

בס"ד

Shluchim Sermons



Devarim

Study Motivated by Love

What are the qualifications necessary to teach Judaism? How should we approach our own Torah study?

The World's Best School System

Good Shabbos!

There is one thing about Finland that makes it stand out—its national educational system is ranked #1 in the world.

In these rankings, the United States and Israel don't make it to the top ten, and not even in the top twenty.

Of course, when we hear such a thing, it stokes our interest: What is the secret of their success? What do they do in Finland that they don't do anywhere else?

Well, back in the 1990s, when Finland decided to make education its top national priority, one of the first things they did was close all the education courses and tracks in every university and college across the country—except for select schools of higher learning, which were permitted to open new programs for the certification of teachers. Then, these schools only accepted the best and most outstanding students—with less than ten percent of applicants getting accepted into these programs. Only those who saw teaching as a mission were accepted—and even among those, they were sifted and reviewed to see if they're truly suitable for teaching; do they really love and enjoy teaching children?

That created massive competition for education-related positions and specialties, making it a very valuable career. And today, teachers in Finland hail from the top ten percent of university graduates and enjoy a high social status.

But there's more than that to the world-leading Finnish educational system.

In today's Finland, the government does not officially test students. In most countries, including the United States, there are official government tests for various levels of school, like the Regents in New York or the California Test of Basic Skills or the Common Core federal test. The result of that is that students are educated with the goal of doing well on tests. In Finland, however, they are now educated with the goal of broadening horizons—with the goal of learning just to know, and how to apply that knowledge to life.

The Finnish system also is a very small fan of homework, of which they give virtually none. School-based work at home is only assigned where and when a student doesn't complete work in school—and even then, the student is trusted to complete that work. He or she is never checked to see if the homework was actually completed; instead, the student is given faith and relied upon.

In Finland, school hours are perhaps best described as “less is more.” Your average American First Grader puts in about 32 hours of classroom time a week—while in Finland, it's a maximum of 20. They believe that kids lose their concentration and attention after a few hours and are not capable of learning more. They believe that any more classroom hours in the day are ineffective. Thus, Finnish students have the shortest school day and the shortest school year in the Western world.

Finnish law mandates that students get a 15-minute recess every hour.

Half of classroom time in Finnish schools is dedicated to self-study and personal exploration. In a standard Western classroom, some 85 percent of time is occupied by the teacher speaking—but in Finland, it's only half the time. For the rest of the time, students study in pairs on their own, and in many cases, older students teach the younger ones.

Ask any Finnish teacher, and they'll tell you that their goal is to create an atmosphere at school and in the classroom in which the children love what they're learning and want to go to school— an atmosphere of joy in the classroom.

And a brief review of Finland's educational system, of course, brings us straight to this week's Torah portion.

That's because, in this week's Parshah of Va'eschanan, the Torah instructs every Jew to become a teacher.

Jewish Teacher Qualifications

In this week's Parshah, we read the famous verse, "*V'shinantam l'vanecha*, and you shall teach it to your sons." Meaning, you have to teach your children Torah. And Rashi comes along and adds, "...to your sons means students; we find it everywhere that students are referred to as sons...and just as students are called sons...so too, the master is called a father."

Right there we have it that each of us has the responsibility to teach Torah not just to his children but to every other Jew, too.

But how exactly do we become great teachers? What is the entry exam in Judaism for us to fulfill the mitzvah of "*Vishinantam l'vanechah*"? The Torah comes along and tells us by prefacing that verse with an even more important verse: "*V'ahavta es Hashem Elokecha*, and you shall love the L-rd Your G-d." To be a great teacher, you have to love G-d.

In the Yud Shvat Farbrengen of 1951, the day he accepted leadership (Toras Menachem Vol. II, pg. 211), the Rebbe said that the American custom is to issue a statement upon assumption of leadership. And so, the Rebbe continued, his statement was: “There are three loves in Judaism: Love of G-d, love of Torah and love of fellow Jew, and they are all one, and to separate them is impossible.”

What the Rebbe meant is that when a Jew loves G-d, he or she loves the children of G-d. If he or she loves the children of G-d, he or she will then love his or her students. When one loves G-d, he or she will also love the Torah and study it with passion.

I’m sure that every one of us can remember one teacher or two who really had a positive influence on us. Usually, we felt that that teacher really loved us, and so we loved him or her and loved going to class with him or her. Or it was a teacher who really loved the subject that he or she taught, and who would get us all excited about the subject he or she was teaching—making us love that subject, too. And often, that one special teacher had both qualities.

But the Torah is the same thing, too—these three categories of love march together, bound as one: Love of G-d, love of the Torah and love of fellow Jew. And so, the “prerequisite course” for “You shall teach your sons” is “You shall love the L-rd your G-d.”

A Connection of Love or Fear?

In the Book of Chavakuk (3:2), the Prophet Chavakuk says, “O L-rd, I heard a report of You; I feared, O L-rd, Your deed.” The verse means to say that for Chavakuk, service of G-d was based on fear. But in the Zohar, Rabbi Shimon Bar says that his own passions are different. “We place everything on love”—meaning that for us, students of Kabbalah like Rabbi Shimon, it was all about love of G-d.

Rabbi Shimon was saying that for the Prophets, service of G-d was

primarily based upon fear of G-d. But along came Kabbalah with its innovation of “placing everything on love”—reimagining the entire relationship and bond between Jew and G-d as one imperative upon love. What moves a Jew today, Rabbi Shimon teaches us, is specifically the love of G-d.

To bolster his case, Rabbi Shimon quotes three verses—two of which come right from our Parshah. The first one is the verse we mentioned earlier, “You shall love the L-rd your G-d,” and the second one is, “Because of G-d’s love for you...” (The third is a verse from the Prophet Malachi.)

The Rebbe explains that the first two verses symbolize the two sides of the bond between G-d and the Jewish Nation.

The first quoted verse from our Parshah, “You shall love the L-rd your G-d,” refers to the fact that we must love G-d. This is symbolized by prayer, in which we approach G-d.

The second quoted verse from our Parshah, which appears at the very end of the Parshah, is a statement by Moshe Rabbeinu, in which he tells the Jewish Nation, “Because of G-d’s love for you...did G-d take you out...from the hand of the Pharaoh, king of Egypt” (Devarim 7:8). This verse symbolizes the love that G-d has for us, which prompted Him to give us the Torah. What’s clear is that the bond that the Jewish Nation has with G-d and the Torah is a bond based on love (Shabbos Parshas Naso 5744, Hisvaduyos, Vol. III, pg. 1859).

Study What You Love

The concept of studying Torah out of love for G-d is found in Halachah (Jewish law), where we find it stating that, with regards to formal Torah study, “a person should always study in the place his heart desires” (Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zarah 19a). This means that a person should always study the Torah on subjects that he loves,

because then he will have passion in his study—he will understand it better and remember it all the more.

Now, people are always looking for tips and tricks to improve memory—how to successfully retain everything you learn. But the way to do that is simple. After all, we remember the birthdays of all the people we greatly love, do we not? And we forget the little things that are not important to us, do we not? In that vein, when it comes to Torah study, it's critical that we each study the subjects that we love most—and then, we're virtually guaranteed to remember them.

And that, my friends, is what Rabbi Shimon meant when he said, “place everything on love.”

Good Shabbos!