THE MNEMONIC FEAT OF THE ‘SHASS POLLAK’

Some years ago, through the kindness of my friend Professor Hollander, of the Johns Hopkins University, my attention was directed to a special achievement in memorizing which I venture to report; since, so far as I know, it has remained unnoticed by psychologists, and yet should be stored among the data long and still richly gathering for the study of extraordinary feats of memory.

The facts of the case I can hardly do better than to allow the witnesses themselves to state. And first the Reverend Dr. David Philipson, of Cincinnati, to whom I was first referred by Professor Hollander.

“The Babylonian Talmud” he has been good enough to write me, “consist of twelve large folio volumes comprising thousands of pages. All the printed editions of the Talmud have exactly the same number of pages and the same words on each page. This must be borne in mind in order to understand the remarkable feat of memory about to be described. There have been, as there undoubtedly still are, men who know the whole text of the Talmud by heart. Some years ago one of these men, a native of Poland, was in this country. I witnessed his remarkable feats of memory. Thus, one of us would throw open one of the volumes of the Talmud, say the tractate Berakhot, at page 10; a pin would be placed on a word, let us say, the fourth word in line eight; the memory sharp would then be asked what word is in this same spot on page thirty-eight or page fifty or any other page; the pin would be pressed through the volume until it reached page thirty eight or page fifty or any other page designated; the memory sharp would then mention the word and it was found invariably correct. He had visualized in his brain the whole Talmud; in other words, the pages of the Talmud were photographed on his brain. It was one of the most stupendous feats of memory I have ever witnessed and there was no fake about it. In the company gathered about the table were a number of Talmudic experts who would readily have discovered fraud had there been any. The technical name which was used by the Jews of afores times to designate these memory experts was Shass Pollak; Shass is the abbreviation for the Hebrew terms for the Talmud, and Pollak is Pole; nearly all these memory experts
came from Poland; a Shass Pollak then is a Pole who has memorized the entire contents of the Talmud and is able to give exhibitions of his mnemonic powers like those mentioned above."

And next let me quote from Judge Mayer Sulzberger, of Philadelphia, who in answer to my inquiry, wrote as follows:

"I have met but one ‘Shass Pollak’ in my life. He was brought into my library one evening by a friend. I conversed with him and experimented upon him.

"After he had been introduced as the expert in question I expressed some curiosity with perhaps a mien of incredulity. He was eager for the fray.

"You are of course aware that all (or nearly all) modern editions of the Talmud are paged alike and printed alike, each page beginning and ending with the same word in all the editions.

"I went to the case and took out a volume of the first edition which has its own paging not followed by the other editions. He made an automatic dive for a word in a particular part of the page, and lo! it was not there.

"Confounded by this unexpected event, he thought at first that this was not a Talmud I was showing him; and when convinced finally that it was, seemed to bear it some resentment for its improper behavior.

"I then brought out the corresponding volume of an ordinary edition and he undoubtedly made good.

"He would take a pencil and merely glancing at the page put it down anywhere and without looking told the word on which his pencil had lighted. This he did over and over again. There is no reasonable ground for the suspicion that he saw the words. I watched him closely and am convinced that he did not. He had, I feel sure, a perfect image of the page and the position of every word on it in his ‘head.’"

Finally, let me give the testimony of Dr. Schechter, of New York, the late President of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America—testimony the more interesting in that while it depends upon the recollection of an experience many years ago, yet it is an independent account of the same kind of testing which Dr. Philipson reports—namely, by pricking through the pages—and consequently confirms the opinion of Judge Sulzberger that the success of the ‘Shass Pollak’ who was tested merely by pencil was not due to a sly catching of the word by eye.

President Schechter stated to me by letter that once he had
come across a ‘Shass Pollak’ but that it was too long a time ago to give an account of him with definiteness. “It is at least forty-five years since the incident occurred,” he wrote. “What I remember was that he could tell you the contents of every page of the Talmud by heart. I remember also that the people amused themselves by prying a needle into any volume of the Talmud, and he could tell exactly the word on which the needle touched. But I also recollect distinctly that it was nothing more than a verbal or rather local memory, the students all maintaining that he knew very little about the meaning of the contents, their interpretation and application. I heard afterwards of many similar ‘Shass Pollaks,’ but it is a fact that none of them ever attained to any prominence in the scholarly world.”

This absence of any scholarly grasp of the contents thus memorized, of which President Schechter speaks, also appears in the judgment of Dr. Philipson. “I looked upon his achievement at the time I witnessed it as purely mechanical,” he writes. “It is quite likely that he could not interpret the Talmud though he knew its contents by heart.” And Judge Sulzberger, when proposing to his ‘Shass Pollak’ that he use his knowledge to some scientific or literary end, was listened to with respect, but nevertheless received the impression that such proposals were deemed by his man to be nonsensical.

All of which confirms the oft-repeated observation, that such extraordinary powers of memory may exist in a kind of intellectual disproportion where there is no corresponding development of other powers—where, indeed, there may be an actual stunting of other powers and interests; as though the mind had ‘run’ to memory, and been enlarged here at the expense of other functions.

As to the more precise amount of matter that was memorized, it should be noted that a page of the Babylonian Talmud consists, as my colleague Dr. Popper, has pointed out to me, of the text proper, called the *Gemarah*, and printed as a more central portion on the page, and of a commentary printed below and around this text. Upon special inquiry whether the mnemonic feat applied only to the *Gemarah* or included also the Commentary, Dr. Philipson

1 Professor Popper has also referred me to the articles “Talmud” and “Mnemonics” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* for evidence that at one period the Talmud was handed down solely by memory. The feat of the Poles here recounted may therefore be regarded perhaps as the survival of a custom among early Jewish students in many and widely-separated communities. The work of Brüll, *Die Mnemotechnik des Talmuds*, Vienna 1864, should also be cited.
states that the test which he witnessed was upon the *Gemarah* only; and Judge Sulzberger is of the opinion that this was also true in the case that came under his observation. Even so, the task must have been a stupendous one; the amount of reading-matter upon each page is still great, and the number of pages is enormous.

In closing may I express my thanks, in which other students of psychology will certainly unite with me, to the gentlemen who have so generously given the facts above recorded.

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