

Keep calm and shuckle on

Jewish education builds lifelong skills

by Ariella Cohen

We sit through at least two hours of Torah study a day. And even though many take interest in their Judaic classes, spending countless hours studying Rabbi Yochanan's latest rendezvous or the umpteenth time Bnei Yisrael complained in the desert, can appear a fruitless endeavour.

Our teachers may tell us that we learn valuable life lessons from these texts. Our rabbis might add that these sources strengthen our connection with God.

But I will tell you that through these hours of tedious study, delving over minutia that you so desperately wish could be overlooked, you gain useful skills that you will carry throughout your entire life.

I came to this realization several months ago, on a late night in the wee hours of the morning. I was sitting in my poorly-illuminated room, frantically trying to find some correlation between the author's use of an asyndeton and his overall purpose in an excerpt for English class. After staring at the words for several minutes, I turned to some other homework, hoping my mind might revamp. I shifted focus to my Aggadata essay, attempting to



explore a timeless conundrum: What is the profound, existential significance of Rabbi Eliezer's obesity? In accordance with my years of Talmudic training, I quickly formed a complex, convoluted connection between the Rabbi's "one-too-many-challahs" condition and his righteousness. When I returned to my English homework, I realized I could apply the same strategy. Thirty seconds later, I had formed an explanation that, upon reflection was, dare I say, quite brilliant. But this dazzling explanation was neither hereditarily achieved, nor a stroke of luck, but a product of my cumulative years of Jewish learning and the analysis it called for.

It was in this moment that I realized how much analysis is involved in Jewish schooling. Why? Because the Torah, like any good book, leaves many questions unanswered. Every word in the Torah is meant to be

interpreted as a deliberate inclusion, rich with significance and meaning - an approach not dissimilar to literary critics' or English teachers' understandings of literature. And thus, the readers are left with the painstaking question: Why? And after years of attending Jewish schools and having that question thrown at me in a multitude of phrases and disguised in other ambiguous questions, a blank, dumb-founded face just didn't cut it anymore. I had to start answering. And when I did, I started developing an invaluable skill: critical thinking.

It is a skill that has managed to slide its way into every classroom, every subject, every discussion. It creeps up on you in the most unusual of circumstances at the most unassuming of times. You find yourself doing it subconsciously because as humans, we want to understand; we want to explain.

The next day, when sitting in Rabbi Tannenbaum's Aggadata class, a heated debate took place. The tension in the room was palpable. It was one of those topics that brings your blood to a boil: Why did Reish Lakish think Rabbi Yochanan was a woman? The class was divided. And it wasn't the first time. Often, debate and discussion consume the entire period. Just like Hillel and Shamai, we form polarized opinions about these hot topics, and wielding our Torah knowledge, we, like daggers, try to cut through each other's arguments. It seems neither side comes out victorious. But in the process, we acquire valuable skills.

Some complain that we lack debate clubs at Yavneh, and though Mock Trial involves these elements of argument, our desire to scream our opinions isn't satisfied. That is why as soon as we see the opportunity to springboard into a discussion, we seize it and won't let go until our throats are sore and our minds satis-

fied. But through this toil, we learn how to form an opinion based on the facts, support it and express that support.

Keeping with our Jewish identity, we refuse to agree on anything and pursue arguments on each and every topic. How long to wait between eating meat and milk? What's considered *muktzah*? How long does your skirt really have to be? Are Starbucks frappuccinos kosher? Different opinions and perspectives fly at people throughout their lives. The difficulty lies in making sense of it all and coming to one's own conclusions. Jewish school prepares you for this chaotic world.

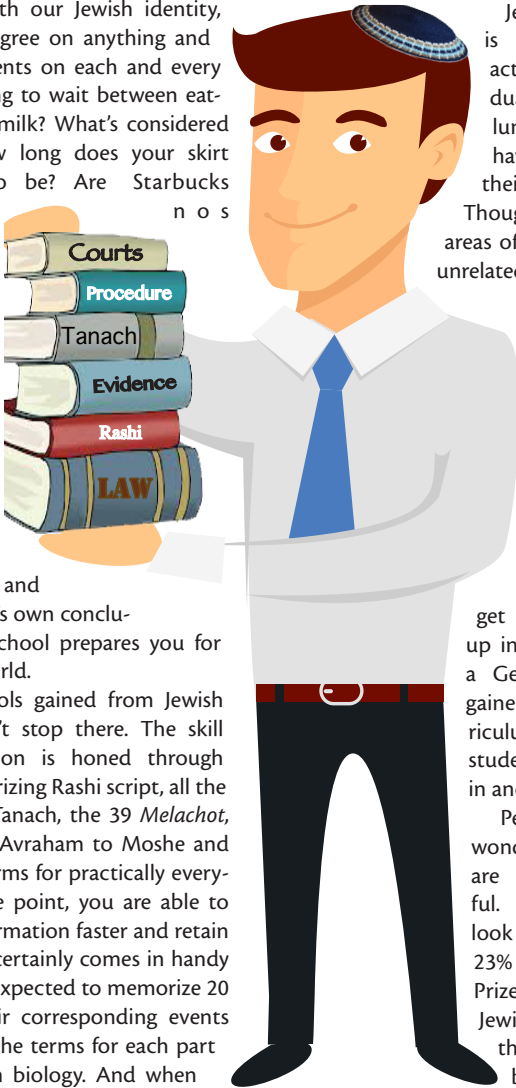
But the tools gained from Jewish schooling don't stop there. The skill of memorization is honed through years of memorizing Rashi script, all the books of the Tanach, the 39 *Melachot*, the lineage of Avraham to Moshe and the Hebrew terms for practically everything. At some point, you are able to memorize information faster and retain it longer. This certainly comes in handy when you are expected to memorize 20 dates and their corresponding events for history or the terms for each part of the body in biology. And when we shave minutes off our studying time, we know that all those years of learning Jewish subjects have come to fruition. And when, one day, we all be-

come doctors and lawyers, we'll speed through the infinite names of diseases

or the vast lists of judicial objections with ease, shooting towards the top of our respective fields.

Jewish school is a balancing act. With a dual curriculum, students have a lot on their plates. Though the two areas of study seem unrelated, their relationship is actually symbiotic. So, if you find yourself failing biology, pick up a Tanach. If you need to get your grades up in English, try a Gemara. Skills gained in one curriculum can help students succeed in another.

People often wonder why Jews are so successful. When you look at the stats, 23% of Nobel Prize winners are Jewish. In fact, the Talmud became a bestseller in South Korea because Korean mothers wanted to know how so many Jewish people became so successful. So what is the Jewish secret? It's a question many have asked and I have just answered. So keep on *shuckling*, keep on "oy-vey-ing," keep those kippahs on and those peyos long because as far as I'm concerned, that's the ticket to success.



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