

# Ten Da'at

*A Journal of Jewish Education*



VOL. VIII, NO. 1      SIVAN 5755      SPRING 1995

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## EDUCATION IN ISRAEL AND IN THE UNITED STATES

*(An address delivered upon receiving the title "Honorary Fellow" from the Organization of Religious Teachers in Israel. The original Hebrew text appeared in the 5754 issue of Bisdeh Hemed.)*

How wonderful! Here I find myself in a country in which the topic of endless discussion—at every conference, gathering, and incidental meeting, and even in a casual conversation between husband and wife—is the question of peace. Israeli society today resembles a cauldron which boils ceaselessly in an era in which politics and diplomacy touch the life of each and every citizen directly. The temperature of debate rises by the hour; tension and anger grow in intensity; and all—at fever pitch.

Yet, in such an environment, a group of learned people has gathered together in the presence of nationally-recognized figures to honor a number of estimable men and women whose life's labor is private and unheralded and whose entire careers are devoted to an unobtrusive and unpretentious endeavor far from battle-front or negotiating table: education. Can this really be true? Is it not absurd?

The answer is: yes, it most certainly is true—and no, it is not in the least absurd! *Au contraire*, you deserve congratulations for the ability to steal two hours from the noisy and tumultuous present for the benefit of the obscure long-range future, and for recognizing that that future will be shaped by the quality of education of our sons and daughters no less than by the fateful decisions on the political and diplomatic plane. Your/our subject is: the soul of the entire nation. It would be criminal to neglect or even to postpone the yearning demands of the Jewish soul for another year and yet another. So my warmest congratulations to you!

There is just one thing I do not understand: Why have you chosen to honor me, a man of the Diaspora, amongst this impressive list of "The Honorees of Religious Education?" I know there are those greater



and better than I who deserve to receive the title of "Honorary Fellow." If I have nevertheless accepted this decoration, it is because of something that happened a number of years ago. It is told that Harry Truman, when he was president of the United States, invited someone to his office in order to appoint him to a high-level position in the government. The latter was delighted by the appointment but, out of politeness, demurred, saying, "I know at least one hundred people more suited for this honor than myself." President Truman replied, "Yes, that is true, but I called each and every one of them and they all declined."

Truthfully, I speak neither out of false modesty nor genuine humility when I say that I as an individual do not deserve this honor; I accept it only as a representative of an important community in the United States namely, that of religious education, which roughly parallels the national-religious educational system here in Israel. I congratulate you for recognizing the need to enhance your contact with this important educational movement in America, a contact with the potential to benefit all of Jewish education, all of Jewry and, in particular, students both here in Israel and in the United States.

### **The Dual Program: A Model**

What kind of education does this American system represent? The major part of elementary and secondary education was established in the mold of the curriculum developed by the founders of Yeshiva University. This institution, founded in 1886, while still young, initiated the dual program of Jewish and general studies in its high-school. Subsequently, this program was copied on the collegiate level. The achievement of this innovation was that the morning hours, when the student was still fresh, were devoted to Torah study on a level equal to that of all the well-known yeshivot. The afternoon hours were devoted to general studies, either to general culture or pre-professional education, similar to the curricula of major American universities. It should be unnecessary for me to mention that the subject of Israel is very dear to us: witness the fact that we have a higher percentage of our graduates coming on Aliyah than any other educational institution in America and, perhaps, in the world.

This dual program is not easy. It burdens a student with double the load of either an ordinary yeshiva or university. This educational and

intellectual load is onerous, not only because of the long hours it requires, but also because of the tension it creates, the inevitable contradictions, clashes, and conflicts between two different worlds. But there is no escaping it. This is the only way to acquire two cultures, one sacred and one secular, through the educational method in which we revel: "Torah U'Madda'." The educational objective is neither a complete synthesis nor a schizophrenic dichotomy, but mutual coexistence which requires both teacher and student to wrestle with both daunting intellectual and metaphysical problems as well as with daily practical challenges.

It is worthwhile elaborating on our educational format in the hope that it will serve your purposes as well. I must apologize at the outset, however. I am not well-versed in the professional, technical and existential problems which beset you. What I know from your periodical literature and from conversations with Israeli colleagues does not comprise even half of the barest minimum necessary to allow a foreigner to lecture to you.

Permit me, then, just to outline some of the basic concepts and ideas that underlie our form of education in the United States and you decide: If it pertains to you—you may apply it to the educational realities of the State Religious School system; if it does not—accept my comments solely as a theoretical report akin to: "Everything you wanted to know about modern Orthodox education in the United States" in twenty minutes.

#### **Torah U'Madda': Lekhat'hila and Bedi'avad**

As I said, the essence of our innovation lies in the dual program throughout the entire course of the student's education. It should be noted that the system of "Torah U'Madda'" is not a compromise between our purely Jewish ideals and the secular reality in which we live. In halakhic terms: It is *de jure* (*lekhat'hila*), not *de facto* (*bedi'avad*). This issues from an authentically Jewish perspective which has notable precedents in the history of authentic Jewish thought. I will not elaborate further on this point, here, because I have already published an entire book—in English—on this topic which I hope will appear, in due time, in Hebrew. One point, however, I do wish to emphasize: If secular



studies, in our opinion, are not merely a compromise, and yet granting the premise that "Talmud Torah outweighs all else," then of necessity even these [secular] studies must be conducted with comprehensive depth and not superficially, with a reluctance that reflects duress. Sciences, literature, and general philosophy have an independent value within the Jewish framework of Torah, the same Torah which includes not only the Books of *Shemot*, *VaYikra*, *Bemidbar* and *Devarim*—with all their mitzvot and laws—but also the Book of *Bereishit* with the story of the creation of the world, of man, and of all the nations. If these secular studies are not on a sufficiently high level, they are but a waste of time and a negation of Torah. Moreover, it has a practical ramification: Without intensive secular study, parents who are concerned with their children's future employment prospects will prefer to send them to secular schools in order to ensure their financial success.

That having been said, I must emphasize that one should not imagine for even a moment that Torah and *Madda'* are of equal value. In spite of the respect we accord to general studies, the study of Torah remains the paramount value. How did Yehudah, in the sidrah of *VaYigash*, put it to the viceroy of Egypt with regard to Binyamin? "The youth cannot leave his father for if he were to leave him he would die." If Jewish youth in Israel or in the Diaspora were to leave their Father; if they were to abandon the sacred and divine legacy of our forefathers that has guided our people throughout history; if they were to relinquish the religious and national roots of the Jewish people; they would die, they could not continue to live as Jews and would, God forbid, inevitably become assimilated amongst the nations and amidst the cultural paganism so prevalent in the contemporary world.

### "It is Our Life and the Length of Our Days"

Torah truly precedes science, and if the study of science requires depth and profundity, how much more so are they required of Torah study! Superficiality and *Talmud Torah* are mutually exclusive. The problem of Jewish identity, in Israel or America, will not be resolved by teaching a surface Judaism. The continuity of our people as a Jewish nation requires that we study Judaism neither academically nor as ancient history but in recognition that "it is our life and the length of our days."

This obligates the teacher to devote himself to nurturing in his

students the value of in-depth Torah study until they desire to study Torah on their own. As my teacher, the late Gaon Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, explained the rabbinic dictum in *Avot* (1:1), "raise up (*ha'amidu*) many students:" "Hold them up until they can stand on their own." Stand the student on his own two legs; accustom him to learn with comprehension until he acquires the desire to study and advance in Torah by himself. The Torah possesses a trove of charm, of grace and attraction; it is a treasure held in store for whoever is fortunate enough to study it in depth, each according to his ability and capacity. A student who has acquired this love and skill will not abandon Torah lightly, nor will he forsake his God or his nation.

I have read that there are I.D.F. commanders who complain that many of their young recruits lack nationalistic motivation, that they speak of "self-actualization" as though the whole world revolves about them and around their personal egos, and that they are indifferent to transcendent ideals. The motivation of the "knitted kippot" generation is quite different; not self-actualization but life as a mission. The question they ask themselves is: "What and where can I contribute most?" This was once characteristic of kibbutz youth. I am aware that this generalization, like all generalizations, does not apply to either all secular youth or to all religious youth. But one thing I do know: Without being rooted in lofty and transcendent ideals, whether in the State of Israel or the Diaspora, there can be no concept of life as a mission, and without looking upon life as a mission a generation will grow up in the United States without any interest in the State of Israel and without any feeling of identification with Jews in general, a generation of Canaanites rather than Jews, who will prefer cynicism to Zionism and will regard both Judaism and Jews whether in Israel and in the Diaspora with feelings of arrogance and contempt. "The youth cannot leave his father for if he were to leave him he would die."

Another point which concerns us in the United States, and which you too undoubtedly wrestle with, is the continuation of Torah study by our students even after they complete their secondary education. A sure sign of the success or failure of any educational system on the secondary level is whether the student continues his learning on a more advanced level.

In the United States, and particularly in Yeshiva University, we spare



no effort to convince the graduates of our high-schools to remain within the walls of the yeshiva while attending university and we utilize the "Israel Experience" toward this end. That is to say, more than three quarters of the graduates of our institution's high-schools, girls and boys, devote at least one year to studying in Israel in various *yeshivot* and *mikhlalot*. This experience has exceeded all our expectations.

### Judaism and Hellenism: An Ongoing Conflict

Finally, a note regarding the philosophical foundation of the singular and characteristic Jewish concept of education, a concept which emphasizes the central role of the teacher in molding the character of the next generation.

The conflict between Judaism and Hellenism was not limited to the military battle which we won, and which is commemorated on Hanukkah. It also was not limited to the freedom of religion in general (as the modern formulation goes), nor even to the freedom to observe particular mitzvot. The conflict spread to the intellectual, ideological and philosophical dimensions as well, and these conflicts have special ramifications regarding education. This, too, is part of the legacy of Hanukkah to our generation.

The Greek scholars, particularly the Aristotelians, valued being above becoming, and the objectives above the means by which they are attained. The Jewish sages disagreed; they cherished the means more than the ends, and dynamic becoming above static being. The process meant more for them than the coveted goal.

Thus, the Greeks gave precedence to the content of the intellect over the process of intellection whereby the content was cognized, i.e., the sum total of correct ideas is an end in itself. What the Greeks thought was self-understood, however, was not acceptable to our Sages. They determined that "*Talmud Torah* outweighs all else," that Torah study is the most important commandment. With all the respect our Sages accorded to Torah as the essence of life, however (and I devoted my book *Torah liShemah* to this subject a few years ago), they averred that the mitzvah was not so much the ideas or information which a person attained as it was the conceptual process itself, i.e., the act of learning, and not just the passive state of Torah knowledge. In other words, they regarded becoming as more significant than being. This has also entered our language.

Instead of using the word “scholar” (*hakham*), there developed the use of the term “student of the scholars” (*talmid hakham*). That is to say, a *hakham* is one who knows whereas a *talmid hakham* is one who studies and who expends effort in the acquisition of knowledge. The latter is the Jewish ideal.

### The Importance of “Process”

In his introduction to the Vilna Gaon’s commentary on *Sifra deTzeniyuta*, R. Hayyim Volozhin recounts a marvelous story about his younger brother, R. Zalman, a great prodigy who died young, and the Gaon, whom both brothers regarded as their most significant teacher. One day the Gaon, who was one of the greatest Kabbalists of the last two or three centuries, told R. Hayyim, “Tell your brother Zelmele (so he was known in Yiddish) that angels will pay him a visit in a dream and will attempt to reveal to him Torah mysteries (i.e., clarify a difficult halakhic issue). Tell him to chase them away! Even if they are correct, he should have no interest in obtaining Torah without laboring over it himself and without having studied and comprehended it himself.” What a powerful illustration of the importance of process, of becoming, in the study of Torah!

Moreover, a distinguished disciple of the *Terumat haDeshen* tells us that in Germany of 500 years ago some imaginative Torah students invented a revolving table from which books could be easily selected without having to get up. Their teacher wrote of them: “Those rich and pampered young men . . . are not behaving properly. On the contrary, when one searches for a book and finds it only with difficulty, that act will always remind him of what he wanted to learn”—a psychologically insightful reply. (I am grateful to my friend, Hayyim Zohar, who brought this source to my attention.)

In the prayer, *Al haNissim*, which we recite throughout Hanukkah, we say that the Greeks wanted “to cause [the Jews] to forget Your Torah,” and that, with God’s help, we experienced the deliverance of “the mighty to the hands of the weak, the many—to the few, the impure—to the pure, the evil—to the righteous, and the malicious—to those who are engaged in Your Torah.” This linguistic variation requires explanation. If our enemies wanted to cause us “to forget [the] Torah,” the text should have said, “the malicious—to those who remembered [or: knew] the Torah.” Furthermore, if the author preferred “those who



are engaged" in Torah, he should have ascribed to the enemies the desire to prevent the study of Torah!

The answer, however, is obvious in the light of what we have said. The intent of the Greeks was to abnegate the Torah as a compendium of ideas, laws, and beliefs because the Greeks considered dry facts to be paramount. The expression, "to cause them to forget Your Torah" therefore suits their intentions. We Jews, contrariwise, prefer the process to the result, the becoming over being itself; the principal foundation of Judaism is study, engagement, and the expenditure of time and effort and hard work which strain the muscles of the mind, so to speak. Hence, "the malicious—in the hands of those preoccupied with Your Torah."

### **Educating Children or Adults; Which Takes Precedence?**

Another interesting ramification of this consideration: Precisely because Plato and the Greek philosophers regarded knowledge above study and regarded study, even though it was a necessary precondition for knowledge, as secondary in its importance, they preferred to educate adults—who had already reached a certain level of knowledge—above the education of the young. Educating the young, while necessary to train the next generation of knowledgeable people, had no independent value. Therefore the Greeks left the education of their young to their slaves. We find this in several Midrashim, as well, wherein one slave or another of a Greek is called "a pedagogue," a term which has since passed into both English and Hebrew, as well as into other Western languages, as a sign of respect. In reality, however, the pedagogue was a slave to his student's father; a slave, not a master.

Our situation was reversed. Precisely on account of the slow and gradual pace of the young student, the education of the young became a choice mitzvah, and, in comparison to all the surrounding nations, our ancestors distinguished themselves in their dedication to the education of their young. The teacher of the young was not a slave, a person without status, but a *rav*, that is to say, a "master," a publicly respected personality.

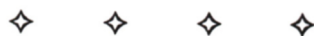
In Maimonides' codification of the laws of Talmud Torah, he devotes the first three *halakhot* of the first chapter to laws which pertain to teaching one's children and grandchildren. Only at the end of the fourth

*halakhah* does he write, "Just as he is commanded to teach his son, so is he commanded to study, himself." How revealing! The Jew's obligation to learn Torah derives from his prior responsibility to teach it to the young.

The teacher occupies center stage because adults need friends and companions, not just instructors, whereas the education of the young is impossible without the instructor. The future of the students depends on the teacher because the latter guides them on their long and arduous journey, and impresses upon them that overcoming their difficulties in comprehension is a great spiritual and intellectual victory, and that the effort to acquire knowledge is more important than the knowledge itself.

A student who has undergone this experience under the direction of a wise teacher who has himself, or herself, absorbed the Jewish ethos and morality of previous generations—directly or indirectly—will want to continue to learn, will be able to properly evaluate the skills he has been taught, and will be a student of Torah, as well as an advocate for Torah, throughout his life.

Such a student will not stop at "self-actualization"; he will regard his life as a mission and will attempt, with all his strength, to discover his own individual mission and learn how he may serve his God and contribute to his people and to the world at large.



Allow me to conclude as I began, by expressing my heartfelt gratitude to the organizers of this convention—the judges, the president, the chief rabbis, and all the honorable participants in this convention—for the great and undeserved tribute to me, as well as for the honor you have bestowed on the other recipients of the "Distinguished Friend of Religious Education" prize. Would that all our efforts at raising a knowledgeable generation, devoted to God and His Torah, nation, and land, be crowned with such success that we will never again need to debate such issues as how to maintain Jewish identity and how to ensure Jewish continuity in the face of intermarriage and assimilation—a very real danger both in the Diaspora and (may we be spared) in Israel.



TEN DA'AT

As a result of peace both within and without may we raise our voices in joy and contentment, voicing the great promise, "The Eternal of Israel does not deceive," and immediately return to the study hall and the classroom to teach and guide our precious charges, because no profession is purer, nobler, more satisfying or closer to our Father in Heaven—who also "teaches Torah to His people, Israel."