

The Importance of Education in Judaism

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(On the occasion of Steven P. Winkler's graduation from MLI)

I don't usually begin my messages by quoting from the Internet and especially about Islam, but this statement appears on the website of "My Jewish Learning:"

"Religiously, Jews were categorized by Islam as "infidels" (Arabic: *kuffar*). However, like Christians, they qualified as "people of the book," possessors of a prior revelation from God that was written down."

"The book" that is referred to is, of course, the Bible, and Jews (more than any other ethnic group) not only read the Bible, but they are the main players in it, and they study the *Tanakh* (the Old Testament) verse-by-verse as part of traditional Jewish life. Studying the Word of God (the developing *Torah* at the time), became intuitional during the time of Moses, and formal Jewish studies throughout the ages consisted of both memorizing and copying the Scriptures. Literacy became a high priority, and those that could do it were given much respect.

This endearment of education didn't arise from out of the blue; it was planted by God firmly in Scripture because He wanted his people to be learned. The word "education" does not appear in Scripture, but much is said about teaching, learning, and knowledge. Here are some examples from Proverbs, and I warn you that when I get to quoting Scriptures, I cannot stand leaving good ones out:

Proverbs 1:5a: "Someone who is already wise will hear and learn still more;"

Proverbs 3:1a: "My son, don't forget my teaching,"

Proverbs 9:9: "Give to a wise man, and he grows still wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will learn still more."

Proverbs 18:15: "The mind of a person with discernment gets knowledge, and the ear of the wise seeks knowledge."

Proverbs 22:6: "Train a child in the way he [should] go; and, even when old, he will not swerve from it."

Proverbs 23:12: "Apply your mind to discipline and your ears to words of knowledge."

And this one, Deuteronomy 6:6-7 we all know:

"These words, which I am ordering you today, are to be on your heart; and you are to teach them carefully to your children. You are to talk about them when you sit at home, when you are traveling on the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

Those are from the *Tanakh*, and there are many others in the *Kitvei B'rit Chadashah*; here is a sampling:

Matthew 11:1: “After Yeshua had finished instructing the twelve *talmidim*, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns nearby.”

John 7:14: “Not until the festival was half over did Yeshua go up to the Temple courts and begin to teach.”

Acts 17:10-11: “But as soon as night fell, the brothers sent Sha'ul and Sila off to Berea. As soon as they arrived, they went to the synagogue. Now the people here were of nobler character than the ones in Thessalonica; they eagerly welcomed the message, checking the *Tanakh* every day to see if the things Sha'ul was saying were true.”

1Timothy 3:2: “A congregation leader must be above reproach, he must be faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, orderly, hospitable and able to teach.”

Don't get restless; only two more to go:

2Timothy 3:16a: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is valuable for teaching the truth, “

Ephesians 4:11: “Furthermore, he gave some people as emissaries, some as prophets, some as proclaimers of the Good News, and some as shepherds and teachers.”

At some point in early Jewish history, some of those who were “educated” (they were all men in those days), began to earn their living through reading and writing, and these were known as “scribes” or “*soferim*” - a term derived from the Hebrew word “*sefer*,” meaning “book.” To these and to the latter-day scribes – the Masoretes who labored on the Hebrew Bible's text from the sixth to the tenth century – to them we owe the preservation of the Hebrew text and its pronunciation that has come down to us today. It is because of them that all “Jewish” Bibles contain exactly the same Hebrew words, and why we call these words “the Masoretic text.” So important were the scribes of ancient Judaism, that an entire section of the Talmud is named for them – “*Masakhet Soferim*,” or “Tractate of the Scribes.”

Not all with Jewish education become scribes; some become “rabbis,” and not all “rabbis are spiritual leaders. Some rabbis sell books, some teach, some circumcise, some are *Torah* scribes, some oversee matters of *kashrut*, and some even sell insurance. The one thing that is common to all rabbis, however, is their education in Jewish practice, history, prayer, law, and theology, and it is from this and from the Scriptures that we get Judaism's emphasis on, and respect for, education. I recall my mother's two favorite instructions to me; they were: “Eat all of your food because children in Europe are starving,” and the other one: “Study hard and get good marks so that I can be proud of you.” Well, I listened to her on both counts and have become both educated and large in size.

Originally, education meant “Jewish” education only, but Judaism’s respect for education broadened to all education, and a son’s or a daughter’s professional achievements have become the source of Jewish parental pride. You have no doubt heard Jewish parents bragging: “my son the lawyer” or “my son the doctor – well, okay so he’s a dentist”). Sadly, I have rarely heard a Jewish mother brag about her “son the honest hard worker,” or her daughter the “good wife and mother.” My appreciation of those virtues had to wait until I became a believer and came to appreciate them from my study of the Bible.

I hope I have succeeded in showing you that appreciation for education is characteristic of Jewish people, and you can even notice it here at Ohev. We have *Shabbat* school for children, afternoon *Torah* study for adults, a course in Biblical Counseling, a substantial Jewish and theological library (part of which is packed up because of our building situation), free online courses in Messianic Judaism and theology, a periodic course in *Alef-Bet* Hebrew, training for *B’nei* and *B’not Mitzvah* and *HaDerek*, and we even require a multi-week course of training for those that want to become congregational members. Everywhere you turn in Judaism (including in Messianic Judaism), there is something to study – something to learn.

Jewish education typically begins at home, continues in *cheider* (i.e. Hebrew School), and culminates in *Bar Mitzvah* and, more recently, in *Bat Mitzvah* as well. Young Jewish men (and these days also women) that want to study further, either enroll in a *Yeshiva* or become the disciple of an individual rabbi. Upon completion, the student may be ordained as a rabbi or a *sofer* (a scribe) solely on the basis of his or her education because rabbis do not necessarily have pastoral responsibilities. A cantor (a *chazzan* or Jewish prayer leader) may attend *Yeshiva* as well, but other institutions for training are more common. Notice that I spoke of students, rabbis, scribes, and cantors, as being both male and female. That is a relatively new phenomenon in Judaism, and is still not the case in Orthodox Judaism where its leaders remain entirely male.

If there is one expectation of a traditional rabbi (either male or female) it is to teach, and the kind of teaching that is expected is mostly *Torah* and Talmudic law. Traditional Jewish learning begins at home at age 3 and continues into *cheider* (Hebrew School) at age 5. Teaching may be conducted in Yiddish or some other language, but Hebrew and Aramaic are the main languages taught. First comes the Hebrew alphabet, then reading Hebrew, and when that is accomplished, the study of *Torah* begins. At age 7, the youngster is introduced to the *Talmud* that consists of the oral law (the *Mishnah*) that is written in Hebrew, and rabbinical debates and opinions around the *Mishnah* (the *Gemara*) that is written mostly in Aramaic – hence the need for Aramaic in traditional Jewish studies. All of this culminates in *Bar Mitzvah* for a boy at age 13 (or later), and *Bat Mitzvah* for a girl at age 12 (or later).

The subjects traditionally included in Jewish education are (1) the *Tanakh*, but predominantly the *Torah* which is the first five books of the *Tanakh*. Within the *Torah*, there is an emphasis on the last four books because they are the ones that contain the Law that was given to Moses by God and then committed by Moses to writing. Second (2), is the *Mishnah* of the *Talmud* that is supposedly additional law given to Moses that was carried by memory through the centuries and was finally written down by Judah the Prince in the third century. Third (3) is the *Gemara* of the *Talmud* and although the *Talmud* is of primary importance within the wider Jewish world, it is not considered, by Messianic Jews, to be inspired as Scripture is inspired.

Although it is not Scripture, the *Talmud* is the body of Jewish writings that give rise to most Jewish traditions – even those that we experience here at Ohev – traditions like wearing head coverings, lighting *Shabbat* candles, blowing the *shofar* at prescribed times, separating milk from meat at our *Oneg Shabbat*, etc. In addition to the Bible, it is what forms the basis of what the wider Jewish world considers Jewish law (*halachah*), and that we consider Jewish tradition.

What have so far been described, are the key elements of rabbinical literature; but there is more. Another item of classical Jewish study is (4) the *siddur* (the traditional Jewish prayer book). The *siddur* developed over time as a folk document, with prayers surviving that were found meaningful in the early Jewish communities. There is a common structure to all *siddurim*, but also differences that reflect the various Jewish denominations. And the *siddur* is still in a state of development as changes are made from time to time, and several Messianic Jewish *siddurim* have also been published. Did I say “prayer book?” Nothing is that simple in Judaism, so there are *siddurim* for weekdays, *siddurim* for the Sabbath, *machzorim* for the holidays, *hagaddot* for Passover *seders*, and *benchers* for miscellaneous prayers and blessings.

Onward and upward, we come to the *midrashim*. “*Midrash*” is a term for a body of ancient commentaries on the *Tanakh* and the *Mishnah*. The earliest known *midrash* dates back to the 2nd century, and (5) *Midrash Rabbah* is the best known and most complete compilation of the *midrashim*, and is commentary on the *Torah* and the *Megillot* (scrolls of Song of Songs, Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes).

The next body of literature that is considered a “must” in Jewish education is that which extracts and compiles Jewish law (*halachah*) from both the *Tanakh* and the *Talmud*. (6) The *Shulchan Aruch* (Set Table) is a multi-volume compilation that is the principle authority of Jewish law today. So large is this work that, in 1804, Shlomo Ganzfried extracted from it and published his (7) *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (published as “Code of Jewish Laws”) that is a standard gift given to all Orthodox *B’nei Mitzvah*; I received one from my Hebrew teacher and still have it. But there are other compilations of law as well. The most well-known of these (though not the earliest or the latest) is (8) *Sefer HaMitzvot* (Book of Commandments), a compilation by Maimonides of 613 commandments that he derived almost exclusively from the *Torah*. He followed this up with his enormous work (9) *Mishneh Torah* that included the 613 commandments, and added the entire body of *Talmudic* law to it. A problem with the *Shulchan Aruch* and the *Mishneh Torah* is that they include laws that are no longer applicable today. Yisrael Meir HaKohen (the “*Chafetz Chaiyim*”) sought to correct this, so he wrote (10) *Sefer HaMitzvot HaKatzar* (“Short Book of Commandments”) that only includes those that he deemed applicable in the twentieth century.

Although not yet considered a work of classical Jewish literature, I would be remiss were I not to mention that Dan Juster and I have been collaborating on a book titled (11) *The Law of Messiah Compiled as Mitzvot: (subtitle) Torah from a New Covenant Perspective*. Our book purports to list applicable commandments that are derived not only from the *Torah*, but from the entire *Tanakh* and the New Testament as well. It can be found in its unfinished form posted on Ohev Yisrael’s web site under the menu “Resources / The Rabbi’s Corner.”

Finally, so much of Jewish studies has to do with Jewish law, that I feel I must draw your attention to a relatively new literary movement in Judaism known as (12) “*musar*” meaning “reproof” or “instruction” as the word is used in Proverbs 1:8. It was founded by Israel Salanter in 19th-century Lithuania, and deals with Jewish ethics and relationships with the expectation that those who meditate on matters of *musar* will fulfill their ethical and religious obligations as part of their enhanced nature.

I hope that I have made my point of how important education is and always has been within Judaism and to the Jewish people. Messianic Judaism is no exception, and so years ago, leaders of Beth Messiah congregation in Rockville, Maryland founded Messiah Yeshiva, a school designed to train prospective Messianic Jewish leaders. Dan Juster was the school’s director, and Asher Intrater was its first graduate. When the School came under Tikkun, its name was changed to Messiah Biblical Institute (MBI), and it became qualified to grant religious degrees under the law of the State of Maryland. Many of today’s older generation of Messianic Jewish leaders both studied and taught at MBI. I did, and so did my son David who then went on to receive two more Masters at Gordon Conwell and then a Phd from Cambridge – all beginning at MBI.

When MBI closed its doors some years ago, I acquired all of its recorded teaching materials, and incorporated a new School, Messianic Life Institute (MLI), whose purpose it was to offer Messianic Jewish education online instead of in the classroom. I also received approval from the Department of Education of the State of Florida, the state of MLI’s incorporation, to grant graduate degrees in religious subjects. If anyone is interested in auditing or viewing these courses free of charge, go to MessianicLife.org and click “Free Courses.”

[Call Steve Winkler while I don my academic robe]

Today, as the Dean of MLI, I have the pleasure of conferring the degree of Master of Theological Studies upon our brother Steve Winkler. Steve took courses at Messiah Biblical Institute from the Spring of 1989 until 1991. After a significant hiatus, Steve transferred his MBI course credits to MLI where he completed his remaining courses in 2017, and stands before us today to receive his well-earned degree.

[Read the degree certificate, present it to Steve, and invite him to speak briefly]