

**HEDER STUDY, KNOWLEDGE OF TORAH,
AND THE MAINTENANCE OF SOCIAL
STRATIFICATION IN TRADITIONAL
EAST EUROPEAN JEWISH SOCIETY**

Shaul Stampfer

Study and knowledge had, as is well known, great importance in Jewish life in Eastern Europe. In part this was due to theological factors but in part to the close correlation between the level of education and class membership. Social status was closely related to the individual's knowledge of sacred sources. In this situation, the operation of educational institutions played an important role in stabilizing communal life and determining the place an individual would occupy in society.¹

Jewish society was divided into two classes: the *sheineh yidden* — the “beautiful Jews” — and the *proste* — the “simple” ones.² *Sheinah* was not an aesthetic characteristic of physical features but a reflection of the behavior, manners and knowledge of the *sheineh yid*. Thus an individual could be rich but still *proste*.

1 See the first three chapters in Louis Ginzburg, *Students, Scholars and Saints* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1928); Abraham Heschel, *The Earth Is the Lord's*, (New York: Henry Schuman Inc., 1950); Mark Zborowski, “The Place of Book Learning in Traditional Jewish Culture,” *Harvard Educational Review* 19, no. 2 (1949): 87-109; and Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is With People* (New York, International Universities Press, 1952). The best general introduction to traditional Ashkenazi Jewish culture remains Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961).

2 These concepts are discussed in Zborowski and Herzog, *Life is With People*, 142-166, and in Tamar Somogyi, *Die Scheinen und die Prosten* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1982), ch. 5.

Study in Jewish Education

Z (1988)

However, if he was sensitive to social gradations he tried to become *shein*. For a mature adult to do so was very difficult, so ambitious individuals tried at least to raise the children to that status. These social distinctions were universally recognized and accepted within traditional Eastern European Jewish society. It was the *sheineh yidden* who had the greatest influence on communal decisions and it was from their circles that communal leaders were usually drawn.³ The *proste* accepted the high status of the *sheineh* in part because of the power that was often at the latter's disposal. However, this acceptance was often justified in view of the attainments in sacred study that characterized the *sheineh*.

The high value placed on study is a Jewish tradition which can be traced back to the time of the second temple and even earlier. The act of study was seen as a religious act and the bearer of the tradition was regarded with great respect, if not with awe. This aspect of Jewish culture has been amply documented with no small degree of pride. However, there is a parallel tradition of "unscholarliness" or ignorance which, understandably, has tended to be less documented. In almost all Jewish societies there have been large elements of the population, often the clear majority, who were ignorant and unlearned, and who accepted, willingly or not, the guidance of the intellectual elite in all questions of religious thought and practice. The *am haaretz* of the Galilee had his successors in the masses of Babylonian Jewry, and they in turn were followed by much of the Jewish communities of both Spain and Ashkenaz — to mention only two major cultural areas.⁴ Given the general belief that personal redemption was dependent on the correct fulfillment of the *halacha* — Jewish law — the unlearned found themselves dependent on the interpreter or person well versed

3 On the oligarchic nature of communal life see for example Isaac Levitats, *The Jewish Community in Russia 1771-1884* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1943), 134-137.

4 On the *am haaretz* of biblical and Talmudic times see the references in *Encyclopedia Judaica* s.v. Am Ha-Aretz. Prof. Haim Soloveitchik once pointed out in a class a number of years ago that many of the words glossed in *le Glossaire de Bale*, ed. Menahem Banitt (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences, 1972) were very simple, which suggest that there was a significant body of individuals in thirteenth century Ashkenaz who never got past an elementary knowledge of Hebrew.

in the law in order to guarantee a good place in the world to come. This concern was not without significance in Jewish communal life and in this respect Jewish life in Eastern Europe was similar to that in earlier Jewish communities.

There is a natural desire for the members of any elite to try to transmit their status to their offspring. Wealth, an important determinant of status in many societies, usually presented few transmission problems because of generally accepted concepts of private property. Guaranteeing the security of this wealth, however, and transmitting leadership roles was a more complex affair. One obvious method was the development of concepts or ideologies which justified inherited positions of authority and responsibility. Thus the idea of "royal blood" — which implied that biological qualities and not just chance were responsible for the hold of a king on his office — appeared in some societies. The concept also served, of course, as an argument against potential usurpers.

In western society, the possession of land traditionally acted as a stabilizing factor in the maintenance of status. The relative lack of liquidity and the income-generating potential of land in pre-industrial society made its possession desirable, in order to provide long-term security against the fortunes of time. Even a less than talented heir should be able to hold on to land and transmit it to future generations.

Moreover, each year his coffers would be replenished — offering a fair degree of security and stability. In this way wealth and political power usually came together in a manner designed to maximize stability.

Jewish society in nineteenth century Eastern Europe lacked the means to guarantee status security. Due to tradition and law as well as a desire for mobility, East European Jewish capital tended to be invested in trade or money lending and not in landowning. In other words, it tended to be highly liquid but not very stable. In non-Jewish society, nobility of blood added a dimension of status security, but in Jewish society it was very difficult, though not unknown, for such a system of social gradation to develop. A framework of inherited family status markers, such as titles of nobility, might have filled this gap. However, family status with clearly recognized gradations usually comes together with independent

political power which provides the framework for both the theory of gradation and its implementation. Moreover, it presumes a body which is authorized to determine status membership in cases of question or dispute. This condition was generally absent in post-Biblical times — the inherited status of the *kohen* (priest) and the *levite* was significant only within ritual spheres. The concept of *yihus* or membership in an important family did exist. However, having *yihus* was the product of distinguished ancestry. There were no formal gradations marking different levels of *yihus*, and each additional generation away from a distinguished ancestor, the value of *yihus* went down. The virtue of nobility lies in the fact that once earned by an individual, its value to future generations remains the same.

Another option for stabilizing the possession of authority that was not adopted in Eastern European Jewry was the formalization of religious status. Ordination in some Christian societies gave special status and authority to the bearer and, according to certain theologies, implied that the ordained individual had special powers with regard to the divine. If ordination were limited to the children of the ordained, status stability over the generations would be insured. In Jewish societies there were periods when ordination was employed as a means of clarifying the position of individuals in the hierarchy.

However, in Eastern Europe ordination as a rabbi was regarded as merely an attestation to previously acquired religious knowledge. Possession of ordination was not necessarily a source of pride or a reflection of a special relation to the divine. The ambivalent attitude to ordination reflected ambivalence towards the use of a rabbinical position for personal gain.⁵

Scholarship and learnedness could serve as surrogates for the role of blood, nobility, or ordination. Possession of knowledge provided a special kind of security. In Eastern European Jewish society having knowledge was publicly demonstrated not by formal title but by the ability to carry on a rabbinic discussion, cite passages and argue a position. There was thus no need for supervision of the granting of "academic" titles, nor were there problems with

⁵ See *Encyclopedia Judaica* s.v. Semikha.

checking the authenticity of credentials. A probing conversation was not an insult but part of the social graces of the intellectual elite. The learned man, whether rich or poor, at home or far from it, could enjoy respect and honor from his Jewish compatriots and expect aid and assistance from them if necessary. His personal status was assured irrespective of the vicissitudes of time. Thus the security that nobility granted the non-Jewish elite, was granted the Jewish elite by scholarliness.

There was a complex relationship between wealth and scholarliness. Wealth did of course provide power, and with that, respect, but there was a general tendency on the part of those who had both wealth and power to seek out grounds for respect other than the mere possession of money. Moreover, when making difficult or unpopular decisions, it was useful to have ties with other elite groups. Scholarship was then attractive to those in authority.

Maintaining communal authority is an important issue in any political unit or religious community. It was an especially complex issue in early modern Eastern European Jewish society because of the continual need for obedience and unity, in order to withstand external pressures in a time when traditional communal and religious sanctions were becoming more and more limited. Formal religious authority alone was problematic. Decisions of a communal rabbi or religious questions could be appealed to more distinguished rabbis. Moreover, learned laymen often were regarded as being as qualified as a rabbi to express opinions and render decisions. *Kehillot* could impose financial and at times physical punishments on recalcitrant individuals, but this power was often limited and did not necessarily contribute to the authority and respect of the leadership. Moreover, the weakening of the formal *kehilla* structure in the course of the nineteenth century, both for external and internal reasons, made the use of formal sanctions increasingly problematic. At the same time many members of the learned circles were often interested in ties and support of the wealthy, who usually possessed political power. It was in the interest of both sides to have a coalition. It is understandable that whatever could strengthen the authority and status of the communal leadership would be a contribution to the stability of Jewish society.

The educational system of Eastern European Jewry played an important role in maintaining this status system, and hence, indirectly, in supporting the stability of the community. Like any other commodity, the value of education lies in part in its rarity. The more it is available, the less it is worth — and this dynamic operates irrespective of utility. The paradoxical truth was that since study was so important for the members of society, means of acquiring knowledge had to be limited lest it lose its value. However, limiting access to knowledge posed both practical and theological problems. On a practical level it would not have been simple to legislate limited access — especially since it would have come up against the desires of the community. Moreover, such a limitation to access would have also caused opposition to the possessors of knowledge who had “unfair advantages” and in the long run might have aroused opposition to the whole religious tradition. These problems were compounded by the theological implications of such an approach. The Torah, according to religious tradition, was given to all of the Jewish people and the duty of study was incumbent on all. It was necessary to limit access to knowledge without appearing to do so. This complex task was performed by the Jewish educational system and in particular by the *heder*. To understand how this was done requires a familiarity with both how the *heder* appeared and its “hidden” reality.

At first glance there appears to be little to understand about a remarkably simple educational institution.⁶ The *heder* was a

6 There is a large literature on the *heder*. The best guide to it is Diane Roskies, *Heder: Primary Education Among East European Jews | A Selected and Annotated Bibliography of Published Sources*, YIVO Working Papers in Yiddish and East European Studies #25 (New York: YIVO, 1977). One of the best introductions to the *heder* is Zvi Scharfstein, *Haheder B'Hayye Amenu* (Tel Aviv: M. Newman, 1951). An important and neglected source is the anonymously edited study in Russian, *Sovremenni Heder* (St. Petersburg: 1912). An enlightening description of elementary education in one town is Yehiel Stern, *Kheyder and Beys Midrash* (New York, YIVO, 1950). See also Moshe Avital, “The Yeshiva and Traditional Education in the Literature of the Hebrew Enlightenment Period” (Ph.D. diss., Yeshiva University 1977); and Yaacov Hocherman, “The Function of the Heder in the Life of the Jews and Its Reflection in the Mirror of Literature,” *Iyyun VeMaas* II (Haifa: 1981) 31–36 (Hebrew).

private one-teacher school. Studies were conducted in the home of the teacher, who was paid directly by the parents. The program of study consisted of sacred and traditional rabbinic texts. No formal degree was granted by the *heder*, nor were grades given. There were different levels of *hadarim* — distinguished not by the age of the students nor by abstract criteria but rather by the texts studied.⁷ In each *heder* only one text was studied and that determined the level of the *heder*. Teachers were not formally trained nor were there any prerequisites for opening a *heder*. They were not licenced and thus everyone was free to open one. The decision as to the level of the *heder* was the teacher's. This decision was determined by his assessment of his own abilities, and by market factors such as demand and competition.

The first level was devoted to learning the mechanics of reading and the textbook was the prayerbook. Sometimes special alphabet sheets were used to teach the alphabet and sometimes the prayerbook itself was used for this purpose.⁸ There was no such thing as a primer or a text written for beginning readers, and no attempt to teach children how to write was made. Parents who wanted their children to learn how to write would arrange with special teachers to give their children supplementary lessons. The texts the children learned, the prayers, were in Aramaic and Hebrew. These were languages that children did not speak or understand. This approach, which is so different from contemporary ones, is quite understandable in its context and was not unique to the Jewish community. It was a product of the function of reading and writing in the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century Jewish communities of Eastern Europe.

There was a logic in the choice of the language of study. Rela-

7 Stern, *Kheyder and Beys Midrash*, provides a careful description of different types of *batei midrash*.

8 On alphabet instruction see Diane Roskies “Alphabet Instruction in the East European Heder — Some Comparative and Historical Notes,” *YIVO Annual* 17 (1978): 21–53. An interesting discussion of pedagogic aspects of *heder* study is Shlomo Haramati, *Methods of teaching Hebrew in the Diaspora* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: World Zionist organization, 1977), 16–21.

tively little popular literature was printed in Yiddish.⁹ The lack of a large body of written literature in the vernacular was common to many societies and reflected both a sense that the written word was to be saved for elevated topics and tongues, as well as the high costs of producing books. There was then little point in investing major efforts in learning to read a language that had a limited body of literature and there were many reasons to begin with Hebrew — despite the fact that it was a “foreign” language. Not only was Hebrew considered a holy language, and its knowledge a pre-condition for the advanced study of rabbinic texts, but it had immediate uses as the exclusive entrance-way to participation in the adult community. All religious activities of males were conducted in Hebrew. Ignorance of Hebrew denied an individual membership in the society of adult males.

The emphasis on reading rather than upon writing or comprehension is also understandable. By learning to read the prayerbook the child was able to follow the service in the synagogue and to participate in the prayer service. Comprehension was not necessary either to join with the adults in reading the prayerbook nor in fulfilling the minimal ritual requirements of prayer. This meant that the young student quickly found a reward for his study in a newly developed ability to enter into the world of adults. This was no doubt a source of personal and family pride and a spur to further study. Writing on the other hand was a useful skill, to be sure, but not a necessary one. There was little need to deal with a governmental bureaucracy. Even had there been such a need, it would have required an ability to communicate in writing in Russian or Polish, but not in Hebrew. In the absence of a well-developed postal system there was a limited need for family correspondence, and the use of writing for the maintenance of business records was a skill that not all needed. For the occasional formal document, such as a contract or a marriage agreement, a professional scribe was desirable even for those who could write. Reading then was the key skill for the young Jew because it enabled

⁹ This is not to say that there was no secular Yiddish literature available. However, there was nowhere near the range of materials in the beginning of the nineteenth century as there was at its close.

him to participate in the synagogue rituals. Upon mastering prayerbook reading the young boy was ready to go on to the next level of *heder* — that in which the Torah was taught.

Study in the second level *heder*, the *Humash* (Pentateuch) *heder* preserved some significant characteristics of the first level *heder*, primarily emphasis upon mechanical knowledge and concern for application and participation. However, in the second level there was an additional emphasis on comprehension. *Humash* was taught through reading the text with the aid of an interpolated oral Yiddish translation. In the course of time the text of this translation became fixed and in a sense canonized. As the Yiddish language developed, especially in Eastern Europe, the language of the by then traditional translation became less and less comprehensible to children. Ultimately, not only did the child have to master a text written in a foreign language, but also to commit to memory a barely understood translation which was often translated in turn to colloquial Yiddish.¹⁰

In *Humash heder* the students studied each week the portion of the Torah which was to be read the coming Sabbath in the synagogue. Since students, especially beginners, could not master a whole portion in just six days, they simply covered as much of the text as they could and when Sunday came, jumped to the beginning of the next week's portion. This approach was criticized as being unsystematic and leading to gaps in the child's knowledge of *Humash*. This type of criticism is more revealing of the bias of the critic than of the real problems of the *heder*.¹¹ It assumes that the school has the sole responsibility for the transmission of knowledge. In reality, the *heder* student had many alternative sources of information about the deeds of Biblical heroes and the Biblical narrative. These stories were cited in the conversations the children heard in the synagogue; they were the basis of holidays which were discussed at home; and a *heder* student could always ask his teacher about the outcome of a story that was cut off in the

¹⁰ On this translation see Shlomo Noble, *Khumesh — Taytsh* (New York: YIVO, 1943).

¹¹ On the problem of “skipping” see for example Emanuel Gamoran, *Changing Conceptions in Jewish Education*, vol. I (New York: Macmillan, 1924), 95.

middle. With regard to the legal portions of the *Humash*, this problem of continuity hardly existed because the literary units of the legal portions are made up of relatively short, discrete units.

Since study was integrated with daily life it was not necessary to convince the student of the significance or utility of his study. It was not hard for the little boy to find a natural framework in which to display his knowledge publicly by handling the same texts that adults used with obvious reverence and respect. Even without understanding very much of the Torah it was possible to have a real sense of accomplishment. Through the study of Rashi's commentary on the *Humash*, which was taught along with the *Humash*, the student was introduced both to the midrashic view of the world and the place of the Jew in it as well as to the rabbinic methods of thought and textual analysis which are essential for the study of the Talmud. Indeed, the next and highest level of study in the *heder* was the study of Talmud.

In the Talmud *heder* students were introduced to the study of Talmud the same way they began with the Pentateuch. There was no introduction to Aramaic, the language the Talmud is written in, nor was thought given to a systematic presentation of rabbinic thought. The idea of starting with a special textbook or source book was unheard of. The beginning Talmud students learned from the same texts as did the most advanced and respected scholars and rabbis. They simply began with a typical Talmudic text, translating word by word until they "picked up" both the idiom and thought patterns. Students began the Talmud *heder* around the age of ten — though there were often wide variations in the age of students since progress from level to level in the *heder* system was the result of "mastery" of previous stages of study and not on age. Similarly, there was no formal cut-off point for study in the Talmud *heder*. It was generally accepted that at about *Bar Mitzvah* age (thirteen) or shortly thereafter, most students would leave the Talmud *heder*, either for study on a higher level or to start working. One of the assumptions behind the *heder* curriculum was that the *heder* was designed to teach vocabulary and to establish a sense of familiarity with the text as well as to prepare the students to follow the weekly reading of the Torah portion in the synagogue.

Hence dropping out of the *heder* was acceptable as long as the minimal skills were mastered.

To be sure, some went on to what may be called either advanced *heders* or elementary *yeshivot* which were similar to a Talmud *heder* but were on a higher level and excluded students with no background in Talmud. The use of the term *yeshiva* by some institutions of this type was a reflection of this higher level but not of a structural difference. These were generally private institutions and depended on the tuition paid by the parents.

There were other options for more advanced study. Some parents took young scholars as private tutors for their adolescent sons although this was a rather expensive framework for study. This type of tutoring is to be distinguished from the more common practice of Jews living in isolated hamlets in the countryside who would hire tutors for their children. The country tutors taught for little more than room and board and not surprisingly, the level of their teaching was not much higher. Advanced *yeshivot* only really became important near the end of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the best known of them, Volozhin, was founded early in the nineteenth century. However, until the last third of the century it was not a model but an anomaly. It appears that only a minority of students chose one of the above frameworks. Most chose to continue their studies in one of the many *batei midrash* or communal study halls that were found in every community.

In many respects the *beit midrash* offered an almost ideal framework for study. Students in a *beit midrash* were almost totally independent — though within certain bounds. They could choose to study whatever Talmudic tractate they wished. They set their own pace of study and could determine the style of analysis as well. Those who liked mental gymnastics could indulge in them while those who preferred to deal with the legal implications of the texts studied could concentrate on the way the text was elaborated in later halachic literature. There was no demand to adopt a standard approach. The only requirement was that students had to devote all their time to the study of Talmud and to study by themselves. This system gave maximum freedom to the individual student and wide scope for developing talents and creativity. The absence of formal classes and tests would seem like a dream to many con-

temporary students. Even more surprising would be the lack of tuition charges and universal financial support of students.

The community usually provided for the material needs of the students in *batei midrash*, albeit at a minimal level. Students could take advantage of the *teg* system. In Eastern European Jewish communities it was the custom for families to invite Talmud students on a regular basis, to share in the main meal for one or more days of the week. Thus a student would eat his Sunday meal with one family, Monday's meal with another and so through the week. This practice was called "eating *teg*," ("*teg*" means "days" in Yiddish). If a student was fortunate he would arrange families for every day of the week. If he was less lucky then he would find himself on certain days without a family — and without a good meal that day. This system had a number of advantages to it. It was easy to administer because there was almost nothing to administer. Arrangements were made by the students themselves or by the *gabbai* (warden) of the *beit midrash*. Once set up with families, the communal administration had no more responsibilities. There was no need to collect funds or disburse them. Since the students ate in the homes of the hosts, there was no need to worry about facilities and upkeep. It was usually not too difficult to find willing hosts since householders had a variety of incentives to host a student. Not only would they earn a divine reward but an immediate one as well — enjoying the gratitude of the student or students. Many hosts also enjoyed the company of the students and saw them as positive role models for their children or, sometimes, as surrogate children. Hosting a student was far from being an anonymous deed. Hence it was a source of prestige in the Jewish community and served as a public display of charity and piety. In this way communities succeeded in guaranteeing the support of poor students.

In short, study in the *beit midrash* should have had an irresistible appeal to older boys and young men. Not only was it free but it provided for the minimal needs of the student and promised status advancement. Moreover, there were more direct and practical advantages. During the terrible days of the forced draft of children and youths after the new draft law of Nicholas I in 1825, it was the general policy of Jewish communities, which had to supply the

draftees, not to take students from *batei midrash*. However, while contemporaries reported an increase in the number of Talmud students after the institution of the draft, it is significant that *batei midrash* were not swamped with students. Clearly, had all young men of draft age been *yeshiva* or *beit midrash* students, the communities who had to meet draft quotas would have had to extend the liability of draft to Talmud students. That did not happen. That it didn't is a reflection of the effectiveness of the first stage of study, the *heder*, as a means of selection. The basis for this effectiveness is not hard to identify.¹²

It can be plausibly claimed that the *heder* was a failure at teaching Talmud. The stated goal of the Talmud *heder* was to bring the student to the point where he could study Talmud on his own. Most *heder* students never achieved this goal or even came near it. The majority of Jews — the peddlers, the shoemakers, the tailors, etc., — could not study a page of Talmud on their own. They were pious, they said their Psalms, they went to hear the midrashic sermons of the wandering preachers, but they were not themselves learned.¹³ This failure was itself one of the most important functions of the *heder*. These seemingly self-contradictory statements can be understood only in terms of the dual functions of any educational system both to stimulate ambitions and to repress them and thus to prepare individuals to accept their place in society. The first function reflects the need of a society to recruit the most capable members of the younger generation for positions of responsibility.

12 On this problem in general and the draft in particular see Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983). With regard to the positive influence of the draft on the numbers of *beit midrash* students see p. 32 note 76.

13 While no surveys of learnedness can be cited of course, the relative ignorance of the masses is at the basis of the distinction between the *shein* and the *proste*. One clear reflection of the low education of the masses is in the existence of *hevrot* or study societies devoted to the study of sacred texts. The most prestigious was the *hevras shas* or Talmud study society. However, most Jews belonged to *hevrot* devoted to the saying of Psalms or the study of midrash. This was apparently not out of a lack of interest in Talmud but out of an inability to follow on advanced lecturer. On *hevrot* see Levitats, *The Jewish Community*, ch. 6.

By stimulating individuals to aspire to these positions and display their capabilities at an early age, a society is able to select the fittest. However, the problem is that the more successful an educational system is in stimulating ambitions and in identifying the very best, the larger the body of frustrated individuals who try — and fail. Conversely, the earlier the majority “learn their place”, the less frustrated they are likely to be but the greater the possibility that talented individuals go unnoticed.¹⁴

In the traditional East European *heder*, the vast majority of students “had a go” at Talmud — and failed. In this respect the *heder* selected a minority from the majority. But all students, successful or not, learned one very important thing. They learned that it is very hard to understand the Talmud and even harder to master all of the rabbinic literature and that anyone who did so was deserving of great respect and could not be argued with on his terms. His mere possession of knowledge gave him charisma and this was irrespective of more conventional sources of charisma such as appearance, bearing, or personality. Charisma of knowledge is best created when everyone has tried to study — just as the charisma of sporting ability gains from near universal youthful attempts to play sports. Thus an elite was formed which enjoyed respect within the Jewish community at large and which could grant authority to the communal leadership. It was when there was no one leading and no cohesive group which agreed on basic principles that the Jewish community really began to split.

The selective process which created this elite was not based on random selection. It was related to the two basic pre-conditions for success in Talmud study. One was a combination of desire and ability, and the other — a good learning environment. There is no reason to assume that ability was not randomly distributed. Desire was probably less randomly distributed since one element which influences desire is the degree to which a boy sees his goal as achievable. If a child is expected to master the Talmud and lives in a home where this knowledge is the standard for adults,

14 This analysis is based on Ralph Turner, “Modes of Social Ascent” in Halsey, Floud, and Anderson, *Education, Economy and Society* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 121–139.

he is far more likely to push himself to the goal than is a child who grows up without the stimulus of nearby models. However, the most important variable which affected the ability to master in Talmud was the quality and nature of the *heder* in which the Talmud was studied. To understand the significance of this point it is not enough to note the universality of elementary education among East European Jewry. It is also necessary to pay attention to differences between schools.

It should not come as a surprise that *hedarim* differed widely in terms of quality.¹⁵ Here as well two variables were important. One was the quality of the teacher and the other the size of the class. A complex interplay between parents and teachers existed. As noted above, parents chose the teachers for their children and paid them directly. They were interested in getting the best possible education for their children in accordance with the means at their disposal. Teachers were interested in acquiring a maximum income along with the best possible working conditions. Understandably, a good teacher could command a better income than an inferior teacher. Similarly, parents who had the means and a commitment to give top priority to education when allocating resources, could get both better teachers and better studying conditions for their children. This was because it was a common practice for parents to pay a premium to teachers on condition that they limit the number of students they took or to pay more for a better teacher. These policies appealed to good teachers because the results for them were smaller classes and better working conditions without a loss of income and possibly even a somewhat higher one. For the parents, this was a way of insuring more attention for their children and thereby, greater progress. The dialectics of the Talmud can hardly be explained in a rote fashion. Therefore, only the student whose teacher really understands what he is teaching, and can transmit this knowledge, is likely to reach the point where he can study the Talmud on his own.

The relative quality and ability of *heder* teachers was a matter

15 This fact was usually regarded as obvious by contemporaries and hence not discussed. For references to it see Stern, *Kheyder and Beys Midrash*, 78; and Hoeherman, “The Function of the Heder,” 31.

of general knowledge. It was known whose students made the best progress in their studies and whose did not. Hence a parent's choice of a teacher signaled to the child what was anticipated of him. This effect was no doubt strengthened by the parallel expectations of classmates which reinforced expectations children brought with them. It is also quite reasonable that *heder* teachers themselves taught in light of how they thought they were regarded by their peers and by society. The result of all of this was that parents who had little money at their disposal or who were less willing to sacrifice their budget for education had low expectations for their children and sent them to less capable teachers who tended to have larger classes. There is no point in spending extra money on the first stages of education if no long-term difference is expected. Thus, low expectations of the children were created which, when combined with the worst possible study conditions, not surprisingly, were usually fulfilled. Under these conditions, it is clear why most of these children failed in Talmud.

The consensus that the age of thirteen was a proper time to leave the *heder* was not the result of legislation or religious law but the natural product of a number of factors. It should not be forgotten that there was no direct or clear relationship between the program of study and the future economic prospects or activities of the pupil. Moreover, the only practical skill learned in *heder*, reading, was learned first. There is no evidence or reason to presume a relationship between the cut-off point of *heder* study and religious considerations related to the *Bar mitzvah* ceremony. More significant was that at this age boys could be expected either to begin to work and to contribute to the family income, or to begin an apprenticeship (formal or informal) in order to be ready for the economic responsibilities of adulthood. Study was expensive and parents of an adolescent *heder* student not only had to pay tuition but had to forfeit the possible income that he might earn. Hence, in the absence of expectations that a boy would go on to become a scholar, and under heavy economic pressure, most families found that it was logical to end a son's *heder* education at around the age of thirteen.

The situation was no different in the communal *Talmud Torah*. This was a tuition-free institution supported by the community to

provide a minimal education for the children of the indigent, so that they too would be able to participate in the synagogue service and fulfill basic religious requirements. It was simply a *heder* with magnified problems. The classes were large and the teachers perhaps of an even lower quality than poor *heder* teachers. Students in a *Talmud Torah* had low academic aspirations. Both the supporters who donated money to the *Talmud Torah* and the students would have seen little point and great difficulties in extending the period of time spend in study in a *Talmud Torah*.

Heder education was a race against time, even if most pupils did not realize it, because in most cases the stage after *heder* education was the *beit midrash*. Study there, as noted above, was independent — without teachers or structured guidance — and the communal support was predicated on the fact that the *beit midrash* student was a full-fledged Torah scholar. Hence the entering student had to be able to study the Talmud and the complex literature of Talmudic commentaries independently. Otherwise, there was no place for him in the *beit midrash*. This was no mean achievement for a thirteen-year-old. Given the realities of *heder* study, it was an impossibility for most children to reach this level by the age of thirteen or to continue in order to reach it at a later age. It turns out, then, that the traditional elementary system among Eastern European Jews was one which on the surface offered opportunities for all but in reality served to recreate in the younger generation the same categories which classified their parents.¹⁶ In this respect, the Jewish educational system in Eastern Europe appears to be not very different from educational systems in most other societies. What is unique and interesting is both the mechanism of reproducing socio-economic class distinctions and the use made of the system. The very freedom of the study in the *beit midrash* and the opportunities it offered for independent personal intellectual growth was the means by which underprivileged or less talented pupils were held back. A more extended and more formal educational system, an impossibility under the conditions of the time, would have had positive results in terms of general achievement, but

16 See Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London: SAGE, 1977).

would have possibly led to the collapse of the whole social order of Eastern European Jewry.¹⁷

In light of this one can understand the significance of the following description of *heder* study in nineteenth century Eastern Europe:

In 1857 my father sent me to a *melamed* who was good etc. and he paid tuition of seven and a half rubles for six months, on condition that the *melamed* would not take more than six pupils...¹⁸

The *beit midrash* system we have described also contributed to the acceptance of authority. Since, in theory, the Jewish educational system was as open as one could imagine, all children went to *heder*. Study in the advanced framework, the *beit midrash*, was not only free but students had all their expenses covered by the community. On these grounds, collections for *beit midrash* students and appeals to house them could be based on the claim that one should support these needy students. They were indeed in need of support but their's were not the neediest families and their neediness was temporary. Indeed, many Jews led lives that were just as hard or even harder than those of *beit midrash* students. Since in theory every Jewish child could become a Talmudic scholar, Jews at the time saw the study of Talmud as a means of intellectual mobility and not just that. Biographies and literature repeated the motif of the poor but brilliant Talmud student who is chosen as a son-in-law by a rich merchant and is thus raised at one go to the top of society.

All of this together meant that the religious elite could be regarded as a meritocracy in which membership was based on achievement and not family. Their's was a status that was both secure and not open to challenge as being unfairly obtained. Theologically it was sound because it fit with concepts involving ideas of revelation to the entire community and the universal responsibility to study

17 One possible consequence of the universal Jewish concern with the study of text is developed in Harold Bloom, *Agon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 14.

18 Moshe Leib Lilienblum, cited in Zvi Hirsh Lifshitz, *Midor Ledor* (Warsaw: Sokolov, 1901), 74.

the Torah. This was effective precisely because the reality was concealed. The system operated with a minimum of organization and this "secret" no doubt contributed to the strength of the Jewish community even after the abolishment of the formal communal authorities. It lost its effectiveness only in the beginning of the twentieth century — and in many communities even later — when new educational demands which required more formal training not only in reading and religious knowledge, but in writing and secular studies as well, appeared.¹⁹ Until that point, the *heder* played an important role not only in education per se, but in the specific function of maintaining social distinctions.

19 On the nature of communal authority even after the formal abolishment of the Jewish communities see Azriel Shochat, "Leadership of the Jewish Communities in Russia After the Abolition of the 'Kahal'" (Hebrew) *Zion* 42 no. 3-4 (1977): 143-233. Some of the problems of this authority are exposed in Katz, *Tradition and Crisis*, and in Chimen Abramsky, "The Crisis of Authority Within European Jewry in the Eighteenth Century," *Altmann Jubilee Volume* (Alabama: 1981), 13-28.