



## The Poor Had to Sacrifice Everything for Education

There is the Talmudic story about the legendary Rabbi Hillel. He was desperately poor but dedicated to his studies, earning just enough to care for his family and to pay to enter the house of study.

One day, he lacked the sum to pay the guard at the study house and was denied entry. The Talmud recounts: "He climbed up and sat upon the aperture in the roof so that he could hear the words of the living God. It was winter season and snow fell upon him. When dawn broke, the rabbis looked up and saw the figure of a man in the aperture. They went up and found him covered in snow. They extracted him and washed him and sat him next to the fire."

This is ostensibly a story about a rabbi's dedication to Torah study, but the eminent scholar Jeffrey Rubenstein suggests that the real question is: why was there was a guard collecting money at the entrance to the academy? Was education reserved only for the well to do or an elite group? Rubenstein sees the story as a critique of the lack of access to education. It took a near death for the Sages to see what they had not seen before: the tragic fact that the impoverished had to sacrifice everything for their studies.

The story constitutes a challenge to reconsider who has access to education. After all, not everyone is as dedicated and resourceful as Hillel -- and even he almost lost his life trying to pursue his thirst for knowledge. One wonders about the others, whose entry was barred due to a lack of funds, and who walked away and never returned.

There is a short statement in another section of the Talmud that sheds light on this issue: "Yehoshua ben Gamla instituted an ordinance that teachers of children should be established in each and every province and in each and every town, and they would bring the children to learn at the age of six and at the age of seven. This system was established for the masses."

This declaration ensured universal education for Jewish children of all backgrounds and economic levels, and may very well stand as the first universal education system in history.

Of course, "universal" education in those days meant education for boys. In the 20th century, in response to the crisis of young women turning away from Orthodoxy in eastern Europe, Sarah Schenirer established the Bais Yaakov school for girls. Before World War Two, about 38,000

girls in 200 schools were enrolled. After the war, Bais Yaakov took root in North America and Israel and continues to educate thousands of girls to this day. Sarah Schenirer, herself with little formal education of any kind, left her mark on the history of Jewish education.

Education has been a priority of the Jewish people for millenia. The Jewish emphasis on learning of all kinds, religious and secular, has led the Jews to earn an extraordinary number of Nobel Prizes (22.5% of all Nobel Prizes for a group that comprises 0.2% of the world's population).

Today's Jewish day school system is the next incarnation of this long tradition of emphasising education. These schools are an essential bulwark against ignorance of Jewish history, culture and religion, especially in a secular, multicultural society. While the cost, in hard-earned dollars, has become almost impossible for most families, the cost of neglecting this vital institution is far higher for the Jewish future.

If Hillel was willing to freeze on a rooftop lest he miss a class, can we afford to be the generation that posts a guard at the door of the academy? If an uneducated woman, centuries later, had the vision and foresight to create a way to enlighten countless girls, dare we fail our generation?

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