

*Behold, children are a gift of the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them; they will not be ashamed when they speak with their enemies in the gate (Psalm 127:3-5).*

According to the Old Testament, children are a precious gift from God. Giving birth to children was an order of creation under God's special blessing. (Genesis 1:28) Women of many children were called blessed (Genesis 34:6), while childlessness was considered a curse. This desire to have children came from their belief of having been chosen and called by God for a special purpose. As children of the Covenant, they were bound to continue their presence on the earth. Their joy and love for children was a reflection of God's love for them. However, the Jews did not idealize children.

### **Hebrew Words for 'child'**

The tenderness of the bond which united Jewish parents to their children is found in the many Hebrew words for 'child.' There are eleven different words designating various stages of physical growth:

<i>zehrah</i> : seed; practitioner of righteousness (Isaiah 44:3)	<i>elem</i> : child becoming firm (Isaiah 7:14)
<i>bakar</i> : first born (Jeremiah 4:31)	<i>naar</i> : youth; servant (1 Samuel 16:18; Proverbs 1:4; 7:7; 20:11)
<i>yaneq</i> : suckling (Isaiah 11:8)	<i>yathowm</i> : fatherless child (Psalm 10:14; 82:3; 146:9)
<i>gamul</i> : weaned child (Isaiah 28:9)	<i>yeled</i> : son, young man (Isaiah 9:6)
<i>taph</i> : child clinging to his mother (Esther 3:13)	<i>bachur</i> : the ripened one; a young warrior (Isaiah 31:9)
<i>'owlel</i> : child; boy (Psalm 8:2)	

### **The Hebrew Home Was the Center of Education**

*Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he shall not depart from it ( Proverbs 22:6).*

The word 'train' in Hebrew—*hanakh* in Proverbs 22:6 means to initiate; discipline; dedicate; train up. The Hebrew cognate *hekh* means palate or the mouth organ vital for speech. This Hebrew word is a word picture of a midwife who, immediately after birth, takes her two fingers and cleans the mucus out of the newborn's mouth to initiate breathing oxygen on his own, or who 'initiates an environment for life.' This was the Jewish concept of 'to train up a child' or to educate a child. Wisdom, personified (Proverbs 8:7), commends herself to mankind saying "all the words of my mouth (*hêk*) are righteousness."

*You shall teach them to your sons, talking of them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your sons may be multiplied on the land which the Lord swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens remain above the earth (Deuteronomy 11:18-21).*

*Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and do not forsake your mother's teaching (Proverbs 1:8).*

*My son, observe the commandment of your father and do not forsake the teaching of your mother (Proverbs 6:20).*

*Then Manoah [father of Samson] entreated the LORD and said, "O Lord, please let the man of God whom You have sent come to us again that he may teach us what to do for the boy who is to be born." God listened to the voice of Manoah; and the angel of God came again . . . Manoah said, "Now when your words come [to pass,] what shall be the boy's mode of life and his vocation?" (Judges 13: 8-9, 12).*

Both parents shared the responsibility for educating their children. Most Jewish homes had portions of the Scriptures written on little rolls of parchment. Many biblical scholars believe Mary and Joseph had a precious copy of the sacred volume in its entirety. Edersheim (Messiah, p. 162) notes that the words of the Lord, as recorded by Matthew and Luke also imply that the Holy Scriptures which He read were in the original Hebrew, and that they were written in the square, or Assyrian, characters. He frequently asked the Pharisees and Sadducees, 'Have you not read?'

**Mother's Role:** The first education was necessarily the mother's responsibility.

- a. Nurturer: Infancy in Israel was a prolonged state of nurture. Babies nursed for three years.
- b. Teach the domestic rites and songs of the weekly festivals, feasts, and the annual festival.

Edersheim (Messiah, p. 121) states that children were given careful training of the memory before the age of three. By the time the child was three, formal homeschooling was begun in the form of memorizing Scripture, benedictions, and

wise sayings. Mnemonic rules were devised to help the child retain what he memorized. Each child had a guardian-promise that he inserted in his daily prayers. The earliest hymns taught would be the Psalms for the days of the week, or festive Psalms, such as 113-118.

**Father's Role:** It was the father who was 'bound to teach his son' (Kidd. 29a).

*The LORD said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham will surely become a great and mighty nation, and in him all the nations of the earth will be blessed? For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him" (Genesis 18:17-19).*

For the Jewish father, 'to impart to the child knowledge of the Torah conferred as great a spiritual distinction, as if the man had received the Law itself on Mount Horeb' (Sanhedrin 99b). The Book of Proverbs gives us the deepest insights into the social and family life of the Old Testament dispensation. To the Jew, child-life was considered peculiarly holy, and the duty of filling it with thoughts of God especially sacred. During the time of Jesus Christ, children were taught how to read and write by their parents before attending school at the age of six.

### **Synagogue School-Houses: Bet Sepher, the 'House of the Book'**

Ezra is credited with establishing the synagogue form of worship and study during the Babylonian exilic period. There was no temple in which to worship, so the synagogue became the place where Jews worshiped. Elementary schools were attached to the synagogues. These buildings were called the "House of the Book," because the children attended to learn God's Word. Every child was required to attend school by the age of six. It was deemed against the law to live in a place where there was no school. Every place where there were 125 families or 25 boys, a schoolmaster was appointed. Indeed, at the time of Christ, there were hundreds of schools in Jerusalem and throughout Israel.

Edersheim (Sketches p. 121) describes the office of the chazzah, (minister) or officer of the synagogue, "who should impart to children the precious knowledge of the Law, with constant adaptation to their capacity with unwearied patience, intense earnestness, strictness tempered by kindness, but above all, with the highest object of their training every in view. To keep children from all contact with vice; to train them to gentleness, even when bitterest wrong had been received; to show sin in its repulsiveness, rather than to terrify by its consequences; to train to strict truthfulness; to avoid all that might lead to disagreeable or indelicate thoughts; and to do all this without showing partiality without either undue severity, or laxity of discipline, with judicious increase of study and work, with careful attention to thoroughness in acquiring knowledge – all this and more constituted the ideal set before the teacher and made his office of such high esteem in Israel."

The grand object of the teacher was moral as well as intellectual training. Children stood or sat on the ground facing the teacher. The schools were consistent with home life. The sacred obligation to preserve the innocence and purity of children and to keep out that which was crass or vicious was maintained. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word for both 'work' and 'worship' is *'abodah*. Study was seen as an act of worship, or one of the highest ways to glorify God.

### **Curriculum Found in the Periods of Life (partial list)**

1. Five years of age in the bet sepher, "house of the book": Reading of the Bible in the original Hebrew. Wilson (p. 299) states that the Bible was the exclusive textbook for five years! Students began by learning the Shema (great Jewish prayer and statement of faith recited daily: Dt 6:4-10; 11:13-21; Nu 15:37-41); the Book of Leviticus (the book of holiness); the Hallel; then the Creation Story. Then it passed to the Pentateuch; the Prophets; and finally the Hagiographa. (Greek: "written by inspiration." It's the last of the three Jewish divisions and comprises Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Canticles, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles.)
2. Ten years of age in the bet talmud, "house of learning": Learning the Mishnah (study of the oral law)
3. Thirteen years of age in the bet Midrash, "house of study": Bound to the commandments (Bar Mizvah: "Son of the Commandment")
4. Fifteen years of age: Study of the Talmud
5. Eighteen years of age: Marriage
6. Twenty years of age: Pursuit of a trade or business
7. Thirty years of age: Full vigor (also the age when men entered the priesthood)
8. Forty years of age: Maturity of reason
9. Fifty years of age: For counsel

## **Characteristics of an educated Hebrew at the time of Christ**

1. Read fluently
2. Speak well with special care in the choice of language and pronunciation
3. Memory was treasured; children memorized vast portions of the Scriptures, wise sayings, benedictions
4. Know and be able to repeat the history of Israel for all festive and memorial occasions
5. Great importance given the preservation of traditions

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