

**WISDOM FROM ALL MY TEACHERS:
CHALLENGES AND INITIATIVES IN
CONTEMPORARY TORAH EDUCATION**

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Preface

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

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 "ודעת 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: — פ"א רבינו יונה על אבות

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

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.”¹

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*.² 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 *halakhah*.³ 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 (*hirhur*), no blessing is required.⁴ 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 (*hirhur*), 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 *hirhur* alone.

In both the halakhic tradition and in pedagogical practice, learning and teaching are symbiotically unified. 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.

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

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

³ 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.

⁴ This question is based upon the *halakhah* as presented by the *Shulhan Arukh* in *Orah Hayyim* 47:4, from which the Vilna Gaon dissents in his *Bi’ur ha-Gra*.

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 *Aggadah* 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:

“And *Torat hesed* (Torah of loving-kindness) upon her tongue” (Prov. 31:26)—Is there a Torah which is *not* of kindness? ... Torah for the sake of teaching is the Torah of kindness.

Jeffrey Saks *and* Susan Handelman
Jerusalem
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Hag Matan Torah

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The support of the Straus, Rubin, and Quintas families enabled the publication of this volume, which serves as a monument to the memory of their late parents, Gwendolyn and Joseph Straus ז"ל. We are grateful for their partnership in this project, and in other initiatives undertaken by ATID on behalf of Torah education.

Publication of *Wisdom From All My Teachers* marks a significant achievement for ATID—both as an institution and as a collective of dedicated Jewish educators working in harmony to improve the state of Jewish education. Since our founding in 1998, we have been privileged to work with an outstanding cadre of young teachers and future educational lay leadership (from both Israel and the Diaspora). We are therefore particularly proud that a number of the essays in the volume began as work undertaken by the educators in our ATID Fellows program, and others by members of our faculty. We have benefited from the input and dedication of many colleagues, themselves outstanding Torah educators and trendsetters, in both the design and the execution of the ATID program, and we are particularly grateful for the ongoing commitment to our work of friends such as David Ebner, Beverly Gribetz, and Daniel Marom.

The visionary leadership of Rabbi Chaim Brovender, President of ATID, informs everything that we do as an institution. His dedication to Torah study as the formative component in helping a student navigate his or her own development as a thinking, religious soul is legendary. Publication of *Wisdom From All My Teachers* coincides with the thirty-sixth year of his involvement in Torah education in Israel, and we pray that he be blessed with many years of health, together with his wife Miriam, leading us in ATID

to new heights of excellence, improving the state of Jewish education, and meriting in the continued teaching of *Torat Hashem Temimah*.

—*The Editors*

My parents, Gail and Gene Saks, my first and most important teachers, have served as lifelong models of doing “right and good in the eyes of God” (Deut. 6:18). Their love and support, together with that of my in-laws, Sorie and Ed Goldstein, have enabled Ilana and me to build a home for our children dedicated to seeking wisdom from every person. Additionally, it has been my great privilege to direct ATID since its inception, and I am grateful to my colleagues and the ATID Fellows, who continue to make it a rewarding experience.

—*J.N.S*

Since making *aliyah* the number of my teachers has increased greatly. In addition to the many extraordinary *talmidei* and *talmidot hakhamim* to whom I am privileged to have access (and especially R. Marc Kujawsky), the people of *Medinat Yisrael*--in their infinite variety and abundant spirit in the face of the trauma and suffering of the past three years--each day teach me many precious lessons about life and what it means to be a Jew. My *havrutot* in Jerusalem over the years have been not only stimulating companions and teachers in the journey of endless discovery, consuming passion, and joy that is Torah study; they have also become my very dear friends. I would like to acknowledge and thank: Sara Aisenfeld Beyer, Ora Wiskind Elper, Bryna Yocheved Levy, Simi Peters, Gilla Ratzersdorfer Rosen, Esther Sha'anan, Yardena Cope Yossef, and Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. And also the ATID Fellows whom I have taught for the past three years, and ATID staff with whom I have worked: you have become a treasured community of fellow teachers from whom I have gained great wisdom, support, pleasure, and inspiration.

—*S.H.*