



Why do I need people? I have Wikipedia!

“Oh how good is it for people to sit down together”

Moses Mendelsohn, *Jerusalem* (Berlin 1783)

Jewish philosopher writing in Berlin during the middle of the 18th century

“What a student himself did and saw being done from morning till night pointed to religious doctrines and convictions and spurred him on to follow his teacher, to watch him (for Mendelsohn it was most likely always a “him” but we don’t need to hold ourselves to his gender bias), to observe all his actions, and to obtain the instruction which he was capable of acquiring by means of his talents, and of which he had rendered himself worthy by his conduct.

The diffusion of writings and books which, through the invention of the printing press, has been infinitely multiplied in our days, has entirely transformed man. The great upheaval in the whole system of human knowledge and convictions which it has produced has, indeed, had on the one hand advantageous consequences for the improvement of mankind, for which we cannot thank beneficent Providence enough. However, like every good which can come to man here below, it has also had, incidentally many evil consequences, which are attributed partly to its abuse and partly also to the necessary condition of human nature.

We teach and instruct one another only through writings; we learn to know nature and man only from writings. We work and relax, edify and amuse ourselves through overmuch writing... everything is dead letter; the spirit of living conversation has vanished. We express our love and anger in letters, quarrel and become reconciled in letters; all our personal relations are by correspondence.

Hence it has come to pass that man has almost lost his value for his fellow man. Intercourse with the wise man is not sought for we find his wisdom in writings... Hoary age has lost its venerableness, for the beardless youth knows more from books that the old man knows from experience.”

Questions

1. What is the essence of Mendelsohn’s complaint?
2. In what ways might it ring true to our time?
3. Are there ways that our time is different? What are the differences and how might they affect Mendelsohn’s complaint?
4. What is his solution? What is yours?

Here is an excerpt from the Talmud outlining the kinds of rabbinic educational experiences that may have been in the back of Mendelsohn's mind.

Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 62a:

תניא אמר רבי עקיבא פעם אחת נכנסתי אחר ר' יהושע לבית הכסא ולמדתי ממנו ג' דברים למדתי שאין נפנין מזרח ומערב אלא צפון ודרום ולמדתי שאין נפרעין מעומד אלא מיושב ולמדתי שאין מקנחין בימין אלא בשמאל אמר ליה בן עזאי עד כאן העזת פניך ברבך א"ל תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך

It has been taught: Rabbi Akiba said: Once I went in after Rabbi Joshua to a privy, and I learnt from him three things. I learnt that one does not sit east and west but north and south; I learnt that one evacuates not standing but sitting; and I learnt that it is proper to wipe with the left hand and not with the right. Said Ben Azzai to him: Did you dare to take such liberties with your master? He replied: It was a matter of Torah, and I required to learn.

רב כהנא על גגא תותיה פורייה דרב שמעיה דשח ושחק ועשה צרכיו אמר ליה דמי פומיה דאבא כדלא שריף תבשילא א"ל כהנא הכא את פוק דלאו אורח ארעא אמר לו תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך

R. Kahana once went in and hid under Rav's bed. He heard him chatting with his wife, joking and doing what he required. He said to him: One would think that Abba's mouth had never sipped the dish before! Rav said to him: Kahana, are you here? Go out! This is rude. He replied: It is a matter of Torah, and I require to learn.

Questions:

1. According to these texts what is Torah? How broad is the definition?
2. What does this say about the organization of rabbinic education?
3. How might this kind of 'experiential' learning be different than learning from books?
4. Which do you think is preferable? Why?

Khalil Gibran, *the Prophet* (London, 1926)

Lebanese poet writing in the United States during the beginning of the 20th century

"Then said a teacher, speak to us of teaching. And he said:

No man can reveal to aught but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge. The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and his lovingness.

If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind.

The astronomer may speak to you of his understanding of space, but he cannot give you his understanding. The musician may sing to you of the rhythm that is in all space, but he cannot give you the ear which arrests the rhythm, nor the voice that echoes it. And he who is versed in the science of numbers can tell of the regions of weight and measure, but he cannot conduct you thither.

For the vision of one man lends not its wings to another man. And even as each one of you stands alone in God's knowledge, so must each one of you be alone in his knowledge of God and in his understanding of the earth."

Questions:

1. How is Gibran in agreement with Mendelsohn? What aspect(s) might he be adding?
2. How might Gibran be in disagreement with Mendelsohn and the rabbis?
3. What are they saying about the nature of education?
4. Whose reading do you prefer?

Mishna Avot 1:6

יהושע בן פרחיה אומר עשה לך רב וקנה לך חבר והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות:

Yehoshua ben Perahiyah said: "Make for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every person favorably."

Sifrei Devarim 305

ויאמר ה' אל משה קח לך את יהושע בן נון קח לך גברתן כמותך. קח לך אינו אלא בלקיחה לפי שאין חבר נקנה אלא בקשי קשין מכאן אמרו יקנה אדם חבר לעצמו שיהא קורא עמו ושונה עמו אוכל עמו ושותה עמו וגולה לו סתריו וכן הוא אומר + קהלת ד ט +טובים השנים מן האחד והחוט המשולש לא במהרה ינתק

God said to Moses: Take Yehoshua bin Nun to you" (Numbers 27:18). "Take to you" one whose strength is comparable to yours. "Take to you" only through acquisition, for a friend is only acquired through great difficulty/in dire straits. From here they said that a person should acquire a friend for himself to read [Scripture] with him, and to learn [Mishna] with him, to eat with him and drink with him and to reveal to him his secrets. And similarly it says (Kohelet 4:9): "Two are better than one" and (ibid. 4:12): "The three-twined cord is not quickly broken."

Questions:

1. According to these texts what is the role of a friend?
2. How is a friend like a teacher? How different?
3. What do you think the meaning of "acquire" is?
4. With whom does this text agree more, Mendelsohn or Gibran?
5. What reading do you prefer?