

This past week, I read about a poll taken by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life. They asked over 3,400 Americans thirty-two questions about the Bible, world religions, historical figures, and Constitutional principles. What were the results? They were the proverbial good news and bad news.

Some good news: They found Americans tend to be deeply religious.

Some bad news: They also found Americans to be deeply ignorant about religion.

Some good news: Of all the religious people surveyed, Jews answered more questions correctly than any other religious group, beating out the Mormons. Jews averaged 20.5 correct out of the thirty-two questions. The Mormons were a close second at 20.3 correct.

Some less good news: In Christianity, evangelical Protestants did the best, but their score averaged only 17.6 correct answers. The lowest score was 11.6 correct, by Hispanic Catholics.

The worst news: Atheists and agnostics scored the highest. They barely beat us—the score was 20.9 to our 20.5, but beat us they did.

These results intrigue me. The article I read did not list the questions that were asked, something that would have been of interest to me. I wonder how it can be that religious people can be so uninformed about their religion—that’s why I am curious what questions were asked. But there is a clue in the article that I think is significant.

Dave Silverman (oy!) is president of American Atheists. He said he gave a Bible to his daughter because “That’s how you make atheists.”

I get his point. There was a time during college that I said to myself, “I consider myself to be a religious Jew, but I have never read the entire Torah, let alone the entire Bible. I had better read it, because if I am a religious Jew, I have to believe everything in it.” I began to read the Torah in a uninformed, simplistic way. It was the only way I had at my disposal, and I ran into trouble right away.

I did not believe that the world began with just two people, Adam and Eve. I did not yet understand that the Torah does not claim that to be the case. I did not believe there was a talking snake. I had not even made it through the first *parashah*, and I was deeply distressed.

David Silverman is right. Give someone a Bible and tell them that to be a religious person they must read and accept everything in the Bible, but do not teach them how to read the Bible. It would almost be like handing a score

of a symphony to someone with no musical knowledge and saying, “Read this so you can become a music lover.” The person certainly would not become a lover of classical music that way, but at least he would not find reasons to reject classical music. But if someone reads the Torah without a teacher or other source of guidance, that person may well conclude that religion is for the simple-minded, non-critical thinker.

The fact is that much of the Torah’s wisdom is not readily accessible to the uninitiated. Some of it is, but not all. Some is difficult even for experts who have spent their lives immersed in its study.

Fortunately for us, we live in an age in which sophisticated Torah study is accessible to everyone. A staggering number of traditional sources, available for centuries in Hebrew alone, have been translated into English. Wonderful books have been written in English, by Jews

and Christians alike, that teach the intelligent lay reader how to plumb the depths of the wisdom of the Judeo-Christian tradition. As technology has progressed, so has Torah study. You can study with software, DVD's, and podcasts. Never in history has there been so many ways to grow in Torah knowledge.

20.5 questions correct out of a possible thirty-two. In baseball (although how you would get half a hit I do not know) that works out to a .640 batting average, far better than anyone ever has or will do on a baseball field. But Judaism is not baseball. *Let this be the year when we all work to raise our potential score on the Pew test*, even if we never get the opportunity to be questioned. But don't just sit down with a Hebrew Bible. Study with a commentary such as Etz Chaim, or read one of countless books, or take a class—we'll be planning our adult education program very soon. Study in any way that you like, but study.

Deeply religious and deeply ignorant about religion is a bad combination. I hope if another such poll is taken in the future, Americans show an increase in our religious knowledge. For us, as Jews, we made it to the World Series of religious knowledge and lost to the atheists. But we're going to devote this year to study, correct? And then, as we used to have say all the time in Philadelphia, just wait until next year!