Jewish Tribune – Teruma

**Torah Transformations**

The Gemoro is Berachos (28a) tells the famous story of when Rebbi Elozor ben Azaryah was appointed the Rosh Yeshiva, replacing the deposed Rabban Gamliel.

One of the first decisions Rebbi Elozor ben Azaryah made was to change the yeshiva entrance policy. Previously only talmidim who were “tocho k’baro” could join, talmidim whose inside mirrored their outside. This was an exclusive policy which attracted top students who had no pretences and were genuine, through and through.

This policy found its roots in our parsha. The aron hakodesh was made up of three boxes, an inner and outer one of gold and a middle one of wood which was inserted in between the two gold boxes. The aron was therefore “tocho k’baro”, its’ inside was like it’s outside, both made of gold.

Unsurprisingly, when Rebbi Elozor ben Azaryah relaxed the policy, the number of talmidim who joined the yeshiva increased dramatically. Two opinions are recorded in the Gemoro – either 400 or 700 benches had to be added to the Beis Hamedrash.

The late Gateshead Rov, Rav Betzalel Rakow ztl noted this unusual description. Why describe this influx in terms of benches and not people?

Rav Rakow explained that the lenient entrance policy attracted boys of a lower calibre who were more focused on the gashmius of the yeshiva – the benches - and they were described accordingly.

At Hasmonean, we are about to embark on the yeshiva faher season. Many yeshivos will send their representatives to our beloved Beis and over the next few weeks, each get a turn to speak after shacharis and boys who want to interview at that yeshiva can do so.

But although each representative will share a dvar Torah, many will briefly describe their yeshiva. It is interesting to note how this is done and what the focus is. Is it the quality and range of the shiurim, the sterling calibre of the Rebbeim and the hasmodo of the bochurim? Or is it the quality of the food, dormitory or basketball court?

There is certainly a need for a range of yeshivos to cater for the wide range of talmidim that we are privileged to have, but I often think of Rebbi Elozor ben Azaryah’s benches.

But then something unusual happened. On witnessing this huge influx and a bursting Beis Hamedrash, the Gemoro records that Rabban Gamliel became disheartened and questioned his own policy of “tocho k’baro”. Perhaps he had held back Torah from the Jewish people?

This seems very strange. Surely Rabban Gamliel was aware of the many applications to his yeshiva; he was the one who made the exclusive entrance policy and turned boys who were not “tocho k’baro” away. Surely Rabban Gamliel knew that he could have increased the numbers in his yeshiva very easily.

So why was Rabban Gamliel disheartened? It was a conscious policy that he implemented.

I once heard an explanation in the name of the Chiddushei Harim, the first Gerrer Rebbe. What surprised Rabban Gamliel was the fact the these “second rate” boys who were not “tocho k’baro”, **became** “tocho k’baro”. And it was through limmud HaTorah that this transformation happened.

My own experience in school bears this out. It is hard to pinpoint the moment of metamorphosis, but once talmidim engage seriously in learning, change happens. Their punctuality to shacharis improves, they daven better, and are generally more polite and considerate.

That is the magical quality of Torah. It has the capacity to engender change and transform boys into young men who are “tocho k’baro”. That is why Rabban Gamliel was disheartened and it is that transformation that we must aspire to.

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