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Freedom of Thought in Judaism

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אבנא זאב בן פנחס זי"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Yitro

Freedom of Thought in Judaism

Seems there's a study for everything nowadays, doesn't it? So here's a study that should do us all proud as Jews.

A study on the level of education in developed countries came out recently, and one of the interesting findings of the study was that Israel is one of the most educated countries in the world.

According to the study, Israel tops the table of most educated countries, with only Canada above it. Following Israel in the #3 position is Japan, with the U.S. only taking the fourth spot.

The study authors write that 45 percent of Israel's citizens are college graduates, and that if one adds Israel's thousands of yeshivah students who are not "college graduates", then Israel definitely leads the world in all-around study and education.

Now, a lot of people wonder what the real secret of the Jewish Nation is—how the Jews have so many members who work and invest their entire lives in study and scholarship. What gives these people this motivation to acquire knowledge and be educated?

There are cultures in which children are forced to study. There's the concept of "tiger moms," a reference, and not the kindest one, to Chinese mothers who believe in a strict education. With such parents, a child may not get dinner if he or she doesn't finish his homework—and punishments worse than that.

In short, in this Chinese culture, there are no games—you simply must succeed in your studies.

But in the Jewish Nation, one never hears of a "Yiddishe Mameh" who withholds food from her kids. On the contrary, the story is told about a Jewish boy who until he went to his first day at school thought his name was "Taste It"—because that was all he ever heard from his mother.

What's more, when Chinese force their children to study, it's with the hope that they'll do so well on their tests—but Chinese aren't typically going to become hardcore "knowledge fans" or people who just love to learn because of their parents' pushing.

But with us, there must be some much deeper reason that Jewish culture makes people *want* to study and learn.

And that, of course, brings us to this week's Torah portion of Yisro, the Parshah that tells us the story of the Giving of the Torah.

Over 3,000 years ago, everywhere in the world, only a very small percentage of people knew how to read and study. In general, those people were members of the highest and most elite classes of their civilizations. Only they received educations, while the majority of the people didn't know how to read and write. Not only that, but the ruling class specifically intended it that way, taking pains to ensure that the common folk would not have the capacity to revolt and overthrow their rule.

The Rebbe explains that in ancient Egypt, even among the Jews, the overwhelming majority of them were just like the Egyptians. Most of the Jewish Nation in ancient Egypt were busy a whole day with the forced labor, "and of shortness of breath and hard work" they did not have the opportunity to study (which is why, among other reasons, they did not observe the mitzvah of circumcision at the time).

But then came along the innovation of Matan Torah, the Giving of the Torah—which represented the complete opposite of Egyptian belief. Hashem did not just give the Torah to a select few of the most honored rabbanim, or just to the Sanhedrin, and not just the men alone, but also women and children, the very old, and the babies and children. Everyone heard the Aseres Hadibros from Hashem's mouth.

And so ever since, the subject of Torah study became a mass inheritance—meaning that everyone is obligated to study Torah.

But there's yet something deeper here.

Everyone knows the pledge that the Jewish Nation gave Moshe Rabbeinu at Matan Torah: "All that G-d says, *na'aseh v'nishmah*—we will do and we will listen" (Shmos 24:7).

The meaning of the phrase "we will do" is simply to *do* everything that G-d commands us—but what does "we will listen" mean? The Rebbe explains that it doesn't mean listening with the physical ear, since that's obvious that one needs to hear to know what to do. Rather, the *simple* meaning of "we will listen" is understand and grasp—to hear and to understand G-d's Words.

But before the Jewish Nation uttered the famous words of "we will do and we will listen," there was also a lesser-known pledge before that. The Torah tells us that before "*na'aseh v'nishmah*," the Jewish Nation twice said "*na'aseh*" alone.

And the first time they uttered the word "*na'aseh*" is in this week's Torah portion: "And all the Nation answered in unison and said, 'All that G-d said, we will do' (Shmos 19:8)."

The second time is in the Torah portion of Mishpatim, when we read again about the Giving of the Torah. The verse states: "And the entire Nation answered in one voice and they said, 'All the things that G-d spoke, we will do' " (Shmos 24:3).

Only the third time, in this week's Torah portion, do we hear for the first time the famous phrase "na'aseh v'nishmah."

And when we look into the verses, we discover something interesting. The two times at which the Jewish Nation only said "na'aseh," the Torah tells us that they all said it together—they all took the "na'aseh" pledge. At the first, the Torah states, "Vaya'anu kol ha'am yachdav—and all the Nation answered in unison," and at the second time, "Vaya'an kol ha'am kol echad—and the entire Nation answered in one voice." But with the verse that states "na'aseh v'nishmah," this unity does not appear. The verse simply states, "And they said, 'All that G-d said, we will do and we will listen' "—not "together" and not "in one voice."

There is a deep lesson in this change. When it comes to "na'aseh," to doing, to action, then the entire Nation is unified and of one voice. Everyone keeps the same mitzvos. Everyone lights Shabbos candles. Everyone puts on tefillin. Everyone fasts on Yom Kippur. When it comes to action, we're all unified.

But when it comes to "nishmah," which means understanding and grasping the Torah, there isn't that same unity and sameness. When it comes to that, everyone has an individual merit and obligation to try to understand the words of the Torah in his or her mind in a way that is acceptable to their mind.

It's not like it is with other cultures and religions, in which everyone is forced to think the same thing and understand the same thing. In Judaism, there is no "thought police"—on the contrary, Judaism encourages everyone to think on their own and not just accept things because someone greater than you said so.

In the famous book "Start-up [Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle](#)" by Dan Senor, it is explained that one of the secrets for Israel's success in the development of technology is that they do not accept anything at face value just because someone who is considered a big authority said that that's how it is. On the contrary, they're all educated to ask questions and challenge every conclusion they read.

Even in the Israeli military, commanding officers encourage ordinary soldiers to think for themselves and not accept things as they are just because the commanding officer is apparently smarter than them and that if he says so, it means that that's how it has to be.

And so in Judaism we find all kinds of approaches. There are people who believe that the best way to get close to G-d is through happiness. There are those who are convinced that it's only through doing good unto others that one gets close to G-d. There are those who believe that one must dedicate one's entire life to the study of Torah, and there are those who argue that one specifically needs to get out into the big world out there and integrate into some practical industry.

And since Judaism allows every individual the right to think differently, not only does every individual have this right, but teachers even encourage independent thinking. And so in Judaism, study has turned into an intellectual experience—into something that people enjoy.

But there's only one group in Judaism that does not encourage debate, and that is: pulpit rabbis. They, of course, believe that their sermons are "Torah from Sinai" and don't want any interruptions. On the other hand, it's not worth arguing with them—just let them finish their speech, and you'll get to the Kiddush faster.

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