



## **Beyond Flipping Out: Experiences of Year-in-Israel Programs**

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### **Understanding the Reasons for Mitzvot – Do Students Care?**

Overwhelmingly, almost all those interviewed described that they found meaning in a given mitzvah as a function of **how well they understood it**.

The closest we came in most cases to initiating discussion about understanding mitzvot was in one interview question that inquired as to which Jewish activities the students find most meaningful and why. In this or other contexts, **an impressive 12 of the students volunteered that they place importance on understanding the reasons behind the mitzvot and religious beliefs**. Of the remaining two students, one (student #3, f) did not mention the importance of understanding at all, neither positively nor negatively. The other (student #6, m) said that he favors following his heart over his mind. Nevertheless, even he spoke passionately about his admiration for clarity and simplicity.

**What impact would a lack of understanding have on the students' practice?** Some said they would only do a mitzvah if they felt they clearly understood it. Others took a less extreme position, stating that understanding the mitzvah made them more emotionally connected to it, feel better about doing it and, even, more likely to diligently perform it. Others said that they

perform mitzvot because they know it is the right thing to do, but wish that they had a deeper understanding of the reasons for what they are doing.

This is how student #2 expressed his feelings about his experience trying to describe to his not observant mother why he was performing the mitzvah of having a new suit checked for sha'atnez before he understood it. (Never mind the fact that this particular mitzvah is a "chok" for all of us. His attitude toward his not knowing the reasons and having all the answers is just as compelling.):

"First of all, what is that? Second of all, why is that? Third of all, what's going on here? And, I wasn't really equipped with good answers to that; and that felt really awful feeling like this.

Not surprising, but powerful nonetheless, here is what the same student said about the power of learning the meaning for a mitzvah:

"I read the book Tfilin by Rav Arye Kaplan, and I thought it was the coolest thing ever. A lot of the metaphors that he said in the book really talked to me, so I really loved wearing Tfilin... I'm not just wrapping a piece of animal on my arm, you know. So Tfilin has definitely been something I tried to be really consistent on, especially since I read that book."

**A recipe for winning your student's heart – answer the tough questions!** Some students linked their connection to and general respect for their teachers, and/or the rabbinic community at large, on the responsiveness of their rabbis to questions. Apparently dependent on their own varied personal experiences, some students related frustration with rabbis who gave unsatisfactory or evasive answers, while other students went so far as to commend Judaism for its openness to questioning and its readiness to provide satisfactory responses.

What follows are two student's opposite accounts of their experiences when asking rabbis tough questions. The common denominator between them is that both cared deeply about gaining understanding and about the teacher's ability and openness to address the questions. Also note how crucial it is to make a student feel at home to ask about what is bothering him.

Student #4 has been disappointed by rabbis that she feels do not adequately answer her questions. Student #4 had responded that when she had asked questions about women's seemingly secondary role in Judaism, she had received unsatisfactory answers or no answers at all.

When asked for other examples of unsatisfactory answers, or the like, this was her response:

"I can't remember what the question it was that I asked. It was something either about women making Kiddush or women doing—it was something Shabbos-service related. And, I don't know, the answer I got was just awful. I can't even remember what it was, but it was, like, the worst answer I have ever heard. Like, there was nothing to it."

It is noteworthy that this painfully "awful" answer is to a question the student does not even remember anymore. It would seem that she is not troubled with the details of the question as much as the fact that it did not readily have an acceptable answer. It is not clear if in this one instance the problem was that she thought it was a bad answer, or that she thought she was not being taken seriously. However, previously in the interview, this student had explicitly reported being frustrated by both of those types of responses. Furthermore, in case the reader is thinking that these scenarios don't apply to him, see from the continuation of her dialogue with the interviewer that she had chosen to speak to

a male Gemara teacher, despite the student's extra close relationship with her own mother.

Interviewer followed with, "In general, who do you go to with these types of questions?"

Student #4: "I think it depends on the question. In high school, I would ask my freshman-sophomore-year Gemara teacher. I don't know, I think it depends on the context."

Interviewer: "That teacher was a male or female?"

Student #4: "Male."

Interviewer followed up by asking if she asks these women's issues to her Mom, whom she had previously identified as being the biggest influence on her and on her views.

Student: "I feel like these issues, more often than not, come up in a classroom setting. And, I won't be content with waiting and then going home and asking my mom; so – I usually just ask it right then, but, I'd certainly feel comfortable enough asking my Mom."

In contrast, student #2 appreciates that rabbis have always welcomed his questions:

"You can ask hard questions, I have always loved that. So I like doing that, I like having the pilpul, wrestling with rabbis – what do you mean now? What do you mean this? So I have always liked that."

"The fact that I have always have a rabbi that I could go to and throw these questions and not be afraid, like – you're asking the wrong question, how dare you not accept this on faith, what's wrong with you? [That] Never happened to me."

**To what extent are the students willing to follow directions out of sheer obedience?** In contrast to the almost all-inclusive set of students who spoke of the centrality of understanding why they do what they do, only about half of the group spoke of performing mitzvot out of a sense of sheer obedience. The students who did raise the issue of obedience were split about evenly over whether it was a sufficient reason to do the mitzvot. Even those who said that they do mitzvot just because they know that it is the right thing to do still expressed anxiousness to learn deeper understandings for the mitzvot.

Two of the students (#13, #14) seemed to have progressed from initially performing the mitzvot based on faithful acceptance to a recently more satisfying performance based on intellectual understanding. Student #1 remarked on his own transition in very sharp terms. When asked about meaningful mitzvot in his last year of high school, the student responded:

“They were all very robotic. [I’m] not gonna lie. When I came here, everything became more like real...In high school it was all very robotic.”

When asked why he had kept at it if it was so robotic, the student responded by citing his trust for his father, following the mesorah that his father had imparted, and his father’s rules. The student added:

“I knew that it was the right thing. I have always believed in G-d and that God wrote the Torah, and everything, I always believed that, but I guess I wasn't always as into it though.”

Apparently, for student #1, trust and tradition were enough to keep him in the fold during high school. Nevertheless, during the interview, he described his own adherence to religious practice late in high school as being inconsistent and, in fact, totally non-existent for a few-weeks’ time. Some other students, though not mentioning any similar cessation of religious practice, said that they were

unwilling to adopt a new practice until they clearly understood why they would do it. Apparently, "Because I told you so!" isn't as welcomed a response with today's teenage population as an actual rational reply.

**Alternative means:** It is noteworthy that aside from the traditional means of attaining deeper understanding, such as books and dialogue with teachers, a number of students attributed their understanding to people whom they had met, personal life experiences and introspection. A significant portion of the students look forward to gaining more full understanding in the future.

**Conclusion:** Perhaps the prevailing feeling of the students with which we met is best summed up in a comment by student #13 in which she confirmed to the interviewer her attitude:

[The more I understand about a mitzvah,] "the better. The better I become; the better person I am."