

Commentary with Rabbi Benjamin Hecht

Shimush

T.B. Berachot 7b states: *gedola shimusho shel Torah yoter milimudo*, the service of Torah is greater than the study of it. **Melachim II 3:11** is presented as a proof text for this concept because the verse, in tribute, describes Elisha *HaNavi*, the student of Eliyahu *HaNavi*, as one who intimately served Eliyahu and not as one who studied with him. The meaning of this somewhat vague statement seems also to be clarified through this illustration from Elisha. Greater is the service rendered to one's teacher than one's study from him. But why would this be so?

Maharsha explains that, in our studies not much is really connected to *halacha l'maaseh*, applied law. In other words, much of the study of Torah that we undertake is often only theoretical without practical application in terms of our behaviour. What we see our teachers perform in their daily lives is, though, *halacha l'maaseh* and, thus, effectively, from serving our teachers we are able to observe their actions and learn practical application of the law. To the Maharsha, the *gemara* is effectively informing us that *shimush* is a better form of education than straight study.

A simple understanding of the Talmudic statement does present a problem. The study of Torah is a most, if not the most, important *mitzvah*. How can service, even of one's teacher, supersede it? Furthermore, the very value that one gives to one's teacher – the very value that would make the service rendered to this person significant – is built upon the Torah knowledge that one's teacher possesses and, then, imparts. If the goal of Torah study is to gain Torah knowledge – to integrate knowledge of the Divine Will into one's being – although the serving of a *rebbe*, teacher, is most significant, how can it supersede one's

personal acquisition of Torah knowledge? It must be in response to such questions that Maharsha had to understand the *gemara's* statement as applying to education itself. *Shimush* can also be a form of education. By serving a *rebbe* and thus being close to a *rebbe*, thereby being able to observe him in his daily life, one can see how one's teacher behaves and actually performs *mitzvot* and practices the law. This, the *gemara* is saying is a higher form of Torah education.

The fact is that it is really not so simple that *shimush* refers to service. **HaKoteiv, Berachot 7b** directs one to **Rashi, Berachot 47b, d.h. Shelo Shamash**. The *gemara* presents an opinion that an *am ha'aretz*, a Torah ignoramus, is one who, although he has studied Torah and Mishna, *lo shamash talmidei chachamim*, seemingly has not served Torah scholars. Rashi explains, though, that *shimush* means that one is involved in gaining a full understanding of the principles upon which Torah thought and laws are built and the *am ha'aretz* is thus one not involved in such processes. Rashi thus compares *shimush* to *gemara*, the study of the principles upon which the Mishna is built, stating that the *Gemara* work which we study, developed by the *Amoraim*, is simply an example of this in-depth form of study. This understanding of *shimush* clearly ties the phrase of *gedola shimusho yoter milumudo* to the educational process: greater is the study of the processes of analysis of Torah concepts over the simple study of Torah facts and information. To be such a valuable item in the process of Torah, it must be related to a higher form of Torah study.

Nonetheless, the simple meaning of the word *shimush* does seem to mean service and the example of Elisha's service of Eliyahu does entail actual service. Rashi's explanation of *shimush* in Berachot 47b does present problems if simply applied to the statement of *gedola shimusho* in Berachot 7b. This may defend why Maharsha wished to maintain an understanding that explained *shimush* as a service which boasts an educational effect. The difficulty, though, is that this understanding is quite limited. It is solely *shimush* when a student has an opportunity to actually see a *rebbe* apply a law, which has greater value. Even more limiting, we could add that it would only seem to be the chance to observe the application of law that is obscure or under dispute that would offer this unique benefit. If

the law is well known already, why would the observance of a *rebbe* following the law be so significant?

Iyun Yaakov, Berachot 7b returns to the simple understanding of *shimush* as service yet still explains its importance in regard to education. Essentially, he maintains that *shimush* furthers the unequal relationship that must be at the heart of a *rebbe-talmid*, a student-teacher relationship. In the same manner that a slave in the service of a master reflects the fear that the slave has of the master, the student in the service of a teacher reflects the fear or awe that must be at the heart of this educational relationship. From servicing the *rebbe*, the student will develop the proper relationship to learn from the *rebbe*. In the same way that **T.B. Kiddushin 40b** praises Torah study, for study leads to proper action, Iyun Yaakov perceives *shimush* as an action that leads to study.

Still Maharsha did not want to apply this understanding of the value of *shimush*. The explanation of Iyun Yaakov does explain why the simple act of *shimush* itself may have value but, still, can this value be described as greater than study? The commentators on the *gemara* in Kiddushin are bothered by the idea that study is deemed greater for it leads to action: if the final desire is proper action, does that not imply that action is actually greater? Similarly, we can ask the same question here: while it may be true that *shimush* will make the study better, is there not still the inherent implication in this praise of *shimush* that study is still most important? Maharsha thus, it would seem, wanted to show how *shimush* could directly yield a better result. To Maharsha, *shimush* itself must have a potentially better direct educational result.

A question, though, emerges: how do we know that our understanding of the observed behaviour undertaken is correct? There would seem to be a fundamental problem with education through observation – it is not explained. Perhaps the Maharsha expects the student to then question the *rebbe* to explain the behaviour and thereby gain a full understanding of what has occurred. With such a perception of the value of *shimush*, though, we again would only be perceiving the value of *shimush* in its impact on *limudo*, not

inherently in itself. Again there is also the limiting nature of this observation. Given the entire period of *shimush*, how much valuable observation time would there be?

Maharsha's answer limits the value to *halacha l'ma'aseh*. The benefit of observation would seem to specifically apply to actions that can be simply interpreted as clear, cut *halachic* behaviour with defined parameters. So that is how *rebbe* washes his hands prior to eating bread. Or is that everything? Does *halacha l'ma'aseh* solely imply actions that are clear to define? Would it not also be a lesson in *halacha l'ma'aseh* in observing a *rebbe*'s behaviour when the parameters are not so clearly defined? So that is how *rebbe* spoke to and tipped the waitress in the restaurant? If Maharsha is extending his definition of observation to such cases, then there really are, in fact, many cases of practical behaviour that could be observed from which we would gain Torah direction. The challenge, though, is that such a process would now include an element of detective work.

We could say that there are two ways of Torah study. One is what we may term simple book learning. We study the text and arrive at ideas and conclusions. The other we may term life investigation. Torah directs us how to look at the world and derive further Torah understanding and direction from applying this vision to the world. This is not similar to book learning. It is much more *halacha l'ma'aseh*. Through this process we see how Torah is impacted on the world. The further challenge, though, is that the lesson is not necessarily concrete or clear. We see the behavior of a teacher, a Torah scholar. We accept that this behavior is the correct behaviour. But what exactly is the lesson we are to learn? We have to fill in the gaps. We have to determine the principle that led to this conclusion. We have to forge the understanding.

In a certain way, the various understandings of *shimush* actually seem to thereby come together. It is easy to learn by rote. To apply a principle in different situations demands, though, an understanding of the principles behind the rote action in a defined situation. One must reach the level of *gemara*, understanding the principles behind the law. A true understanding of these principles can only be reached when one observes their practical application, when one sees how a Torah scholar actually acts in given circumstances. There

one can be surprised. There one can even be dumbfounded – how did this person do this? It must be the correct behaviour but I really don't know how. That is when one really begins to learn. That is when one begins to understand the true challenge of Torah study and how the magnitude, complexity and genius of Torah is manifested in Torah thought and practice. That is what emerges from *shimush*.

Nishma recently introduced a new phrase that explains its methodology in Torah. Our goal is not simply text study. Our goal is to determine how Torah truly operates in the world and thereby to derive the underlying principles of Torah thought. We learn by placing the world under the Torah microscope. We learn from observation. Included in this is learning from observing the actions of Torah scholars in various situations. Do we know exactly what they were thinking? Not necessarily, but we do assume that their behaviour is assuredly correct and so we can be challenged to understand why.

This study by observation does not necessarily end there, though. We learn from recognizing that Torah is not separate from the world but to be practiced and applied in the world. *Halacha l'ma'aseh* does not only mean knowing how to wash one's hands, although that is also important. It is knowing how to behave in every and all aspects of life. Torah cannot just stay within the books. It must breathe in the world. It must be understood through how it impacts on the world. That is an extension of this principle of *shimush*.

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