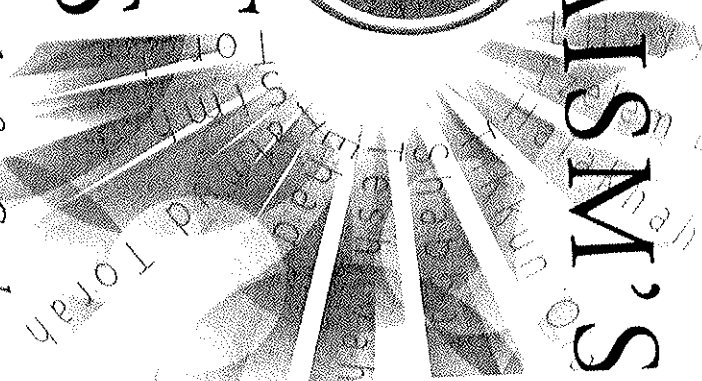


“Superb! ... A gem, as valuable for one beginning to explore Judaism as for one who needs renewal of soul and purpose.”

—RABBI RACHEL COWAN,
author of *Mixed Blessings*

JUDAISM'S 10 BEST IDEAS



A Brief Guide for Seekers

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author of *These Are the Words: A Vocabulary of Jewish Spiritual Life*



TALMUD TORAH

“Teach Them
to Your Children”

The Role of Education

If you were to ask me what single precept of Judaism is the one to which Jews feel the greatest commitment, I could answer completely without hesitation. “You shall teach them diligently to your children” (Deut. 6:7): the commandment to educate, to pass the legacy of tradition and its knowledge onward from generation to generation. Jews have a particularly strong awareness that our lives serve as bridges between those who came before and those who will come after us; each of us is a living link between our grandparents and our grandchildren. Even in families where the thick and rich stew of that

heritage has become so watered down as to be almost tasteless, Jews still feel an obligation to "pass it on," while hardly knowing what the "it" is. Ask any non-Orthodox American rabbi why most Jews join his or her synagogue; the answer will be clear. People say, "I want my son to know he's Jewish, to be proud of his heritage." Or today, even more pointedly, "We want our daughter to share in the knowledge that for so long belonged only to men," but for the same purpose. "to understand what it means to be a Jew;" something she too will give to her children, thus passing on the torch.

The commitment to learning as the chief vehicle of continuity is not something that is immediately obvious. In most traditional societies it was the land itself, especially agricultural land, that constituted the patrimony to be handed down. There are parts of the world where ancient enmities and memories of tribal conflict are the stuff of legacy. Jews certainly have these memories as well. But beginning more than two millennia ago, the Jewish people identified its culture as one of Torah, literally meaning "teaching," and knowledge became the essential tool for participation in that culture, passed on from each generation to the next. Jewish heroes over the course of those centuries include very few warriors or statesmen, only a handful of artists, and not many

people of special physical prowess or athletic ability, but a great many scholars and sages. To be a *ben Torah*, a person of learning, was the aspiration that Jewish society valued most.

For much of that long period, this knowledge was largely internal: sacred texts, commentaries, legal compilations, codes, works of philosophy, and mystic lore written by Jews and intended for consumption within the Jewish community. The apex in this culture of learning was the Talmud, the vast compilation of law and lore completed by the rabbis of Babylonia in about the sixth century CE. The complex dialectics of talmudic argumentation, especially in the legal sections, became the paradigm for a typical style of Jewish thinking that spread over the ages and through the world. (Much of Jewish humor, by the way, is an imitation and parody of that style of discourse.) A special institution was created for intellectual conversation in the dialectical mode. The *hevruta* or study partnership, in which two people ask each other questions, demolish each other's arguments, and help clarify and reframe their thinking, is a particularly Jewish form of friendship. It is carried on in the *bet midrash*, or house of study, a communal learning hall that in traditional communities stands alongside the synagogue as a key communal institution.

This valuing of intellectual achievement worked well as a tool for Jewish survival through the long period of exile and diaspora. The spread of knowledge went from great feats of oral memorization to the copying of manuscripts and then to the wonder of printed books. These meant that one could engage in a conversation (long before the age of cyberspace) seated around a virtual *bet midrash* table with two disputing sages from second-century Galilee, an eleventh-century French commentator, a sixteenth-century Turkish codifier, a nineteenth-century Polish questioner, and one's own study partner. The wisdom of tradition was always seen as cumulative, each generation of students and scholars standing on the shoulders of all those who had come before.

As Jews entered the modern world, beginning in the late eighteenth century, their faith and accrued skills in textual reasoning came to be applied to new, broader realms of knowledge. The massive attraction of Jews to higher education, both in Europe and in contemporary America, is the result of a number of factors. Some of it is about the desire to get ahead in social and economic terms. When Jews were still seen as low-class outsiders in Western societies, we felt a need to try harder than anyone else in order to claim our place. The breakdown

of the intellectual ghetto walls was also seen as a great liberation for many Jews who felt confined and constricted by the ancient rubrics of Jewish learning, most of which had little to do with the struggle to live in the contemporary world. The turn to modernity, we should add, also eventually gave educational opportunity to Jewish women, the 50 percent of the population that had been excluded from the world of traditional Jewish learning.

The new Jewish society that became the modern state of Israel was created by generations of so-called pioneers who believed that European Jews had become too intellectualized. They sought a world where Jews would be farmers and laborers rather than professors. This vision lasted for two or perhaps three generations, but it soon became clear that Israel's strength lay in the life of the mind. Although Israel's current educational system leaves much to be desired, the fact is that most farm and manual labor in today's Israel is done by Arab or international migrant workers, and the nation excels in high-tech, medical, and other learning-based innovations.

The academic community of North America over the course of the past half a century or more has been greatly enriched, even partly shaped, by the contribution of Jews far beyond our presence in the general population. Once the discriminatory quotas and "gentlemen's

agreements" excluding us broke down, beginning in the early post-World War II years, both faculties and students, especially in the highest-ranking institutions, have embraced large Jewish populations.

For much of this period, Jews in the academy were one of the most secularized segments of the Jewish community. The first group to arrive at the universities consisted of children of immigrants, forged in Depression-era poverty and naturally attracted to the politics of the left, including a passion for social justice. Their vision of an ideal society was a thinly secularized version of the ancient Jewish prophetic dream, even if they did not recognize it as such. After them came Jews of my own generation, partly shaped by the great social changes of the 1960s. These and their successors, while more fully Americanized, disproportionately maintain a belief in the value of education, especially a sense that it bears responsibility for social transformation, including the eradication of inequality and poverty. In that sense, I would claim, some deep part of our ancient Jewish legacy has passed into the American mainstream.

But what of our own educational efforts, the attempt to pass on Jewish traditions to current generations of Jews? Jewish education in America is hardly a tale of litigated success. The afternoon Hebrew school

was the bane of most Jewish kids' lives for much of the twentieth century. Valiant efforts by teachers, both professional and volunteer, could not overcome the fatigue and boredom of sitting still for another two hours after a long school day; the greater attractiveness of the general culture, including sports; and, perhaps most important, the readily perceived gap of practices taught in school but ignored in the home. Those same parents who strove so hard to get their kids to attend Hebrew School, at least until age thirteen and the great ritual reward moment, did rather little to witness to Judaism's importance in the lives of their children on a daily basis.

The ongoing achievements of Jews in secular learning alongside this widespread failure of Jewish supplementary education has led to an unacceptable disparity in American Jewish life between the levels of general intellectual sophistication and the mastery of even the most basic forms of Jewish knowledge. Jews who possess advanced degrees in the sciences or humanities or who are highly successful in law, medicine, or other education-based professions are often virtually illiterate when it comes to Judaism or Hebrew. This is often manifested by the embarrassment such people feel when receiving an honor in the synagogue, when trying to recite the blessing over Hanukkah candles, or when trying to

conduct even the most basic sort of Passover seder. Many congregations now offer adult Jewish literacy classes to help overcome this chasm. Such classes are often of special importance to women, who were given no Jewish education in the era before the bat mitzvah was widely embraced as a significant Jewish rite (around 1980).

In the course of passing tradition from one generation to the next, it is important to note that the tradition carried forward has to be enriched and reshaped, not merely preserved, by its custodians in each generation. The Judaism my grandparents imbibed in small-town Eastern Europe would hardly be the proper vehicle for my grandchildren and their descendants in the fast-paced, open-ended, and culturally diverse America of tomorrow. If we look at the past few decades, these generational enrichments may be clearly seen. Enthusiasm over the new Jewish state, including modern Hebrew song and dance, were added in the 1950s and 1960s. These were followed in subsequent decades by the growth of Holocaust memory and the effort to liberate Soviet Jews. Then toward the turn of the new century came the full inclusion of women in Jewish life and emerging new perspectives brought about by it. Most recently, we note the reembracing of mysticism, meditation, and spiritual search as legitimate

parts of Judaism. Each of these has successively served to enliven Jewish education for both youth and adults.

I have devoted much of my life to educating a leadership for American Jewry in the mid-twenty-first century, a generation of rabbis who will be able to provide contemporary and compelling answers to the question, "Why should we care? Why should we make the effort to pass this tradition forward from each generation to the next?" The answers vary, depending on both the person asking and the time in which it is asked. But seeking the answers throughout our lives is its own great reward.

