



Parshas Toldos
School Friends

This week, students from Migdal Ohr's "Maor Yisrael" school came to visit me. I was very excited to see them, as I have been bedridden for a long time, and have not had a chance to see them in school. This is my greatest pleasure, sitting with the students and hearing their thoughts and feelings, offering my support and discussing Torah with them.

The students came to me with a list of "resolutions" (optional good deeds) which they have taken upon themselves in merit of my speedy recovery. I was deeply moved.

I looked at them, united by good intentions. I thought give them the chance, and they will prove how worthy they are.

I went through the list. One took upon himself to study more Torah, another chose to be more careful with fulfilling the mitzvos, and a third took upon himself to be more careful about Shabbos. Tears came to my eyes, as I thought to myself: "G-d, gaze upon your children, who is like them?"

One resolution stood out. One of the boys named Lior, took upon himself to "be a friend only to good kids." I told the students' representatives that this was the most important resolution.

I spoke to them about this week's parsha reading. This week we read Parsha Toldos which contains a complex relationship between a pair of siblings, Yaacov and Esav.

We read about Rivkah we she is pregnant: "And the children struggled within her, and she said, "If [it be] so, why am I [like] this?" And she went to inquire of the Lord."¹

Our Sages teach us that when Rivkah passed by the entrances of the Torah academies, Yaacov would struggle to come out of the womb; when she passed the entrance of a temple of idolatry, Esav would struggle to come out.²

I asked - why is it the Yaacov wished to come out of the womb to study Torah, after all, the Talmud teaches us that the fetus is taught Torah in utero by an angel.³ Is there any better place than this?

There are many answers to this question. Some explain that Yaacov wished to toil while studying Torah, and not have it fed to him by an angel.

There is another answer, which teaches a fundamental principal to students. Our Sages teach us that those who are skilled learners should learn, and those who are not as

capable should pair up with other students, and will eventually become skilled learners as well.

This arrangement has a positive effect as long as the student does not disturb his peers, but if a student is not seeking to learn but rather hinders the others' study efforts, then such an arrangement fails.

While Yaacov studied with the angel he was in a sublime state, but once he saw that his brother sought to enter the places of idolatry, he felt in danger and immediately tried to escape the womb, so as to avoid being in proximity of such a negative influence.

A positive influence and a good friend are the first thing a person should seek. When he is in a positive environment with good companions, it has a constructive impact on him. The reverse is true as well.

This is what King David prays for in Psalms: "Happy is the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seat of the scornful,"⁴ because the environment has a powerful effect on an individual.

I recounted to the students my first years in Migdal Ha'Emek. One of Migdal Ohr's first students was Shimon, who came from a broken home; his father was in prison and his mother was nonfunctional. Shimon chose Torah, and studied diligently, with complete disregard to his background.

I loved to watch Shimon study, and he would do so even during recess, as his peers were out playing.

One day I could not find him. I asked the faculty what had happened to him, and I saw from their faces that something dire had happened.

They told me that Shimon has left school in favor of the street. I was stunned by the news as I knew him well and saw a bright future for him. I tracked him down and we sat to talk in a public park.

He told me that his friends ridiculed him for his diligence, and he was in constant pain until he decided to leave. I returned to the Beis Midrash and told the students: "Behold your influence, you can chart his path and be the determining force in deciding whether he becomes a scholar or a street thug."

Shimon returned to school. He became the most popular student, and grew to become a scholar and teacher, thanks to his friends at school.

¹ Beresheit 25:22.

² Midrash Rabbah 63:6

³ Tractate Niddah 30b.

⁴ Tehillim 1:1.