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## [An Educational Manifesto](#)

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1.

For a long time, traditional Judaism was based on authoritarian structures that paralleled structures of the general pre-Modern world. Most significantly, faith in a Creator had long been a nearly universal norm. Thus, while Judaism, per se, was not consonant with society around it, God was at the center of how people understood their world.

Although this is not the place to properly review changes brought about by the Modern era, it may be helpful to remind the reader about some of the great upheavals that directly impact on religious continuity. Modern thinking opened up all realms to free inquiry, leaving nothing to dogma. One of my first teachers, perhaps inadvertently, summarized the impact on Judaism when he said that contemporary acceptance of the Torah is no longer characterized by *na'aseh venishma* (we will do and we will understand), but rather by *nishma vena'aseh* (we will understand and we will do). Whether we are conscious of it or not, our zeitgeist impels us to understand what we believe and why we believe it.

Modernity also challenged the authority of the elites by pronouncing all humans to be equal. As such, rabbinic authority was severely compromised, opening the way for the various movements that arose independently of the traditional rabbinic hegemony on ideology.

In our own times, as Modernity continues to unfold and develop, the last authoritarian stronghold to fall is the family. In accordance with the Democratic idea, older children are choosing whether or not to listen to their parents. Of all structures, this is arguably the most critical to Judaism. And yet, we see it falling nonetheless.

Moreover, today we see faith in a virtual state of siege. Even those who proclaim to believe in a Creator rarely explain the world around them in more than mechanistic terms. This is undeniably having an impact on our own ranks, as reflected in the following quotation from a talk by Rav Shlomo Wolbe *zt"l*:

It seems to me that education in faith is really weak today. You have to start talking about faith already in *heder*, telling the students that they were created from God, explaining how it is God who gives them life. God gave the Torah that they are learning. Then later in yeshiva ... you have to talk more about faith.

Such an educational need has arisen because these things are no longer assumed in the surrounding society. Schools do not teach that we need to eat food or that the sun keeps us warm, because these ideas are universally accepted. Once faith has lost its universal acceptance, attentive teachers like Rav Wolbe will see a need to "teach" it.

In spite of Orthodoxy's extremely mixed record, the dominant approach in this sector toward Modernity has been to isolate ourselves from general society, its paradigms, and questions. This has not only been the approach to education, but to thought as well, as the philosophical investigations of the *Rishonim* (medieval scholars) were shunned for more narrow textual study, focusing mostly on understanding the *how* and *when* as opposed to the *what* and *why*.

The ability to isolate ourselves from the assumptions of society around us, however, has of late become severely compromised. Two trends have made Orthodox society permeable, to the point where Modernity is confronting the previously most isolationist segments of our society. The first trend is the increasing dependence on media, and particularly the Internet, necessitated by participation in the marketplace. The second trend is the greater exposure to the non-Orthodox brought about by the influx of *ba'alei teshuvah* in the last few decades (as well as our contact with a greater number of defections from the Orthodox community). Thus, the continued usefulness of the isolationist strategy is becoming more and more questionable.

Almost all Jews today live part of their lives in contact with modern Western culture. In many subtle ways, this culture competes with Judaism for our loyalty. Unconsciously, many of its values become incorporated into our worldview without our even realizing it. An obvious and dangerous example is the growth of consumerism among all but the most careful circles. Consumerism is defined here as spending inordinate amounts of time and effort on consumer choices and believing that these choices help define our identity.

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that Jewish faith and values can no longer be assumed as cultural norms—even within the most conservative segments of Orthodoxy. As such, we must consciously and explicitly teach our beliefs to ourselves and our children, with the realization that the assumptions and freedom of modern society ultimately give our children a much greater prerogative to reject these values. Although these assumptions may not be ones with which we agree, under the present circumstances we have no choice but to work within them, believing that we have good reason to expect success in the free market of ideas and lifestyles. Thus, we must learn how to compete for the hearts and minds of our own children as well as for the hearts and minds of others. In our time, there are few, if any, voices presenting a clear strategy on how to do this. Rather, we muddle along, focusing on performance of mitzvot and Torah study in a cultural vacuum.

Instead of designing a plan to deal with the causes of the current malaise that exists in Orthodoxy, people are merely dealing with the symptoms. Although we may salute the courage of the *Jewish Observer* in acknowledging and addressing the issue of dropouts, like the vast majority of efforts, it isolates the problem to the individuals and not to problems with the system as a whole. The same can be said of the myriad forums that are trying to deal with the variety of marriage/family/parenting issues that are more and more apparent within our ranks. Focusing on individuals is much more palatable to the dominant conservative forces within Orthodoxy, but in the long run it is doing us a disservice.

One obvious arena that must be addressed in dealing with the problem outlined above is our educational system. Essentially based on the Eastern European yeshiva model, its focus is on giving students the ability to study texts. The European yeshiva curriculum was aimed at providing two goals for its elite student body: 1) proper mastery of the Talmud and accompanying literature to provide the necessary expertise from which to reach halakhic decisions, and 2) enhancing the spirituality of the students in a mystical fashion, grounded in the questionable idea that more involvement in Torah study will bring about a stronger connection to God. In the contemporary context these two goals are clearly insufficient. Although traditional study itself, if done well, can be invigorating, it is not enough to give today's culturally ambivalent students an understanding and internalization of classical Jewish beliefs and values, and thus motivate them to devote their lives to God.

What is needed, therefore, is a complete reevaluation of what we study and how we study it, in accordance with what most of our children will need in order to flourish within our religious tradition.

II.

Many of us owe a great deal to the yeshiva system. Even more important than knowledge and skills, our religious inspiration was largely formed by the years spent within the yeshiva walls. Clearly, there is much to be gained by carrying over certain aspects of the yeshiva model.

It is our thesis that the yeshiva curriculum is totally unsuited to the needs of the Jewish masses. Still, there are at least three components of the yeshiva experience that are invaluable: 1) the atmosphere of intensity, 2) the rigor of approach to text and, hopefully, truth, and 3) success in bringing about strict adherence to halakha.

## [H2] Intensity

Former High Court Judge Menachem Elon once recalled the unmatched intensity of his days at Yeshivat Hevron. The single-minded pursuit of understanding that exists in the classical yeshiva is clearly invigorating. Elon described it as a pursuit unlimited by time or schedule. In spite of its overwhelmingly intellectual nature, the complete dedication of self to religious pursuits experienced in the yeshiva is something that leaves an indelible mark upon a person.

Similar dedication to a more holistic curriculum and setting may be harder to bring about. The key may be in the schedule, logistics, and perhaps most important, in the leadership of the new schools. When the rosh yeshiva exhibits sincere and complete dedication, it sets the tone for the entire yeshiva. This will presumably also be true of the new schools that we envision.

## [H2] The Search for Truth

One of the appealing facets of the yeshiva is its democratic approach to truth. A rebbe's shiur does not stand if he cannot appropriately address a logical flaw pointed out by even the weakest student. In fact, stumping the rebbe is the aspiration of every yeshiva student worth his salt. In a proper yeshiva, all are equal before the truth. The soundness of this approach speaks for itself, allowing the natural ambition of the students to motivate them toward achievement.

As we propose to move away from the uniquely cerebral approach of the yeshiva, we must ensure that rigorous pursuit of truth not be sacrificed. Even as we put more emphasis on personal expression, we must hold teachers and students accountable for their ideas. If their ideas are not properly rooted, we will be following in the ways of all antinomian sects, a risk that must be taken very seriously.

## [H2] Adherence to Halakha

One of the major goals of the yeshiva is to create punctilious loyalty to halakha. While yeshiva dropouts may often reject halakha completely, successful graduates are usually highly dedicated to the halakha, which they see as directly emanating from the texts that they have studied.

One of my students observed that it often appears as if yeshiva graduates worship halakha instead of God. Even as I believe this to be a very insightful observation, historical experience shows that halakhic rigor serves as the backbone of Jewish spirituality. In our efforts to correct the situation by putting God back in the center of Judaism, we must make sure that we formulate a convincing motivational scheme to engender strict adherence to halakha among our students.

The uninterrupted tradition of learning has given us a justified self-confidence in giving over a quality experience in the traditional yeshiva. The creativity, rigor, and depth involved in traditional study of the Talmud and its commentaries are appealing to the best of minds. There is no equally developed body of literature in other Jewish realms, such as *aggada*, Jewish Thought, and prayer. Thus, it is only natural that we are happy to stay with something in which we are proficient. Such reticence to expand our horizons is understandable, yet it is ultimately untenable. In today's field of "mass" Jewish education, the traditional yeshiva curriculum is as archaic as the typewriter. One can create a typewriter that is literally a work of art. Even one who can create such a typewriter and is not yet sure how to build a computer, has no choice but to learn how to do the latter, if he expects any appreciation and use outside of a museum.

In sum, we have no choice but to move past the yeshiva model in setting up schools for the masses. This will require much experimentation in order to create a quality experience. That being the case, we have everything to gain by making use of every successful facet of our learning tradition. Rigor, intensity and stress on normative behavior must be central to new institutions of learning if they are to form the next link in the transmission of Judaism from one generation to the next.

III.

The dichotomy between the Jewish educational system and its cultural context is perhaps greater today than ever before. The Jewish people, including all segments of Orthodoxy, has never been so fully integrated within a culture that often espouses a competing set of values and assumptions. This integration creates a serious challenge to the cultural integrity of the Jewish people.

In spite of this challenge, we find ourselves relying upon an educational model that unrealistically expects an automatic internalization of Jewish values and modes of behavior. Thus, religious schools expend most of their energy teaching text for its own sake. These schools assume that this quality experience will magically inspire our children to accept any values, ideas, or behaviors that are associated with Judaism. The equation the current system depends upon is: "If I love (see the quality in) learning and learning is exclusive to Judaism, than I must also love (see the quality in), and will adhere to, all of Judaism." Lack of true analysis of how and whether the schools meet our religious goals is a sure harbinger of catastrophe. As a result, the only way to prevent the impending crisis is to give sober and unsentimental thought to our goals as a people, and the role of Jewish education in accomplishing these goals. Once we do that, we will feel compelled to embark on a fundamental reformulation of the contents and methods of Jewish education.

Obviously, serious reformulation of Jewish education will take years, probably even decades. Nonetheless, initiating this discussion is long overdue. Below are a few modest suggestions to get the ball rolling:

It must be understood that the main job of Jewish schools is to create balanced and secure, truly religious Jews. If our students end up becoming *talmidei hakhamim* so much the better, but that must remain a secondary goal. In a world where individuals choose their beliefs and lifestyles, the societal norm is to understand one's choices. In this cultural context, we clearly cannot expect great success without giving our children some background knowledge as to why Jews are supposed to act in a certain way. Our schools need to transmit an understanding of the Jewish belief system and code of conduct. This will then give our children a sense that they know the *raison d'être* of the Jewish enterprise. In short, our children must be shown that Judaism as an organic system is the most effective way to a meaningful and holy life.

Curricula must be selected that will explicitly communicate Torah values—their sources and implications. Mitzvot should be studied in their broader ideological context—from a philosophical, as well as legal, perspective. Teaching the beauty of individual mitzvot without plugging them into something more systemic is a big mistake that may well have been a prime cause of the "*hithaberut*" phenomenon in Israel, where young people pick and choose which mitzvot to observe based on how relevant to their own lives they perceive them to be. It is for this reason that Rav Kook was in favor of teaching Kabbalah on a mass level in Modern times.

We must teach our belief system and faith. This means that students need to know how Jews historically have understood the nature of God, prophecy, and other such matters. As a simple example, someone who has not studied Rambam's discussion on prophecy in *Hilkhot Yesodei haTorah* will probably be unclear about how we can categorically deny the claims of other religions. Since today's individual will be exposed to other faiths, such information is indispensable.

More important than anything else is the creation and internalization of students' relationship with God. Prayer is central to this. It should be taken for granted that students have to understand what they are saying, the meaning of the words as well as the ideas behind them. We must teach *kavana*. Children must be taught meditation skills as well as the ability to be comfortable with silence and being alone. It is true that such concepts are not easily imparted. Their central value, however, should force us to spend a great amount of time and effort on developing and perfecting the strategies needed to internalize these skills. If this means working in small groups or one-on-one, it is well worth the extra cost in personnel.

Finally, texts must be chosen based on their content and in line with educational goals. As such, we must spend more time on Tanakh and Jewish Thought and less time on Talmud. It is worth noting that as far as halakha is concerned, Tanakh is the only subject that a father has to make sure his son learns (Y.D. 245:6, see Taz and Gra).

Concerning method, we must prioritize religious socialization over the acquisition of information. Thus, the educational relationship that must be created between teacher and student should be in the form of apprenticeship. Apprenticeship is teaching by theory followed by practical example. The apprentice is then tested on his or her own ability to use the theory as best as he or she can under the scrutiny of the master. A good master will allow the apprentice to develop his own unique style with the tools that the master has taught.

Indeed, we will need to spend more time with our students and invite them into our lives. Students need to see how truly religious Jews interact with their children, what they do with their free time, how they eat and make *berakhot*, and so forth. Students need to see how Jews celebrate and why they celebrate; they must see how and why Jews mourn. Correspondingly, teachers need to be role models worthy of emulation.

Even within the classroom, we have to take the phrase *na'aseh venishma* (we will do and we will understand) more seriously. As most educators know, a hands-on experiential lesson is almost always a successful lesson. Beyond learning about mitzvot, their performance must be fully experienced. A full mitzvah experience should obviously have more than a physical component. When a teacher shakes a lulav, he or she should find strategies how to prepare for the mitzvah with his or her students, through meditation, song, inspiring stories, and the like. There is often no greater source of motivation than seeing and being involved in a properly performed mitzvah.

Students also need to be exposed to the outstanding role models of our generation. It is important for them to hear about *tsaddikim*—and see them firsthand. People need living heroes. If we do not provide them, children will look elsewhere. One should not underestimate the role of heroes in personal values development. In this, one must be careful to distinguish between *tsaddikim* and *gedolim*. While all *gedolim* worthy of the name have many outstanding traits, sadly they may also have painfully visible flaws and consequently exposure to such people can be disconcerting for students. While their teachers' flaws, within reason, help to make them more human and thus more accessible as role models, we have to be careful about whom we acclaim to be heroes.

The first step in overhauling the current educational system is to give teachers (current and future) the ability and knowledge to do so. Teachers are in an ideal place to be the foot soldiers of the revolution that we would like to implement.

New teachers must be trained to view themselves as religious facilitators. They have to understand that they hold the keys to the next generation's spiritual development, or lack thereof. As a result, a great responsibility will be given to them and, by the same token, the unparalleled merit will be theirs if they can meet this challenge successfully. They would be making a major contribution to epic history.

We live in a time that demands bold thinking. Indeed, we live in a time that also demands bold action. More than ever, it is an "*et la'asot lashem*"—a time when we require the courage to act for the sake of the Divine.

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