

The Talmudic Approach to Accommodating Different Learning Styles

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# Introduction

With the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act in the 1970’s (Now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)), the right to a free and appropriate public education was enshrined into American law for students with disabilities. It is both surprising and gratifying to learn that the Rabbis had extended this right to Jewish children more than 1,500 years before. This guide will explore their approach.

# The Primacy of Education in the Rabbinic Tradition

## Education as the Legacy of Jewish Children

The Babylonian Talmud in Masechet Sanhedrin 91b teaches:

“Anyone who deprives a student of being taught Torah, it is as if he robs him of his father‘s legacy.” Babylonian Talmud in Masechet Sanhedrin 91b

The full meaning of this quote is only really apparent if one understands that the Rabbis were not thinking of legacy as we think of it today. In the ancient world, generational wealth was scarce, and so depriving someone of their legacy, in this case, education, is equivalent to cutting someone off of today’s version of a trust fund. This should demonstrate just how central education is in the Jewish tradition.

## The Primacy of Education

In today’s world, a legacy is often something nice to have, like treasured gifts left to us by parents and grandparents. In the ancient world, where wealth was scarce and families prospered only by accumulating it over generations, depriving of a legacy would likely mean destitution.

In most cultures therefore, legacies are about money, property or title.

In the Jewish tradition, we prize learning so much, that *education* is our legacy. Learning Torah is so important and passing it down sustains us. Depriving someone of learning the Torah is depriving them of their legacy.

Note, the quote does not limit itself to a particular type of student. In fact, other parts of Jewish tradition make it clear that this Rabbinic admonition applies to every single Jew. Of course, with today's values, we would probably apply this to people with disabilities even if the Rabbis had not. What is particularly fascinating, however, is that they did. Let’s explore that further.

## The Obligation of the Student with a Disability to Pursue Their Education Begins with Proper Understanding

Maimonides (1138–1204) created the Mishneh Torah, sort of like a cheat sheet for understanding Torah, which created specific laws around teaching Torah to students. At the time, Maimonides had created almost a Jewish “gold standard” of understanding Torah.

In the Mishneh Torah (Hilkhot Talmud Torah/The Laws of Torah Learning), 4:4, Maimonides writes:

“A student should not say ―I have understood when s/he has not understood. Rather, s/he should ask again, even several times. And, if the teacher gets angry and abuses the student verbally, s/he should say to the teacher, ―Teacher, this is Torah and I must learn it, even if my capacity is inadequate.”Mishneh Torah 4:4

It is clear that the teacher has to do whatever is necessary to ensure that their student learns the Torah. If that means hiring an ASL interpreter, you hire an ASL interpreter; if that means having captions, you have captions. Whatever the student needs to succeed and continue their legacy, the teacher should provide it to the student. Today, these types of plans are commonly referred to as an IEP or 504 plan, which is a form of an individualized education plan. These accommodations help students succeed based on their different learning styles and needs.

Interestingly, the text above says, “even if my capacity is inadequate,” which is recognizing that some people may have learning challenges, so we already see the connection to disability here. Essentially, the reason it is hard for someone to learn Torah doesn’t matter; the *need* to learn Torah is greater than any challenge a teacher might face in helping the student understand. The teacher's goal should be to help the student understand and master the Torah. If the teacher gets mad at the student for requesting a specific accommodation to assist his or her learning, the student has the right to insist, “This is Torah, this is my wealth, this is my legacy!” And the teacher has the obligation to teach the student torah regardless of how they need to learn it. We acknowledge that it is important for a student to continue working at the task of learning until they feel they understand it.

In sum, education is so important that it is referred to as a source of legacy and generational wealth. Therefore, even someone with a learning disability should be open and transparent about whether or not they are struggling to understand the content. Torah is of such importance that everyone needs to, and should have access to this knowledge.

Because the Torah is of such significance and is a source of generational wealth, the student has the right to advocate for themselves to have their needs met, no matter what challenges it presents to the teacher. As you will see in the texts below, there are great examples of teachers going above and beyond for students who are having difficulties learning Torah, because it is of such importance!

# The Obligation of All Jewish Teachers of Torah to Educate People Who Learn Differently

“Train a youth in his own way, He will not swerve from it even in old age.”Proverbs 22:6

This is the most commonly quoted text on special education, and it bears some analysis. We’ve already established that everyone has their own individual ways of learning. People are only going to continue carrying on the knowledge of Torah and Jewish education if it was learned in a way that makes sense to them. If you teach it to them in a way that they understand, they will continue to use it for the rest of their lives.

This is clearly an important interpretation, and yet, the ancient Jewish concept of *d’var acher* allows us to freely recognize that the same text can be amenable to multiple interpretations and that each one of these interpretations is correct.

This text is not specifically mentioning or referring to disability, however if there is a disability lesson to be learned from it, then Jewish tradition says that this lesson is encompassed in the quote. For the purposes of this session, let’s assume that this quote is about different learning styles, and that maybe our interpretation of the text is correct, because it helps you to learn important precepts about the world. If one interpretation of a text helps you to learn that content, it is a correct interpretation, though *not* *the only interpretation*.

# Accommodating Different Learning Styles

“Rabbi Preida had a student to whom he had to repeat each lesson four hundred times before he understood it. One day R. Preida was required to leave and attend a certain matter involving a mitzvah. Before leaving, he taught the student the usual four hundred times, but he still did not grasp the concept. R. Preida asked him “Why is today different?” He answered him “From the very moment that they told my master that there is a mitzvah matter that he must attend to, my attention was diverted, because every moment I thought that now the master will get up and leave.” R. Preida said to him, “Pay attention, and I will teach you.” He taught him another four hundred times.” Babylonian Talmud, Mashechet Eruvin, 54b

If we look carefully at the text above, we see that rabbinic texts have been hinting at the notion that including people, especially those who may be having a hard time understanding the content, is important. The text never specifically describes this student as having a disability, and yet, we can analyze it through a disability lens. It seems clear that we have a student with a different learning style, who requires that each lesson be repeated 400 times.

On this particular day, his teacher had to “attend to a certain matter involving a mitzvah.” This is code to tell us that the teacher had to do something very important and probably times sensitive.

For those who do not know what a mitzvah is, a mitzvah is technically a commandment which must be followed. It is something of great importance that is really prioritized over everything else. This text does not provide details as to what this mitzvah is, but knowing how important a mitzvah is in general, is important to understanding this text.

Still, despite having to attend to a certain matter involving a mitzvah, the teacher stayed with the student and taught the student the requisite 400 times. The student failed to grasp the lesson, and explained to us that this was because of his justifiable anxiety that the rabbi was in a hurry and might leave before the full 400 repetitions. We’ve all seen situations where anxiety makes a student less than fully attentive.

What we have to note, is that in this situation, the Rabbi, whom we already know was in a hurry, taught the student another 400 times before attending to the other matter, which the Talmud had indicated to us was a matter of supreme importance.

This brings us to our biggest takeaway. Even though the teacher had to attend to a mitzvah, he chose to stay and help the student learn the content. That teacher prioritized the student's success and educational attainment over the mitzvah.

There are three core ideas that stand out as important:

* The primacy of education
* Do whatever it takes to help a student learn, understand, and succeed.
* It’s really common when people are looking at this content, they might think “this is modern.” But, 1700 years ago, the Rabbis were making an effort to be inclusive. So, if the way we interpret these texts are “modern,” then we’ve been modern for a very long time.

There is really no denying that this appears to be a matter of accommodation for some kind of learning difference. However, let’s assume that this isn’t the case. As mentioned earlier, one interpretation of a text does not mean it is the only correct interpretation. If you do not believe that this is some matter of accommodation, what do you believe this text is showing and/or asking us?

In telling us that the rabbi was willing to put an important time sensitive matter on hold for 800 repetitions, the story is telling us the importance of accommodating different learning styles. In doing so, everyone may have their legacy.

We often think that modern educational strategies and accommodations for those who learn differently are recent innovations. However, given that this story comes to us in a document produced in the early or mid-centuries of the Common Era, we can infer that the place of accommodation for different learning styles in Jewish tradition is not new, and is not a recent innovation. In fact, based on these texts, it seems as though Jewish tradition has been inclusive of those with different learning styles or perhaps learning disabilities, for quite some time.