The Cheder

The Czarist Government did not permit Jewish children to attend the Russian schools. The education came from the Chayder, the place where they were taught to read, write and understand Hebrew. They began with the first five books of Moses and proceeded over the years to the Biblical interpreters (Rashi and Tosepeth), the prophets, the sayings of the elders, and the Talmud (an interpretation of the various Biblical expressions). They also read the psalms of David and the proverbs of Solomon. Those who intended to be rabbis were then sent to the Yeshivahs (schools of higher education in Hebrew) in the bigger cities.

The Cheder itself consisted of a large room, a kitchen, and a smaller room or two nearby. In the large room were 12 to 15 boys around a big table, at the head of which was the rabbi with his “kantchick”. The Cheder facilities were the same when the child graduated from elementary learning to the Talmud, except the rabbi was different. But the “kantchick” was always the same! In each course boredom entered because there was a lot of repetition, but the kantchick was an effective means of maintaining discipline. Some relief from boredom came from some Talmud discussions which related to everyday life. One example of this was a discussion of the equities of each of two men who found a cloth. If one said, “I found it”, and the other said, “I found it”, the Talmud provided that each should pronounce under oath that he owned “no less than one-half” of the cloth (if each had sworn that he owned only one-half of the cloth, he would have weakened his claim to the whole cloth). After each had sworn, as required, the cloth would be divided between them. But if a division of the cloth would destroy its value, the Talmud provided that the cloth be sold and the proceeds divided.

In studying this, I visualized Moishe (my school friend) and myself as the two men involved. I was sure that if I had found the cloth first Moishe would not hesitate to claim that he was at least a co-finder. I had to admit, however, that I would probably do the same. The situation obviously lent itself to possible fraud. Apparently, the writers of the Talmud had in mind persons with greater ethical concepts than Moishe or I possessed.

Another example was a discussion of the liability of the owner of a goring ox. The statement was that if one ox gored another ox, the owner of the goring ox was not liable for damages to the owner of the gored ox if it was a first goring. The rationale was that the owner of the goring ox could not equitably be charged with knowledge of the vicious propensities of the ox until its first goring.

I posed a hypothetical case to my rabbi — a case in which the ox had gored before, but the peasant sold the ox to the new owner failed to disclose this fact. As far as the new owner was concerned, the last goring was a first, but in truth it was a second or even a third goring. My rabbi didn’t like hypothetical cases.

There were, of course, less intellectual diversions from Cheder boredom. One evening after the class had become especially restless, one of the boys spat upon the hot glass which covered the wick of the kerosene lamp. It broke, of course, and it took some time to replace it, and that was some relief. But you can guess who was blamed for that. The rabbi was unable to decide whether Moishe or I was the culprit. To avoid a possible inequity in the case, he used the kantchick on both of us.

By David B. Schreiber

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