

A Life of Learning: The Heart of Jewish Heritage



Synagogue school at the time of Christ

In the Talmud, the synonym for 'education' is 'heavenly work.'

There is no nation in history where children were so conscientiously educated as the children of Israel. The first reference to educating children is found in Genesis 18:19:

"For I [God] have chosen him [Abraham], so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him."

The children of Abraham were to "keep the way of the Lord" among the nations. God told Abraham that He would make him a great nation and in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. (Genesis 18:18) Abraham's descendents believed they were chosen by God for this special task, and that the Torah was given to keep them on that path. (Psalm 119:105)

As covenant people of the Living God, everyone was to be educated. The primary purpose of education in the ancient Hebrew culture was to train the whole child in the knowledge of God (Proverbs 1:7; Ecclesiastes 12:13) for lifelong, obedient service.

The aim of learning was holiness in living – to be set apart unto God in every dimension of life. It is no idle boast that Jews from infancy were trained to recognize God as Father and Creator of the world, and that having been taught the knowledge of the Torah from their earliest years, they bore in their souls the image of His commandments.

You shall therefore impress these words of mine on your heart and on your soul . . . (Deuteronomy 11:18).

Antiquity's Pagan Worldview of Children

In antiquity children were held in very low esteem. In the eyes of adults, they had no worth and their individuality was seldom valued. In most cultures, children were disposable. Unwanted babies were exposed to the elements and left to die, or they were killed, sacrificed to idols, or reared to be sold as slaves. In the Roman culture, girls were given numbers as were boys after the third or fourth son! Weber (p. 6) notes that the new-born child was placed at his father's feet. If the father did not pick up the babe and acknowledge him, he was left to die. The Latin verb "to lift up" ('suscipere') became a synonym for survival. In Roman schools, children were flogged daily. In classical antiquity, the position of women, slavery, the education of children and their relation to parents, and the state of public morality all reveal a pagan worldview even among the higher classes of the greatest sages, poets, statesmen and historians. Edersheim (Sketches, p. 116) states, "For such a world there was only one alternative – either the judgment of Sodom or the mercy of the Gospel and the healing of the Cross." It was into this world that God sent His only Son, Jesus Christ!

Hebrew Worldview of Children

It is significant to note that in all the ancient civilizations, only the Jews and perhaps an ancient Germanic barbarian tribe (Tacitus) held children in high esteem and regarded it a crime to kill their offspring! Edersheim (Sketches p. 84) notes the grand distinction which divided all mankind into Jews and Gentiles was not only religious but social. Not only were towns, villages, buildings, streets, rules, manners and customs of the people very different, but family life stood in marked contrast to what would be seen elsewhere. On every side there was evidence that religion in the Jewish culture was not merely a creed nor a set of observances, but that it pervaded every relationship and dominated every phase of life!

The Child Among the Jews

By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict (Hebrews 11:23).