

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE YESHIVA
EDUCATION SYSTEM, AND HOW IT
PREPARES THE STUDENTS FOR LIFE.

EDUCATION AT ITS BEST

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Children are our most precious commodity. They are our future, our next generation. And our future is shaped by how we prepare them for life. It is up to us, as a society, to help our children grow up in the best way possible. In today's fast-paced world, the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" is true more than ever.

As parents, we do our best to provide our children with everything they need, to grow up into happy, successful adults. Childrearing has a lot of components, and education is a very important one, if not the most important one. The goals of education cover many aspects, which ultimately shape how our children are prepared for life. Therefore, it is understandable that a good education should be our top priority, both as parents, and as a society in general.

The goal of education

Why is education so important? As younger versions of their future selves, our children are still developing emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Every aspect of what they will be as adults, is being shaped now, as they grow. Therefore, a quality education in the formative years is crucial to a successful life.

Education is not just about the curriculum; it's about teaching our children a way of life, the ability to view and approach everything with an open mind and a clear understanding. It's not just about knowledge and career; it's about leading a healthy, independent, successful life. A well-educated individual is then able to raise their own children – our future generation, into healthy adults. Teaching a child is a gift that keeps giving, any way you look at it.

An important focus is placed on the curriculum in our schools. What's important to note, though, is that the goal of the curriculum is not the information per se. While certain subjects, like reading and math, are important in itself, the purpose of many other subjects is not as obvious. Kids often wonder about the goal of learning ancient history, science and biology, and many other topics with not much real-life applications. The same question can be asked about the general education requirements in any college degree program. Regardless of the major, every student is required to complete a set number of classes in various subjects that will not be used in their chosen field. Why so?

The purpose of a well-rounded education is to help us develop our brains to think critically and effectively. A nursing student will use what she learned in her sociology class when interacting with patients, even though she does not become a psychologist. A doctor, when making a diagnosis, will use the critical thinking that he practiced in algebra class, even though there is no algebra involved in his current work. It's the thinking processes that we're trying to hone.

A Different Curriculum

With the goals of education in mind, it's important to give an honest look at schools with a curriculum that is vastly different than the standard public-school curriculum. It is understandable that the government needs to make sure that all kids receive an education, and this obligation does not end by ensuring that the kids attend school. It's important to ensure that private schools are what they claim to be, a school with a curriculum that properly prepares the students for adult life. But it is also important to remember why the parents chose a private school, usually at a very high cost, as opposed to the local public school.

When assessing schools with a vastly different curriculum, it's important to keep in mind the real goals of education. As mentioned above, the goal is not always the knowledge per se, but the intellectual development that results from learning. Development that is crucial for successful adulthood.

One area that is currently under close critic, is the Yeshiva education system. Some critics raised concerns, that kids who receive a Yeshiva education are not adequately educated. Understandably, the government took those concerns very serious, and is now considering new guidelines for all private schools. However, these changes are unnecessary, as these kids already receive the best education possible. On the contrary, forcing the Yeshivas to learn more secular studies will be detrimental for the kids' future, because it will leave less time for learning the Talmud, which develops the critical thinking part of brain better than any other subject.

The Benefits of Learning the Talmud

The learning of the Talmud is a complex task. It requires a synthesis of many skills that are normally achieved in a variety of different classes in a typical curriculum. In order to successfully master the material, the students need to apply critical thinking skills as they analyze the text and all the

commentaries. The text is often written in argument-style, and the students need to follow a complex array of reasoning that culminates in one possible conclusion.

The analytical and argumentation skills applied during Talmud study is equivalent to college level study. The students develop these skills at a far younger age than the average American kid; in sixth grade they can easily compete with graduate students, as is evident from the following story.

Rabbi Yossi Wallis, an outreach professional, arranged an evening of inspiration in an Israeli army base with mostly secular Jewish officers. When the comedian canceled last minute due to a family emergency, Rabbi Wallis invited Rav Eliyahu, a Rosh Yeshivah (high-school teacher), to take his place. His only skill was to teach the Talmud, and wanting to avoid disappointing the army officers, they decided not to reveal the facts up front. Instead, Rav Eliyahu introduced a hypothetical modern-day legal scenario, similar to one presented in the Talmud. He then encouraged a discussion about the correct course of action. After forty minutes of active debate, during which Rav Eliyahu constantly introduced more concepts and opinions from the Talmud, he informed the officers what they are actually studying. Intrigued, they inquired at which grade level this study is, and were shocked when told that they're at a ninth-grade level. In truth, they were more at a sixth or seventh grade level, but the rabbi didn't want to insult the officers, university graduates with a master's degree in statistics and math (Seltzer 422).

The study of the Talmud has even more benefits. In fact, it encompasses most of the secular curriculum in one single class. Throughout the course of their study, students learn about ancient history, law and legal terms, and more. Depending on which part of the Talmud they study, they might learn about astronomy, biology, or other sciences. Many aspects of the Talmud require the use of complex math skills, such as converting fractions, geometry, or trigonometry. These can be learned as early as in fifth grade.

Of course, before starting to learn the Talmud, students need to master basic reading and writing in Hebrew, as well as reading comprehension. This is taught in the younger grades, just like English reading is taught in public school. The kids learn to read all three types of Hebrew fonts – print, script, and Rashi letters. Additionally, they learn to write in Hebrew script.

Concepts Acquired Through Talmud Study

- ✓ Reading
- ✓ Writing
- ✓ Reading comprehension
- ✓ Critical thinking
- ✓ Analyzing text
- ✓ Foreign languages
- ✓ Law
- ✓ Ethics
- ✓ History
- ✓ Math
- ✓ Geometry
- ✓ Science

Of important note is, that all learning is done from the original text, in Hebrew and Aramaic. Consequently, the students learn foreign languages in primary school. And this is in addition to the English reading and writing, which all American Yeshivas learn. It is easy to see how Yeshiva students indeed get a well-rounded education, simply by learning the Talmud for most of the day (Krakowski).

A Well-Rounded Education

As noted by Laura Jimenez and Scott Sargrad, a well-rounded education is more than teaching the core subjects. Its main goal is to develop the critical reading and thinking skills of the students. They even venture to say that American schools do not provide a well-enough education, with the influence of the so-called “fake news” being proof that Americans lack the above-mentioned skills. Because those skills are necessary for life, not just in the classroom.

They claim that a larger variety of classes is required to develop enough skills for a student to succeed in college and in life. The skills they refer to fall under the category of reading, which, while it starts with deciphering sounds, its real importance lies in comprehending and analyzing the information properly. Needless to say, a Yeshiva student practices these skills in the best possible way by learning and dissecting the texts in the Talmud.

South Korea and the Talmud

Of great interest is the current phenomenon of South Koreans learning the Talmud. After realizing that more than one in five noble prize winners are Jewish, despite comprising just a tiny percent of the world population, the South Koreans set out to find the source of the Jews’ success. They concluded that the secret lies in the Jewish education system. Therefore, they started to introduce Talmud study in many schools. Additionally, they started to teach other subject in the same manner as the Talmud is studied – in partner discussions (Alper).

Whether the South Koreans’ conclusion for the Jews’ genius is accurate, remains to be researched further. But the prevalence of a country studying a different nation’s ancient history and laws for the sake of developing their skills, is proof of the power of studying the Talmud.

Higher Education

While a Yeshiva education adequately prepares a child for life in general, there may be a possible concern regarding career options. While the students develop their skills to the best of their

abilities, they do not learn a specific trade. But neither does the public-school students. They go to college for that.

And a Yeshiva student can attend college, too, if he so desires. If an individual chooses to pursue a career in a field that requires extensive training, he has the option of earning the prerequisite HSE diploma before applying to college. With a brain as sharp as only a Talmud student can have, learning the necessary material should not be too difficult. Then, he can earn general education credits for his Yeshiva studies and start graduate school within a relatively short time. Many former Yeshiva students are now successful doctors, lawyers, or therapists.

For other types of careers, a Yeshiva student can be very successful even without a degree. As noted by Jeffrey J. Selingo, the goal of higher education is not merely to learn a trade, but to “prepare citizens for the world, conduct research and assist adolescents in becoming adults”. Studies show that about 40%-50% of college graduates are underemployed, meaning they work in a job that does not require a bachelor’s degree. Still, unemployment among graduates is low, because employers value the degree for what it really is – a synthesis of knowledge and skills that come in handy in any field.

Furthermore, even when the job does require a degree, it does not necessarily mean that the specifics of what was studied is being utilized. According to Brad Plumber, only 27% of grads work in the field they studied. The reason, he notes, is probably because many jobs don’t require specific study. Still, learning is always helpful, as he himself says, that “[his] specific math degree doesn’t really come in handy for journalism all that often, but college itself was still useful.”

In communities where most students attend Yeshiva, employers know that these applicants obtained the necessary life skills through the study of the Talmud, and a college degree doesn’t have much effect on one’s potentials for a job. If specific knowledge is required, one can always take a course or two, specific to the needs of their job. It is, in fact, not uncommon to find so-called uneducated Yeshiva graduates running successful businesses, with a full staff of college graduates (from other communities) running the technical aspects of the business. The ambition and hard work are what leads one to succeed.

Conclusion

Since Talmud study contains such a vast amount of benefits, benefits that are crucial for success in today’s world, it is easy to conclude that Yeshiva students receive a top-notch education. They are being adequately prepared for life, and an increase of secular studies will have a detrimental effect on

their development. As Albert Einstein said, “Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think.”

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