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The Questions of Thomas Edison - What is Education?, 1921.

LECTURE BY RABBI ABBA H. SILVER, ON
"THE QUESTIONS OF THOMAS EDISON--WHAT
IS EDUCATION?" AT THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY
MORNING, MAY 29, 1921, CLEVELAND, OHIO.

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Mr. Thomas Edison, along with his remarkable achievements and experiments in his chosen field of endeavor, has many other pastimes and diversions, and occasionally Mr. Edison entertains the public. Sometime ago Mr. Edison added to the gaiety of the nations by a dissertation on the subject of immortality, and, lately, Mr. Edison has contributed to the entertainment of people by the publication of a questionnaire which he was wont to submit to the college men who applied for positions in his establishment.

The questionnaire--most of you have read it--covers a variety of subjects--almost the whole field of human knowledge. It is, of course, elementary. Mr. Edison's conclusion, based on his experiences with college men who endeavor to answer the questions, is rather disconcerting. Mr. Edison says that our college men are amazingly ignorant, that there is almost nothing which they actually do know.

This questionnaire has evoked a good deal of comment--mostly adverse comment. Some have said that the ability to answer the questions is no indication of a man's intellectual capacity; that memory is not a true test of mentality; that to be able to have at one's fingertips a

series of disconnected, disjointed facts, is no evidence of a man's thinking faculty, of his power of judgment, of his initiative, and so forth. Of course these comments are based largely upon one's own experience in trying to answer these questions. If you succeeded in answering a goodly number of them you felt complimented, and you at once resolved that the questionnaire was a sound one and a true indication of your mental status; if you succeeded in answering only ten per cent of them you at once resolved the questions were stupid and meaningless. Personally, I tried to answer these questions, but out of deference to my sensibilities I didn't take the average; it is not a good thing for one's self-esteem.

It is, of course, true that it is much less important to know what city produces the greatest number of laundry machines; it is much less important to know in what other country besides Australia kangaroos are found, than to know where these scattered facts may be found. In 1921 it is a very difficult thing, an impossible thing, to have an abstract, encyclopedic mind covering the whole range of human knowledge. I suppose in the eighteenth century such a thing, in a way, was possible, for after all the intellectual horizons of men were limited, and a man by application and study may have mastered a goodly portion of human knowledge. In the twentieth century it is an impossibility. Knowledge today increases as rapidly as a number is squared, and no mind, however unusual in its

endowments, can know all the facts that can be known.

It is, therefore, logical to assume that it is much more important to know how some facts may be obtained and where these facts may be found, and in what encyclopedias and dictionaries, than to know offhand what state in the United States produces the greatest number of peanuts, which was one of the questions of Thomas Edison.

It is also true, is it not, that memory as such is no evidence of ability. I have known people who could recite by heart poetry by the ream, who couldn't write a line of English themselves. I have known a number of men and women who have a most remarkable gift of remembering names and faces, but who wouldn't be able to pull down a hat check privilege in some hotel. Memory is one faculty, and that not the most important.

But making due allowances for all these things, it still remains true that Mr. Edison's indictment is, to a large degree, sound and tenable. Our college men and women have need of the same amount of definite, concise, immediately available information at their disposal that the college men of the countries of Europe have. Their information, to a large degree, is vague, hazy, indefinite. They have not that discipline of mind that European universities somehow succeed in developing. That is a fault which our college curriculum will have to overcome in the days to come. There is too much of indefiniteness in our liberal arts departments. I know hundreds of

thousands of young men and women who spend four, six and eight years in mastering Latin, or Greek, or French, or German in our American colleges, and yet who could never read a page of Latin, or Greek, or French, or German with ease and intelligently. There are very few of our college men and women who are able to use their own language gracefully and accurately, or who possess a fair acquaintance with the classic literature of their own people. Our colleges do not educate enough.

But--and this is the thought that comes to me this morning--were a man able to answer these 146 odd questions that Mr. Edison put, and did he not possess those other qualities which we regard as essential to education, that man, to my mind, would still remain ignorant. Education serves two purposes--one, utility, and the other, culture. Education must enable a man to become efficient in life, to help him to attain that goal which he has set for himself; and that education must humanize the individual.

Now, in making a man efficient memory is not of primary importance. What is much more important in education, to enable a man to wrestle successfully with the problems that life will present to him in whatever field he may find himself, is, first of all, the power of concentration--the power of will that will focus our attention upon a definite problem and a definite task, and to stick to it until we have solved it; the ability to

shake off the mental fag and centralize and concentrate upon a definite thing until we have succeeded. That is a thing that can be cultivated, and that is one of the tasks of education--to cultivate the power of concentration.

And then to cultivate the power of effective thinking. I remember passing through the great establishment of the National Cash Register Company, at Dayton, one day, and I was delightfully astonished to find before every desk and every bench in that great establishment a sign in very bold, red letters, with one word thereon--"Think!" That is the hardest thing in the world to do--to think hard, and think long, and think for yourself, and think through a thing. That is a gift infinitely more important than the gift of memory.

You know, I think we are losing this faculty for quick and effective thinking through what Mr. Elliot calls our mental dissipation. We read today not for purposes of cultivating our mind or quickening our intellectual faculties, or learning how to think by reflection; we read today for purposes of relaxation--to rest; we read the magazine or the short story when we are tired, just to be able to lull us, to prepare us for sleep; we read thirty minutes before we go to sleep, and in the morning our minds are a perfect blank concerning the subject which we have read about. The movies, to my mind, destroy our faculty of thinking. We are not active when we see a moving picture; we are entirely passive; we are in a receptive mood;

all the thinking is done for us, and the muscles of our mind before very long become atrophied and worthless.

That is one of the great functions of education--to stimulate quick, resolute, effective, deliberate thinking. And then, to my mind, another great function of education is to develop within you and me the power to reason, to judge intelligently; to weigh evidence; to form conclusions intelligently; to sift evidence; to be able to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, the fact from the fancy--that is real education. To be able to pick up a newspaper and to discern almost intuitively what is propaganda and what is the fact; to be able to read between the lines of a newspaper column--that is education.

We are developing a propaganda type of mind, a mind that receives uncritically everything that people prefer to put into it--a sort of a waste basket receptacle for all the information or misinformation of the world. Our minds should be like sieves--only the truth should be able to enter and to reject that which is not true.

The nineteenth century has given one big thing to civilization, and only one big thing, and that is a scientific point of view. Men today are no better than what they were a hundred years ago or five hundred years ago, but men today have the scientific tools of gauging and measuring reality, of discovering truth accurately, and unless you possess that scientific attitude, unless you

approach every problem with a scientific method, and unless you pay reverence and deference to facts, you are not a product of the twentieth century; you might just as well belong to the thirteenth century, when mysticism and reality, fact and fancy, blended and were hopelessly confused.

And, lastly, I believe for purposes of real efficient education our schools and colleges must stimulate our imagination. I know many a fool that had a perfectly good memory; he lacked that something which gives a touch of originality to our lives--and that is imagination. Nothing is possible without imagination, whether it be in science or in art or in literature; to be able, as Browning says, to strike two notes and get not a third but a star. That is what the imagination does for men. That is your contribution to it--to be able to combine facts in an original and unique way. That makes for progress; that makes for discovery; that makes for invention; that makes for great art and great literature. So that there are more facts requisite for real education, if it is only for an efficient education, than a retentive memory.

But, granted all these things--that of the power of concentration and effective thinking and reasoning power, and a constructive imagination,--I say, a man may have all these facts and still remain uneducated, uncultivated, for, as I said, there are two purposes in education, one, utility, and the other, culture. Education for

efficiency is only one half of education. To train a man to become successful in life is but to train him to one-half of his status of real manhood. Real success must be measured in terms of manhood and womanhood, and character and social service. To train a man in efficiency so that he may be a more effective tool, a greater producer, is but to train one side of his nature, and but to make him a professionalized, jobified, departmentalized man, but not the man made in the image of God--the well rounded man, the complete man.

Prussian education before the war was very much this sort of education--the technical education; the individual was trained almost perfectly to become absolutely perfect in his chosen vocation, but his other self, his sensibilities, his sentiments and emotions, were left untouched; they were not refined; they were not purified; they were not crystallized; and so they produced machines but not men.

Utility may go hand in hand with culture; science must go hand in hand with humanism. To know is but one-half of life; to feel is the other half of life; and true knowledge and fine fields make up the cultivated man. Mr. Eliot, whose name was mentioned by me before, gave a very excellent definition of a cultivated man in a lecture of his delivered some years ago. He said: What is the cultivated man? Who is a cultivated man? A cultivated man is not a weak, critical, fastidious creature, vain of

a little exclusive information, of an intellect lacking in Latin or mathematics. He must be a man of quick perceptions, broad visions, wide affinities, responsive but independent, self-reliant but differential, loving truth and candor, but also moderation and prohibition, courageous but gentle, not finished but perfecting.

All authorities agree that true culture is not exclusive, sectarian or partisan, but the very opposite; that it is not to be attained in solitude but in society and that the best atmosphere for culture is that of a school, university, academy or church where many pursue together the ideals of truth, righteousness and love.

True culture, then, is, first, a matter of character. The most dangerous criminal in the world is the man who has mental gifts of concentration and effective thinking and reasoning power and imagination but no morals. You may have read a short time ago a newspaper item reporting that the average intelligence of the criminal, the man behind bars, is higher than the average intelligence of people outside of prisons, and that the average intelligence of the repeater in jails is higher than the average intelligence of the other criminals.

In other words, intelligence per se is not the true test of education. Intelligence plus morality, intelligence plus character, intelligence plus the sympathetic use, the social use, if you please, of one's gifts and one's talents--that is real education; and when

you educate the mind of a child and starve his soul, you are sending forth a dangerous individual into society.

And, secondly, culture. In real education one must have a critical faculty, an esthetic appreciation of men, of nature, of human excellencies, of the virtues of life; to be able to discern the good, and the true, and the wholesome, and the beautiful; to be able to discriminate between the real and the unreal, between the fine and the vulgar; an esthetic eye, a critical appreciation of the world, of values,--that is, to my mind, the essential of education. To avoid the vulgar things almost instinctively; the false, the tawdry, the garish, the insincere, whether in art or in literature or in human relations; to look for the true, the sincere, the fine; to love charm, dignity and restraint in life; moderation and tolerance in place of bigotry, and intolerance, and furious aggressiveness, and a grasping and a seeking; to love the quietness and the peace and the beauty of God's great world,--that, to my mind, is the last word in education, the only good thing that education can do for a man.

To be able to read the whole history of the universe in one's little plot of garden back of his home; to find complete satisfaction in a few beautiful human relationships; to know how to make friends and how to hold them; to know how to become an influence in life, how to radiate love, and how to inspire and evoke love in other people; in other words, to use the old and beautiful

Biblical phrase--how to be a blessing to the world. That is real education.

Lastly, the glory and the motive power of education is an enkindling, an ennobling enthusiasm; the driving force in one's life, the motive power, the urge, is an ideal. To lack a great ideal in your life is to do an infinite number of things unrelated and disjointed; it is to scatter your soul. A great ideal unifies your efforts, harmonizes your activities, gives you a central focal point in life, a spiritual unity, a harmony. You know what you want, whither you are going, and how you are going to arrive there; there is a purpose to your life, a direction, a goal.

An educated man who is blase, and prosaic, and cynical, has missed the golden fruit of education--unless you have an enthusiasm that lives, an inspiration that enables you to step over obstacles, that enables you to endure disappointments and disillusionments and failures, that brings you contentment and happiness in spite of lack of realization of the things which you set out to do. That is real education.

If I were to sum up all that we have said, I would say that real education is religious education--truth wedded to Divinity; knowledge in form and made holy by idealism; to know and to feel; to learn to teach; to receive and to give--service. That is education.

I'll tell the names and sayings and the places
of their birth,
Of the seven great ancient sages so renowned
on Grecian earth,
The Lindian Cleobulus said, "The mean was
still the best";
The Spartan Chilo, "Know thyself," a heaven-
born phrase confessed.
Corinthian Periander taught "Our anger to
command,
"Too much of nothing," Pittacus, from Mity-
lenes' strand;
Athenian Solon this advised, "Look to the
end of life,"
And Bias from Priene showed, "Bad men are
the most rife";
Milesian Thales urged that "None should e'er
a surety be";
Few were their words, but if you look, you'll
much in little see.

From the Greek. Author unknown.



HOTELS STATLER

BUFFALO
450 ROOMS-450 BATHS

CLEVELAND
1000 ROOMS-1000 BATHS

DETROIT
1000 ROOMS-1000 BATHS

ST. LOUIS
650 ROOMS-650 BATHS

HOTEL PENNSYLVANIA, New York
2200 ROOMS-2200 BATHS
THE LARGEST HOTEL IN THE WORLD



This Letter Written at CLEVELAND

1. No one agency will help as much in reconstruction as education.
 1. If it was it failed, like religion. If 100 of schools ruin. could not stop war - then educ. is wrong.
2. I believe all hum. int. will profit. Rel. will become broad - humanitarian. Less of warlike thinking and divisive. Art will seek to make the good, beautiful etc.
3. Education. will work for efficient education. but for educ. of offspring.
 1. Russia - man pol & state. machine. Some uneducated, unskilled -
 2. Technical Training. well good Book keeper etc. but not only good useful man.



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THE LARGEST HOTEL IN THE WORLD



This Letter Written at CLEVELAND

4. Japan. 1866. 1899. Re at Russia
in 1905.

5. Real Ideal of Education.

1. Get success - My friend - Worship
2. Interest in Journey and in Goal.
in life adventure.

3. Training of body, Mind & Soul.
a strong body, a R. trained mind, and
an inspired soul.

4. Strong body - strenuous life. Religion

5. St. trained mind - free from superstition.
Influence in life - propaganda. numbers

6. Soul - 1. Love & fellow-men. head & heart
translate learning into emotion. 2. Aspire to higher reaches.
character training.