

CAJE encourages you to make reprints of and share them with your colleagues and lay leadership. All we ask is that you tell them that these articles originally appeared in *Jewish Education News*, published by CAJE, and that articles on this and other topics, curriculum, and information about CAJE can be found online at [www.caje.org](http://www.caje.org).

## "The Best of Times, the Worst of Times"

by Lenny Matanky

*"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair..."*

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

It is hard to imagine better words to describe the era in which we now live than those used by Dickens nearly 150 years ago. For today we live in the "best of times," in an era of unimagined technology, prosperity, knowledge, and opportunity. Yet, at the very same time, we live in the "worst of times," as poverty, extremism, and isolation separate us from one another and from much of the world's peoples.

How are we, as Jewish educators, supposed to confront these challenges and these opportunities? How are we supposed to teach our students in this 21<sup>st</sup> century to live as a "light unto the nations" and as bearers of the great tradition of Sinai?

Perhaps the answer begins with an apocryphal tale of a *Rosh Yeshivah* who was approached by a young man who wanted to come to the *yeshivah* to learn. Unfortunately, this young man was not yet ready for such intense study. But the young man was very insistent. The *Rosh Yeshivah* finally said, "I am going to ask you a question to see if you can understand the rabbinic mind. If you can answer that question, I'll let you in." The young man agreed, and the *Rosh Yeshivah* said, "Here is the question. If two men come down a chimney and one comes down dirty and one clean, which one will go to wash?" The young man thought for a moment and said, "The dirty one."

"Wrong!" said the *Rosh Yeshivah*, "because the dirty one will look at the clean one and think 'I must be clean.' But when clean one looks at the dirty one, he will think 'I must be dirty.' Therefore, it is the clean one who will go to wash himself, and not the dirty one!"

The next day, the young man appeared again. "*Rosh Yeshivah*, I have been thinking and I really feel I now understand the rabbinic mind. Please let me in!" The *Rosh Yeshivah* said, "All right. But once again I will ask you one question and, only if you get it right, will I admit you to the *yeshivah*. The young man agreed and the *Rosh Yeshivah* asked the following. "If two men come down a chimney and one comes down dirty and the other clean, which one will go to wash?" "The clean one!" said the young man. "Wrong!" said the *Rosh Yeshivah*. "Obviously, the clean one looks at his hands, sees they are clean, and knows he is clean. But the dirty one looks at his hands, sees they are dirty, and, therefore, has to wash." "Oy!" moaned the young man and left in dismay.

Finally, the next day, the young man returned and said, "*Rebbe*, please, I really think I'm beginning to master rabbinic logic." "All right," said the *Rosh Yeshivah*, "but this is the last time. I will ask you one question and, one way and another, if you don't get it right, you do not enter the *yeshivah*." The young man agreed and the *Rosh Yeshivah* asked, "If two men come down a chimney and one comes down dirty

and one clean, which one will go to wash?" The young man thought for a moment, until finally he gave up and said, "Tell me, *Rosh Yeshivah*, which one will go to wash?" Said the *Rosh Yeshivah*, "Tell me, young man, how can two men come down the same chimney and one came out dirty and the other clean?"

### **A World of Challenges and Opportunities**

We live in a complex world, a world of challenges and opportunities. And, as educators, we need to understand that, in truth, there is no one answer, or panacea, to everything we encounter. Rather, Jewish life teaches us that there are "seventy facets to *Torah*"<sup>1</sup> - multiple perspectives and approaches to any single issue. Therefore, as we engage the 21<sup>st</sup> century and all that it presents, we need to remember that technology is but a tool that can be used or abused; that the explosion of information and communication can both enlighten and isolate; and that globalization can serve to spread the word of *Torah*, or God forbid, to homogenize it beyond recognition.

This means that, as teachers, we must be open to the opportunities of this new era, of its technologies and possibilities; but, at the same time, we must be wary of them - because of the Jewish values we are entrusted to guard and transmit.

For example, with the ever-expanding access to electronic texts, students can now research information from the comfort of their homes. Yet we must now teach them not only to be wary of unreliable sources, but also to be ever more honorable and upright. For these electronic texts can be "like a stumbling blocks before a blind man,"<sup>2</sup> tempting our students to "copy and paste" essays and assignments. Therefore, while trust is critical, "you shall be guiltless before God and Israel"<sup>3</sup> - we must be prepared to use tools such as "turnitin.com" to encourage integrity.

A second example is the Internet, which is the source of so much valuable information but also can be a threat to our students' physical and moral/religious well-being. Therefore, we need to teach our students (and their parents) that there are limits to openness, boundaries to appropriateness, and even a need to protect themselves by using "monitoring" and/or "blocking" software in homes and schools.

### **Balancing the Risks and the Opportunities**

This points to the dialectic we must now embrace - "the best of times" vs. "the worst of times." Balancing the two, understanding both the opportunities and the risks, is the challenge we face, as members of society and as teachers of its youth.

But even more, as teachers, we must be prepared to guide our students as did Joshua, a "man in whom is spirit"<sup>4</sup> - fulfilling not only the leadership role we play, but also carrying out the responsibility we bear to address the individual needs of our students. For we live in a society that has begun to understand learning differences, and our tradition, more than most, celebrates those differences - "educate a child according to his needs."<sup>5</sup>

This also requires us to be life-long learners and professionals who continue to seek new and better ways to teach, employing technology where helpful and ignoring technology when appropriate.

Because, and this is key, we are a people of tradition transmitted from one generation to the next. Therefore, we are a people who values personal contact; celebrates "*chevruta* study"; cherishes the relationships of "*rebbe* and *talmid*"; and understands that, sometimes, environment is even more important than knowledge.<sup>6</sup> When technology and new research help to create those relationships, they must be used. But when they separate us, create anonymous groups of learners devoid of human contact, they hurt us and should be avoided.

The challenges and opportunities of our 21<sup>st</sup> century are, in many ways, similar to those Dickens wrote about in the 19<sup>th</sup> century - we both live in the "best of times" and the "worst of times." Yet, unlike Dickens, we Jewish educators possess a moral compass of *Torah* values and traditions to guide our every decision. If we heed their instruction, our teaching will always be the best, our students will prosper, and our *Torah* will continue to be passed down - whether in person or via an iPhone, an IM, or a PDA - to the next generation and beyond.

---

**Endnotes:**

1. *Numbers Rabbah* 13:15
2. *Leviticus* 18:14
3. *Numbers* 32:22
4. *Numbers* 27:18
5. *Ecclesiastes* 22:6
6. *Responsa Iggrot Moshe Orach Chaim* 3:71

*Rabbi Dr. Leonard A. Matanky is the associate superintendent of Associated Talmud Torahs of Chicago, Dean of Ida Crown Jewish Academy, rabbi of Congregation K.I.N.S. of West Rogers Park, and former board member of CAJE.*

[Mattanky@att.net](mailto:Mattanky@att.net)