

# Study

Education has been the bedrock of Jewish religious life for thousands of years. The Torah insists that “you should teach your children”. We recite this phrase at least three times a day whenever we say the Shema (a declaration, not a prayer).

After the Bible, the next greatest book in Judaism is the Mishna (which together with its companion the Gemara came to be known as The Talmud), compiled in the second century. It starts with these words:

“These are the obligations that have no fixed limits—leaving corners of the field for the poor, first fruits, appearing at the Temple on festivals, kindness to other human beings, and studying Torah. These are the things that return one a benefit in this world but the absolute return is in the World to Come—honoring one’s mother and father, kindness to other human beings, hospitality, visiting the sick, helping girls get married, participating in funerals, and studying Torah” (Peah 1).

Somewhere in the first millennium the second part was modified to read

“These are the things that return one a benefit in this world but the absolute return is in the World to Come—honoring one’s mother and father, kindness to other human beings, attending the Study House morning and night, hospitality, visiting the sick, helping girls get married, participating in funerals, concentrating on prayer, making peace between people (and between a man and his wife), and studying Torah is worth all of them.”

And this text, with minor variations, has entered our prayer books.

The list of priorities is significant. Notice how much emphasis is put on what we would call inter personal relations! The final reiteration of Torah study is based on a line in the Talmud that says, “Study is the greatest obligation of all precisely because it leads to practicing everything else.” (Kidushin 40b). In theory, of course, that should be true but it is strange that what is thought of as a great spiritual tradition should put so much emphasis on an intellectual activity.

The opening phrase seems to me to have been written during Temple times and the second after its destruction, for those elements dealing with the Temple and the Land of Israel have been omitted. This would also explain the increased emphasis and priority on studying Torah. By then it was blindingly obvious that we would survive as a people only if we maintained our traditions, and the best way of perpetuating them was to study them and to teach them. This had already been clear during the first great exile into Babylon. It became even more so as the challenges of Greco-Roman civilization forced us to respond in an intellectually demanding and educationally rigorous way.

There was a difference of opinion in the Talmud as to the relative priority

of prayer over study, and in the end a compromise was reached. But ideally the two should be interrelated, like two arms are essential to the balance and effectiveness of the body.

From an early age I remember my father emphasizing at home, at school, and on the lecture circuit, the necessity of a Jew knowing his heritage. "An ignorant Jew," he would say, "could not possibly be an authentic one." This was part of his great Lithuanian heritage of intense intellectual involvement in studying Torah, which has become the hallmark of Orthodoxy today. In my youth you could be "Orthodox" and be completely ignorant of most of Jewish Law.

Since then the Jewish State, through welfare and financial and moral support, has enabled centers of Torah study to proliferate. Everyone now recognizes the primacy of the Israel Torah community, if for no other reason than that so many of their elite have actually gone to live there. Financial support coming from the Diaspora has also encouraged growth. And in this modern world of individuality, and freedom to choose to belong or not, knowledge as well as a sense of commitment are factors in keeping one "in".

Many Jews still have no inclining of how demanding and tough, intense Talmudic study is. Nothing I ever went through at university compared to the demands and disciplines of Torah study. This is one reason why so many who have had this tough training do so well when they go out into the world to compete in professions and commerce. And there's another plus—continuing to study into old age is wonderful for preventing senility. Not only, but it gives elderly people a sense of value and pride in their old age. In secular society, people are often valued according to how much they earn. With us, ongoing study not only fills the vacuum of retirement but gives one status and significance too.

Study, says the Talmud, must lead to action, and in the end human relationships and obligations are what define a good person. After all, the great "Musal" movement was initiated by Rabbi Israel Salanter in the nineteenth century precisely because, as he saw it, study was not impacting sufficiently on behavior. Still, study is a very solid basis from which to start, because it constantly reminds one of the nobility of our tradition and its obligations.

I am immensely proud that I belong to a tradition that values study. We are not just the People of the Book, we are the People who Study the Books. And everyone is involved; it is not just for priests and clergy. That is why we have survived against the odds. It is why Israel, for all its faults, has done so amazingly well in almost every sphere where brainpower counts. And why if they do not do something soon about the abysmal state school system, yeshiva graduates might soon be the only educated Israelis left.