

This Shabbos we're celebrating "Graduation Shabbos" at our shul. The list of graduates is long and impressive; we have graduates who have completed high school, college, and graduate school. In looking at the list, though, there's one name noticeably absent from the list -- Yelli Smason. Yelli graduated Old Bonhomme Elementary, and is off to Ladue Middle School!

There can be nothing more important than educating the next generation -- our children and our grandchildren.

I attended a high school graduation this past week, and heard a fantastic speech that was given by the class president. There were many things I liked about her talk, but the best part was the question that our own Morissa Pepose asked. Her question was, "What does it mean to be educated?"

At first glance the question sounds simple. But upon further reflection I found it to be both important and profound. How would you answer that question?

I looked in the dictionary and found three approaches to defining 'educated':

1. Having an education, especially one above the average.
2. Showing evidence of schooling, training, or experience.
3. Having or exhibiting cultivation; cultured: an educated manner.

Still, though, there seems something lacking from these approaches. Does being educated truly depend on a certain amount of schooling? And if so, to what extent? Is a person educated if they've graduated high school? College? If they have a graduate degree? In looking back at my own schooling, one of the most helpful classes I took was high school typing. Typing skills aren't typically associated with 'education'. If you know the capital city of Ecuador or the name of Charlemagne's father, does that mean you're educated? And if you don't, does that mean you're uneducated?

A young man who had been hired by the personnel department of a large supermarket chain reported to work at one of the stores. The manager greeted him with a warm handshake and a smile, handed him a broom and said, "Your first job will be to sweep out the store."

"But," the young man protested, "I'm a college graduate."

"I'm sorry," the manager said, "I didn't know that. Here, give me the broom and I'll show you how."

I think it was Mark Twain who said, "I dropped out of school to continue my education."

Ben Franklin once told about a boy who was so smart he could name a horse in 9 languages, but so ignorant he bought a cow to ride on.

Perhaps a more difficult question to ask than "What does it mean to be educated?" is: "Do you consider yourself well educated?" For those of us who have attended college or onward, we might hesitate to answer 'no' -- yet it somehow seems immodest to pronounce ones self as 'educated', regardless of the number of years of our schooling.

Morissa's question is difficult to answer. Let me suggest framing the question in the following way: What does it take to to give your children the 'very best education'? When it comes to our children, our focus becomes sharper. What are the three areas, disciplines, or bodies of material that are absolutely indispensable for them to know? What are the three things our children need to know that their future success and happiness in life depends upon?

I'd like to share with you my opinion of the three subjects one must be familiar with to be considered an 'Educated Person'.

First, our children should know the answer to the question, "**Why am I here, and what is life about?**"

This majestic existential query has been pondered by philosophers throughout the ages. And while the question may seem so deep as to be almost unanswerable -- particularly for young people -- anyone without a rudimentary understanding of the meaning of life is a ship adrift. If we're fortunate and blessed, we'll have 70 or 80 years of life in this world. What is it for, and how shall we use it?

The 'meaning of life' isn't necessarily something we learn in high school, college or graduate school. I've met a number of older individuals, successful in their chosen careers, who don't have much of an idea of what life is about. On the other hand, I've met young people who have a pretty good idea of why we're here. It is clear that schooling and training is crucial to the extent that it leads to acquiring the means to support ones self and one's family. But who among us wants to spend our life living to work, rather than working to live?

On this one, I won't leave you with just the question. Each of our children -- and ourselves -- should know that we're children of G-d and that in life we have a mission to fulfill. There are three parts to this purpose:

a) Judaism teaches we were created for pleasure. The term *Gan Eden* literally translated means the 'Garden of Pleasure.' In the right time, right place and with moderation, we're here for the pleasure of chocolate frozen yogurt (or vanilla, if you prefer). But more significantly, every person was created to enjoy the pleasures of love, doing good, expressing creativityand the ultimate pleasure, having a relationship with G-d

b) We're here to do the very best we can. That's what G-d expects of us. Nothing more, and certainly nothing less.

c) We're here to make a difference, and everything we do makes a difference. We live in a time when many people feel a profound sense of loneliness and insignificance; there are some who feel that if that if they dropped off the face of the earth nobody would notice. But like the theory of the 'Butterfly Effect' which posits that a butterfly beating its wings in Japan affects the weather in California, spiritually every action we take and word we speak makes a difference. And to others, and to the world, each of us can make an enormous difference.

The second body of knowledge that is a prerequisite for our children to becoming educated people is:

Who am I?

Rabbi Shlomo Volbe, the great Torah scholar and Ba'al Mussar (Ethicist) wrote the following: Woe is it to the person who doesn't know their faults, for they won't know what they need to correct. But ...a double woe to the person who doesn't know their strengths -- because without knowing our strengths, we don't know what are our tools for success in life.

What makes me tick? What are my unique abilities, skills and talents? It's been said that the greatest gift one can share with someone is the gift of self-knowledge. We need to know what we have going for ourselves. A ship is safe in the harbor -- but ships were made to sail, and so are we. There are three aspects to knowing one's self:

a) Many individuals suffer from a profound lack of self esteem. A study by the National Parent-Teachers Organization revealed that in the average American school, eighteen negatives are identified for every positive that is pointed out. This study revealed that when children enter the first grade, 80% of them feel pretty good about themselves, but by the time they get to the 6th grade, only 10% have good self-images.

b) At my daughter Yelli's elementary school graduation, the gym coach said the following: "Class, today we aren't able to have gym. However, I'd like to briefly review one lesson. Who is in charge of you?" At that moment, the teacher and students pointed at themselves. The coach said, "That's right. You are in charge of your own heart, your own mind, and your own body." What a profound lesson! Knowing one's self means knowing that I'm in charge of myself. My soul is in charge of my body. And like a rider that skillfully controls a horse, our soul can direct the wants and desires of the body. In life it's crucial to be able to do what we want to do, and not be compelled by our instincts to do only what we feel like doing.

c) For those of us blessed to be Jewish, we must know what it means to be a Jew. Those who understand what it means to be Jewish realize that living a Jewishly-committed life provides the greatest opportunity to live a meaningful, satisfied life. Our goal should not be to become 'Orthodox'; labels are for clothing. Rather, we should aspire to become 'Good Jews' who follow the guidelines and mitzvot of the Torah. Why go to a local community college if you have the brains, grades and money to go to Harvard or Stanford? Living a Jewishly-committed life enables us to travel through life first-class. Don't settle for coach.

Third and finally, an indispensable component of a top-quality education is **learning what it means to be a mensch** - a decent, ethical person who knows how to treat people properly.

When we think about how we might define ourselves, virtually every self-definition involves others. I, Ze'ev Smason, am: a Jew, a husband, a father, a grandfather, a rabbi, a Dodger fan, a friend, an American, The ability to get along with others directly and profoundly impacts the quality of my life -- and yours, as well. Here are the 'top 10' items on my list of what it means to be mensch; feel free to compile your own list:

honest, loyal, trustworthy, responsible, strong (in the face of difficulties -- to do the right thing), humble, respectful, compassionate, caring, empathetic

I'd like to conclude with the following story.

An education counselor at NYU was interviewing a middle aged man who was interested in self-improvement through education. During the interview the man remarked, "I wish I had studied medicine. I've always wanted to be a doctor."

The counselor told him, "Then that's exactly what you should do -- study medicine and become a doctor." But the man balked, telling him that to do so wasn't practical because "When I finish it in 7 years I'll be too old."

The counselor looked the man right in the eyes and said, "And how old will you be in 7 years if you DON'T take the course?"

It's never too late to strive to provide the best possible education for ourselves and for our children. But what it means to be 'educated' requires thought. Today, I've shared with you my top three components of 'the best possible education.' We must teach our children -- and know for ourselves :

Why am I here?

Who am I?

What defines a mensch, and why is being one important?

May we and our children never feel that our education is complete, as we strive to obtain the very best education.