

ARI BERMAN

# Consumer Culture Has No Place at College

*What Jewish tradition gets right about the purpose  
of the university*



NUMBER of years ago, I attended a conference for new university presidents. Between sessions, several of us discussed the question of what was likely to be the greatest challenge in our upcoming tenures. After a few minutes, a consensus seemed to emerge. When would an offensive gesture by a faculty member or student justify a presidential intervention? What level of indecency would require a reaction by the administration?

This was my first experience with a group of university presidents, and I registered my surprise that the whole conversation was reactionary and negative. “What about the positive kinds of challenges?” I asked. “What are you, as a university president, trying to accomplish? What is the purpose of your university? Why are you here in the first place?” The group seemed both gripped and confounded by the questions.

Often lost in the post–October 7 conversation about the educational climate at universities is that universities are themselves often lost. In the Western world, the mission of the academy to pursue truth and develop young minds toward a productive and moral citizenry dates back to late antiquity and developed throughout the medieval and modern periods, from Athens to Bologna, Paris to Oxford. But in today’s context, so many universities have diluted their mission. What follows is not a historical analysis, but a narrative framework from which to consider the realities of universities today and how Jewish teachings can help us understand what universities should be.



The Jewish model of education is rooted in the concept of covenants — the commitments that underpin our lives. To consider the subject of university missions through the prism of covenants is to see how consumerism has eroded this collective mission.

We live in a consumer society, one in which the acquisition of goods, products, and status is often seen as an end to itself. This has left our society impoverished in fundamental ways. As the great theologian Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks once amusingly put it: “The consumer society was laid down by the late Steve Jobs coming down the mountain with two tablets, iPad 1 and iPad 2. The result is that we now have a culture of iPod, iPhone, iTunes, i, i, i.”

The focus on the “I” fosters an individualistic, egocentric culture in which commercialism constantly reminds us of all that we do not have, instead of fostering gratitude for all that we do have. The result? “Through constant creation of dissatisfaction,” Sacks observed, “the consumer society is in fact a highly sophisticated mechanism for the production and distribution of unhappiness.”

A consumerist mindset has also deeply influenced higher education,

which is, as a result, too often seen as a product for purchase. From this perspective, tuition is a cost incurred for the instrumental purpose of professional credentialing; students are customers, and university administrators and faculty exist to serve them. But there is another model for higher education that engages the whole student in a process of broadening the mind while deepening a sense of purpose. This is the covenantal model found in our Jewish tradition, which is not only instructive and aspirational but also illustrative of the values once held dear by traditional universities.

In the Jewish tradition, education began at Sinai. The Hebrew Bible tells us that the Jewish people stood at the foot of the mountain and proclaimed: *na'aseh v'nishma* (we will do and [then] we will listen). It is a strange expression. How can one “do” without first “listening”?

The sages of the Talmud extol this phrase as “the secret of the angels.” Just as the angels are committed to God’s words even before understanding them, so too the Jewish people intuited that their growth depended first and primarily on *commitment*.

This commitment was comprehensive, thorough, and forward-looking. As the 12th-century sage Rabbi Samuel ben Meir explained: “‘We will do’ refers to all of the laws given until this point and ‘We will listen’ refers to the laws that were still yet to come.” This interpretation intimates a profound confidence in the evolution of Jewish knowledge creatively captured in the midrashic tradition. The Talmud, for example, says that at Sinai, Moses witnessed God adorning the letters of the Torah with calligraphic crowns, and he wondered at God’s purpose for doing so. Immediately, Moses was transported to the future classroom of Rabbi Akiva who was expounding on each jot and tittle of the biblical text, including its crowns.

Upon hearing Akiva’s interpretations, Moses grew despondent; he was finding it challenging to follow the detailed lecture. Then,

suddenly, Rabbi Akiva responded to a student's question about the source of the law under discussion: "It is a law that stems from Moses at Sinai." Moses's mind was "put at ease." Rather than being absent from the conversation, he was the source to which all future expounding is tied. The creativity and intellectual output of every successive generation add layers to those that preceded it, engendering a lively dynamic between the inheritance and creation of knowledge.

This model of Jewish knowledge depicts a flow of energy that moves back and forth in time. The great scholar and master teacher of the 20th century, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, once said that each time he cited a Maimonidean text in his Talmudic lectures, he envisioned the author himself entering the classroom and presenting the idea. When the students would question Maimonides about the cogency of his argument, Rabbi Abraham ben David, the famed medieval critic of Maimonides, would nod his head approvingly. Rabbi Soloveitchik would then invite his renowned grandfather, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, into the room to defend the idea. A dialogue between the ages would commence as past and present merged into one intergenerational conversation.

"We will do" is a commitment to what was; "we will listen" to what will be. And committing to them simultaneously forges a covenantal community continuously unfolding and inextricably linked across time.

Long before the Enlightenment and its Republic of Letters, this covenantal community bound the initiated into a mutually respectful conversation. Disagreements between rabbis were legendary and multiple. The fervent belief in the uprightness of one's position was strong. But nevertheless all those who participated in this living conversation were seen as fellow travelers, each representing the "words of the Living God."

Interestingly, the Talmudic discussion about "we will do" preceding "we will listen" also infuses this covenantal community with nobility. The rabbis teach that two crowns were brought from the

heavens and placed on the heads of the Jews at Sinai: one for “we will do,” their commitment to act, and the other for “we will listen,” their commitment to study. In the Jewish tradition, it is study, rather than consumption, that is a value unto itself.

But study is also seen as a vehicle for the transmission of values and character. A famous rabbinic dispute posed the question about which is greater: study or action? The rabbinic conclusion, revealing the bidirectional nature of the “we will do and we will listen” formula, said study, because it leads to action. The most heralded form of intellectual endeavor is one that also refines one’s personality, generates compassion toward others, and leaves a positive impact on the world. The sages of the Talmud are described as not only wise but also righteous. Study not only educates; it also ennobles.

Perhaps counterintuitively, in the Jewish tradition it is by binding oneself to a covenantal community that nobility is discovered and human potential realized. For it is this life of commitment that provides the deep roots that nourish a lifetime of learning, growth, generosity, creativity, and self-discovery. The energy of the study hall charges each of its participants to add their imprint to the enduring historical conversation. A covenantal community binds its members in an intergenerational dialogue that prizes faith, empathy, curiosity, resilience, brilliance, and humility. It fills one’s life with meaning and purpose. This is the secret of the angels.



While there is no doubt that some of these elements are unique to the Jewish tradition, they also form the basis of the intellectual tradition of the great universities of the past. This includes the essential commitments to seek truth, develop the character of students as productive citizens of society, assemble great minds who create new

knowledge with their research, and foster a community of letters with deep respect for the past and a sense of responsibility for the future.

Universities used to offer this profound sense of purpose and commitment. A letter of admission was an invitation for students to enter the great exchange of ideas that extended from the beginnings of time into the wondrous possibilities of the future. Students were not simply purchasing a degree but were part of a historical community that challenged and expanded their imaginations.

In this model of a university, every enrolling student is welcomed into a community of exploration built on a canon of texts that have stood the test of time. As time moves forward, the aperture is widened and more texts incorporated. The intellectual exchange of ideas is not unyielding, but it is unfolding. Texts do not live in isolation but in conversation with one another. The students who are most successful during their years of study do not come with the sense of entitlement of a consumer but with the humility and thirst of a seeker. Perhaps the greatest tool they discover is to recognize, as Rilke notes in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, that questions are better than their answers. Our job is to teach them to love the questions.

In the imagery of the modern university, questions are the ivy-strewn building blocks of the ivory tower. What happens inside is an ever-expanding conversation of inquiry. In the Jewish tradition, the cultivation of questions is the process in which one stretches oneself and grows, which ultimately is the purpose of education. As Kalonymus Shapira, the famed 20th-century rabbi of Piasezna who secretly kept Jewish education alive in the Warsaw Ghetto, observed, the word for education in the Jewish tradition is *chinukh*, which means to bring into the open the potential that rests within. Each child is born in God's image and carries a distinct way of expressing that godliness. Whether one is a healer, an artist, a leader, or a scientist, a great university education introduces the mysteries of the world to enable

students to develop and discover the greatness within themselves.

This type of education is saturated with covenants and commitments: to one's fellow students as companions on the path to wisdom, to one's professors as guides who escort them on their journey, to the brilliant thinkers and writers who laid the path long ago, and to their future selves who will emerge from a lifetime of exploration. The institution and its professors in turn make a commitment to the students to be present with them during these formative years, creating enduring attachments and profound feelings of gratitude that last a lifetime.

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This is the kind of covenantal community that leads to a campus culture devoted to human flourishing. The university both sets the standard for academic excellence and infuses its campus with core values. It inspires students to think critically, pursue truth, and live lives of service, compassion, and contribution. It stresses that knowledge and character are integrated, not separated. Such an education prepares them for both personal and professional success, empowering them with the skills and networks to succeed in their vocations—and the values and aspiration to succeed meaningfully in their lives as contributors rather than simply as consumers.

There are many reasons that institutions of higher education failed their Jewish students, faculty, and alumni after October 7. One of the primary ones is the lost sense of purpose. Not long ago, the great universities in this country considered themselves stewards of a noble tradition. Today higher education has become big business. Sadly, for many, this has also brought a diminishment of their historical mission. University administrators busy formulating their

responses to the pressures of the moment have too often ignored their institutions' foundational core values, managing fallout rather than rededicating themselves, as the Hebrew word for education could also be translated, to their first principles. No wonder they so often come across more like corporate managers and marketers than educational leaders. As the House Committee on Education and the Workforce concluded in its recent report, "While university leaders publicly projected a commitment toward combating antisemitism and respect for congressional efforts on the subject, in their private communications they viewed antisemitism as a PR issue rather than a campus problem."

In today's climate, it is essential to identify and strengthen the institutions that uphold the covenants and commitments on which higher education has long been built. Based on a vision of education that is transformational rather than transactional, we can integrate the wellsprings of our past into a model of constructive and redemptive learning for all. \*