“Elbow Grease”

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There’s one important aspect of education that I believe in, and that I learned only on reflection. It is the aspect of exposure. We expose young people to words, ideas, objects, and experiences before they are “ready” to understand them.

The information gets recorded in their long-term memory. Many years later, the information reveals itself at a point when the context makes sense of it. Instead of being ignorant of the information, the person retrieves what is rightfully his or hers, and applies it to the moment. It becomes an inheritance whose purpose is only eventually revealed.

This educational idea is not popular, I regret to say. “She’s not ready for that,” I hear someone saying. “He can’t possibly understand it now,” I hear. But I’m living proof that exposure works.

When I was four, I enrolled in a program at our synagogue called the “consecration class.” Prior to Simchat Torah, they taught us to recite the Sh’ma. You will not be surprised to learn that I didn’t understand it at the time. But I learned to recite it. And I remember it to this day!

But along with it, they gave us a little script to learn. We were to be gathered in a large group on the bima on Simchat Torah morning, each of us dressed up appropriately (this was 1957) and holding a little tiny replica of a sefer Torah. I of course still have the Torah, and have shown it to countless students of my own.

The script went like this: “*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe*, this our prayer shall be: *Sh’ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad*. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

Now what was that first snippet of Hebrew? *Torah tzivah lanu Moshe*? If they had told us that it was a key verse in the blessing from Moses that concludes the Book of Deuteronomy, namely *V’zot Hab’rachah*, I am sure it would have gone over our heads, and maybe our parents’ heads as well. We were not “ready” to learn it, if you follow that thinking, because we could not possibly comprehend its meaning.

But we did indeed comprehend! We understood that we were reciting some words that mattered tremendously and ultimately to our teachers, and maybe to ourselves as well. That was the meaning! We were *inheriting* something valuable, and in time we would come to appreciate what it was. Meanwhile, we were enjoying standing up there in that big room and being doted on.

Well, one day in my adulthood I came to “comprehend” the verse, which I will reveal to you now. *Torah tzivah lanu Moshe* means “Moses commanded the Torah to us,” which might mean that Moses commanded us to take the Torah, or to study the Torah, or to preserve the Torah and pass it onward, or all of the above, or something else entirely.

The key might be in the second part of the verse, which unless I am incorrect was not part of our little script at Consecration. It goes, *morashah k’hilat Ya’akov*, roughly, “it is an inheritance of the Community of Jacob.”

The Community of Jacob is obviously us, the Jewish people. The Torah is something we inherit. Did Moses command us to inherit it? Or was the inheritance a given, and now Moses was insisting we do something specific with it? Maybe to live by it? Maybe to go beyond keeping it in a pretty box and taking it out to look at it from time to time like any common inheritance?

One commentator calling himself K’vod Chachamim, which I found in Itturey Torah, brings up a seeming contradiction between our verse, which calls the Torah an “inheritance,” *morashah*, and the Mishnah in Pirkey Avot that specifically adjures us to *hatken atzmach lil’mod Torah,* “prepare yourself to learn Torah,” *she-eynah y’rushah lach,* “for it is not bequeathed to you.”

Which is it, asks the commentator? An inheritance, or something you have to work for?

He answers that what he calls “general Torah,” *Torat hak’lal,* is indeed an inheritance. Everyone is born with it. It is the basic sense of decency, of knowing right from wrong, of avoiding sin and striving for good, of responding instinctively in the face of suffering.

But the *Torah shel hap’rat*, the Torah of the details, that was something we not only had to learn the hard way. We also had to spend months and years attaining the literacy simply to be able to read that Torah and begin the tedious process of deciphering its secrets.

I would guess that our proud band of four-year-olds already saw ourselves as inheritors of “general Torah.” We knew to be nice to one another; to do what our parents asked of us; to learn this incomprehensible script and get up there on time to recite it, because it was what was expected of us.

But our teachers were preparing us, even at that tender age, to begin the lifelong task of working tirelessly and unceasingly to learn the fine points, to hone our study skills so that we could do more with our lives than simply “be nice” or “be good.”

Students of Torah – of all sorts of Torah, both secular and religious – needed to learn how to question, examine, doubt, trust, test, learn and re-learn. The only part of that process we were going to inherit was the opening gambit, the invitation to get started on a lifelong journey of growth, discovery, disappointment, and ultimately, fulfillment.

Says our commentator, “If you don’t *learn*, i.e., work at learning, you will not ‘know.’ Don’t believe that you can achieve without struggle. It’s what my mother of blessed memory referred to as “elbow grease.”

Our Rabbis put an exclamation point on this idea in Pirkey Avot: *l’fum tza’ara agra*. “According to the effort is the reward.” The reward is great, for sure. Perhaps the greatest reward is the gift of a new year to begin the cycle of learning Torah all over again. And this time we’ll be ready for it! This time for sure!