

REMEMBERING MEMORY

by Rabbi Yisrael Rutman

'Forward the Light Brigade!'

Was there a man dismay'd?

Not tho' the soldier knew

Some one had blunder'd:

Theirs not to make reply,

Theirs not to reason why,

Theirs but to do & die,

Into the valley of Death

Rode the six hundred."

-- from *"The Charge of the Light Brigade"* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Even though it was back in the 1960's, I can still remember those lines from England's poet laureate because I was made to recite the entire poem in front of my class in New York's P.S. 114. It was a survival of the system of rote memorization which was already in disfavor by the time I was exposed to the sonorous cadences of Tennyson.

I recalled those lines once again recently at the end of another school year. But this time it was the end of my son Moshe Chaim's school year, and I was taking him to the store to buy a computerized notepad---a special

prize for his hard work and good grades. But it was not without a certain ambivalence that I did so. Not because of the expense. The money comes out of the Mommy-And-Daddy-Educational-Foundation, which is underwritten by the Bank of Israel in the Sky. As the Midrash says, G-d pays you back for the money you spend on Torah education; and I think that includes prizes like this, too.

No, my ambivalence had to do with the nature of the prize itself. Having a machine to do your calculating and remembering for you is a dubious advantage. The development of one's mental powers is, after all, one of the main goals of education; and reliance on such devices to do your mental work for you engenders a ruinous sloth.

Indeed, the exercise of memory itself seems to be a long-forgotten relic of the past. The collective atrophy of the faculty of memory reaches far beyond the classroom into every aspect of our lives. We are increasingly dependent on the artificial memories of computerized registers and notepads. When they fail us, we are rendered helpless until someone can come and fix the problem. How many times have we had to face our incapacity to cope when the office computer or the scanner at the checkout counter goes down? Not to mention the embarrassment of otherwise intelligent people resorting to calculators for relatively simple mathematical problems.

It was not always like this. My parents were no mathematicians; they were ordinary working people. Yet, they both knew by heart the price of every item in their grocery store and worked the totals out on the sides of brown paper shopping bags for each customer with unerring speed.

The dismal state of the educational system in England and America today is an agreed-upon fact. But neither Bush nor Blair would dare to recommend learning the classics by heart as a remedy for the nation's ills. Nor could they. For both the system of memorization and the classics curriculum have long fallen into disfavor. The negative attitude toward linguistically difficult and politically incorrect works of literature has all but destroyed any desire to study them, much less memorize them.

Memorization itself bears the stigma of stultification. It is commonly thought to be the kind of curriculum designed to be enforced by the waiting smack of the teacher's ruler. And although it surely was abused by bad teachers, the equation between memorization and anti-creativity is fallacious. The greatest literary personalities steeped themselves in Bible, Homer, Shakespeare and Tolstoy until they could recite reams of it from memory. Rather than stultifying, it trained and enriched the mind.

By contrast, the emphasis on memorization in traditional Jewish studies has, if anything, been revived in the current generation. World-wide mishnayot competitions, in which the young participants demonstrate not only their astounding recall, but their intelligent mastery, of thousands of mishnayot, are a reflection of the emphasis on memorization. This thorough grounding in the classics of Jewish study provides the basis for the deep Talmudic analysis and original thought that are the hallmark of the Torah scholar. Only the age-old Jewish love for the words of the holy Torah makes it possible. And when there's a conflict between the Torah and the ideas of the moment, it is the moment, not the Torah, which is politically incorrect.

To be sure, there now exist CD-ROM's loaded with whole libraries of Judaica; but there is no substitute for the individual's mastery of the material. Some years ago, Rabbi Yaakov Yisrael Ruderman, one of the great European-born Torah scholars of the past century, was shown the miracle of the entire Talmud available to anyone on a computer screen at the press of a few buttons. Rabbi Ruderman himself knew all of the Talmud's 2,711 pages by heart. And he knew it word for word. But he was unimpressed by the computerization of Torah. He explained that it means very little to have it in the computer's memory. You have to have it inside you.

Indeed, that is the goal of Torah study. Not just to know facts, and to be able to spit them out on a test, but to make the Torah a part of you. To internalize its wisdom, so that your very life, every thought and deed, is an expression of Torah. As the chassid said who went to visit the great Maggid of Mezritch, successor to the Baal Shem Tov:

"I did not go to hear words of Torah from his mouth; I went to watch him tie and untie his felt bootlaces."

And what of my Moshe Chaim and his computerized notepad? Well, it's been a few days, and---Baruch Hashem---it looks like the novelty is already wearing off. Could be that soon he'll forget about it altogether...

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