

Why My Friends and I Had More Wisdom When We Were 12 Than College Students and Faculty Have Today

The average 12-year-old student at a yeshiva has more wisdom than almost any student at Harvard or most other universities. (A yeshiva is an Orthodox Jewish school with an emphasis on religious studies. About half the school day is devoted to religious studies – taught from the original Hebrew sources.)

This is probably true for many 12-year-olds in traditional Christian schools as well.

College students do have more *knowledge* than almost any 12-year-old in religious school. But they have much less wisdom.

I know this because I was a yeshiva student from the age of 5 until 19. To appreciate how much wisdom I was taught is to appreciate the root of our society's present crisis: Secular life doesn't teach wisdom (nor, it should be noted, do many schools that call themselves "Christian" or "Jewish"). Generations of Americans have not been taught wisdom; instead, they have been told that it is sufficient to rely on their feelings to understand life and to determine right from wrong.

Here are just three examples of basic insights into life that most 12-year-old yeshiva students know and that few secular students – or, for that matter, secular professors – know.

No. 1: I knew well before the age of 12 that people are not basically good. Any young person who studies the Bible – and believes in it – knows that God says, "The will of man's heart is evil from his youth." (Genesis 8:21).

Aside from the issue of God's existence, this is probably the most important issue in life. It might be said that wisdom begins with this realization about human nature. It is hard to imagine any person who believes human nature is good attaining wisdom.

To be clear, the message of the Bible is not that human nature is basically bad. What matters is that we acknowledge the reality, noted in the Bible and affirmed by all of human history, that human nature is not inherently good.

No. 2: Precisely because human nature isn't good, the preoccupation of my religious education was how to work on myself to make me a better person. Every yeshiva student in the world memorizes the Talmudic aphorism, "Who is the strong man? The one who conquers his urge(s)."

The great difference between a religious and secular education can be summarized thus: I was taught that the greatest problem in my life is me. In the secular world, students are taught that the greatest problems in their lives are others.

That is the genesis of the current American tragedy. Vast numbers of young people blame others – and/or America generally – for their problems and their overall unhappiness. Few are taught to struggle with their own nature. Blacks are told to struggle with whites, America and systemic racism. Women are not taught to first work on themselves but to blame men and fight misogyny, patriarchy and America for their unhappiness.

No. 3: People are to be judged by the standards and behavior of the generation in which they lived.

Ask any yeshiva student – even one in elementary school – to explain the verse in Genesis, "And Noah was a righteous man in his generations." (6:9) He or she will tell you what I first learned in fourth grade: that the ancient rabbis debated what the words "in his generations" were meant to teach. Some

rabbis argued that they were inserted to teach that Noah was a particularly righteous man only in comparison to the (awful) generations in which he lived. Other rabbis argued that these words were there to make the point that if Noah was a righteous man in the awful generation in which he lived, he must have been a particularly righteous man, since it is very difficult to be good when all those around you are bad.

Whichever interpretation one agreed with, it was clear that people are to be judged according to the time in which they lived, not by the present time.

In the present Age of No Wisdom, the best educated – usually the same people who most lack wisdom – dismiss the unique moral accomplishment of America's Founders because most of them owned slaves. Fools – the term for people who lack wisdom – judge the Founders by our time, not by their time – a time when slavery was universal.

Wisdom can sometimes be a product of aging but given how many old fools there are and how many young people have some degree of wisdom, it should be clear that wisdom, like math, a foreign language and any other discipline, must be taught. Only then is one likely to become wiser with age. Otherwise, a young person without wisdom is most likely to become an old person without wisdom.

When America was more religious, wisdom was taught to young people. This is another reason to fear a thoroughly secularized America – we are producing a nation of fools. The proof lies in our universities. The most secularized institution in America is the most foolish institution in America.

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