

The First Jewish Graduate

Category: Bereishis, Vayeira

A disproportionate amount of Jews are awarded the Nobel Prize for their intellectual achievements. Who was the first Jewish student?

Disproportionately Jewish

Over the past month, the Nobel Prize committee announced the winners of this year's prizes. At least four Jews are on the list: Harvey Alter for his contribution to medicine, Roger Penrose for his contribution to physics, Louise Glück for her contribution to literature, and Paul Milgrom for his contribution to economics. It is difficult to ignore the disproportion of Jewish Nobel laureates. Although we are only 0.2 percent of the world's population, over twenty percent of the Nobel awards have been given to Jews.

This is especially surprising given the fact that six million Jews were killed in the not-so-distant past. Among them were many intellectuals and academics which - no doubt - had the potential of being Nobel prize winners themselves.

Jewish success has been studied for a long time. In South Korea, they are convinced that our wisdom comes from the study of the Talmud, so they make their own attempts to study it as well. Others maintain that the source is not from our high IQ, but from Jewish culture, which places a great emphasis on learning. But - as someone pointed out to me - Chinese culture also places a great emphasis on learning without the same results.

I don't know the correct answer. But I would like to share with you a story from the Zohar, the foundational work of Kabbala, which might shed light on the issue.

“The Wealthy and the Honorable”

The Zohar speaks of Rabbi Abba, a rabbi of the Talmud who lived in Mesopotamia in the fourth century. In addition to his great scholarship, he was quite wealthy from his involvement in the silk trade.

At some point in his life, he decided to make Aliyah. He moved with all his assets

to the Land of Israel and settled in Tiberias (Tverya), where he established a Yeshiva. He would go around and announce, "He who desires riches, should come study Torah." His Yeshivah became very popular and attracted students from all over.

One local bachelor once approached Rabbi Abba and said, "Rabbi, I would like to study Torah in order to become rich."

"Your wish will surely be fulfilled," Rabbi Abba replied. "What is your name?"

"Yosi."

Rabbi Abba instructed his students to call their new colleague, "Rabbi Yosi the Wealthy and Honorable."

Yosi settled down and began to study Torah. But after a while, he came to complain to Rabbi Abba. "Rabbi, where are my riches?"

Rabbi Abba was disappointed that after learning Torah for so long, Yosi didn't come to appreciate the value of the Torah learning itself. Retiring to his room, he thought to himself that for disparaging Torah learning he actually deserves divine punishment, but then he heard a voice from heaven call out, "Don't punish him, because one day he will be a great person."

Rabbi Abba returned to Rabbi Yosi "the Wealthy and Honorable," and assured him,

"You study Torah, and I will make you wealthy."

Moments later, a visitor arrived at Rabbi Abba's home. Taking out a gleaming goblet of the most refined gold (Paz), he told Rabbi Abba that he was searching for a Torah student who was willing to share with him the merit of his Torah study.

"My father was phenomenally wealthy; on his table he had thirteen such cups. I didn't merit to study Torah, so I am willing to share this wealth with the individual which will share the merit of his Torah study."

The Age-Old Partnership

This was not an unreasonable request. In Judaism, if someone cannot study Torah for whatever reason - being occupied with his business or lacking the necessary education - he can enter into a partnership with a Torah scholar: he will commit to support the scholar, and the scholar will commit to share the mitzvah of Torah study with him.

Torah study is considered one of the greatest pursuits in Judaism. In the second paragraph of Shema, a person who studies Torah is promised long life for himself and his children. If someone studies Torah, we read in *Parshat Bechukotai*, Hashem promises him livelihood, tranquility, and many more blessings. Therefore, it was common for regular folk to make these partnerships with Torah scholars. One partner would provide physical sustenance, while the other would provide the spiritual.

The first such partnership was between two of the tribes of Israel, Issachar and Zebulun. The tribe of Zebulun lived on the coast and was heavily involved in commerce, and they supported the tribe of Issachar, who served as the teachers and rabbis of the Jewish people.

Meeting this visitor, Rabbi Abba was ecstatic. G-d had sent him the perfect answer for his student! He called over Rabbi Yosi and told him, "You will study Torah, and this individual will give you wealth."

During their first meeting, the new 'partner' gave him the gold goblet, and their relationship took off. He provided money, and Rabbi Yosi continued to study.

One day, Rabbi Abba was surprised to find Rabbi Yosi in tears. "How could I lose my portion in the world-to-come," explained Rabbi Yosi, "for the sake of material riches?"

Rabbi Abba was happy that Yosi had finally come to appreciate to value of Torah study for its own sake. He called the wealthy sponsor and returned the golden goblet. "Distribute your wealth to the orphans and the poor, and I will give you an even greater portion in my Torah."

From that day, Rabbi Yosi became known as Rabbi Yosi *Ben Pazi*, in merit of the cup of *paz*-pure gold which he had returned. He became a veritable Torah

scholar, and his sons - the Ben Pazi family - followed in his path. (*Zohar Lech Lecha 88a*).

Why the Reminder?

The Rebbe posed the following question:

Why was Rabbi Yosi named for the golden goblet which he returned? Why do we call attention to the period in his life when he studied Torah with improper intentions?

The Rebbe answered by citing a teaching in the Talmud: "A person should always study Torah, even not for its sake, because he will ultimately come to study it for its own sake."

Ben Pazi is a classic example for this teaching. He began his studies for irreverent reasons, but he soon abandoned them and dedicated himself to Torah. We call him Ben Pazi, the Rebbe said, because it reminds us of his story and inspires us to follow in his path. (*Lech Lecha 5741*)

I think this provides some context to the discussion about Jewish wisdom. A society that has people that are willing to pay large sums of money just to get intangible merit of someone else's study is quite unusual. And on the other hand, people who are willing to forgo large amounts of money just because they want to study Torah for its own value; no wonder, wisdom and scholarship are held in such high esteem among the Jewish people.

The First Jewish Student

Some people think that Torah study began at the giving of the Torah, 3300 years ago. In truth, it began even earlier. Our sages say that our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, studied Torah as well.

They also espoused Torah to others. They taught their communities about the Seven Noahide Laws, about faith in G-d and about being good to humanity. They taught the people around them to reject the pre-flood behavior of crime and corruption and establish a civilized society.

In this week's parsha, we read about the birth of Isaac. The Torah says that "when Isaac was weaned," Abraham held a large celebration, to which he invited all the mighty and wealthy people of his time: Shem, Ever, Avimelech, Og, and so on. Abraham was a famous individual, and everyone came to pay their respects.

This celebration took place when Isaac "was weaned," and the commentaries offer various interpretations of this statement. One Midrash says that it was his Bris, while another posits that it was his Bar Mitzvah.

A third interpretation offers a different idea:

"Abraham wrote books about G-d and taught them to Isaac. When he completed his studies, he was considered 'weaned,' and Abraham held a feast of thanksgiving to G-d..."

It was essentially Isaac's graduation from Jewish studies amid a world of idol worshippers. It was the first Jewish graduation party.

Study, apparently, is in our genes.