

Education:
More Than Just Getting Good Grades and into a Good College

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At her Supreme Court Senate nomination hearing earlier this year, for some reason nominee Elena Kagan was asked where she was on Christmas eve. It had to be one of the strangest questions ever asked in a confirmation hearing, but probably one of the best setup lines of all times. Although I am sure none of us could recite any of the other questions she was asked by the Senators on the Judiciary Committee, it, as well as her response is one that I am sure all of us will remember for a long time. To laughter and widespread recognition Kagan replied, "Probably like most Jews on Christmas Eve I was having dinner at a Chinese restaurant." I would love to know the context, why the question was even asked, and what it had to do with her qualification to serve as a Supreme Court justice. The line of questioning seemed as if she was being asked to provide an alibi to a prosecutor where she was and what she was doing at the time of a crime.

Her smile and good-natured response revealed a person who doesn't take herself too seriously. No wonder she passed her interview with flying colors. While Kagan appears to be a knowledgeable and committed Jew who is proud of her identity and not shy about practicing her religion I cannot help but wonder if her comment doesn't reveal something on a deeper level about the current state of the American Jewish community -- because for too many Jews the extent of their Jewish identity is little more than going to the movies and eating Chinese food on Christmas Eve. (And by the way, you don't need to go to a traife restaurant - we had a great Chinese dinner here at B'nai Tzedek last year, and will be doing it again this year as well.)

It is painfully clear that although today's youth are highly educated they know less about what it means to be a Jew today than previous generations. And how can we blame them? After throwing a blowout party costing tens of thousands of dollars when they reach their thirteenth birthday we then turn to little Johnny and say: "So do you want to continue your religious school education or not?" I am willing to bet when told they have a choice about going to school or not most kids say to themselves, "Are they kidding me?! Is this for real? Since when have they ever let me decide anything?" And so the parents timidly tell me when I ask if their child will continue learning after the bar or bat mitzvah, "well it's her decision" - as if the choice is as important as which cell phone plan the child will be getting, which incidentally they usually don't let the kids decide.

3,000 years of tradition and martyrdom, of resisting all kinds of odds and surmounting unimaginable challenges to keep Judaism alive and the fate and future of the Jewish people is placed in the hands of pre-pubescent 13 year olds, whose main stimuli and interests in life, through no fault of their own consists of Facebook, computer games,

sports and dance, and who for the most part do not yet possess a sense of responsibility for others, much less an appreciation of the gravity of their decision or its long-term significance for the future of Judaism and its implications for the viability and survival of the Jewish people.

Any wonder the kids will say, "I don't know, mom. I have conflicts in my schedule. I'll see if I can work it in." We would never dream of not exposing our children to classics such as Shakespeare or Whitman, algebra or geometry, or the history of the civil rights movement in America, all subjects introduced after children reach age 13. Yet we are willing to tolerate illiteracy and ignorance of the great writings and treasures of our tradition.

Make no mistake about it -- we and future generations will have to live with the consequences of the choices we allow our kids to make.

Later today I will lead a discussion about Chelsea Clinton's wedding to Mark Mezvinsky, and whether or not it is "good for the Jews." The truth is that many of our young people who are getting married, regardless of whether they are marrying someone who is Jewish or not, know painfully little about what it means to be a Jew and are ill equipped to live a Jewish life.

Elie Kaunfer author of "Empowered Judaism" writes that the young Jews of today face a crisis of meaning caused by their lack of knowledge of what Judaism means and stands for. As he puts it, "For the first time in centuries, two Jews can marry each other and have Jewish children without any connection to Jewish heritage, wisdom or tradition...Even people who are in-married by and large have little connection to Torah, Jewish practice and values... They have been sold a world in which Judaism is a bunch of platitudes, at best matching their existing modern liberal values and at worst completely irrelevant to the struggles they experience day to day. Who can blame these Jews for disengaging from Judaism? This is the legacy of American Judaism in the 21st century -- a Judaism that has been undersold and watered down."

On this Yom Kippur I choose as I have occasionally in previous years to focus on a single Jewish value that I want to emphasize and strengthen in the hope that it will have an impact and motivate you to act. Among the topics I have addressed in the past are the centrality of Shabbat, prayer, the role of ritual and tradition in preserving Jewish identity, the importance of creating a Jewish home, tikun olam and social justice. The issue I want to concentrate on today is why education is so central to what it means to being a Jew.

It is remarkable how often people - Jews and non Jews alike will say to me how much they admire Jews for our emphasis on education. It shouldn't be surprising. After all, it is a well-known fact that a "genius" is an average student with a Jewish parent.

As we all know we are disproportionately represented where knowledge is valued: in the faculty and upper echelon of academic institutions, among the literati, in the field of medicine and healing professions, the arts, and of course, among Nobel Prize winners.

What we often don't realize is that our attitude towards education is not meant to refer to excelling in secular education, getting good grades or going to a good college. Were that the case, there would be little difference between us and other high-achieving students and ethnic groups. Although many of the generation of immigrants to this country, our grandparents who first came here at the turn of the century saw education as a way to get ahead, the traditional Jewish veneration of studying entailed mastering the wealth of Jewish teachings.

Unfortunately people go through life thinking of Judaism as being little more than Seinfeld and Woody Allen, or bagels and lox, not aware of the intense, fascinating debates Judaism has and of the answers it offers about existential issues that all of us confront in our lives. We cannot offer superficial platitudes or mere social opportunities for our young people or ourselves. We need to expose them and delve into the power of the Jewish heritage, for without substance Judaism is devoid of significance.

Exploration of texts is the path for those interested in spirituality, for it brings us into contact with and closer to the Divine will. As Rabbi Louis Finkelstein said long ago, "when I pray I speak to God. When I study Torah, God speaks to me."

Imagine for a moment that we are living in a shtetl in 19th century Russia, not the best of times for Jews. There are pogroms, it is difficult to eke out a living, there is constant threat of random attack, of taxes arbitrarily imposed, or of being conscripted into the Czar's army. You are a simple Jew talking with your friends and dreaming of a better life. Some of these Jews go to Israel where they become pioneers and build the foundation of what will become the land of Israel, some set out for America, the *goldene medina*, while others plot the overthrow of the repressive Russian government and the Bolshevik revolution.

But focus now on two simple Jews who are not caught up in politics, or the various movements swirling about them. One, a teacher in a heder, a traditional Jewish school for young boys tells his friend, "Hymie, you know if I were the czar, I would be richer than the czar." "How is that possible?" His friend asks with incredulity. "Easy," his friend the simple teacher responds, "I have it all figured out. In addition to my job as czar, I would tutor on the side." I can just picture it: the czar giving bar mitzvah lessons.

There is a reason I went such a long way to set up this punch line.

There was a time when our people thought like this, when study of Judaism was so central to our very being that it was inconceivable to imagine life without it.

We are called, "the people of the Book" because study of our texts and our attachment and affection to it defines who and what we are. A number of years ago I visited the

home of a rabbi, and the first thing he wanted to show me in his home wasn't his artwork or family pictures, but his *seferim*, the new *shas*, the Talmud set he had just purchased. His pride reminded me of an observation once made by one of my teachers in a class I took in Jerusalem and which I have never forgotten. In the middle of a presentation about various explanations by medieval commentators on a difficult Biblical passage she remarked, "Sometimes I feel I know the biblical commentator Rashi better than my closest friends." It fascinated me that she felt that familiar and comfortable with this genius who lived a thousand years ago.

A story is told about a *yeshivah bochur*, a student who asked his rebbe if it is permitted to smoke while studying torah. The rabbi answered, "Smoke while studying torah?! Of course not. It is a *hillul haShem*, a desecration of God's name." A little while later another child comes up and phrases the same question slightly differently, "Rabbi, is it permitted to learn Torah while we smoke?" Without a moment's hesitation the rabbi answered, "Of course you can!"

You might be wondering what is the difference? Same rabbi, same question, different answer. It is all in the phrasing, for to a *yiddishe cup*, there is a world of difference. The Hebrew term for wasting time is *bitul torah*, literally, wasting Torah, meaning that unproductive time is wasted because it could have been used to study Torah.

A tractate of the Talmud is called a *massechet*. An entire *massechet* is called "*Beytzah*", meaning "egg." It opens with a discussion that goes off on tangents and raises other related issues, for eighteen pages on whether or not it is permissible to eat an egg laid on *yom tov*, a holiday or Shabbat. While this may appear to be a rather esoteric topic with little relevance to our lives today, it is actually an elaborate exercise in logic and reasoning. The intention is to sharpen the intellect by seeking truth and attempting to comprehend why various rabbis take differing positions and to strive to harmonize and negate apparent inconsistencies.

Education is a core value for Jews because understanding and grappling with our texts challenges us and causes us to grow intellectually.

An obscure disturbing passage in the book of Deuteronomy refers to a "*ben sorer*," a rebellious son and what the parents must do with such a child. He is described as defiant, a glutton who sits around stuffing his face, is disrespectful to his parents and doesn't listen to them – in other words, a typical teenager. The penalty is that the child is to be stoned by the elders of the city. The sages in the time of the Talmud, living over a thousand years after the original document was written, were so disturbed by the prospect that without changing a word they interpreted the words so that they severely restricted the circumstances when it could be implemented. They limited the age so that it only pertained to a period of a few months prior to the age of bar mitzvah. Furthermore they determined that it only applied if the parents had the exact same voice. On an even more profound level, they taught a broader lesson, that "parents speaking with the same voice" means they cannot contradict each other. As a result of all the qualifications the rabbis imposed, the Talmud concluded, "there never was nor will there ever be such a case in all of Israel." So the logical question raised by other

sages was, if it is all hypothetical, why then does the Torah even mention it? And the answer: so we will earn the merit one gets for studying and analyzing the text. So we can earn the merit of studying and dissecting the text! That statement typifies for me our approach and attitude towards studying and captures what I am trying to teach this morning. In our tradition, learning is a goal in and of itself because studying is a defining characteristic of what it means to be a Jew.

When Jews were confined to the Warsaw ghetto during the Holocaust and even in concentration camps, classes were formed to study classic Jewish writings. They knew that this is our lifeblood, and that study is what would help to keep them, as well as Judaism alive. It was a defiant response to the filth and degradation all around them, a powerful means of resistance and depriving the Nazis their goal of humiliating the Jews since this was one way to be sure Judaism would not be eradicated.

Imagine now that you are not in a *shtetl*, but rather the proverbial observer from outer space, and you land in a synagogue on a Sabbath morning. You see that there is great pageantry as doors are opened to reveal something dressed in royal garb and silver. As it is taken out and paraded through the congregation, people approach and touch and kiss the object wrapped in a royal gown. When it is lifted up, everyone stands. As you see the reverence and respect with which it is treated you realize that this is obviously something very precious to these people. If you understood the words that are recited when it is returned to the box it came from you would hear it described as a tree of life.

The Torah is special as a symbol not just because it is considered the word of God, but because of the wisdom it contains, and how it guides us since we constantly refer to it. By studying it we are instructed in how to live righteously and thereby internalize eternal Jewish values, perspectives and outlooks.

We dare not overlook the importance to the rest of the world for us to preserve study of Jewish sources. People look to us as having access to a tradition the world appreciates and needs. We have a duty not to ignore it but to share its light and insights with the world.

In her best selling book "The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self Reliant Children" author and psychologist Wendy Mogel explains that she grew up assimilated, knowing little about Judaism, but as a psychologist was drawn to it for she found that the wisdom of our tradition "teaches that there is greatness not just in grand and glorious achievements but in small everyday efforts and deeds". She uses Jewish teachings in her practice because it is a philosophy that helps adults and children keep things in perspective and cope with the challenges of life by achieving the delicate balance of appreciating our material world without becoming consumed by it.

Probably one of the greatest impediments for individuals who are experts and confident in their professional lives is that they feel uncomfortable, uncertain and inadequate with their lack of familiarity with their own heritage. But you are not alone. You are part of a congregation that offers classes and courses that wants you to grow and take those first steps. Consistent with the tone set by our sages no question is ever discouraged or

mocked or seen as simplistic. One of the greatest sages of the Talmud, Rabbi Akiba did not begin his studies until he was 40 years old, and knew nothing when he started.

Interestingly, the first page of the Talmud is the letter bet, the second letter of the alphabet. According to popular explanation it starts with bet, meaning, page 2 and not aleph because it is impossible to ever begin at the beginning. Studying Judaism, our commentators, say is “like jumping into the sea.” Wherever you start, there will be things you don’t know – but do not be intimidated by what you don’t know. Do not let it discourage you from taking the plunge, from starting your journey.

We Jews study our texts according to Arnold Eisen the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary because, “like earlier generations of Jews, we want life, for ourselves and our tradition, and therefore need to figure out what Torah means today and what God wants from us here and now. We want the meaning to life that comes from having Torah at the very center of our lives, and need one another’s insights at every step of the way to bring Torah close and keep it there... Members of the congregation of Israel around the world in 2010 still hold fast to Torah for dear life at these High Holy Days (because) (m)any of us are convinced that Jewish life and other lives too, depend on it.”

One of the most exciting aspects of Judaism is that it is dynamic, not static. It invites us to question and argue with the received tradition. It is not monolithic. People may study the same text and arrive at different conclusions, as a wide range of opinions are presented in the classic texts. Our interpretations and understanding of what our sages meant is constantly changing. A page of the Talmud is a lively discussion in which the rabbis are practically yelling at each other across the centuries debating fine points. Many of the issues raised in the Talmud are unanswered, as if they are waiting for us to join the fray or to offer our suggestions and insights. There are commentaries, and commentaries on the commentaries, for our relation to the tradition is constantly evolving. Perhaps that is why Edmund Fleg wrote over a hundred years ago that Judaism is both the oldest and the newest religion.

My friends, it is anything but dull and irrelevant. It is a never ending, ongoing conversation. It is exciting. It is alive and vibrant. It is intellectually stimulating. It is ours, and I want you to partake of it, to be a part of the ongoing, unending eternal dialogue. Then you will be able to pass it on to ensure that this precious treasure entrusted to us and handed down throughout the ages does not die with us.

Although it is obviously not a foolproof system, for all of us know and have read of people who seem to be pious or well-learned who are scoundrels, immoral rogues or thieves, but one of the reasons Judaism places such an emphasis on study of our texts is to help transform and improve our character. We learn how to overcome and resist the temptations presented to all of us as well as a sense of priorities. Don’t be fooled or discouraged or dissuaded by hypocrites who use their piety as a disguise to cover up their improprieties. By studying we learn what is expected of us and what character traits we should seek to emulate as well as how to interact with others in a moral fashion that hopefully leads to a more ethical society.

Rabbi Roly Matalon of New York said in a recent interview in the *New York Jewish Week*, "Why is it important to me to be Jewish? It's who I am. Being Jewish is what gives me incredible resources to go through life in a meaningful way, as part of a community, as part of a people, with its own vision, its own history, destiny and future. Being Jewish is also a language, a way of expressing oneself in the world. All of these resources are waiting for us to open them and use them, to contribute and to participate in enriching them, and to leave our mark for those who come after us. We're part of a continuum. We have to enrich Judaism so that those who follow us may benefit from our wisdom and our contributions, our struggles and our journey, incorporating everything that came before us."

I could not have said it better myself.

Standing before you as one who is often considered the most passionate and pro Israel rabbi in our community, and affirming that we must not lessen our efforts on behalf of the Jewish state for a moment, nevertheless, I say to you, Judaism must be more than pro Israelism. We must continue to advocate for Israel in the face of the coordinated attempt by anti Semites and even some Jews to delegitimize the Jewish state and the very real threat posed by Iran and its surrogates Hezbollah and Hamas. We must do all we can to keep Israel strong and secure, and be supportive as it enters difficult and important negotiations with the Palestinians. But to be most effective, we have to be educated Jews and knowledgeable of our history and who we are. We need to understand our claim to the land. Dear as Israel is to me and close as it is to my heart, it is one part of my Jewish identity. Important as it is, ultimately being Jewish in the 21st century must consist of more than just advocacy or lobbying for Israel.

A pointed debate in the Talmud raises the question – what is more important: study or deed, since both seem to be equally stressed. Some rabbis advocate for learning and some for action. It is a fascinating debate, with numerous nuances. Although I encourage you to study this matter in further detail, I won't keep you in suspense. The conclusion is that study is more important – primarily because it ultimately leads to action, which in certain respects is / CIR QUI TOUS/ circuitous. But what it does tell us is that study is fundamental and the foundation upon which Judaism is built. Needless to say they are not talking only about those under the age of 13, as the endeavor and the encounter with Jewish teachings is as important for adults.

So now my call to action: As Hillel said, "*Zal ulmad*, Go and study," and I would add, do it here at B'nai Tzedek.

A barrier often preventing people from crossing the threshold is they don't know where to go or where to begin. You can do it here. Rabbi Nehorai is quoted as saying, "Don't wait for Torah to come to you. Leave home and go to a place of Torah." That place is here. On Wednesday mornings after minyan I teach the popular ethical tractate Pirke Avot. You can join my Thursday morning weekly Torah study class, come to the lecture on October 17 with one of the most brilliant Jewish thinkers and popular instructors at the Jewish Theological Seminary today, Dr. Neil Gillman. Take our five part class

beginning on Sunday November 7 to learn to read Hebrew, come to services on Saturday morning when I lead a discussion of the Torah portion, or one of the holiday workshops I lead throughout the year, including sessions geared to our Nursery school parents, attend any of the outstanding lectures or other classes we sponsor during the year, or attend one of the parlor meetings I will be conducting in the coming year. Take advantage of the many opportunities offered by your shul.

If you have children, learn with them. Show them you care about what they are learning. Come with them to services as well as to our new BLT, B'nai Tzedek Learning Together program. When you ask, "What did you learn today?" and they tell you nothing, don't take that for an answer. Take an interest in what they are learning. Follow up, be involved. You will find it fulfilling, meaningful and stimulating.

I conclude with a prayer based on one of my favorite blessings from Massechet Berachot, recited when the disciples of Rav Ammi concluded their study and would take leave of their beloved teacher. It beautifully and poetically captures the essence of my message, and is my prayer for each of you.

May your cherished hopes be fulfilled in your lifetime;
May you be worthy of life eternal;
And may your ideals persist throughout the generations.

May your heart be filled with understanding;
May your mouth speak wisdom;
And may your tongue give expression to song.

May your eyes shine with the light of Torah...
May your lips speak knowledge and righteousness;
And may your feet swiftly take you to places where the words of God are heard.

Amen.

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