

A group of learned rabbis were discussing their students, whom they were teaching about the law.

One rabbi said, 'In my opinion the most difficult type of student is like a funnel. This student retains nothing. Whatever goes in one ear comes out the other.'

The second rabbi said, 'I think the most disappointing type of student is one who resembles a strainer. The most important information that passes through his mind escapes and he retains from his lesson only what is superfluous or insignificant. This student is like wine that is strained: the sediment is retained while the wine, which should be consumed, passes through and is wasted.'

The third rabbi said, 'My favorite type of student is like a sponge. This individual is capable of absorbing everything he is taught.'

The fourth rabbi said, 'I think the most satisfying student to teach is like a sieve. He allows insignificant information to pass through, retaining only quality material. This student is like a sieve in which grains of wheat are shaken to eliminate dust and chaff, retaining only the finer inner kernel.'

[Pirke Avot 5]

Let's look at each one of these descriptions in a little more detail to see where we fit in as students. It's too easy to look at our students or our children to see where they fit. But it's much more important for our spiritual growth to see how we fit into this paradigm. Are we funnels, strainers, sponges or sieves? And are the rabbis correct in determining which ones are positive and which are negative?

When we are like the funnel, allowing everything we learn to pass through our awareness without retaining any of it, we waste not only our teachers' time but our own. If our inability to absorb any of our learning is because the subject is not interesting to us or the teacher is not teaching the material in a way that we can absorb it, we owe it to ourselves and the teacher to stop that learning. That is the most respectful thing to do.

On the other hand, we may be like the funnel because we think we already know everything about a particular subject. Or we may feel superior to the teacher and assume he or she has nothing to teach us.

If either of those things is true, it's important for us to analyze our assumptions about our own abilities and those of our teachers. Can we really ever know everything? And is there anyone that we can't learn something from? As *Ben Zoma* said in *Pirkei Avot*, 'Who is wise? The one who learns from everybody.'

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Those who are like strainers manage to accumulate a lot of information that is not very important. This makes me think about the internet. So much of what we find there is sediment and not wine. Much of it is fiction masquerading as truth or truth that is not substantially useful or important in our lives. We might absorb those things that are juicy bits of gossip or clever but mean spirited analyses but it's the results of peoples' actions that have more meaning for us than the actions themselves.

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The sponge is indeed an amazing person. That kind of student assimilates everything they learn and finds a place for all of it. The problem I see with the sponge is that sometimes we don't need all the information we are taught. Sometimes we

need some of it now and some of it later. As I'm finding out, there really is a finite amount of space in any one person's head. It is better to let go of that information which is not needed at a particular point of our lives than waste the precious and declining space we have.

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So the kind of student that I would like to strive to be is the one who is like a sieve, taking in what is important and being able to ignore what is not. This kind of student does not waste brain space with inessentials but is able to decide what they need and don't need in their lives at any given moment. If they ever get to a point when they need the information they haven't retained, then they know where to find it.

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We are the people of the book. Learning is one of our essential traits and one that I hope we never let go of. As we continue to learn it's important for us to choose the learning method that will give us the greatest amount of knowledge when we need it and at the same time be able to seek out any new learning as we need that.

Shabbat Shalom.