

# If You Don't Learn, You Will Grow Up to Be a Dummy

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

On the first night of Shavuot during the break between *Minchah* and *Maariv*, a father wanted to learn with his 10-year-old son. However, the boy was not particularly interested. The father said to the boy more than once, "If you don't learn, you will not become a *talmid chacham*. You will grow up to be a dummy."

After *Maariv* I took this father aside and, in a friendly manner, said to him, "I do not think it is wise to make your son think that there are only two possibilities in life — being a *talmid chacham* or a dummy. Not everyone is cut out to become a true *talmid chacham*. For those of us who fall into this category, there are other respectable possibilities. One can live a meaningful life as a Jew while earning a living and studying Torah in one's spare time. To suggest to your son that his only choice is either being great in Torah learning or being a failure is not wise." After listening to me, the father agreed that I was correct.

This brings us to the issue of what I will call "diversity," for want of a better word. One of the most remarkable things about the world that Hashem created is the fact that no two human beings are the same. Each of us

has unique strengths and weaknesses, and each of us is required to live our lives according to the Torah in a manner that maximizes our strengths and minimizes our weaknesses. Each of us has a unique contribution to make to *Klal Yisrael*, and it is a mistake to try to fit all people into one mold.

In his commentary on *Bereishis* 35:11-12, Harav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch elucidates the concept of the Jewish nation being composed of individuals with diverse talents and occupations, all of whom have an important role in serving Hashem.

*The people of Yaakov is to become "Yisrael," is to reveal to the nations G-d's power, which controls and masters all earthly human affairs, shaping everything in accordance with His Will. Hence, this people should not present a one-sided image. As a model nation, it should reflect diverse national characteristics. Through its tribes, it should represent the warrior nation, the merchant nation, the agricultural nation, the nation of scholars, and so forth. In this manner it will become clear to all that the sanctification of human life in the Divine covenant of the Torah does not depend on a particular way of life or national characteristic. Rather, all of mankind, with all its diversity, is called upon to accept the uniform spirit of the G-d of*

*Israel. From the diversity of human and national characteristics will emerge one united kingdom of G-d.<sup>1</sup>*

I understand Rav Hirsch's message to be that all members of *Klal Yisrael* have an important place within the Jewish nation. Some have the extraordinary abilities to become *talmidei chachamim*: others are more suited to be involved in the "mundane" world as businessmen, professionals, laborers, etc. However, whatever one does, it must be done within the framework of service to Hashem and *Klal Yisrael*.

*We need bnei Torah who are doctors, physicists, lawyers, economists, politicians and public spokesmen for Torah Yiddishkeit.*

Based on the above, I would suggest that a father tell his son, "If you study, you may discover that you have the abilities to become a *talmid chacham*, which would be a wonderful thing. However, if you find that you do not have these abilities, then you will have to pursue other options. But always keep in mind that whatever you end up doing, you can live a life that is a *kiddush Hashem*."

---

*Dr. Yitzchok Levine is a professor at the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, N.J. He can be reached at [llevine@stevens.edu](mailto:llevine@stevens.edu).*

1 The Hirsch Chumash, Sefer Bereishis, Translation and Commentary by Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, (new) English Translation by Daniel Haberman, Feldheim Publishers/Judaica Press, Jerusalem/New York, 2007 page 693.

2 Moresheetz Tzvi, The Living Hirschian Legacy, Essays on "Torah im Derech Eretz" and the Contemporary Hirschian Kehilla, Rav S. R. Hirsch - The Leader and Fighter by Rav Shimon Schwab, Feldheim, 1988 pages 73 - 74.