

# THE MAKINGS OF A BEN TORAH

From an Address at the Ordination Exercises of  
Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary,  
an affiliate of  
Yeshiva University

*March 6, 1983*

by  
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# THE MAKINGS OF A BEN TORAH

**The President of  
Yeshiva University  
charges and  
challenges the  
graduating rabbinic  
class**

**NORMAN  
LAMM**

To be a rabbi, one must first of all be a *ben Torah*.

What or who is a *ben Torah*? The translation, "a scholar of the Torah," does not do the term justice; it is far too restrictive. A better definition would be "a Torah person"—bearing in mind that one cannot truly be a "Torah person" without first being an accomplished Torah scholar.

What, then, are the extra ingredients, beyond talmudic learning, that go to make up a Torah person, a Torah personality?

Someone once said that education is what a person has left after he has forgotten all that he has learned. Applying this to a *ben Torah*, we might then ask what distinguishes a *ben Torah* from others after you have subtracted all that he has learned of Talmud Bavli and Yerushalmi, of Rashi and Tosafot, of Rishonim and Acharonim, of Rambam and Ramban, of Tur and Shulchan Aruch, of Shach and Taz, of R. Hayyim and R. Akiva Eger. Remove all that and ask: What makes (or should make) us different and special? What, in other words, are the attitudinal foundations that inform the mentality of a *ben Torah*?

The most obvious and the primary answer is that a Torah person loves and esteems the Torah and Torah learning.

So, if a *ben Torah* forgets all that he has learned, his first task is—to learn it all over again. "For [the words of Torah] are our life and the length of our days" (*Siddur*). Inscribed in the cornerstone of our yeshiva is the principle that R. Hayyim of Volozhin cemented 180 years ago in the foundation of his yeshiva, Yeshivat Etz Hayyim, the mother of all yeshivot since. This mishnaic dictum, *v'talmud Torah k'negged kulam*—the study of Torah outweighs all other commandments—is to be taken not quantitatively, but functionally. The study of Torah is not only greater than the sum

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of all the other commandments; it is their very source. Torah is the "tree of life"; all the other commandments are the branches of that tree. Accordingly, the study of Torah is the source of all Jewish life.

That is why your overarching commitment is to learn, and then learn more. The day you stop studying, the day you stop climbing the road to Torah excellence, is the day you are no longer a *ben Torah*. On that day, all that is written on your rabbinic diploma is rendered meaningless.

I have long wondered about an imbalance between our early morning and our late evening prayers. Upon arising in the morning and upon going to sleep at night we recite two blessings that are quite parallel to each other. In the morning we bless God "who removes sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eyelids." Similarly, after reciting the *Sh'ma* before retiring, we bless God "who closes my eyes in sleep and my eyelids in slumber." However, accompanying these blessings are two additional petitions that are not really analagous. The night prayer seems reasonable enough: "May it be Thy will . . . to grant that I lie down in peace and that I rise up in peace. Let not my thoughts upset me—nor evil dreams, nor sinful fancies," etc. By the same token we should expect that the morning prayer should ask that God grant that we rise up in peace, that we prosper, that we be spared all misfortune. Instead, we pray, "May it be Thy will . . . to habituate us to thy Torah, and to cause us to adhere to Thy precepts," etc.

Why the asymmetry?

Because a true *ben Torah* must know and understand that without Torah, he cannot know that he is awake. How do we know that our lives are not but dreams—and not necessarily pleasant ones, at that? Without our daily contact with the eternal, without this glorious communication with the transcendental to elevate and transform the routines of daily life, what difference does it make whether we are sleeping or not sleeping?

A *rav* who does not practice "habituate us to thy Torah" is not only in a state of somnolence; he is inauthentic. His mind and his heart are sealed even if his eyes are open.



Moreover, he is cut off from his moorings, alone in the world. A *ben Torah* without Torah is an orphan.

So the love of Torah is an absolute prerequisite in the mentality of a *ben Torah*. We expect you, therefore, to enhance your own love of Torah. Let it motivate you to greater learning, let it inspire you to goad your fellow Jews until they, too, achieve the status of being Torah persons, and always know that a rabbi is not a rabbi if he is not a *ben Torah*.

After your years here, so much must by now be obvious to you. Are there, then, other ingredients, beyond study, that are required of the *ben Torah*?

There is *ahavat Yisrael*, the love of Israel; this is the love that complements your love of Torah.

Remember always that Torah was not meant exclusively to provide for you *own* spiritual needs, your *own* religious integrity, your *own* intellectual creativity. The Talmud refers to the study of Torah for its own sake as "an elixir of life." But it is the kind of medicine of which you must be not only the consumer but also the pharmacist. It is a medicine that if kept on the shelf and never dispensed is no longer a medicine but merely a chemical, one that in time can become dangerous.

The problem with too many of us in the yeshivot is that we have somehow managed to assimilate—excessively—the spirit of the times. Society today is highly narcissistic. Everywhere, the quest is for self-fulfillment, for self-expression, for self-realization. Unfortunately, we have too often adopted that self-centeredness in its spiritual form, and we have thereby become religious narcissists. We are too concerned with our own Torah growth, and the result of this spiritual introversion is an indifference, at times even an antipathy, to Jews who are unlike us, who are, by our standards, deficient in learning or in commitment or in observance. As a consequence, even those who admirably devote their lives to the teaching of Torah, as rabbis or as educators, confine themselves to preaching to the converted, come to see themselves as halachic technicians. Their sense of

responsibility for others' lives—physical as well as intellectual, worldly as well as spiritual, psychological as well as scholarly—is inadequate.

From this there derives a deep malaise in our community, a malaise that must be exposed if it is to be uprooted. For Torah was meant for *all* Jews, not just for a small circle of the religiously privileged, the halachic cognoscenti. It was meant for laymen as well as rabbis, for those who yearn for the poetry of Torah as well as for those who revel in its intellectual rigor, for those who are not yet observant as well as for those who already are.

And that means that rabbis, whether in the pulpit or the classroom, must use all the forms of communication in order to bring Torah close to Israel—not just those forms that confer prestige in the halls of the yeshiva.

Perhaps that is why, right after we ask God that it be His will that He habituate us to Torah, we add, "Lead us not into sin, transgression, iniquity, temptation or disgrace." The temptation of smugness? The disgrace of ignoring or denigrating those who are not yet within the circle of Torah and *mitzvot*?

I do not want to be unkind or unfair. I recognize the psychological reality: After such deep immersion in the study of Torah here at Yeshiva, with criteria and standards so very different from, so far beyond those that prevail in the "outside" world, it is understandable if we sometimes feel discomfort with those who have not attained such a level, who have never aspired to it, who—perhaps—look down upon it because they have never experienced its intellectual stimulation, its moral beauty, its ethereal sanctity, its transcendental significance.

Let me confess to you: I, too, am uncomfortable with many Jews and with many types of Jews. Any rabbi, any principal, any Jewish leader, any president of Yeshiva University has to deal with a variety of people of whose views he may not approve, whose life-styles he may not share, whose company he may not enjoy—or whom he simply does not like.

I can give you a whole list of my own pet peeves, of Jews with whom I do not feel particularly relaxed: Jews who are either enamored of or intolerant of non-Jews; Jews who are embarrassed by their Jewishness or who are aggressively holier-than-thou; zealots who burn the Israeli flag and Israelis who believe that now that we have a Jewish state we do not need Torah; Jews who are indistinguishable from WASPs and Israelis who regret that they are not WASPs; Op-Ed page writers who loudly proclaim their Jewishness and then go on to excoriate Israel with venom. And the list goes on, and on.

But—and this is my point—so what if I am not comfortable with them? The love of Israel means that even if I do not approve of them or endorse their views or relish their company or even *like* them—I must *love* them. I must dedicate my life to saving and enhancing and enriching their lives, to healing them spiritually and physically, to comforting them, to bringing them to Torah and Torah to them—and them to each other.

That is what the love of Israel is all about. It is not an easy *mitzvah*. And it is especially incumbent upon Jewish leaders and *b'nei Torah*.

This duty of the *ben Torah* towards his fellow Jews was already adumbrated by Moses. I believe, rather shockingly, I suppose, that Moses did not especially like his Jews. He did not find them congenial, he was not comfortable with them, he did not enjoy their presence. He had little respect for them, he had no desire to impress them, he did not seek their approbation, there was virtually no mutuality between him and the people.

Truth to tell, Moses was not the sort of man who could be easily pleased. It is usually difficult to develop an easy relationship with a perfectionist, let alone the greatest prophet who ever lived. And it is also true that there wasn't much to like about these Israelites. They were an impetuous and whining and capricious lot. Moses broke open for them the horizons of Heaven, and they concentrated on their trivial needs and petty wants. He offered them a career of holiness, and they snivelled about leeks and onions





Yeshiva University

Rabbi Lamm and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik (front, 4th and 5th from left) with faculty and members of the graduating class

and garlic. He offered freedom, and they complained that they were thirsty. He pointed to the heights of the spirit, and they yearned for the fleshpots of Egypt and coveted another *fleishig* meal. They were ungrateful, stubborn, slow to learn and narrow.

But Moses was passionate in his love for Israel. Remember that Moses was the only human being in history to whom God made the offer that, for his sake, He would abandon the Children of Israel and raise up a new people from his, Moses's, loins, and that this new people would be the Chosen People, descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and—Moses. But Moses refused. He gave up this stunning opportunity. Not only that; his refusal bespoke his feeling of injury on his people's behalf. For after he asked God to forgive his people, he went on to say, "And if not, erase me from Thy Book" (Exodus 32:32). He loved the Jews so much that he was willing to forfeit, for them, his life, his fate, his destiny and eternity.

Moses loved them enough to risk and sacrifice all for them—but he did not like them very much. As a result, he was impatient with them, intolerant, angry and upset.

So Moses teaches all Jews, and especially Jewish leaders imbued with

Torah, that love transcends liking. You will recall that Ramban interprets the commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" as dealing with function, not emotion; act lovingly towards your fellow man even if you do not particularly like him. Similarly, *ahavat Yisrael* is volitional, not affective. To possess true love of Israel means to overcome your dislikes and your distastes, your peeves and your complaints, and to serve your people heroically.

Moses was the ultimate archetype of the *rav*, the *rosh yeshiva*, the *talmid chacham*—the *ben Torah*. His difficulties, his challenges, his ambivalences and his resolutions are all a model for Torah leadership in the personal and social problems that confront us.

It is this love of Israel that will inspire you to devote your lives, whether vocationally or avocationally, to the sacred service of Torah and Israel; to risk problems and peacelessness of mind; to travel far and wide to seek out our people. The mission upon which you now embark is, truly, a mission of love.

These twin loves, the love of Torah and the love of Israel, are what a true *rav*, a true *ben Torah*, has left even

after he has forgotten all that he has learned. These are the basic attitudes that inform and orient and motivate him.

Your teachers have found you worthy of bearing the mantle of the rabbin. This means that they have trust and confidence in your learning—and also in your love of learning and in your love of your fellow Jews, all of them.

I have no doubt that that trust and that confidence will be vindicated as you go forth, each in his own way, to spread the learning of Torah and to serve your people Israel and, in the process, bring much comfort and pride to your families, your teachers, your yeshiva.

On your behalf, I—and, I am sure, all our people—pray for you, in the words of the latter half of that morning prayer I discussed earlier, the prayer that begins with a petition for habituating us to His Torah and letting us cleave to His commandments:

"Grant us today and every day, grace, favor and mercy, both in Thy sight and in the sight of all men, and bestow loving-kindness on us. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who bestowest loving-kindness on Thy people Israel." ★



# MUSMAKHM

(1981-1983)

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