

A COLLEGE EDUCATION FOR A YESHIVA BOY ?

I am in receipt of your letter in which you ask my opinion about the advisability for graduates of a Yeshivah (Day School) to continue their sacred studies in conjunction with college attendance.

By way of preface, let me state at once that my views on the subject under question apply not only to students of Yeshivoth, but to all Jewish youth, since all are children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the souls of all were present at Sinai and received the Torah and Mitzvoth. This is, indeed, the basis of my view which will be outlined below, after some introductory observations.

Jews have always been a "minority among the nations", even in the best of times. At the same time "their laws differ from those of any other people", and they differ not only in regard to special occasions, or special aspects of life, such as Shabbos, or Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, but they differ in their way of life, and in every aspect of the daily life. For the Jew, the Torah and Mitzvoth are the guide of daily life and the source of life and true happiness, and this is the simple meaning of "Toras Chayim" - Law of life, and the definition of the Mitzvoth as the essence of Jewish life, "whereby Jews live".

It is clear that being in the minority, Jews must have special reinforcements from childhood on, in order to be able to hold their own in the face of overwhelming odds.

If it was difficult enough to live as a Jew in countries where Jews were persecuted, confined to Ghettos, etc., there was one redeeming factor at least, namely that under those circumstances Jewish adherence and loyalty to the Torah and Mitzvoth was not put to the test. An individual Jew could sever his ties with his people, but that involved a sudden and complete break; it was therefore rare and extreme. But in the free countries, and under present economic and social conditions, there are no outside barriers separating Jew from gentile; the road to assimilation is wide open, and the danger is all the greater since the process is a gradual one. No sudden break with tradition is entailed, but a gradual deviation, step after small step, leads in that direction. There is a well-known parable for this, about the boy who strayed from the road and later found himself in the midst of the woods. He got there by making a small false step off the road, which led to another, and yet another.

The conditions and environment in a country such as this call, therefore, for an even greater spiritual reinforcement of the Jewish boy and girl than ever before and elsewhere. This reinforcement must be of such strength and duration that the Jewish child will always be conscious of the fact that no matter what the environment is, he is the bearer of the sacred tradition of the Divine Torah and Mitzvoth and belongs to a people that is holy and different. For this, it is essential that right from the earliest childhood to adolescence the Jewish child should receive the fullest possible Jewish education, throughout his formative years.

Hence, when a Jewish boy completes his compulsory education, it is an absolute must that for a couple of years, at least, he should dedicate himself to the exclusive study of the Torah and sacred subjects, in a most conducive atmosphere of a Yeshivah, without distraction of secular studies, all the more so as the teen-age are crucial and formative and of lasting effect, in the chrystallisation of the character.

This would have been my opinion even if the college entailed no more than the distraction of secular studies. Actually there is much more involved. Theoretically a college and its faculty should not try to impose any particular views, much less a way of life, on the students. Actually however, the student cannot help being impressed, on the conscious and subconscious level, by the views, outlook and way of life of his professors. These, as well as the whole atmosphere of a college, are unfortunately, not computable with the Jewish way of life, and frequently if not always quite contradictory to it. This is so even in colleges which are theological, or having so-called religious studies. Needless to say, the whole atmosphere of college is in violent conflict with the Shulchan Aruch way of life, whereby the Jew is totally committed - in every detail and aspect of his personal daily life - to the Torah and Mitzvoth and the service of G-d, as is written "Yet shall know Him in all your ways", to which a whole chapter in Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim (Ch.231) is devoted: note there.

In other words, the Jewish boy (or girl) ^{entering} college, yet desiring to retain the Jewish way of life in accordance with the Torah, finds himself tossed about in the raging waves of conflict between two contradictory worlds. He is at a further disadvantage in finding himself in the minority camp, since those sharing his views and convictions are few on the college campus, while the forces pulling in the opposite direction are overwhelming; forces he must confront at every turn - among the student body, faculty members, text books, newspapers and periodicals. It is very doubtful whether even an adult and mature person who is subjected to such "shock treatment" day after day, would not be shaken; how much more so a teen-ager.

Needless to say, I am aware of the argument that many Yeshivah boys attending college, or even college graduates, remain loyal to the Torah and Mitzvoth. The answer is simple. The number of such students and graduates who have not been seriously affected is relatively small indeed, much smaller than imagined. They are so exceptional that the wonder of it attracts attention, since those that go astray under college influence are taken for granted, while the one that still puts on Tefillin calls forth amazement. One may use the analogy of the shoe-shine boy who became a millionaire and everyone talks about him. It is not because he was a shoe-shine boy that he attained success, and no one will suggest that in order to become a millionaire one should start in the shoe-shine business. The greater the exception and sensation, the greater is the proof of the rule.

Some people ask, is there really such a conflict between attending college and remaining an observant Jew. I can speak from experience and personal knowledge, having attended various colleges and seen the painful inner upheavals of Jewish students, and having for many years been the confidant of Jewish students who are otherwise reluctant or ashamed to open their hearts. I can therefore state with the fullest measure of conviction and responsibility that he who sends his child to college during the formative years subjects him to shock and profound conflicts and trials and invites quite unforeseen consequences.

To put the matter in bolder relief, by way of illustration. Take the general attitude to polio, G-d forbid, and the precaution taken against it. Fortunately, the incidence of polio is not widespread, and where it strikes, it cripples only a part of the physical body; yet though the odds are farfetched it would be reckless not to take the necessary precaution. Unfortunately, the victims of college education are numerous indeed and most widespread, by far in the majority, and the harm is even more far-reaching.

Another point which is often the subject of misconception - the importance attached to a college degree from the economic point of view. Statistics show that the majority of college graduates eventually establish themselves in occupations and business ~~not~~ directly connected with their courses of study in college. The moral is obvious.

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