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# WISDOM FROM ALL MY TEACHERS

CHALLENGES AND INITIATIVES IN  
CONTEMPORARY TORAH EDUCATION

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*ATIDTIVU*

ACADEMY FOR TORAH INITIATIVES AND DIRECTIONS

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## PREFACE

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בן זומא אומר איזהו חכם הלומד מכל אדם שנאמר (תהלים קיט:צט) "מכל מלמדי השכלתי." – אבות פ"ד, מ"א

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אמרו חכמי האומות כי היודע כל החכמות אם אינו אוהב החכמה אינו חכם אלא טיפש הוא אחר שאינו אוהב החכמה כי היא הדעת. אך האוהב אותה ומתאוה אליה אע"פ שאינו יודע כלום הרי זה נקרא חכם שעל כל פנים תשיג אל החכמה האמיתית "יודעת אלקים תמצא" (משלי ב:ה). ועל זה אמר בן זומא "איזהו חכם הלומד מכל אדם" שכל כך אוהב החכמה ומתאוה אליה ששואל לכל אדם ואף מי שאינו יודע כי אם דבר אחר [נ"א: אחד] ילמד ממנו ואז יצליח דרכו ואז ישכיל. ועל זה נקרא חכם שנאמר "מכל מלמדי השכלתי" שכן אמר דוד ע"ה שלמד מכל אדם ולא היה אומר זה אינו יודע כמוני כי מכלם למד והשכיל. משל לאדם שהפסיד כלי קטן והלא מכל אדם מבקש אותו: – פירוש רבינו יונה על אבות

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Ben-Zoma says: Who is wise? One who learns from every person, as Scripture states (Ps. 119:99): "From *all* my teachers I grew wise."

– *Avot* 4:1.

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The sages of the nations declared that if one were to know *all* wisdom, yet not *love* wisdom – such a person is not wise, but a fool, since he does not love wisdom, which is the knowledge. However, one who loves and hungers after wisdom, even were he to know nothing at all, is called "wise" – since inevitably he will acquire true wisdom "and attain knowledge of God" (Prov. 2:5). About this, Ben-Zoma said: "Who is Wise? One who learns from every person" – since he so greatly loves and hungers after wisdom that he seeks it from every person, even from someone who knows merely one thing. He will learn from that person, succeed, and become enlightened. For this trait he is called wise, as Scripture says, "From *all* my teachers I grew wise." Thus stated King David, who learned from all, never saying, "This one knows not as much as I" – but from *every* person he learned and gained insight. This is similar to one who loses a small item, and seeks it from each person.

– Rabbeinu Yonah on *Avot*

BEN ZOMA'S READING of the verse in *Tehillim* about the acquisition of wisdom – from which we have borrowed the title of our book – is a most appropriate epigraph for a collection of essays and reflections by teachers of Torah about the holy task they undertake. The best educators are themselves perennial students, and a true student is one who learns from all because he or she loves wisdom (the literal meaning of the Greek word “philosophy”). This idea is echoed in another well-known talmudic source: “Much Torah have I learned from my rabbis [and teachers], from my colleagues even more, but from my *students* most of all.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, upon entering *yeshivot*, or other settings of traditional Torah study, one encounters a unique educational setting, one in which teachers don't teach and students don't study – rather, everyone *learns*. In addition to learning, however, educators must *also* teach. Much can be said about the relationship between learning and teaching and, as we know, Rambam counts these two components as one unified *mitzvah*.<sup>2</sup> It is no surprise, then, that one's students – and the need to teach them – serve as the greatest impetus to a teacher's ongoing acquisition of wisdom.

In this light, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik resolved an apparent contradiction in the *halakhab*.<sup>3</sup> On one hand, we are obligated to recite the blessing over Torah study (*birkat ha-Torah*) prior to any learning whatsoever. On the other hand, even though one does indeed fulfill the *mitzvah* of Torah study through mental contemplation alone (*birbur*), no blessing is required.<sup>4</sup> The Rav explained that although silent and solitary study does constitute the learning component of *talmud Torah* (as defined by Rambam), it lacks the potential for the second component, namely, *teaching*. Torah study, in its fullest sense, is always dialogical – possessing the capability to educate others. Silent contemplation (*birbur*), although a fulfillment of “You shall meditate on it [Torah] day and night” (Josh. 1:8), does not meet the criterion for requiring its own blessing, since it is impossible to teach others through *birbur* alone.

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<sup>1</sup> *Makkot* 10a; cf. version in *Ta'anit* 7a. On Maharal's discussion of Ben Zoma's principle, see Yael Wieselberg's essay in this volume.

<sup>2</sup> See his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment #11, and the introduction to *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (as opposed to the opinion of *Bebag* and *Semag*, e.g.).

<sup>3</sup> Cited by R. Mordecai (Morton) Green in *Ha-Darom* 64 (Elul 5755): 95. See also the opening discussion in R. Aharon Lichtenstein's essay in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> This question is based upon the *halakhab* as presented by the *Shulhan Arukh* in *Orah Hayyim* 47:4, from which the Vilna Gaon dissents in his *Bi'ur ha-Gra*.

In both the halakhic tradition and in pedagogical practice, learning and teaching are symbiotically connected. The teacher's own learning reaches its full potential when it is transmitted to students – and the teaching of those students forms the basis for the teacher's own wisdom.

This volume, an outgrowth of the work begun by the Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions in Jewish Education (ATID), which is based in Jerusalem, offers reflections by leading Jewish educators from Israel and the Diaspora on our most pressing issues. ATID has been working since 1998 to create a broad community of Torah educators; our conviction is that the much-needed reforms in Jewish education will come through involving all those entrusted with this work: teachers and parents, administrators and lay leadership, formal and informal educators, academics and school personnel, students of *yeshivot* and of universities. We seek to bring all actively and intensely together in ATID to map out the future and create a new generation of educational decision-makers, designers, and practitioners. ATID's work, and this book by extension, seeks to be a forum in which the interplay between learning and teaching – in all of its complexity – can be activated and explored.

The twenty essays in this volume are both descriptive and prescriptive. The authors represent a remarkable cross-section of contemporary Torah educators: men and women; teachers with but a few years of experience side by side with the leading figures in Torah teaching. The issues they cover include the nature of the *mitzvah* of *talmud Torah* and its relation to the love and awe of God, and to personal moral development; the role of worldly wisdom in Torah education; the cultivation of the student's soul; the challenges of teaching students or adults who do not fit into the mold of the traditional curriculum; deliberations on the teaching of Talmud and *Tanakh* to this generation; the use of philosophy and *Aggadab* in the yeshivah curriculum; and the place of the Israel experience in shaping the religious personality.

By definition, a book is a static vehicle to convey a message and communicate ideas, yet we hope this volume will serve on one level as a snapshot of ATID's dynamic and rigorous effort to explore and translate those ideas into innovative practice. Furthermore, we believe that the body of thinking that stands behind the book has the potential to both enlighten and ennoble our work, and that it may serve as a springboard for the type of deliberation that will foster educational improvement in a variety of settings. In sum, our goal is for these essays to stimulate all who feel strongly about the future of Torah teaching. Regardless of your window on the

world of Jewish education – be it from within home, school, or synagogue – we hope our book will provoke you to think more profoundly and act more sensitively toward the complexities and challenges that we face together as teachers of Torah in the contemporary world. It is our prayer that *Wisdom From All My Teachers* will aid the community of Jewish educators, parents, and policy-makers in our collective efforts on behalf of Jewish children and the Jewish people.

Finally, in the spirit of *Sukkah* 49b, may we all be reminded of the most sublime aim of learning:

Rabbi Elazar said: What does it mean, “Her mouth is open with wisdom, and the Torah of kindness is on her tongue” (Prov. 31:26)? Is there a “Torah of kindness” and a Torah that is not of kindness?... Some explain, studying Torah in order to teach – this is Torah of kindness; studying Torah without the intention of teaching – this is Torah that is not of kindness.

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*Hag Matan Torah*