

“THE YESHIVA SHEL MA'ALA AND THE IVY LEAGUE”

BY RABBI MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, Associate Rabbi of the Congregation, delivered the following sermon on Parshat Vayera, January 28th:

November 21, 1925 ought to have been a wonderful weekend for Harvard alumnus W. F. Williams, who had traveled from his home in Greenwich Connecticut to watch his alma mater play in the 44th Harvard-Yale football game. Yale was favored to win, but Harvard's defensive line kept the score to 0-0, or what the Harvard Crimson called “a scoreless victory.” But when he arrived at the campus, he found with dismay that his beloved school had changed since he had attended Harvard in 1900. Where, he wondered, had all these Jews come from? He headed home in disgust, and wrote a letter of complaint to Harvard's president: “Being uncertain what stadium entrance to use,” he recounted in this correspondence, “I stopped a boy, evidently a student, to ask directions - he was a Jew. I was ushered to my seat at the game by a Jew, and another of the same “breed” followed me to my seat and required me to sign my ticket.”

“Naturally,” he wrote elsewhere in his letter, “after 25 years, one expects to find many changes, but to find that one's University had become so Hebrewized was a fearful shock. There were Jews to the right of me, Jews to the left of me, in fact they were obviously everywhere that instead of leaving the Yard with pleasant memories of the past I left with a feeling of utter disgust of the present and grave doubts about the future of my Alma Mater.”

Leaving aside his abrasive anti-Semitism, Williams was on to something; Harvard of the 1920's did have a significantly higher Jewish population than any time earlier; in fact Jewish undergraduate enrollment was fully 28 percent of the student body. Williams' letter and the history of Jewish enrollment in the Ivies, is discussed in a recent book that I have begun reading by historian Jerome Karabel, entitled *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale and Princeton*, to which I was first referred by an excellent review by Jonathan Kay in *Commentary*. Karabel depicts an early twentieth-century Ivy League in which intellectual achievement was less celebrated than were extracurricular activities and social class. In fact, in 1904 the Yale yearbook boasted that their university had “more gentlemen and fewer scholars than any other class in the memory of man.” Because it was assumed that only the “right people” would apply, describes Karabel, no quotas were needed. And this system worked, Karabel writes, until

the arrival of Eastern European Jews in America. “In those days,” writes David Brooks in an article on the book, “people who applied to schools like Harvard were admitted because people who weren't from the right social class didn't bother applying. But Jews, for reasons that are not clear, never got the message. They applied to Harvard, Yale and Princeton even though they weren't really wanted. And because many were so academically qualified, they increasingly got in.” It was in response to this increased Jewish attendance that a form of quotas were subsequently instituted, drastically limiting Jewish enrollment.

Now, the Jews who applied to the Ivies were under no illusions that the social stigma surrounding Jewish students would dissipate over the course of their four years; in the three decades between 1900 and 1930, 1,200 Jews attended Yale, but not a single one of them was admitted into a senior society. But what drove Jews to apply, to attend, in ever increasing numbers, was an eagerness to experience the highest degree of academia. That they would not avail themselves of the best educational opportunities America had to offer was unthinkable.

And there is no question that a love of education, and a thirst for knowledge, has been an essential aspect of Jewish tradition for thousands of years. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once took note of an extraordinary passage in the book of Shoftim. The Jewish judge Gidon is described as seeking to punish the elders of the Jewish city of Sukkot: “*Vayilkod naar meianshei sukkot*,” we are told, Gidon captured one of the youths of *sukkot*, and ordered him to write down the names of the people Gidon sought. The youth complied: “*vayich-tov eilav et sarei sukkot ve-et zekeineha*.” The story doesn't seem all that interesting, writes Rabbi Sacks, until we realize the following: In ancient Israel, it was logical for someone to assume that a random youth seized on the road could read and write. One implication is that this was not a society in which only the priests, or the nobles, were literate, but one where education was compulsory; *veshinantam levanecha*. H.G. Wells wrote that “the Jewish religion, because it was a literature-sustained religion, led to the first efforts to provide elementary education for all the children in the community.” In contrast, writes Rabbi Sacks, “universal literacy is a relatively recent idea in the West. Compulsory educa-

tion was not instituted in Britain until 1870.”

The Jewish focus on education brings to mind that old joke about the anti-Semite who walked into a Jewish fish store in a shtetle and asked the proprietor “Tell me, what makes you Jews so clever? Why are you so smart?” “Well,” responded the store owner, “it's because we eat a lot of herring.” The anti-Semite immediately bought an enormous amount of herring and spent the night ingesting the smelly fish. The next morning, cross-eyed and green, he stumbled into the fish store and said to the owner, “This is ridiculous. Eating herring doesn't make you any smarter.” “See,” said the Jew, “it's working already!”

To the extent that there is a connection between Judaism and intellectual achievement, some have suggested that the link can be found first and foremost in the Jewish focus on education. Many of you have read recently of Robert Aumann, the religious Jew and the new Nobel laureate in economics, and someone whose success can make all Jews proud. Aumann brought his children and 19 grandchildren with him to the ceremony; he arrived late at the Nobel dinner, because it was scheduled on Saturday; of course, the fact that *shkiah* was at 2:30 PM in Sweden helped things a bit. And it goes without saying, he didn't partake in the salmon mousse with crayfish sauce served at the Nobel banquet, and probably had to order one of those triple-wrapped airline meals. And he even had his required tuxedo and tails flown from Sweden to Israel to be tested for *Shatnez*; it tested positive, by the way. In an interview with *The New York Sun*, Aumann was asked whether there was any connection between the Jewish love of learning and the fact that while Jews make up a mere 0.25 percent of the world's population and a mere 3 percent of the United States, they account for 27 percent of all American Nobel Prize winners. Aumann answered that there may be something to this: “One of the reasons may be that there is an ingrained love of learning in Jews. It's not ingrained in genetics, its ingrained in tradition,” he said. “Study for its own sake has become a prime value, a religious commandment, like eating kosher, like keeping the Sabbath.”

And yet, if Jews always believed in the importance of the intellect, if Jewish child after Jewish child was taught that a mind was a terrible thing to waste, it was also assumed that Jewish minds were meant to be utilized

first and foremost for intellectual achievement in Torah study. Rashi on our *parsha* quotes one of the strangest statements in the midrashic corpus. Noting that at times *parshat va'eira* places Aharon's name before his younger brother Moshe, and at times the reverse, the Sages comment that *melamed she-shneihem shekulim*, this teaches us that Moshe and Aharon were equals: intellectually, ethically and spiritually. What is this, a bit of rabbinic blasphemy? Is it not one of the deeply held doctrines of our faith that Moshe was of an unsurpassed intellectual achievement in Torah and spiritual relationship with the Divine? Did we not proudly proclaim last night that *lo kam beYisrael keMoshe od navi umabit et temunato*? Did not God later sternly inform Aharon and Miriam that *lo kein avid Moshe*, my servant Moses is utterly unlike you, that *peh el peh adaber bo*, that he alone is able to speak to God face to face? Is not the truth of our Torah at least partially premised upon the fact that he who received it and transmitted it to us was the greatest prophet alive? How, then, can Moshe and Aharon be compared, placed on the same spiritual pedestal?

Rav Ahron Lichtenstein once offered a striking explanation: Moshe and Ahraron are depicted in our *parsha* as equals because at this point, when they stood before Pharaoh, they were equal. Both were prophets, both righteous, both religious role models. But what made Moshe so special is that he always sought to grow in his understanding of God and his Torah. Even after serving as our intermediary in communicating God's law to the Jewish people, still Moshe sought to improve his spiritual understanding. *Hodieini na et dirachecha*, Moshe implores the Almighty: Teach me more about You. It is because Moshe wished to dedicate his mind toward sacred knowledge, because he thirsted to better comprehend God, that God chose Moshe to receive and communicate the Torah, to achieve more intellectually than any other human being before him, to know more about God and His Torah than any human being that followed. If the Jewish intellectual hero is Moshe, and if we have always revered his intellectual heirs, Rabbi Akiva, the Rambam,

all the great Torah scholars through the millenia - it is not just because they were brilliant people who happened to be Jewish, but because they devoted their awesome intellects to the study of God's Torah, and because, through their insights, they enhanced our own intellectual appreciation of the Almighty.

My father once went to a classical music concert with my mother. Following the performance, the crowd rose to its feet and yelled "*Encore! Encore!!*," asking for one more piece of music before they returned home. Following the performance, my father commented to my mom that it's funny how you never see that happen after a *shiur*. When a Rosh Yeshiva teaches a *blatt gemara* for 2 hours, after the Rambam had been explained and the class comes to a close, the students rarely rise from their seats shouting *Encore! Encore!* Ten more minutes of Torah! One more *chidush!* But the truth is that those who have been so fortunate as to sit spellbound in the presence of an extraordinarily brilliant *magid shiur* realize that one is experiencing not only an astounding display of human creativity, but also insights into God's words, and thereby insights into God himself; if, in Reagan speechwriter Peggy Noonan's felicitous phrase, astronauts aspire to slip the surly bonds of earth to touch the face of God, we Jews have treasured the Torah because it allows us to experience the mind of God. It is no coincidence that Chazal describe the afterlife in academic terms; heaven was called the *Yeshiva shel Maala*, the Almighty's academy, where God is the only instructor, where we are all eager students, and as, with "*Encore!*" on our lips, we ask to learn more and more about ourselves, about the Torah, and about Him.

None of us can be Moshe; but we are all expected to imitate him. All of us are expected to sanctify our own intellect, to grow, day by day, bit by bit, in our own knowledge of Torah, in our own intellectual engagement of God, at whatever level we may be. And though our tradition has always embraced many forms of intellectual endeavor, we are all expected to devote a little of our daily schedule to grow in Torah learning. Our insistence on education was always meant to

assure the ability of all Jews to progress in Torah learning whatever other endeavors they pursue: "Should any one of our nation be asked about our laws," writes Josephus proudly in the 1st century C.E., "he will repeat them as readily as his own name. The result of our thorough education in our laws from the very dawn of intelligence is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls."

In the 1960's, Karabel concludes, America found itself in a space race, and all of a sudden its intellectual and national prestige were intertwined. Quotas were disbanded, universities became more meritocratic. Now, Jews in America are offered everything our grandparents sought and more; educational opportunity, and also social acceptance. Today, the challenge facing religious Jews who are also engaged with the modern world is not to overcome admission hurdles but in some way almost the reverse: to refrain from making these schools the standard of Jewish intellectual achievement. We rightly hope for the best educational opportunities for our children; but we must always remember that their attending Ivy League schools is a lot less important than their growth, day by day, as knowledgeable Jews, and that their admission to Harvard, Yale or Princeton, Cornell or Penn, Columbia, Dartmouth or Brown is a lot less important than their aspiring to ultimate admission to the *Yeshiva shel Maala*. And whether we are doctors or lawyers, artists, scientists, businessmen, musicians, or rabbis, we are never allowed to be satisfied with the Jewish knowledge we have achieved thus far, but must seek to constantly improve our knowledge of the Torah, our knowledge of God. The Almighty's heavenly academy is one school to which none of us want to apply early admission, but I have heard that once you get there, it features one incredible class.



Note: I am indebted to reviews of the book discussed, published in The New York Times by David Brooks and in Commentary by Jonathan Kay.