likely that he heard these particular halachic pronouncements when he was yet an infant, when his mother brought his baby crib into the synagogue—so that his ears would be saturated with divrei-Torah. At that time, however, he was too young to demand an explanation. This is not really so surprising. For, we find similar examples in the Talmud of others with memories from their infancy. Shmuel states that he recalls the midwife assisting with his birth. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi states that he recalls the "mohel" performing his "bris." Rabbi Yochanan states that he recalls the women that attended his mother while she was giving birth to him.

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