

Cooking or Gemara?

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Government at Westminster (U.K.) has announced that it intends to make cooking a compulsory subject in schools. It is worried about rising obesity and thinks that if you teach kids to cook they will eat more healthily.

Gosh, aren't politicians a dumb lot! If they do learn to cook they'll more likely deep-fry chips and meat patties or heat up ready-made hamburgers. And if they want to eat healthy they can make a Salad Nicoise without cookery lessons. Official exam results might be getting better but in fact employers complain that high school kids have lower levels of literacy and numeracy than before. Wouldn't it be better to spend money on dealing with the serious shortage of mathematics and science teachers?

Now I have issues with ultra-Orthodox education and its limited horizons. But it achieves three things. It ensures that virtually every kid gets to read fluently. It doesn't matter in what language. It's a transferable skill. It emphasizes numbers, because you can't make your way through Gemara without having a good grasp of basic mathematics. And, above all, it forces one to learn by heart, which is a much overlooked mental discipline.

Secular educational experts ought to get over their prejudices and look at what the graduates of yeshivas achieve in basic skills, even if those basic skills are extremely limited and there is no connect between what they learn and getting a job. But armed with basic skills, if or when you do decide to go for a job, give me Gemara over cooking any day of the week!