

Poverty and Scholarship

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

When the New Yorker was first launched in 1935 and for a long time after, money was very tight. Once, when the first editor, Harold Ross, asked Dorothy Parker why she had not written a promised piece, she answered, "Well, someone else was using the pencil."

We often forget the creative constraints imposed upon our ancestors by simple poverty. Talmudic scholars created commentaries despite living in cities in which an entire set of Talmud could not be found. Writing in drafty or sweltering rooms, they provided foundations for the tradition that flourishes to this day. The Talmudic giant Hillel was unable to pay the pittance required for the study hall and as a result the fee was abolished.

We are fortunate to have tremendous resources and yet, with the vast wealth of the Jewish community, many do not have a Jewish education because of the cost. Our ancestors, who taught and studied with scraps of paper and stubs of candles, would be stunned to see how many Jews do not learn given the potential of our community. If we could wed the resolve of generations past to the good fortune of the present, then instead of lamenting our losses, we would be celebrating our triumphs.