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THE DAFYOMI DISCUSSION LIST

brought to you by Kollel Iyun Hadaf of Yerushalayim

Rosh Kollel: Rabbi Mordecai Kornfeld

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[REPLY TO THIS MESSAGE TO DISCUSS THE DAF WITH THE KOLLEL]

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GENERAL 000: Expression in Chazal

Shimon Brodie <shimonbrodie@gmail.com> asks:

 !לידידי הרבנים החשובים, חברי הכולל  שליט"א השלום והברכה

I have to say a Vaad today, and I want to make a certain point. The concept is described quite well by the American expression "Sometimes you can't see the forest for the trees''. Of course, every true sentiment is to be found someplace in Chazal, and I would prefer to bring it from there. Where do Chazal express this common human phenomenon?

Thanks,

Shimon Brodie

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The Kollel replies:

Shalom R' Brodie,

Great to hear from you.

You wrote that you were going to deliver a Vaad. Therefore I assume that this reply was time sensitive. So I feel remiss for not writing to you sooner. I hope that your Vaad went well.

Chazal seem to have been sensitive to the issue of failing to see the forest for the trees, and they express the danger of losing track of the bigger picture if one spends great effort focusing on the numerous finer details.

My Chavrusa, R' Tzvi Lesman, pointed out that in Makos 24a Chazal recount how various leaders tried to "reduce" the vast number of specific Torah laws -- 613 -- down to a smaller number of simpler, more basic guidelines. For example, David reduced them down to 11, Yeshayau down to 6, Michah down to 3, etc.

This could be understood as expressing the idea that it is easier for a person to manage a brief list of principles that are more general, i.e. the forest, rather than try to keep track of hundreds of applications, i.e. the trees. This may, however, not be the understanding of Rashi, since he explains (DH v'He'emidan) the reason why the number of laws was reduced: Because the previous generations were more righteous than the later generations, and if the latter individuals would try to keep all of the laws they would not succeed; therefore they were given a shorter list of guidelines so that their task should be more manageable. So, it might be argued that this concern is different than missing the forest for the trees; since the latter usually refers to the understanding a subject matter, rather than the performance of a great number of tasks.

Perhaps even more relevant, there are additional sources in Chazal which indicate that the act of study in particular should first be done with an emphasis on the broad overview, and only subsequently to focus on individual details. One is in Shabbos 63a, which says that a person should first learn a lot of material, and only subsequently think into it. Rashi (DH d'Ligmar Inish and DH v'Hadar Lisbar) explains this to mean that one should absorb the content from his teacher, even without understanding the rationale behind it, and only subsequently should he analyze the reasons behind the teaching.

Another statement of Chazal on this very subject is found in Avodah Zarah 19a. There Rava makes the point that a person should first learn the material and only later contemplate it. Rashi (DH Yilmad Adam and DH v'Achar Kach Yehgeh) explains this to mean that a student should first be fluent in the whole teaching, and only later start to make comparisions and raise challenges.

In fact, Rashi offers two reasons for this: one is because he might spend so much time on the analysis that when he finally is ready to learn more material his teacher may not be available; Rashi's second reason -- and I suspect this is closer to the phenomenon of missing the forest for the trees -- is that once the student learns a large enough amount of material, then many of his questions will be resolved on their own.

Finally, the Gemara in Berachos 63b teaches that one should first quietly listen to the material of a given lesson, even if there are difficult portions to understand, and only later raise challenges and arrive at resolutions.

So, these three sources can be understood as telling us that if we try to analyze subtlties before getting the larger view of the subject, then we risk getting bogged down in details, misunderstanding the points, etc.

You expressed the idea that any statement which is true must have a source in Chazal. It does say in Pirkei Avos (Ben Bag Bag's statement at the end of chapter 5) that we should repeatedly go over the Torah since we can find everything in it. From there it does appear that there is a Torah source for virtually everything.

Moreover, the Gemara in Sotah 4b -- citing Tehilim 25:14 -- relates that a Chacham may be privy to certain information since Hashem reveals His secrets to those who fear Him. But I believe this is actually not a source to prove that all truths are found in the Torah or in a statement of Chazal, since here the information is specially dispensed to one Tzadik, and it is not found somewhere in the Tanach or Mesorah.

On the other hand, Eichah Rabbah 2 teaches us that if someone tells you there is wisdom amongst the Goyim, then you can believe him. Furthermore, the Gra on Mishlei (beginning of chapter 6) expresses the thought that a Talmid Chacham can be fluent in the whole of Torah, and yet might be missing some knowledge of wordly wisdom. These sources might be interpreted to mean that there are some truths about the world that are not necessarily easy to infer from purely Torah sources.

I hope this helps!

Warmest regards,

Yishai Rasowsky