

SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES FOUND IN  
RABBINIC LITERATURE

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Today, we often think of the duties of a rabbi as being pretty much the same as that of any other member of the clergy, i.e. giving sermons on weekends, officiating at weddings and other life cycle events, and perhaps engaging in counseling during the week.

However, in ancient times rabbis were primarily scholars and teachers, and consequently, they had much to say about education. Their collective experience spanned hundreds of years, and that helped give them a good perspective on what did and what didn't seem to work. The examples below are collected primarily from the *Babylonian Talmud* and the *Midrash Rabbah* collection, and they give insight into what educational problems and solutions people were dealing with approximately two thousand years ago. Also, the examples are divided into two parts, those for teachers and those directed at students. As a teacher of college level mathematics, I find their conclusions both insightful and to the point. Furthermore, since we have all been students at one point or another in our lives, the list of advice for students will have broad application. Today, there is a plethora of work that has been done in the field of education to determine what works and what doesn't work, but having also been a practicing statistician, I am aware of the difficulties that can arise in trying to determine causal relationships among variables involved in statistical studies. Thus, as time goes by, I tend to have more and more faith in the cumulative experience of those who have worked as teachers in the field than I do in statistical studies. As far as the ancient rabbis go, their methodology was undoubtedly

pragmatic. I suspect that they first arrived at a conclusion from personal and cumulative experience, and then invoked a *Biblical* text to support that conclusion. Surprisingly, when we look at their experiences, not much seems to have changed in education over the past two thousand years. In fact, as an educator I am both guided and inspired by the experiences of those who taught so long ago. Many of the experiences they had are the same as those of teachers today, and consequently, their solutions are very apropos. For convenience, on the following page is a table that summarizes the lessons I've accumulated for both students and teachers from rabbinic literature, and following this are several specific quotes along with my personal commentary. Enjoy!

<b>Lessons for Students</b>	<b>Lessons for Teachers</b>
Don't procrastinate in learning	Be clear in your lectures
Involve your whole being in the learning process	Those who can, teach
Engage in repetition and review of your lessons	We learn from our students
Don't cram; learn a little each day	We learn from our peers
Study with a buddy	A student may idolize you a little too much
The more you know, the more you want to know	There are boundaries that must be respected by both students and teachers
Don't skip class	Use good students to help poor students
Knowledge is important	Challenge your students
Listen when your teacher is speaking	Act and dress appropriately
Respect both your peers and your teachers	Don't embarrass your students (or anyone!) in public
Study even if you don't fully understand	There are different types of students
Learn from your teachers even if they are not perfect	There's an optimum class size
Use mnemonics when necessary	Respect your colleagues
There's no limit to how much you can learn	Don't water down your subject matter
To master a subject, first learn the basics from one teacher, and then learn from several teachers	Avoid mistakes
Make your home a learning environment	Students need to be ready to learn
Learn to think for yourself	Restrain yourself when disciplining students
Don't waste precious time	Take good care of your brain
Be sincere in your endeavors	College still isn't for everyone
Everything is an opportunity for learning	Be a fountain of knowledge
Set aside fixed times for study	Give your students the benefit of the doubt
Study what you have a passion for	We forget so that we can engage in lifelong learning
Be honest	
Old scholars still deserve respect	
Take good care of your brain	

## Lessons for Students

### **Don't procrastinate in learning**

*“Don't say, ‘When I have leisure, I shall study.’ Perhaps you won't have leisure.”*

*(Pirkei Avot 2:4)*

Comment: You can't always count on that perfect moment arising for sitting back and studying. In general, you have to make time to study while all the other things in life are swirling around you, and then little by little your knowledge will increase.

### **Involve your whole being in the learning process**

*“Beruriah once discovered a student who was learning in an undertone (a subdued utterance). Rebuking him she exclaimed, 'Is it not written, “Ordered in all things and sure?” If it is “ordered” in your two hundred and forty-eight limbs, it will be “sure.” Otherwise it will not be sure.’” (B. Eiruvim 54a)*

*“One taught: Rabbi Eliezer had a disciple who learned in a low voice. After three years he forgot his learning.” (B. Eiruvim 54a)*

*“Samuel said to Rab Judah, ‘Open your mouth and read the Scriptures, open your mouth and learn the Talmud, that your studies may be retained and that you may live long, since it is said, ‘For they are life unto those that find them, and a healing to all flesh.’ Read*

*not, 'To those that find them,' but, 'To him who utters them with his mouth.'"*

*(B. Eiruvim 54a)*

Comment: When I was in graduate school working on my doctorate in mathematics and studying for my oral final exams, I would regularly pretend that I was standing before the committee reciting my answers and giving learned expositions on the things I knew.

Consequently, the knowledge I had was not only in my head, but also in my voice and my facial expressions and the gestures I would use to accentuate a point. As a result, I breezed through my oral exams, and I learned the educational value of not only thinking about what you know, but also writing and talking about what you know as you would if you were explaining it to another person.

### **Engage in repetition and review of your lessons**

*"Resh Lakish said, 'If you see a student to whom his studies are as hard as iron, it is because he has failed to systematize his studies, as it is said, "And one does not sharpen the edge." What is his remedy? Let him attend the school even more regularly, as it is said, "Then must he put to more strength, but wisdom is profitable to direct." The latter words indicate how much more profitable would his efforts be if he had originally systematized his studies.' Thus, for example, Resh Lakish made it his practice to repeat in systematic order his studies forty times corresponding to the forty days during which the Torah was given, and only then would he come before Rabbi Johanan. Rabbi Adda ben Abbahu made it his practice to repeat in systematic order his studies twenty-four times*

*corresponding to the twenty-four books which embody the Torah, the Prophets and the Hagiographa, and only then would he come before Raba.” (B. Ta’anith 8a)*

*“He that repeats his studies a hundred times is not to be compared with him who repeats his studies a hundred and one times.” (B. Chagiagah 9b)*

*“If you will listen to the old (review your lessons), you will be able to listen to the new, but “if your heart turn away (Deuteronomy 30:17),” you will no more listen (you won’t learn anymore).” (B. Sukkah 49b)*

*“Rabbi Joshua ben Karha said, ‘Whosoever studies the Torah and does not review it is likened unto one who sows without reaping.’” (B. Sanhedrin 99a)*

*“Raba also said the following, ‘One should always study the Torah first and meditate in it afterwards, as it is said, “. . . the Law of the Lord,” and then, “And in his own law he meditates.”’” (B. Avodah Zarah 19a)*

*“Ben Bag Bag used to say, ‘Turn in over and over again.’” (Pirkei Avot 5:22)*

*“Ben Hehe said, ‘According to the labor is the reward.’” (Pirkei Avot 5:23)*

Comment: There are some educators today who dismiss rote practice as boring and an anathema to creativity. However, few have learned any skill without engaging in the task of repetition and daily drill. The truth is that while rote practice is not the final goal of the process, such repetition is the glue that often makes knowledge stick. By going over a subject again and again, we not only gain mastery of the topic, we also begin eventually to expand upon the original lesson and discover new connections and insights that are

truly our own.

### **Don't cram; learn a little each day**

*“Raba expounded in the name of Rabbi Sehora who had it from Rav Huna, ‘What is the meaning of the text, “Wealth gotten by vanity shall be diminished, but he that gathers little by little shall increase (Proverbs 13:11)?” If a man studies much at a time his learning decreases, but if he does not do so but instead “gathers little by little” his learning shall increase.’” (B. Eiruvim 54b)*

Comment: Anyone who has ever mastered a foreign language knows that the key is to learn a little bit each day rather than to try to learn everything all at once. If we force our brains to face a particular task on a daily level, then it will quickly understand both what it has to do and how unavoidable the task is. However, if the brain is asked to focus only once a week, then it knows that it need not think about it at all on the remaining days of the week. And the result is that everything is lost.

### **Study with a buddy**

*“Raba said, ‘If you see a student who finds his studies as hard as iron, it is because his teacher does not encourage him, as it is said, “And one does not sharpen the edge.” What is his remedy? Let him seek many companions.’” (B. Ta'anith 8a)*

*“Rabbi Hama ben Hanina said, ‘What is the meaning of the saying, “Iron sharpens iron?” This is to teach you that just as in the case of one iron implement sharpening another, so also do two students sharpen each other’s mind.’” (B. Ta’anith 7a)*

*“Rabbah ben Hanah said, ‘Why are the words of the Torah likened to fire, as it is said, “Is not my word like as fire? saith the Lord?” This is to teach you that just as fire does not ignite of itself, so, too, the words of the Torah do not endure with him who studies alone.’” (B. Ta’anith 7a)*

*“Rabbi Jose ben Hanina said, ‘What is the meaning of the verse, “A sword is upon the lonely, and they shall become fools?” This means that destruction comes upon those scholars who confine themselves to private study, and what is even more, they become stultified, as it is said, “And they shall become fools.”” (B. Ta’anith 7a)*

*“Rabbi Jeremiah said in Rabbi Eleazer’s name, ‘When two scholars sharpen each other in the law, the Holy One, blessed be He, gives them success.’” (B. Shabbat 63a)*

Comment: On the one hand, I always say that everyone eventually teaches themselves. The teacher opens a door, but the student has to figure out how to enter. But on the other hand, nothing can sharpen your knowledge quite like a study partner. Quite often it is only when you have to explain your learning and reasoning to someone else that you begin to fully understand the subject. Additionally, many feel that the best arrangement is to study in pairs. When more than two come together to study, it’s always possible for some to slack off, leaving the bulk of the work for others. However, when just two



people study together, each person really has to pull their own weight.

### **The more you know, the more you want to know**

*“As with the fig tree where the more one searches it, the more figs one finds in it, so it is with the words of the Torah. The more one studies them, the more relish he finds in them.” (B. Eiruvim 54b)*

Comment: The brain loves to be used, and the more you use it, the more it enjoys being taken out for some exercise. Learn to think well and give yourself a meaningful mental challenge every day. It'll help keep you feeling younger and happier.

### **Don't skip class**

*“Rav Judah said in Rav's name, ‘One should never abstain from attendance at the House of Study even for a single hour, for lo, how many years was a particular passage taught in the House of Study without its reason being revealed, until Rabbi Hanina ben Akiba came and elucidated it?’” (B. Shabbat 83b)*

Comment: Sometimes students don't realize how important it is to attend class and pay attention. Otherwise, you will often miss something important, and it's not the teacher's job to keep repeating things over and over again simply because you decided to be either physically or mentally absent.

## **Knowledge is important**

*“Rabbi Eleazar also said, ‘Whenever there is knowledge in a man, it is as if the sanctuary had been built in his days for the word “knowledge” is set between two names (“For a God of knowledge is the Lord.”), and the word “sanctuary” is set between two names (“Thou hast made, O Lord, the sanctuary, O Lord.”).’” (B. Berachoth 33a)*

*“The study of Torah is more important than the rebuilding of the Temple.”  
(B. Megillah 16b)*

*“Jerusalem was destroyed because the inhabitants neglected the teaching of their children.” (B. Sukkah 42a)*

*“The world exists only by virtue of the breath coming from the mouths of school children engaged in their studies.” (B. Shabbat 119b)*

Comment: I love these passages! They emphasize the sheer importance of knowledge. After all, we generally assume that it is our relatively large brain and our capacity for intelligent thought that distinguishes us from the rest of the animal kingdom. For a person to waste all that brain power is a tragedy indeed. In fact, the very last passage quoted above suggests that the world exists only for the sake of learning. H’mm, perhaps teachers should be paid more!

### **Listen when your teacher is speaking**

*“When scholars disseminate the Torah, you should modestly stay in the background so as not to compete with them.” (B. Berachoth 63a)*

Comment: A skill that seems to be rapidly disappearing from some classrooms is the ability to listen. In part, this is encouraged by the use of pedagogies that aim to achieve learning without the need of lecture. However, what is overlooked is that even if these other educational techniques are successful, it is still important for people to learn how to focus and listen to what is being said.

### **Respect both your peers and your teachers**

*“Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua said, ‘Let the honor of your student be as dear to you as your own, and the honor of your colleague as the reverence you have for your teacher, and the reverence for your teacher as your awe of Heaven.’” (Pirkei Avot 4:12)*

*“Every student who is silent when his teacher is angry with him the first time will become worthy to distinguish between clean blood and unclean.” (B. Berachoth 63b)*

*“Rabbi Johanan said, ‘You are sneering at the words of the Sages!’ Rabbi Johanan then set his eyes on him and the student turned into a heap of bones.” (B. Baba Bathra 75a)*

Comment: Both teaching and learning are not always easy, and from time to time frustrations will arise. However, it is important for everyone to observe basic rules of courtesy and respect in order to keep negativity from spiraling out of control. For

students, respect can be shown to teachers by paying attention in class, holding emotions in check, and discussing any problems in a calm, rational manner. Additionally, students can show respect to their peers by not engaging in behaviors that are disruptive to the learning of those around them.

### **Study even if you don't fully understand**

*“A man should study even if he doesn't fully understand, and understanding will come later.” (B. Shabbat 63a)*

*“This, too, did Raba say, ‘Let one by all means learn, even though he is liable to forget, yea, even if he does not fully understand all the words which he studies. As it is said, “My soul breaks for the longing that it has for Your ordinances at all times. (Psalm 119:20)”’” (B. Avodah Zarah 19a)*

Comment: Education is often a zigzag process of taking one step forward as we learn something new, and then two steps backwards as we discover gaps in our understanding that we have to fill in. It's not always easy, and it takes time. Nonetheless, never let lack of understanding stop your desire to learn. If we understood everything perfectly all at once, then there would be no need for schools. Instead, understand that it is an ongoing process that is usually successful only after a long and gradual journey. Complete comprehension at the beginning is neither expected nor necessary. All that is required is that you keep moving forward.

## **Learn from your teachers even if they are not perfect**

*“Rabbi Abba also said in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish, ‘Even if a scholar is vengeful and bears malice like a serpent, gird him on thy loins (i.e. attach yourself to him and learn what he has to teach).’” (B. Shabbat 63a)*

*“When asked how he could learn Torah from a heretic such as Acher, Rabbi Meir replied that when he finds a juicy pomegranate he eats the seeds and throws away the peel.” (B. Chagigah 15b)*

Comment: It is wonderful when a student discovers a professor who is brimming with both knowledge and the ability to teach it with great lucidity. However, that is not always the case. Instead, teachers, like everyone else, have their quirks and their imperfections. Nonetheless, if they truly have knowledge worth offering and if their imperfections aren’t too severe, then it is best to learn how to work around their idiosyncrasies so that the educational process can be successful. Remember, as a general rule, teachers desperately want to impart to you what they themselves have learned. That is what brings joy and meaning to their lives. Thus, we read in *B. Pesachim 112a* that the cow’s desire to give milk to her calf is even greater than the calf’s desire to receive the milk. In a similar manner, a teacher’s desire to give you knowledge and see you succeed will often exceed your own. Consequently, learn to take those gifts that they offer and to disregard the rest.

## **Use mnemonics when necessary**

*“Rabbi Hisda stated, ‘The Torah can only be acquired with the aid of mnemonic signs, for it is said, “Put it in their mouths.”’ (‘Now therefore write this poem for you, and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this poem may be a witness for me against the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 31:19).’)” (B. Eiruvin 54b)*

Comment: A mnemonic is an aid for memory, often a verse or rhyme that can help one recall specific bits of knowledge. For example, in mathematics some students use the first letters of the words of the phrase, “**P**lease **E**xcuse **M**y **D**ear **A**unt **S**ally,” to remind themselves that in simplifying mathematical expressions, it is done the order of parentheses, exponents, multiplication and division, and addition and subtraction. I’ve never been a big fan of these types of mnemonics for myself. Instead, I usually memorize a key fact or theorem from which many others may quickly be derived, and in that way, the theorem becomes my mnemonic. However, everyone is different, and everyone needs to find their own way of learning and remembering the material. At its heart, a mnemonic is a way of compressing the data into a small bit of information that is more easily remembered, and I find it fascinating that people identified and utilized this technique so long ago.

## **There’s no limit to how much you can learn**

*“Rabbi Zera or, as some say, Rabbi Hanina ben Papa further stated, ‘Come and see that not as the standards of mortal man are the standards of the Holy One, blessed be He.*

*According to the standards of mortal man, an empty vessel is able to contain what is put into it, and a full vessel cannot contain it. But according to the standards of the Holy One, blessed be He, a full vessel is able to contain it, while an empty one cannot. As it is said, “And it shall come to pass, if you shall listen diligently (Deuteronomy 28:1).” If you listen, you will continue to listen, but if not, you will not listen.’” (B. Sukkah 48a)*

Comment: I vividly remember how when I graduated from high school, one of my friends expressed the opinion that their brain was full and couldn't possibly contain any more information. Fortunately, they were wrong. No matter how much we learn, there is always room for more, and as one of the passages quoted above indicated, the world exists solely for the sake of learning. However, because learning is so important and because human beings have such a capacity for it, we should always engage in lifelong learning. It is sad to see those who have forsaken learning and, consequently, deteriorated in their ability to think as they have gotten older (as a consequence of their own negligence rather than disease). Likewise, it is inspirational to encounter those who continue to grow in wisdom and knowledge despite their advanced years. The ancient rabbis knew that scholarship was the key to such graceful aging, and they highlighted this point in their commentary on *Ecclesiastes*,

*“Rabbi Samuel ben Rabbi Isaac taught in the name of Rabbi Samuel ben Eleazar, ‘The seven vanities mentioned by Koheleth correspond to the seven worlds which a man beholds. At a year old he is like a king seated in a canopied litter, fondled and kissed by all. At two and three he is like a pig, sticking his hands in the gutters. At ten he skips like a kid. At twenty he is like a neighing horse, adorning*

*his person and longing for a wife. Having married, he is like an ass. When he has begotten children, he grows brazen like a dog to supply their food and wants. When he has become old, he is bent like an ape. What has just been said holds good only of the ignorant, but of those versed in the Torah it is written, “Now King David was old (I Kings 1:1)” — although he was “old”, he was still a “king.”” (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 1:3)*

**To master a subject, first learn the basics from one teacher, and then learn from several teachers**

*“‘And he shall be like a tree transplanted by streams of water (Psalm 1:3)’ — Those of the school of Rabbi Jannai said ‘a tree transplanted,’ not ‘a tree planted,’ which implies that whoever learns Torah from one master only will never achieve great success. Said Rabbi Hisda to the rabbinic students, ‘I have a mind to tell you something, though I fear that you might leave me and go elsewhere. Whoever learns Torah from one master only will never achieve great success.’ They did leave him and went to sit before Rabbah, who, however, explained to them that the maxim only applies to lessons in logical deductions. But as to oral traditions, it is better to learn from one master only so that one is not confused by the variations in the terms used.” (B. Avodah Zarah 19a-19b)*

Comment: This passage makes a point that I have not heard expressed by modern day education theorists. Namely, that when you are first learning a subject, it is good to stick with the same teacher so that there will be continuity in your learning. However, once you have mastered the basics, then it is definitely to your advantage to study with a



variety of people so that your learning will incorporate a variety of positions and points of view. By emphasizing the need at some point for multiple teachers, the rabbis are perhaps also suggesting that the truth of a matter can only be arrived at through diverse approaches, and that by not embracing diversity, we impair our ability to advance in understanding.

### **Make your home a learning environment**

*“Invite scholars into your house and be covered by the dust of their feet and drink in their words.” (Pirkei Avot 1:4)*

Comment: There were times in both ancient Israel and in America, during pioneer days, when it was customary to invite teachers over for dinner. And there have been other times during which it was the custom for teachers to invite their students *en masse* into their abode for dinner. However, these days it is not so customary to make your house such a meeting ground for scholars. However, even if you do not fill your house with scholars in a physical sense, there is another manner that you should pursue. In particular, create a library for yourself! The principle above is that your house should be filled with the words of those who can teach you, and what better way to do that than to fill your house with the records of their words? Consequently, whether you physically invite teachers over, or establish your own reference library for the subjects you are interested in, or whether your key to learning consists of just a card for access to your local library, be sure that you bring words of knowledge into your home.

## Learn to think for yourself

*“Drink waters out of your own cistern, and running waters out of your own well.”*

*(Proverbs 5:15)*

Comment: Based on *Kabbalah*<sup>1</sup>, I like to think that there are three main stages to scholarship. At the first level or stage, you are simply a sponge absorbing whatever knowledge is put in front of you. You are in an enriched environment, and learning through exposure is fairly effortless. In the second stage, you have to apply yourself and show some discipline. This is where you have to make an effort and work with what has been given to you in order to deepen your knowledge. And finally, in the third stage, you become like the camel. Just as a camel can live off of its own stored fat and water, when you are at this stage you have to live off of the learning and knowledge that you have stored within, and from that knowledge you distill your own wisdom. We could also say that these three stages are characterized, for example, by living in an environment surrounded by *Torah* (effortless learning through exposure), actively studying *Torah* (exerting discipline and making an active effort to learn), and discovering your own insights in *Torah* (drawing from your own well of knowledge to create your own wisdom).

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<sup>1</sup> These stages correspond to the three paths on the left side of the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* connecting the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, *Hod*, *Gevurah*, and *Binah*. They correspond, in turn, to the Hebrew letters *lamed*, *peh*, and *gimmel*. *Lamed* stands for *limmud*, learning; *peh* represents the mouth which must be disciplined; and *gimmel* is *gamal*, the camel.

### **Don't waste precious time**

*“Morning sleep, midday wine, children’s talk, and sitting in the assemblies of the ignorant remove a man from the world.” (Pirkei Avot 3:10)*

Comment: Life is shorter than you think, and learning is more important than you realize. Don't waste a precious opportunity.

### **Be sincere in your endeavors**

*“No student whose inner character does not match their outward character may enter the house of study.” (B. Baba Metzia 59b)*

Comment: Don't be two-faced! On the one hand, we often filter our expressions and our comments for the sake of a greater peace, and that is appropriate. That is just being diplomatic. Just because you momentarily think your neighbor is pond scum doesn't mean you should blurt that out. You're opinion may change by the next day, and you may decide that he or she is now your ally and your best friend. But on the other hand, to continually express one thing while thinking another is a despicable form of deception that is usually engaged in for the purpose of manipulating people and events. If you want to be a good person and a good scholar, then be honest with yourself and others.

### **Everything is an opportunity for learning**

*“Who is wise? He who learns from every man.” (Pirkei Avot 4:1)*

Comment: Every single moment is an opportunity for us to learn more, and as is stated in *Pirkei Avot*, every person can be our teacher if we but open ourselves to the lesson.

### **Set aside fixed times for study**

*“That brings forth its fruit in its season and whose leaf doth not wither (Psalm 1:3)’ — was explained by Raba as follows, ‘If he brings forth his fruit in its season (studies at fixed times), then his leaf will not wither (he will remember what he has learned).’”*

*(B. Avodah Zarah 19b)*

*“Raba expounded, ‘Appoint fixed times for the study of the Torah.’” (B. Eiruvim 54b)*

*“Shammai used to say, ‘Make your Torah study a fixed duty.’” (Pirkei Avot 1:15)*

Comment: Have you ever made a resolution, stuck with it for awhile, and then forgot about it? Chances are that you have, and just as we often start with a resolution to learn a subject, after awhile we get distracted and forget our original intent. A remedy to this, however, is to set for yourself a schedule and then stick to it. For myself, I generally create daily a list of things to get done, and then by frequently referring to the list I stay on track. When I was in graduate school, I realized that it was going to be like a job, and just as a job has a daily schedule, so I had to adhere to a daily schedule of class and study in order to get the job done. It’s the same with school at all levels. Thus, create a study schedule for yourself and stick to it. In that way, the task will be accomplished before you know it.

## **Study what you have a passion for**

*“A man can learn well only that part of the Torah which is his heart's desire, for it is said, ‘But whose delight is in the law of the Lord (Psalm 1:2).’” (B. Avodah Zarah 19a)*

Comment: I have a passion for mathematics and for rabbinic literature, but I don't expect everyone to have the same degree of interest or ability that I may have in these areas.

However, I do expect everyone to be passionate about learning something. Years ago I had a student who worked hard in his algebra course, but he did not have much natural ability in mathematics. However, he did have a great passion for ancient European folklore and literature. I encouraged him to pursue his passion in these areas, and he did, and he is now a teacher with his own students. Consequently, find something in life that you are passionate about and pursue it. Otherwise, you're just wasting your time.

## **Be honest**

*“Raba said, ‘When man is led in for Judgment he is asked, “Did you act with integrity, did you fix times for learning, did you engage in procreation, did you hope for salvation, did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom, did you understand one thing from another?”’” (B. Shabbat 31a)*

Comment: I've always found it interesting that the *Talmud* would say that the first question you are asked after you die concerns whether or not you were honest with other people. Certainly, we must endeavor to show integrity in our dealings with others, and we must demonstrate honesty both in and out of the classroom and not try to advance

ourselves through dishonest means. As the cost of higher education has skyrocketed, some feel that cheating has also become more and more prevalent. A student, though, should refrain from cheating and take pride in knowing that the grade they got is the grade they earned. Furthermore, the long term consequences of cheating can be disastrous both to one's self and to others. No one wants to be operated on by a doctor who cheated or to work in a building constructed by an engineer that cheated. Additionally, when you cheat in school, there is one other person who is also being harmed. You are cheating yourself out of a good education and a chance to learn and grow.

### **Old scholars still deserve respect**

*“Which thou didst break, and thou shalt put them in the ark.’ Rabbi Joseph said, ‘This teaches us that both the second set of tablets and the fragments of the original tablets were deposited in the ark. Hence we learn that a scholar who has forgotten his learning through no fault of his must not be treated with disrespect.’” (B. Menachoth 99a)*

Comment: As it says in *Ecclesiastes*,

*“Remember now your Creator, in the days of your youth before the evil days come ... before the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look out of the windows are dimmed, and the doors are shut on the streets, when the*

*sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low.” (Ecclesiastes 12:1-4)*

In other words, to all of us there will come a time when the teeth (grinders) aren't what they used to be and the eyes (windows) will no longer see with the clarity of youth. Old age and its accompanying deterioration are part of the natural cycle of things, and to every scholar there will come a time when their skills diminish. However, what is lost in terms of youthful energy is often compensated for by mature wisdom, and even when that is gone, old scholars and the elderly still deserve respect. Not everyone makes it to their stage of life, and they often still have much to offer. We simply have to make more of an effort on our part to construct a vehicle through which they can make their offering.

### **Take good care of your brain**

*“When wine goes in, secrets come out.” (B. Sanhedrin 38a)*

Comment: The context of this proverb is that, in Hebrew, the word for “wine” and the word for “secret” have the same numerical value of 70, thus suggesting a connection between the two words, and the plain meaning of the above passage is that wine causes the tongue to lose constraint in such a way that we say all sorts of things that we wouldn't utter otherwise. However, there is another way in which this passage from the *Talmud* can be interpreted. A secret can also refer to hidden wisdom. For example, in *Proverbs* we read,

*“It is the glory of God to conceal a thing, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.” (Proverbs 25:2)*

This suggests that the word “secret” can also refer to things that God has concealed from us but wishes us, nonetheless, to find out. Verification of this stance can be found in the following passage from *Genesis Rabbah*.

*“It is written, ‘The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him and His covenant, to make them know it (Psalm 25:14).’ Another interpretation, ‘The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him.’ At first the secret of the Lord was with them that feared Him, but later it was with the upright, as it is written, ‘But His secret is unto the upright (Proverbs 3:32),’ and finally with the prophets, as it says, ‘For the Lord God will do nothing, but He reveals His secret unto His servants the prophets (Amos 3:7).’ Now the Holy One, blessed be He, said, ‘This Abraham is God-fearing, as it says, “Now I know that thou art a God-fearing man (Genesis 22:12).” This Abraham is upright, as it says, “The upright love thee (Song of Songs 1:4).” This Abraham is a prophet, as it says, “Now therefore restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet (Genesis 20:7).” Shall I then not reveal it to him?’ Hence, ‘And the Lord said, “ Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?”’” (Genesis Rabbah XLIX:2)*

Thus, the relationship between wine and secrets can be that when wine goes in, our ability to understand the secrets of the universe diminishes. A direct verification of this position is found in the following passage from *Numbers Rabbah* where the topic under discussion is the prohibition of wine in the Nazirite vow.



*“When the wine goes in intelligence takes its leave. Wherever there is wine there is no intelligence. When the wine enters, the secret (sod) comes out. The numerical total of wine (yayin) is seventy and the value of secret (sod) is seventy. Intelligence is distributed in four parts of the body--two portions in the two reins, one in the mouth and one in the heart. How do we know that two parts of wisdom are in the two reins? Because it says, ‘Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts (tuhoth)? (Job 38:36).’ The word ‘tuhoth’ denotes the reins, because they are concealed (tuhoth) in the body. And why is one part is in the heart? Because it says, ‘Make me, therefore, to know wisdom in mine inmost heart (Psalm 51:8).’ And why is one part is in the mouth? Because, ‘My mouth shall speak wisdom (Psalm 49:4).’ The intellect has been deposited in these four receptacles, and correspondingly the Sages have given ‘four’ as the limit for drunkenness. In other words, a fourth of a log of undiluted wine which is as much as four cups of ordinary wine. If a man drinks one cup, which is a quarter, he loses a fourth part of his intellect. If he drinks two cups he loses two parts of his intellect. If he drinks three cups he takes leave of three parts of his intellect and his mind gets confused and he immediately begins to talk at random. If he drinks a fourth cup he completely takes leave of his reason, all the reins are dulled, his mind is confused, and his tongue is tied.” (Numbers Rabbah X:8)*

On the one hand, all cultures have had their drugs and their intoxicants, both legal and otherwise within the context of their particular culture, and the ubiquitous presence of mind-altering potions suggests a legitimate need. For example, cancer patients need relief, one way or another, from the ravages of pain and chemotherapy, and ordinary

people need relief from time to time from the harshness of life. I am not here to debate either the faults or the merits of various substances, whether legal or illegal, but rather to acknowledge that history suggests the presence of certain needs within the human experience. Nonetheless, if one wants to truly know the secrets of the universe, such intoxicants should be avoided as much as possible. When potions go in, deeper intelligence goes out. One could even expand on this to conclude that one should engage in a variety of good behaviors to keep the brain in tip-top shape. In particular, eat a good diet, exercise regularly so that blood gets to the brain, and make a habit of challenging your brain on a daily basis. Like any other muscle in the body, the brain wants to be used, and if it is kept in good shape, then it can unlock the secrets of the universe.

### **Lessons for Teachers**

#### **Be clear in your lectures**

*“Say not a thing that cannot be understood at once, trusting that in the end it will be understood.” (Pirkei Avot 2:4)*

Comment: There are many today who denigrate teaching through lecture as boring and without merit. Instead, hands on learning and group activities are encouraged. While these pedagogical methods have their merits, I see one serious problem that appears to be increasing. In particular, even intelligent students these days are losing their capacity to focus and pay attention. Personally, I see great merit in learning through lecture (and

also in other modalities of instructions), but for lectures to succeed, they must be clear and understandable. A case in point would be the lectures given by Solomon. In *Song of Songs Rabbah*, we read,

*“He (Solomon) pondered the words of the Torah and investigated the meaning of the words of the Torah, and he made handles for the Torah.”*

*(Song of Songs Rabbah I:8)*

By saying that “he made handles for the *Torah*,” the implication is that Solomon explained things in such a way that the people could easily grasp the meaning of each verse. In a similar manner, every teacher should also strive for such a level of clarity in their own lectures that the result is that they can easily be understood by all.

### **Those who can, teach**

*“Rabbi Johanan further said, ‘One who studies the Torah but does not teach it is like the myrtle in the wilderness whose fragrance is wasted.’” (B. Rosh HaShanah 23a)*

*“Nahman the son of Rabbi Hisda gave the following exposition, ‘What is the meaning of the verse, “Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance?” To what may a scholar be compared? To a bottle of fragrant oil. When it is opened, it gives off an aromatic scent, but when covered, its pleasant odor does not spread. Moreover, when a scholar teaches others, things that were hidden become revealed to him, as it is said, “Therefore do the maidens (alamot) love thee,” which may be read to mean “the hidden (alumot) love thee.””’” (B. Avodah Zarah 35b)*

*“Torah which is studied in order to teach is a ‘Torah of lovingkindness,’ but Torah which is not studied in order to teach is not a Torah of lovingkindness.” (B. Sukkah 49b)*

Comment: A quote I often hear is, “Those who can, do. Those who cannot, teach.” This quote is essentially a small variant of a line by George Bernard Shaw from his play *“Man and Superman (1903), ‘Maxims for Revolutionists,’*” and as with many of Shaw’s writings, the line is very clever. However, it is also very wrong. The fact of the matter is that someone has to be able to ‘do’ in order to even become a teacher. To teach anywhere from elementary school to high school, you need to first complete a bachelor’s degree. That’s 23% of the US adult population (25 and older). This already puts you into a very select group. To teach at a community college, you generally need at least a master’s degree (approximately 7% of the US adult population), and to teach at a university, you need a PhD degree. Less than one percent of the US adult population has a doctorate degree, so I would say that whether you teach or not, if you have a doctorate, you can do! The real fact of the matter is that George Bernard Shaw hated both school and teachers as he was growing up, and his opinions are, therefore, rather biased. Consequently, I much prefer the statement of the rabbis that if a person has knowledge and doesn’t share it, then he’s like a flower in the desert whose fragrance is wasted. This statement is much closer to the real truth.

### **We learn from our students**

*“Rabbi Nahman ben Isaac said, ‘Why are the words of the Torah likened to a tree, as it is*

said, “It is a tree of life to them that grasp it?” This is to teach you that just as a small tree may set on fire a bigger tree, so, too, it is with scholars. The younger sharpen the minds of the older.’” (B. Ta’anith 7a)

“Rabbi Hanina said, ‘I have learned much from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but from my students I have learned the most of all.’” (B. Ta’anith 7a)

Comment: The best way to learn a subject is to teach it, and this applies whether you are teaching a student of your own or a fellow peer in a class. Whenever we try to teach something to someone else, we are forced to organize and better comprehend the material for ourselves as well. Additionally, the questions asked by students often force us to look at issues more deeply. As one of my professors in graduate school used to say, “You never really understand a subject until you teach it.”

### **We learn from our peers**

“Rivalry among scholars increases wisdom.” (B. Baba Bartha 21a)

Comment: Just as students need someone to discuss their lessons with, so do scholars also need friendly rivalry to help keep their minds sharp. In the *Talmud* many stories are related about Rabbi Johanan and his disciple, Resh Lakish. At one point, when Resh Lakish dies, Rabbi Johanan is filled with grief over the loss of the person who was both his comrade and his intellectual rival. The following story from the *Talmud* illustrates just how important intellectual rivalry can be.

*“Resh Lakish died, and Rabbi Johanan was plunged into deep grief. Said the Rabbis, ‘Who shall go to ease his mind? Let Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedath go. His disquisitions are very subtle.’ So he went and sat before him, and on every dictum uttered by Rabbi Johanan, Rabbi Eleazar ben Pedath observed, ‘There is a rabbinic teaching which supports you.’ ‘Are you as the son of Lakisha?’ Rabbi Johanan complained. ‘When I stated a law, the son of Lakisha used to raise twenty-four objections, to which I gave twenty-four answers, which consequently led to a fuller comprehension of the law, whilst you say, “A rabbinic teaching has been taught which supports you.” Do I not know myself that my dicta are right?’ Thus he went on rending his garments and weeping, ‘Where are you, O son of Lakisha, where are you, O son of Lakish,’ and he cried thus until his mind was turned. Thereupon the Rabbis prayed for him, and he died.”*

*(B. Baba Metzia 84a)*

### **A student may idolize you a little too much**

*“Rabbi Kahana once went in and hid under Rab's bed. He heard him chatting with his wife and joking and doing what he required. Rabbi Kahana said to him, ‘One would think that Abba's mouth had never sipped the dish before!’ Rab then said to him, ‘Kahana, are you here? Go out, because it is rude.’ Kahana replied, ‘It is a matter of Torah, and I require to learn.’” (B. Berachoth 62a)*

Comment: This is an interesting passage. It illustrates that a student can be so enamored with their teacher to the point where every single action on the part of the teacher is

thought of as a lesson that has to be earned. One can easily imagine such adoration occurring today with regard to some of the top luminaries of the academic world. Still, as is illustrated in the passage above, such adoration can go too far, and the extremes should be discouraged.

### **There are boundaries that must be respected by both students and teachers**

*“It was taught, ‘A disciple must not bathe (go to the public bath house) with his teacher, but if his teacher needs him, it is permitted.’” (B. Pesachim 51a)*

Comment: The old public bath houses of the Roman Empire no longer exist, but a remnant of this dictum can still be found in the those places where, for example, students and faculty have separate restrooms or separate dressing rooms in a gymnasium. The overriding principle, though, is that there should always be some boundaries maintained between teachers and students. Generally speaking, teachers and students are not on equal footing with one another, and hence, a certain degree of formality and protocol must be maintained. Otherwise, as a result of the inequality in the relationship, the potential for abuse is enormous.

### **Use good students to help poor students**

*“The attentive one will read on his own, and if one is inattentive, put him next to a diligent one.” (B. Baba Bartha 21a)*

Comment: I love this particular lesson! The truth is that when we pair a good student with a poor student, both are helped. The good student learns the subject even better by serving as a mentor and trying to explain the material in a way his peer will understand. Similarly, the poor student often learns the subject more easily from a fellow student because they are more likely to “speak the same language.” For example, if you ask an automotive engineer how a car works, you are likely to get an entire discourse on the theory of the internal combustion engine when all you really wanted to know was how to turn on the car and release the parking brake. Similarly, a peer will often explain something at the level that you are ready for rather than at the level that the teacher wants you to eventually attain.

### **Challenge your students**

*“It was taught that Rabbi Akiba said, 'It was not Rabbi Ishmael who laid down this ruling but that disciple, and the halachah (law) is in agreement with that disciple.' Is not this self-contradictory? You first said, 'It was not Rabbi Ishmael who laid down this ruling,' from which it is obvious that the law is not in agreement with his view, and then you say, 'The law is in agreement with that disciple which implies that it is also in agreement with his teacher, Rabbi Ishmael.' Rab Judah replied in the name of Samuel, 'Rabbi Akiba made that statement for the sole purpose of exercising the wits of the students.'”*

*(B. Eirubin 13a)*

Comment: The above passage is a reminder that good teaching has to go beyond the mere recitation of facts and figures. While a certain amount of repetition is necessary to



ingrain appropriate skills and intellectual habits, the brain also needs additional challenges. Hence, neither students nor teachers should aim for the minimum that is required. Instead, they should be challenged to develop excellence. Thus, intermingle simpler exercises with those that will make the brain work harder.

### **Act and dress appropriately**

*“Our Rabbis taught, ‘Six things are unbecoming for a scholar. He should not go abroad scented, he should not go out by night alone, he should not go abroad in patched sandals, he should not converse with a woman in the street, he should not take a set meal in the company of ignorant persons, and he should not be the last to enter the House of Study.’”*  
(B. Berachot 43b)

*“Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba said in Rabbi Johanan's name, ‘It is a disgrace for a scholar to go out with patched shoes into the market place.’”* (B. Shabbat 114a)

*“Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba also said in Rabbi Johanan's name, ‘Any scholar upon whose garment a grease stain is found is worthy of death.’”* (B. Shabbat 114a)

Comment: On the one hand, I’ve never been much for dress codes. After all, Gandhi changed history while wearing only a simple loin cloth. Furthermore, I’ve known too many people who seem to have gotten promoted only for their ability to look good rather than for actual skill. Such people are, as we say in Texas, “All hat and no cattle.” Nevertheless, it is also true that our appearance is not only a reflection upon ourselves, but also upon the profession we have chosen, and if we don’t dress in a way that indicates

self respect, then we can't expect students to respect us either.

### **Don't embarrass your students (or anyone!) in public**

*“A tanna recited before Rabbi Nahman ben Isaac, ‘He who publicly shames his neighbor is as though he shed blood,’ whereupon he remarked to him, ‘You say well, because I have seen such shaming, the ruddiness departing and paleness supervening.’”*

*(B. Baba Metzia 58b)*

Comment: I've always been amazed at how the rabbis took this passage literally rather than simply symbolically. In other words, when we embarrass a person, we literally see the same symptoms and characteristics that we do when a person is physically wounded. Hence, the result reiterates the seriousness of causing embarrassment to others. It is as serious as causing a physical injury and it should be avoided at all costs.

### **There are different types of students**

*“There are four types of character among those who sit before the sages. They are typified by a sponge, a funnel, a strainer, and a sieve. A sponge absorbs all, a funnel lets in at one end and lets out at the other, a strainer lets out the wine but retains the sediment, and a sieve lets out the coarse meal but retains the choice flour.”*

*(Pirkei Avot 5:15)*

Comment: It is well recognized these days, as it was in *Talmudic* times, that there exist different styles to learning. When I was growing up, students had to adjust to whatever the teaching style of the professor was, while today there seems to be more emphasis on the teacher adjusting his or her routine to match the learning style of the student. I prefer an approach that meets in the middle of these two extremes. On the one hand, the teacher must always seek better ways to communicate his subject, and this includes learning to teach in a variety of ways in order to have the greatest impact on the greatest number of students. But on the other hand, learning is not meant to be a passive experience. The student also has to make a considerable effort and reach out to grasp what the teacher is offering. As an old Chinese proverb says, “Teachers open the door, but you must enter by yourself.” A teacher should try to open as many doors for students as possible, but ultimately it’s the student that has to make the effort to enter that portal.

### **There's an optimum class size**

*“Raba further said, ‘The number of pupils to be assigned to each teacher is twenty-five. If there are fifty, we appoint two teachers. If there are forty, we appoint an assistant at the expense of the town.’” (B. Baba Bartha 21a)*

Comment: When I was in college at a big university, I was in some of those classes with a thousand students, and the truth is that while you can learn some things that way, you ultimately have no personal contact with the professor. There is no mentoring relationship that can occur in such a large environment. Consequently, I received some of my best higher education at a local community college where the classes were smaller

and the professors more accessible. In striving for economic efficiency, we shouldn't sacrifice what experience has shown to be the better path to take.

### **Respect your colleagues**

*“Rabbi Jeremiah said in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish, ‘When two scholars are amiable to each other in their discussions in halachah (law), the Holy One, blessed be He, gives heed to them.’” (B. Shabbat 63a)*

*“Rabbi Abba said in the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish, ‘When two scholars pay heed to each other in halachah (law), the Holy One, blessed be He, listens to their voice.’” (B. Shabbat 63a)*

Comment: I believe that the above statement applies equally to both education and politics. We've all seen, for example, how rancor in political discussions can poison the chances of a reasonable compromise, and the same thing can also happen in the academic world. At any given moment, there can exist a variety of opinions surrounding both the desired content of courses and the best pedagogical methods for teaching those subjects. Nonetheless, experience shows that things will progress most smoothly if differing opinions are respected and debated in a logical manner.

## **Don't water down your subject matter**

*“Rav Judah said in Rav's name, ‘Whoever fails to teach a point of law to his student is as though he had robbed him of his ancestral heritage, as it is written, “Moses commanded us a law, even the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob (Deuteronomy 33:4).” It is an inheritance destined for all Israel.’” (B. Sanhedrin 91a)*

Comment: In America, the goal has become for everyone to attain a college education, and, indeed, a bachelor's degree has become a prerequisite for entry into more and more jobs. However, as more students from high school have attempted higher education, the quality of the students in college has diminished as is evidenced by the high percentage of students that need to take remedial courses during their first year in college.

Consequently, this also puts pressure on college teachers to lower their standards so as not to flunk the entire class. However, such pressure needs to be resisted. As is indicated above, when we water down our courses and leave out vital subject matter, we are shortchanging our students. In many instances, the material contained in textbooks is the result of the cumulative work of several people over many lifetimes working hard to bring us to that particular level of knowledge, and if we don't pass this knowledge on to the next generation, then we are robbing them of their inheritance.

## **Avoid mistakes**

*“Raba further said, ‘If there are two teachers of whom one gets on fast but with mistakes and the other slowly but without mistakes, we appoint the one who gets on fast and makes*

*mistakes, since the mistakes correct themselves in time.’ Rabbi Dimi from Nehardea on the other hand said, ‘We appoint the one who goes slowly but makes no mistakes, for once a mistake is implanted it cannot be eradicated.’” (B. Baba Bathra 21a)*

Comment: Everyone will occasionally have one of those days when they write at the board that  $2 + 2 = 5$ , but such typos should be avoided as much as possible. More serious, however, is when a teacher purposely teaches something that is incorrect because they feel that the truth of the matter is too complicated for their students to understand. This results in the mistake becoming ingrained, and in later years, it is difficult to remove. Thus, always strive to teach without making mistakes, either small or large, and if the subject is extremely challenging, then search for a simple way to explain it that is also appropriate to the level at which your students are functioning.

### **Students need to be ready to learn**

*“Do not accept pupils who are less than six years old. From that age on you can accept them and stuff them with learning the way you would stuff an ox.” (B. Baba Bartha 21a)*

*“Five years is the age for the study of scripture, ten for the study of Mishnah, thirteen for becoming subject to the commandments, fifteen for the study of Talmud, eighteen for the bridal canopy, twenty for pursuing a career, thirty for full strength, forty for understanding, fifty for the ability to give counsel, sixty for mature age, seventy for a hoary head, eighty is a sign of superadded strength, ninety is the age for a bending*

*figure, at a hundred, one is as one that is dead, having passed and ceased from the world.” (Pirkei Avot 5:21))*

Comment: One truism we can gather from the above passages is that students need to be ready to learn what we have to teach. With today’s science, we know a lot about the brain and how it matures, and we know that some concepts are difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend until the physical maturation of the brain has reached a certain point. These days it seems like there is an effort to push more and more advanced material onto students at younger and younger ages as competition with the rest of the globe increases. Nonetheless, students in America still seem to lag behind those in many other industrialized nations. Again, it needs to be recognized that the brain takes several years to mature, and what we ask of our students must be appropriate to their current state of development.

### **Restrain yourself when disciplining students**

*“When you wish to punish a student, hit him with nothing harder than a shoelace.”*

*(B. Baba Bartha 21a)*

Comment: If you think about it, in spite of all the difficulties that can arise in classroom management, the relationship between teacher and student is still asymmetrical. In other words, the teacher naturally has the bulk of the power. The teacher knows what the student doesn’t know, and the teacher has the power to determine the final grade. Consequently, because the teacher does have so much power in classroom situations, that

power must always be exercised with restraint in order to prevent abuse.

### **Take good care of your brain**

*“When wine goes in, secrets come out.” (B. Sanhedrin 38a)*

Comment: See the comment under “Lessons for Students.” What applies to students applies to teachers as well!

### **College still isn't for everyone.**

*“If a student does not see a sign of blessing (i.e. progress) in his studies after five years, he never will.” (B. Chullin 24a )*

Comment: The sad fact is that IQ is indeed normally distributed with a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. What this means is that the distribution of intelligence conforms to a bell shaped curve where, at any given moment, half the population is functioning at below average intellect. Hence, life is not like it is in the mythical “Lake Woebegone” where “all the children are above average.” The real world is harsher than that, and there will always be those who, unfortunately, will not be able to succeed at college. Thus, if after a reasonable amount of time, a student is not able to achieve success, then they should, perhaps, be encouraged to explore other options in life.



## **Be a fountain<sup>2</sup> of knowledge**

*“Rabbi Tanhuma said, ‘Just as the spice-maker’s chest (migdaloth) is full of all manner of spices, so a scholar should be full of Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, halachoth (law) and haggadoth (parables).’” (Song of Songs Rabbah V:18)*

Comment: We used to say that as a person progresses through higher education and becomes increasingly specialized, they learn more and more about less and less. The recommendation above is for teachers to do just the opposite. Seek to learn as much as you can about everything, particularly in your chosen endeavor. For instance, even if you routinely only teach algebra courses, fill yourself also with knowledge of calculus, statistics, and several other areas of mathematics. Furthermore, learn things outside of your discipline, too. That way, you will exceed the minimum of what you should know, and you will always have something additional to offer to your students.

## **Give your students the benefit of the doubt**

*“Judge all men in the scale of merit.” (Pirkei Avot 1:6)*

Comment: When there is no evidence to the contrary, always give your students the benefit of the doubt. Thus, I always assume at the beginning that a student is honest in what they tell me, that they apply themselves to their homework, and that if their final average is 89.5, then they are really an “A” student. Future facts may suggest otherwise,

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<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew letter *ayin* means “fountain,” and this letter also connects the center of the *Kabbalistic Tree of Life* to *Binah*, the highest level of functioning of our rational brain. Thus, by being a fountain of knowledge, a teacher helps to raise their students to that highest level of cognitive functioning.

but I always begin by assuming the best about my students, and this seems to help bring out the best within them.

### **We forget so that we can engage in lifelong learning**

*“Rabbi Isaac said, ‘It is for man’s good that he learns Torah and forgets it, because if a man studied Torah and never forgot it, he would occupy himself with learning it for two or three years and then resume his ordinary work and never pay further attention to it. But since a man studies Torah and forgets it, he will not entirely abandon its study.’”*  
(Ecclesiastes Rabbah I:32)

*“It is not incumbent upon you to finish the work, but neither are you entitled to refrain from it.”* (Pirkei Avot 2:16)

Comment: One of the frustrating things of life is the principle of “use it or lose it.” We often work hard to learn a new skill, a problem solving technique, or a new language, and then if we don’t use that knowledge, we tend to forget it at an exponential pace.

Consequently, people have long joked about the five minutes worth of information that one remembers after finishing one’s formal education. Therefore, it’s nice to not only learn that people have always had this problem, but to also see what a positive spin one can put on this situation. Exactly because we do forget things over time, everyone can and should engage in lifelong learning. And constantly learning a lesson anew can add both freshness and depth to our understanding of it.



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