

An “U” Identity in the Workplace and in the Beis Medrash

This quote from a recent article about Rabbi Dr. Avraham Steinberg,¹ who, among other things, is the editor of Encyclopedia Talmudit, caught my eye:

Rabbi Steinberg ... passionately advocated that more professionals fuse their Torah study with their profession of choice. ... “If you are a businessman, learn business halacha.” ... In fact, he emphasizes, it’s in the interface between Torah and your profession where your learning is most valuable, because you are an expert in your field.

In YU’s long-time motto of Torah U’Madda (or, for our business school, “Torah U’Business”), what is the most important single letter? Rabbi Dr. Steinberg is highlighting that it is the “U”—the “and”—that connects the Torah grounding with the secular knowledge.

Without active integration, these tend to remain separate compartments of life and of our identities. Our natural inclination is often to fit in at work, to tone down the signs and practices of our Judaism, and to save the “Jewish” side of us for shul. “There’s the Torah

side of me, and then there’s the work side of me.” Or, for YU students, “I have shiur in the morning and secular studies in the afternoon.”

However, we are weaker if we make them into disconnected entities in which we try to separately excel in each and avoid mixing the two. Before compartmentalizing those parts of our lives, please consider an alternative. Consider that our power comes from finding the connections between the two and from developing an “U” identity.

From Business to Torah

When we are in shiur, we should tap the secular knowledge we have gained. I saw a great application of this during a recent trip to Israel. I was scheduled to give a lunchtime talk at Yeshivat Shaalvim, where my younger son is in Shana Aleph. I was privileged to come a couple of hours early and attend Gemara shiur with him. During the shiur, R’ Noam Koenigsberg touched on such topics as consistent income, budgeting, and liability.

When such topics come up during our



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Torah learning, who is more likely to excel at understanding them, seeing key nuances, and being able to have richer insights emerge from the learning: Someone who has learned about income, budgeting, and liability from courses like “The Legal & Ethical Environment of Business” or “Foundations of Personal Finance,” or one who is just being introduced to those concepts?

Similarly, when the YU Beis Medrash is learning about contracts and incentives in *Meseches Gitin*, those who have learned about contracts and incentives in class are likely to have the richest grasp of the content of the shiur. In *Bava Basra*, to name another *masechta* recently studied at Yeshiva, those

¹ <https://www.jewishpress.com/sections/features/the-inspiring-story-of-rabbi-dr-professor-avraham-steinberg/2024/02/15/>.

who have learned about interpersonal dynamics and microeconomics will be able to grasp (and hopefully shed light for everyone else) halachic arguments and decisions more quickly and at a deeper level.

This is one direction of the “U” in Torah U’Business: Developing business depth that can help enrich our Torah learning.

From Torah to Business

The other direction affects how we bring our Yiddishkeit into the workplace.

When I graduated from college and entered the workplace, I wasn’t ready for many of the ways in which work demands would challenge my Jewish values. Honesty in interviewing (do I tell them at my initial interview that I won’t be available to them for 25 hours a week, even if our biggest client has a pressing Saturday deadline?); mandatory business lunches in non-kosher restaurants (e.g., is it better or worse if the restaurant can order from outside caterers a similar-looking meal to the one the non-kosher restaurant will be serving everyone else?); holiday parties; and a wide range of other daily issues.

Anticipating these issues—and even practicing difficult discussions about them ahead of time—is key to our preparation to be Torah-grounded professionals excelling in the workplace.

Learning about them in different contexts might also shape our decisions about our careers. If my top career choice will pose intense challenges to my Jewish values, should I choose my second-best alternative if it will be more aligned with those values? It is key to learn the halachic sources ahead of time, develop a roadmap of the challenges, and be more prepared to identify solutions.

My Personal Experiences: Torah U’Entrepreneurship

For 25 years, I have conducted research on entrepreneurship—specifically, the early decisions founders face that tend to get them into trouble.

Some of my most important insights into founders came from our Mesorah. In turn, my view of the Mesorah was further enriched by new insights that emerged from the founders I had studied.

On Day 1 of the founding-team module of the Founder’s Dilemmas course I taught at Harvard Business School, I would ask the mostly non-Jewish students, “Are there any Bible fans here? Who knows who the founding team of the world was?” When someone answered, “Adam and Eve,” I would highlight for them the two-word description of what their relationship should be: “*eizer kenegdo*” (a helper opposite him, Bereishis 2:18), and then describe the Netziv’s view of

what it means: That the *kenegdo*—the pushback—is the *eizer*, assisting the other by highlighting where s/he is falling short and thus helping the person reach his or her potential.²

We then discussed the importance of founders learning “how to fight well” rather than smoothing over differences until they become much bigger and far less solvable. That was followed by a negotiation exercise over founder ownership that had them practice fighting well.³

On the last day of the course, we would tackle founder failure, examining our natural inclination to recoil from failure rather than seizing on it to get stronger. Our “case study” that day? R’ Akiva’s attempted journey to a town in which he suffered failure after failure: No housing available during dangerous times, forcing him to be stranded outside town, his donkey killed by a wild animal, his candle blown out by the wind.⁴ At each step, we would see how the typical reaction would be “woe is me,” but that R’ Akiva’s approach—learned under Nachum Ish Gamzu for 22 years⁵—replaced the recoil with a drive to persist on his way to finding how it would be for the best. When he woke up the following morning, R’ Akiva saw that the town had been attacked overnight and realized that that would have been him if he had not experienced apparent failure the prior day.

In the other direction of the “U,” we can

² In contrast, Rashi—based on *Yevamos* 63a—says that if we aren’t worthy of getting *eizer*/support, then we’ll get the *kenegdo*/pushback. This captures the natural human recoil when getting criticism, compared to seizing on the criticism to get stronger, as per the Netziv.

³ Also informing this lens on founding teams was the dynamic between the most iconic chavrusas in Shas, R’ Yochanan and Reish Lakish (*Bava Metzia* 84a), who embodied the Netziv’s dynamic. Note that this *daf* also highlights the failed chavrusa relationship between R’ Yochanan and R’ Elazar ben Pedas, due to R’ Elazar’s insistence on only providing *eizer* and refusing to provide *kenegdo*, despite R’ Yochanan’s pleading with him to do so. Interestingly, in *Yevamos* 63a (Rashi’s source in Bereishis 2:18), it is R’ Elazar himself who advocates the no-*kenegdo* perspective that Rashi quotes.

⁴ *Berachos* 60b. Note that this was the *daf* on the day that Covid first hit the frum community, on March 3, 2020. Through R’ Meir Shapiro’s world-changing innovation of *Daf Yomi*, Hashem was sending us a message about the worldwide challenges we were about to face and the need for us to find strength and light amongst the darkness and challenges of the pandemic.

⁵ *Chagigah* 12a.

see new things in our learning by seeing new dynamics in the business world. For instance, I gained insights into R' Akiva's mindset from studying founders who had experienced failure. The most productive of their failures came when founders seized on the setback to get stronger by realizing an incorrect assumption, thinking differently about something they had taken for granted, or increasing their drive to turn things around. I realized that R' Akiva's *emunah* had been stunningly admirable, but that the rest of us could benefit from seizing on failures to partner with Hashem in making it a *gam zu l'tova* (this too is for the best) rather than waiting for the good to emerge. That proactive approach was an important complement to R' Akiva's reactive approach.

Sy Syms as a Case Study

Shifting gears from the universal to the particular, at Sy Syms, Yeshiva University's values now permeate the curriculum at two levels.

The "U" finds its most explicit expression in our Jewish Values curriculum, which we introduced in the Fall of 2020 to actively help our students achieve our "U" mission: To develop Torah-grounded professionals who excel in the workplace and in the community.

At any other business school, the scope of the mission is, in so many words, "To develop professionals who excel in the workplace"—i.e., to develop the "9-to-5" of their students. Preparing students to be Torah grounded and to also excel in the community is not part of their mission. At YU and Sy Syms, we know that many of the most important

contributions of our alumni come from 5 p.m. to 9 a.m., and that we must prepare our students for the "24 hours" of life, not just the 9-to-5.

The Jewish Values curriculum includes required courses on Practical Workplace Halacha (the challenges of being Torah-grounded in the workplace, and solutions to those challenges), Jewish Public Policy (how to think at a communal level and contribute to the Klal), and Jewish Business Law. It includes electives on leadership in the Jewish community, the business and communal interactions between Jews and non-Jews over the centuries with lessons for today, and Designing Your Jewish Life (key inflection-point decisions that will change the trajectory of your life—e.g., choice of community in which to live, choice of career, choice of spouse). Students learn how to adopt the mindset, practices, and identity of an "U" Jew.

However, development of the "U" identity isn't limited to our Jewish Values curriculum. This was encapsulated beautifully by a student, Tomer Wieder, in the weekly Undergraduate Torah Studies newsletter a couple of years ago. In response to a question about his favorite part of YU, Tomer said, "...many of my Sy Syms classes have been infused with Torah values. My finance, accounting, and other secular professors deliberately include topics about—and stress the importance of—acting honestly and amicably in business." Professors will end their classes with *divrei Torah* that are relevant to that day's topic, include reflections and stories from when they faced workplace challenges and how they dealt with them, and provide role modeling for the students.⁶

Building a Foundation for Decades

Rabbi Dr. Steinberg's advocacy for integrating Torah study with our profession underscores the profound significance of the "U" in Torah U'Madda or Torah U'Business. Expertise in our field enhances the value of Torah study, enabling us to provide valuable insights in halachic decision-making. In turn, the Torah's teachings offer profound wisdom that enriches our understanding and approach to secular endeavors, and enables us to add unique value to our professions.

By embracing this integrated identity and approach, we can navigate the complexities of both the workplace and the Beis Medrash with a deeper understanding and a more holistic perspective. It also can yield unique insights. Personal experiences like my own, integrating entrepreneurship with the Torah and with Gemara learning, illustrate the reciprocal relationship between Torah and business.

The college years are a key time to develop this "U" identity in our next generation. These formative years will serve as the foundation for decades of life. Helping students build their "U" muscles will pay dividends long into the future. Yeshiva University is not "a yeshiva alongside a college" (or vice versa); done right, it integrates the two in powerful combinations.

Ultimately, the "U" identity in the workplace and in the Beis Medrash serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of all facets of life. By embracing this unity, we can unlock new depths of understanding, wisdom, and fulfillment in both our professional and spiritual pursuits.

⁶ This is no longer only true at the undergraduate level. Now, with our new Semikha+MBA joint program with RIETS, our graduate students can develop their "U" muscles, too.