

FROM THE EDITOR

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Jewish adult?¹ Consider yourself educated? Odds are better than not that you're a university graduate. And almost one-in-three will have a post-graduate degree as well. That means you've spent at least 16 years of your life studying full-time – and maybe even more. But how many years have you spent studying about Judaism at this same level? Chances are that you don't even know the aleph-beis – the Hebrew alphabet – and even if you do, it's almost a certainty that you don't understand all, or even most, of the words when you do read something in Hebrew. Why are we so complacent when it comes to Jewish education? And we must recognise just how serious an issue this is, one that we ignore, quite literally, at our own peril, as study after study has shown an incredibly strong correlation between the amount of Jewish education a person receives and the chances that he and his descendants will remain Jewish.

Unfortunately, much of what passes for Jewish education nowadays focuses almost exclusively on events from only the last 100 years out of our incredibly rich 3328 year national history. What would modern day Jewish education look like if there had never been a Holocaust? If we had not been blessed with being returned to the land of Israel some 68 years ago? If the Modern Hebrew language, Ivrit, had never been created? What did Jewish education look like and consist of before all of these events took place?

Many will express "pride" in being Jewish, but what does it mean "to be Jewish"? Who do we think of when we picture "a Jew"? Jewish ancestry, history, and culture are, by and large, far from uniform or even held in common by us. Stop and think for a moment about how much the following groups differ from each other: Moroccan Jews, Yemenite Jews, German Jews, Hungarian Jews, Spanish Jews, and the list could go on and on. We likely would barely recognise as Jewish the different ways various groups of Jews around the world live and celebrate, especially considering such things as the range and diversity of customs, traditional foods, and dress.

The fact is that there is one thing, and only one thing, which has always defined us and united us as a people, transcending both place and time: the Torah. It is, without a doubt, the most influential book in the history of the world. And yet, how many of us have ever actually spent any significant amount of time studying any of the many books that comprise it (and I'm using the term "Torah" here in its wider sense, as referring to all of the books of the Hebrew bible as well as those of the oral Torah, the Talmud)? And how many of us have managed to study any of these books in the original languages in which they were written and along with the indispensable commentaries of our great Sages?

In an age of unprecedented access to information at our fingertips, the level of Jewish literacy and disconnection is simply astounding.

To drive the point home in a very tangible way: How many of us can name Moshe Rabbeinu's mother? His father? Any of the twelve tribes?

L'havdil, how many of us can name Jesus's mother? His father? Any of the twelve disciples? We owe it to ourselves – to everyone who came before us – and to everyone who comes after us to seek out a Jewish education, to become literate in Jewish studies.

The Torah, however, is not a book that we can just sit down and read. It's something that we must be taught, that we must receive from a teacher, who, in turn, received it from a teacher before him – in a chain that goes all the way back to Moshe Rabbeinu, who received it directly from Hashem.

Thank G-d, we are blessed here in South Africa with many wonderful teachers who are links in this chain stretching back to Sinai, along with many schools and organisations dedicated to making the Torah accessible to everyone, whatever the age and level of the learner. May we embrace the incredible educational opportunities available to us and may we grow from strength to strength in what defines us and unites us as Jews.

ROBERT SUSSMAN,
EDITOR

¹ These statistics are extrapolated from the results of the most recent Pew Study in 2013.

ON THE COVER: SINCE ITS INVENTION IN THE 16TH CENTURY, THE PENCIL HAS BECOME ONE OF THE MOST WELL-KNOWN AND WELL-USED WRITING INSTRUMENTS, HAVING A PROFOUND IMPACT ON EDUCATION EVER SINCE. ACCORDING TO DISCOVER MAGAZINE, "THE AVERAGE PENCIL HOLDS ENOUGH GRAPHITE TO DRAW A LINE ABOUT 35 MILES LONG OR TO WRITE ROUGHLY 45,000 WORDS", AND THAT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE ANYONE'S HAND A BIT SORE.



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