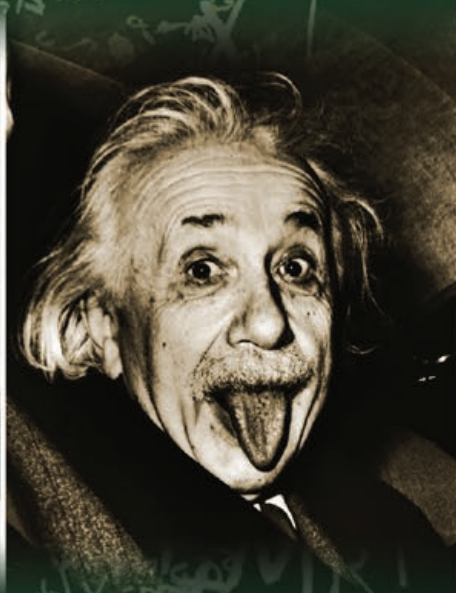


Are Brilliant Minds Condemned to Be Socially Inept?

The Dark Side Of Genius



Many Gedolei Yisrael were born geniuses and yet were tremendously balanced individuals, exemplary in middos and as shaleim (whole) as a person can be. With the proper Torah learning, mussar and hashkafah, the gift of genius can be a tremendous asset. However, in the general world, without Torah, genius was almost invariably a life sentence for misery and torment – both from within and from without. One need go no further than the best minds in world history for evidence of such. Despite the fact that they proved to be geniuses whose vision and inventions changed the face of civilization, in their own time – or at least in their youth—many of them were considered socially inept and even mentally challenged, to say nothing of miserable. If they were living today, it is questionable whether they would be given the opportunity to accomplish what they did.

Let's take a closer look at some of these great minds, tormented outwardly by a society that did not understand them and inwardly by their own intellectual depth and genius. Let's take a closer look at some of these famous "mad professors."



| Yakov M. Hirschson |

What am I in the eyes of most people — a nonentity, an eccentric, or an unpleasant person — somebody who has no position in society and will never have; in short, the lowest of the low.... Though I am often in the depths of misery, there is still calmness, pure harmony and music inside me. I see paintings or drawings in the poorest cottages, in the dirtiest corners. And my mind is driven towards these things with an irresistible momentum.

What emotions do you feel when reading such a passage? Most people feel pity for the writer. If you were a close acquaintance, you might visit him out of concern.

What if we told you that these lines were excerpted from a letter by the renowned Dutch master painter Vincent van Gogh? All of a sudden the entire picture changes....

Actually, van Gogh's contemporaries, who never dreamed that his works would be prized by collectors one day and sell for millions of dollars, reacted to him the same way. Poor guy.

In fact, van Gogh was far from the only creative genius to be treated as a pariah by his peers. Many other prodigies whose discoveries literally changed the world suffered from similar lack of regard, at least in their childhood.

Must creative brilliance be accompanied



Self-portrait by Vincent van Gogh.

by a disturbed psyche? Is every genius doomed to suffer for his intellectual and emotional depth? And what is the source of the association between the two traits? In this article we will attempt to cast light on this fascinating subject.

From Mentally Handicapped to World-Class Genius

Year: 1879

Location: Germany

He was charming as a young boy. His parents delighted in his brilliance and unbridled curiosity. When he was five years old and ill in bed one day, his father showed him a simple pocket compass. What interested the young boy was that whichever way the case was turned, the needle always pointed in the same direction. He thought there must be some force in what was presumed empty space that acted on the compass.

Besides his unexpected questions that often brought the adults around him to laughter, he was a happy child.

But the truth was that young Al's development was not without its early indications of problems. First, he started speaking very late. When he did, he spoke very slowly—indeed, he tried out entire sentences in his head (or muttered them under his breath) until he got them right before he spoke aloud. According to accounts, Al did this until he was nine years old.

Of course, there are many late bloomers. But he also had a penchant to daydream and spend time alone. Still, is daydreaming reason for concern? What mattered most is that he was happy and pleasant. And Al was delightful and content... at least until he entered first grade.

Young Al was not made for the classroom — especially a very strict 19th century authoritarian one. He was used to peace and quiet. He was used to concentrating on his thoughts, undisturbed. He was used to contemplating the mysteries of time and space.

Not surprisingly, then, Al was branded troublesome by teachers and became the subject of constant harassment by peers. From a budding and happy child, he was transformed into a brooding, introverted outcast.

The situation progressed from bad to worse when he advanced to second grade. Everyone viewed him as the class dreamer, the boy who was never focused. His tendency to work slowly led his teachers to assume he was a slow learner, often disregarding him. They regretfully informed his father that the boy was “mentally challenged, unsociable and always daydreaming.”

Young Al grew up as an outcast of society. He was ignored by his teachers and distanced by his classmates. Even his family did not recognize his talents.

Had he remained quiet in his corner of the classroom, he might have survived the experience relatively unscathed emotionally. But his innate distaste for authority led him to question anything that did not make sense, and he challenged his teachers time and again. He needed to know the proof and meaning behind almost every piece of



A young Albert Einstein, before he began talking.



Einstein at age 14. His teachers had already written him off.

information he heard, be it a scientific rule or an accepted notion of social behavior.

After challenging his teachers nonstop for several years, he was unceremoniously



The house where van Gogh lived in fear of how others viewed him.