



Why Teachers are Irreplaceable

When I was in first grade, I watched a classic Israeli children's show, in which they offered an educational prediction: in another 10 years there'll be no need for teachers, and all students will study from computers. At the time, that prophecy made a great impression on me. But that prophecy didn't come true, and hopefully, it never will.

Not one decade has passed, but four, and education is still impossible without teachers. As we are seeing before our very eyes, when trying to swap teachers for computers, the results are not that great.

Current distance learning is only half the problem. The Israeli Education Ministry has been experimenting with distance learning during emergencies for a few years now, but differently from how the teachers are using it today. In the early days of this Corona crisis, the MoE suggested a concentrated program: recording lessons to be broadcast to children all over the country. That was an abject failure. Almost no-one tuned in. Through trial and error, teachers and principals have learned that there is no alternative to individual teachers facing the students he or she knows. That's how we've reached the improvised solution of Zoom learning. At least the teacher sees the students, which is much better than nothing.

Nevertheless, perhaps we can extract something good here: children are learning from real teachers and not from knowledge bases. It's certainly possible and worthwhile to use knowledge bases, even computerized ones. But they will never replace human teachers.

Why not? Because knowledge is accumulated in databases while wisdom is accumulated in human beings.

The Rambam spoke of wisdom as a level of human perfection. A person who remembers a lot of facts is not a wiser person or a more complete one. Our Sages called such a person: "an ass bearing books." This is knowledge, not wisdom, and for that, all one really needs is Google. But when you look for wisdom, Rabbi Google won't help you much.

They tell of a woman who came to a Rabbi on Erev Pesach to ask him whether she could use milk to fulfil the *mitzvah* of the four cups of wine. The Rabbi wrote her a generous check, and she left his house happy and crying. The Rabbi's son asked his father: "*Abba*, why did you give her money?" "Because son, if she wanted to drink milk on Seder Night, it means that not only doesn't she have money to buy wine, she doesn't have money for meat either."

I'd challenge Rabbi Google to come up with that solution.

It's not just the Rabbi's sensitivity, which is certainly an important attribute. I'm talking about the knowledge accumulated through life's experiences – the ability to take a question about Seder Night and intuitively connect it to human nature, to familiarity with the laws of meat and milk, and to a sensitive heart. Data is a collection of informative details; wisdom is a human trait, and it is only possible to absorb it from connecting with human beings.

Researchers Tamar and Oz Almog recently published a book about the failures of our universities. Among

other things, they recommend putting a much stronger emphasis on online learning. However, they also agree that online courses can only replace certain aspects of teaching.

There is a kind of online course called a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course). They put the best lecturer in the world in front of a camera, and the result is supposed to be the best course in the world. The problem is that it doesn't work. The dropout rate from these classes is close to 90%, and among the few who stay till the end, many of them fail the exams. The companies that produce these MOOCs are now focusing on vocational courses, which are much shorter and goal-specific. In other words, you can watch the best lecturer in the world and gain a lot of knowledge, but you won't glean much wisdom.

Because of this, I dare to bet that even in another 1,000 years, our descendants will still be learning from human teachers. It could be that they'll learn engineering from advanced AI programs, but they'll still learn Torah, wisdom and poetry from real human beings.

Even in another 1,000 years, young children will sit and gaze admiringly at their wise teachers. Because just as we need air, light and love, we also need wisdom, and wisdom is only found in wise people. Information can be learnt, but wisdom is infectious. And here the heart sighs: when will our children be able to catch this beloved "virus" again?

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