

טעמו וראו

A taste of the
Rebbe's teachings

Va'era



Jewish Genius

Until two hundred years ago, eighty percent of the world's population was illiterate. The statistic among the Jewish population was the opposite: Eighty percent could read and write. How can we explain the difference?

An insight into the age-old Jewish approach to education.

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Part 1 - The Egyptian Elite

Source 1

Exodus 7:22, 8:3, 14-15



The sorcerers were able to do the same [i.e. transform water to blood] with their sorcery, and Pharaoh became obstinate. He would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as G-d had predicted.

The sorcerers were able to do the same with their sorcery, making frogs emerge on Egyptian land.

The sorcerers tried to produce lice with their sorcery but could not. Meanwhile, the lice were attacking man and beast alike. "It is the finger of G-d," they said to Pharaoh, but he remained obstinate and would not listen, just as G-d had predicted.

חומש שמות פרק ז' פסוק כ"ב.

פרק ח' פסוק ג', י"ד-ט"ו

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן חֲרָטְמֵי מִצְרַיִם בְּלִטְיָהֶם
וַיִּחְזַק לִב-פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא-שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם
כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה':

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן הַחֲרָטְמִים בְּלִטְיָהֶם
וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת-הַצְּפַרְדְּעִים עַל-אֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם:

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ-כֵן הַחֲרָטְמִים בְּלִטְיָהֶם
לְהוֹצִיא אֶת-הַכִּנִּים וְלֹא יָכְלוּ וַתְּהִי
הַכֶּנֶם בְּאָדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה: וַיֹּאמְרוּ
הַחֲרָטְמִים אֶל-פַּרְעֹה אֲצַבֵּעַ
אֱלֹקִים הוּא וַיִּחְזַק לִב-פַּרְעֹה וְלֹא-
שָׁמַע אֲלֵהֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה':

Source 2

worldhistory.biz



Most people in ancient Egypt did not know how to read and write. Since the majority of Egyptians were peasant farmers, they would not have needed to learn to read, and the complexities of the written language would have made it more difficult to learn than most alphabetic writing systems. Although some members of the royal family and high status individuals, as well as officials, priests, and army officers were literate, scribes were needed for operations of the state at all levels.

Egyptian scribes were professionals trained in special schools in royal administrative departments and temples. Some scribes probably learned through apprenticeship, such as is known from the New Kingdom workmen's village of Deir el-Medina. Model letters recorded by school boys, on limestone ostraca and plaster-covered wooden boards, have been found which give us information about what was taught in these schools or to apprentices in jobs. A well-known Middle Egyptian text attributed to the scribe Khety extols the virtues of being a scribe, who will always have employment. He boasts that scribes do not have to wear rough garments like common laborers, and they can take baths. Scribes give orders and others have to obey them.

The Sicha, Part 1

Keeping Education Inaccessible



From Torah's descriptions of the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt and the style of Egyptian education, it is clear that our approach to Torah study is profoundly different than the Egyptian attitude towards education, specifically in regard to the concept of utilizing every person's capacities.

In Egypt, education was made available to a limited group of people: the sorcerers, stargazers, and so on. These intellectual pursuits were a 'closed book' to the rest of the population; the masses were not granted access to any of the higher education Egypt had to offer. Thus, whenever a specific order was handed down to the population, it took the form of a command; they were obligated to fulfill it without understanding its value. It was given to them with the attitude that they would never comprehend it. 'Understanding' was the privilege of the upper echelons of society, not the simple folk.

Part 2 - Education for All

Source 3

Exodus 19:9-11



G-d said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that all the people will hear when I speak to you. They will then believe in you forever." Moses told G-d the people's response to that. G-d said to Moses, "Go to the people, and sanctify them today and tomorrow. Let them even immerse their clothing. They will then be ready for the third day, for on the third day, G-d will descend on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people."

חומש שמות, פרק י"ט פסוקים ט' - י"א

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי בָּא אֵלֶיךָ בְּעָבַיִם הָעָנָן וְשָׁמַע הָעָם בְּדַבְרֵי עֲמֹךָ וְגַם בְּךָ יֵאֱמִינוּ לְעוֹלָם וַיְגַד מֹשֶׁה אֶת דְּבַרֵי הָעָם אֶל ה': וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵךְ אֶל הָעָם וְקַדְּשָׁתֶם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר וְכַבְּסוּ שְׂמַלְתֶּם: וְהָיוּ נְכַנִּים לַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי כִּי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי יֵרַד ה' לְעִינֵי כָל הָעָם עַל הַר סִינַי:

Source 4

Kuzari, part 1 section 7



The people distinctly heard the Divine word of the Ten Commandments...they did not receive these Ten Commandments from single individuals, nor from a prophet, but from G-d.

ספר הכוזרי, מאמר ראשון פרק ז'

והנה שמע העם דבור אלוהי מפורש בעשרת הדברות ... את עשרת הדברות האלה קבלו המוני העם לא מיחידים, ולא מנביא יחיד, כי אם מפי האלוה.

Source 5

Mishneh Torah, Laws of Torah Study 1:8



Every Jewish person must study Torah, whether he is poor or rich, healthy or ailing, young or old. Even if he begs for charity from door to door, and even if he has a wife and children to support, he must set aside time for Torah study at day and night, as the verse states, "You shall study it by day and by night."

משנה תורה, הלכות תלמוד תורה פרק א', הלכה ח'

כָּל אִישׁ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל חַיִּב בְּתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה בַּיּוֹם עֲנִי בֵּין עָשִׁיר בֵּין שְׁלֵם בְּגוֹפוֹ בֵּין בְּעַל יְסוּרִין בֵּין בְּחֹר בֵּין שֶׁהִיא זָקֵן גְּדוֹל שֶׁתִּשֵּׁשׁ כָּחוֹ אֶפְלוּ הִיא עֲנִי הַמְתַּפְרֵנֵס מִן הַצְּדָקָה וּמְחֹזֵר עַל הַפְּתָחִים וְאֶפְלוּ בְּעַל אִשָּׁה וּבָנִים חַיִּב לְקַבֵּעַ לוֹ זְמַן לְתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (יהושע א ח) "וְהָגִיתָ בוּ יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה:"

The Sicha, Part 2

Ten Commandments To All



When the people of Israel received the Torah upon leaving Egypt, they were commanded to employ their own intellect in the study of Torah.

When G-d spoke the Ten Commandments (which are a microcosm of the entire Torah and everything that will be added to it in the future), the entire nation (all six-hundred-thousand adult males and all the women and children) heard G-d's words on equal footing with Moses. In other words, the Torah was personally given to every Jew, even the simplest among them.

This went into effect right when we received the Torah, the moment we became a nation, and remains in effect until the end of time. The Torah was given "to those who stood there on that day and to all future generations," as explained at length in Midrash.

Therefore, the obligation to study Torah rests on every single Jew, from the greatest scholar to the simplest watercarrier. In the words of Maimonides: "Every Jewish person must study Torah, whether he is poor or rich, healthy or ailing, young or old...as the verse states: You shall study it by day and by night." Even an ignoramus must study Torah, at least one segment every morning and night, because we are commanded to ensure that "this Torah scroll does not depart from your mouth." As we've often explained, these few moments of Torah study will permeate the entire day and ensure that the entire day is infused with Torah's spirit.

Torah's novel approach was in direct contrast to Egyptian culture. The Israelites had lived in Egypt for several generations and could have (seemingly) been influenced by the surrounding culture (which preserved its wisdom for the elite). Therefore, as soon as they left Egypt, they were commanded to engage in the study of Torah on their own. Every individual was expected to utilize his own intellectual capacities to understand the Torah; G-d rejects the notion that scholarship is the realm of the few, and that the masses are only capable of following orders.

Even as a child just begins to speak, we are commanded to teach him Torah.

We begin with teachings that are suitable for his young mind, but the very first concept, as per Jewish tradition, is the verse, “The Torah which Moses commanded us is the inheritance of the community of Jacob.” The first message he hears is the foundation for all future teachings: that the entire Torah is the personal inheritance of every single Jew.

Comply But Also Comprehend

At the Giving of the Torah, we were told that every Jew must make full use of his intellectual capacities, through Torah study and through meditating in the greatness of the Creator, bringing him or herself to love G-d, fear Him and fulfill His commands – because “action is the main point.”

In other words, on one hand we are told that “action is the main point” – carrying out the commands of the Torah is the most important aspect of Judaism. On the other hand, we are told not to suffice with knowing the commands and carrying them out. We are obligated to use our intellect to understand the meaning behind those commands (to the best of our abilities).

Two Sides to the Ten Commandments

This combination (action on one hand and comprehension on the other) is also emphasized in the Ten Commandments themselves:

The Ten Commandments contain two forms of commandments which are very different from each other:

Some commandments are very simple: “Don’t steal,” “Don’t murder,” “Don’t commit adultery.” In the positive commandments as well, we read “Honor your father and mother.” It doesn’t take profound wisdom to understand these commandments. Every normal person, even if intellectually challenged, understands the importance of these rules.

On the other hand, the opening of the Ten Commandments is “I am your G-d,” “Do not worship other G-ds...” These are theological commandments which call for profound meditation and intense intellectual efforts.

G-d chose to give both types of commands together to emphasize that a Jew is expected to fulfill both: On one hand, he is expected to fulfill the Torah’s mandates on a practical level, and at the same time, he is expected to fully utilize his intellectual capacities to think about and comprehend each concept.

Source 6

Ibn Ezra, Genesis 20:1



Know that the levels of people's faith...are not equal. The masses believe whatever they hear—whatever they are told by their master. Above them are those who saw it written in the words of the Torah that G-d gave to Moses. But if a heretic challenges them and claims there is no G-d, they will be left emptyhanded, as they will not know what to answer. Then there are those who have strived to learn the sciences—which are like stairs which help a person climb to his goal—who will recognize the work of G-d in the patterns and the plants and the animals, and in his own human body—in the function of each limb...

אבן עזרא, שמות פרק כ, פסוק א'

דע כי אין מעלות בני אדם שוות באמונתם בלבם, שהם מאמינים בשם הנכבד. כי הרבים מאמינים להשמעות אזנים שיאמר להם אדוניהם ככה. ולמעלה מהם שראו זה כתוב בדברי התורה שנתן השם למשה. ואם יבא אפיקורוס לערער כי אין אלקים, ישימו ידם לפיהם. כי לא ידעו להשיב. ואשר נשאו לבו ללמוד חכמות, שהם כמו מעלות לעלות בהם אל מקום חפצו, יכיר מעשה השם במתכונת, ובצמחים, ובחיות, ובגוף האדם בעצמו, שידע מעשה כל אבר ואבר כפי התולדות. ולמה היה, על זאת המתכונת.

Part 3 - Keep the World Informed

Share Your Wisdom Further



This idea (that every person must fully utilize his intellect and cannot suffice with knowing the practical application of the Mitzvah) brings us to an additional point: When G-d gives you knowledge in a certain field (and if he gives you material wealth as well), you must not hold it to yourself. To the contrary, be generous with it. Use your knowledge for the benefit of the public; don't follow the custom of the Egyptian elite, who maintained their wisdom among themselves.

This is emphasized in the Laws of Torah Study: "Torah commands every scholar to teach students." You are obligated to teach Torah to everyone within your reach, and obviously, your Torah message must bring practical results in the student's day-to-day behavior, and that is accomplished, first and foremost, by being a living example.

Doctor's Orders

Our behavior should be the opposite of the Egyptian sorcerers, who concealed their wisdom from the masses. In our day, there is a similar behavior—leftovers from an earlier era—among physicians. When a physician gives you a prescription, he writes it in hints and clues (lines and dots etc.) so that nobody will understand the message aside for the pharmacist and himself.

I don't mean to insult doctors, G-d forbid; we all need their assistance. G-d bless them for their work. My point is to demonstrate that a residue of this behavior has remained with us until our times—to conceal certain knowledge from ordinary people. On the other hand, in addition to the prescription itself, doctors in our day also write instructions for the medication in clear terms—how to use the medication, how often to take it, and so on.

This is the lesson on a practical level: When G-d gives you something special (for example, significant Torah knowledge) you must make every effort to share it with others. Don't be stingy; share it generously and spread it far and wide. The same is true of physical belongings that G-d grants you. Don't hold them for yourself; allow others to enjoy them as well.

Source 7

Talmud, Berachot 28a
(Steinzaltz Translation & Commentary)



It was taught: On that day that they removed Rabban Gamliel from his position and appointed Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya in his place, there was also a fundamental change in the general approach of the study hall as **they dismissed the guard at the door and permission was granted to the students to enter.** Instead of Rabban Gamliel's selective approach that asserted that the students must be screened before accepting them into the study hall, the new approach asserted that anyone who seeks to study should be given opportunity to do so. **As Rabban Gamliel would proclaim and say: Any student whose inside, his thoughts and feelings, are not like his outside, i.e., his conduct and his character traits are lacking, will not enter the study hall.**

The Gemara relates: **On that day several benches were added** to the study hall to accommodate the numerous students. **Rabbi Yochanan said: Abba Yosef ben Dostai and the Rabbis disputed this matter. One said: Four hundred benches were added** to the study hall. **And one said: Seven hundred benches were added** to the study hall. When he saw the tremendous growth in the number of students, **Rabban Gamliel was disheartened.**

תלמוד בבלי, מסכת ברכות דף כ"ח ע"א
(שטיינזלץ)

תנא כי באותו היום שהעבירו את רבן גמליאל מנשיאותו והעמידו במקומו את ר' אלעזר בן עזריה בא גם שינוי יסודי בגישה הכוללת של בית המדרש, שכן סלקוהו לשומר הפתח ונתנה להם רשות לתלמידים להכנס. שבמקום גישתו של רבן גמליאל שיש לברור היטב את התלמידים נקטו בשיטה שכל הרוצה ללמוד יש לתת לו הזדמנות. שכן היה רבן גמליאל מכריז ואומר: כל תלמיד שאין תוכו כבדו, ואינו שלם במדותיו ובלמודיו לא יכנס לבית המדרש.

ומסופר כי ההוא יומא אתוספו כמה ספסלי לבית המדרש מהתרבות התלמידים. אמר ר' יוחנן: פליגי בה בשאלה זו אבא יוסף בן דוסתאי ורבנן. חד אמר כי אתוספו לבית המדרש ארבע מאה ספסלי. וחד אמר כי אתוספו לבית המדרש שבע מאה ספסלי. כאשר ראה רבן גמליאל את

He said: Perhaps, Heaven forbid, I prevented Israel from engaging in Torah study. They showed him in his dream white jugs filled with ashes alluding to the fact that the additional students were worthless idlers. The Gemara comments: **That was not** the case, but **that dream was shown to him to ease his mind** so that he would not feel bad.

It was taught: There is a tradition that tractate **Eduyot was taught that day.** **And everywhere** in the Mishna or in a **Baraita that they say "On that day,"** it is referring to **that day.** **There was no Halacha whose ruling was pending in the study hall, that they did not explain** and arrive at a practical halachic conclusion that day. **And even Rabban Gamliel did not avoid the study hall for even one moment,** as he held no grudge against those who removed him from office and he participated in the halachic discourse in the study hall as one of the Sages.

הריבוי העצום במספר התלמידים הוה קא חלשה דעתיה [חלשה דעתו] של רבן גמליאל, אמר: דלמא חס ושלום מונעתי תורה מישראל. אחזו ליה בחלמיה חצבי חיורי דמליין קטמא [הראו לו בחלומו כדים לבנים שמלאים אפר] לרמוז שאותם תלמידים שנוספו אינם אלא אנשים ריקנים חסרי ערך. ומעירים על כך בגמרא: ולא היא, לא כך היה הדבר, אלא ההיא חלום כדי ליתובי דעתיה [ליישב את דעתו] שלא יצטער, הוא דאחזו ליה [שהראו לו].

תנא, קבלה היא במסורת שמסכת עדיות בו ביום נשנית. וכל היכא דאמרינן [מקום במשנה או בברייתא שאנו אומרים] לשון "בו ביום", ההוא יומא הוה [אותו היום היה]. ובגלל התרבות תלמידי החכמים, והגישה החדשה בבית המדרש לא היתה הלכה שהיתה תלויה (מסופקת) בית המדרש שלא פירשוהו, והגיעו בה לכלל מסקנה הלכה למעשה. ואף רבן גמליאל לא מנע עצמו מבית המדרש אפילו שעה אחת, שלא נטר שנאה או קנאה למדיחיו ונשאר יושב כאחד מבני החבורה, בבית המדרש, ועסק עימם בבירור ההלכה.

