Jewish Education

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What Is Jewish Education?

All parents who identify strongly with being Jewish will agree that they would like their children to have a Jewish education. Jewish education is very important in helping to keep children frum. Now, if you were to ask several people to write down on a piece of paper what a Jewish education means to them, there will be a large variety of ideas. Almost everyone has a different definition of what they feel is a Jewish education. One hundred Jewish parents from different backgrounds and communities may produce one hundred different definitions.

At one of the Jewish Day Schools where I taught, a large percentage of Jewish studies was comprised of the history of modern Israel—along with its political, geographical and environmental studies—and the Hebrew language. They also placed a strong emphasis on various sections of Tanakh. In contrast, during my schooling years, I studied at a number of different Jewish schools and yeshivas where studies went from early morning to late at night, but never did these studies include the Hebrew language or anything to do with modern Israel. And aside for some small sections studied in grades three and four, little Tanakh was taught.

A Lubavitcher (Lubavitch Chassid) will want Tanya and Shulchan Oruch Harav included in a school curriculum. Litvish (black-hat Yeshiva crowd): Mesilas Yesharim and Chayei Odam. A Breslov Chassid: Tshuvas Haran or Likutei

Moharan. And then there are religious Zionists who may want Rav Kook's Torah views studied. Some Sephardic groups will insist on the Ben Ish Chai. The Yiddishists will want to read the works of Sholom Aleichem. There are Orthodox people who would like girls to study Talmud, and then there are Conservative Jews who would also like girls to study Talmud, but they may have different reasons.

Jewish education is a complex issue if no one can agree with each other on what exactly constitutes Jewish education. The next time you hear people say that they want their child to have a good Jewish education, ask them to describe what would be a good education versus a bad education. Does it match with the ideas that you hold?

I recently visited one of my younger sisters. She married a Canadian man, and they are now living in Jerusalem. Over dinner one night, I asked about their future plans. They said they would like to continue living in Israel for a few years, but once they have kids, they want to move back to Canada. They said, "There are too many problems with the religious education in Israel and it is better not to bring up kids here."

I spoke to a number of other North American young, yeshivish couples living in Israel. Like my sister and her husband, they said, "We cannot see bringing up our children in Israel, and we plan to return to North America after a few years here."

This intrigues me because I feel the opposite. If I had to choose one ideal place to bring up Jewish children, it would be Israel.

On to the second issue: How do we define success?

If a child can read, write, and speak English, then he has received an English language education. If one can add, subtract, divide, and multiply numbers, then she has received a basic math education. However, when it comes to Judaism, things are far more complicated. Because some parents will be happy if their child has learned one book of Mishnah and another parent will feel that they should have learned two. Then there is a third parent, who feels that they should no longer be learning Mishnah, but it is time for them to be learning Talmud. Yet a fourth parent may feel that they should learn more Tanakh, and so on.

Many Jewish schools do have solid curricula. But what happens when the child receives excellent marks in Talmud but shows no sign of Yiras Shomayim? Academically the child is doing well, but is this a Jewish education that you would be happy with?

It gets more complicated in the Yeshiva world, where there tends to be very little outlined curriculum, if any. I have seen boys go through 20 years of Yeshiva schools and they barely know a thing! In many large Yeshivas, a boy can sleep through almost every shiur and talk nonsense during his partner-study time. He will come out at the end of the year with very little knowledge. The boy may feel he can get away with this because most Yeshivas will not expel a student for not gaining in knowledge. In a university system, when students fail a bunch of classes, they are not permitted to continue; in the Yeshiva system, there is not really a concept of failing a course. There are generally few, if any, mandatory written exams in Yeshiva, and though there may be some sort of oral exam, perhaps once every term, if a student is unable to answer very much, he will usually still continue with his classes.

There are other factors that are also part of the Jewish educational system. Do the male students at the school need to wear kippot? If so, what color, size or material must they be?

A boy in my class who used to bus to school with me, would get on the bus wearing a suede leather kippah. When we got off the bus near the school, he would switch the kippah for a black velvet one. Another friend did the same thing, by switching a knitted one for a velvet one, and a third friend would take off a baseball cap and put on a kippah. We were at a Yeshiva where we were only permitted to wear a black velvet yarmulke. If you did not, you would get in trouble with the principal.

When I was teaching at a large Modern Orthodox school in Australia, I had to fight with kids to even get them to put on a kippah, despite the fact that a kippah was a mandatory part of the school uniform.

If a child was not wearing a kippah in school, there was probably a good chance that his father did not wear one either. (There were, however, students who came from religious families who took off their kippot in school because they wanted to fit in with the “cool” guys.) I would be wasting my time complaining to a father that his child did not wear a kippah when the father himself did not wear one—more so if the father did not even place any importance on the wearing of one.

If you knew a child who came from a religious family, where family members wear kippot all the time, and you found out that the child was not wearing a kippah around school but he was getting good grades in all Jewish subjects, would you be happy with the child’s Jewish education?

Home vs. School

Jewish education, and for that matter, any education, starts from the time a person takes her first breath until she takes her last. A parent's responsibility and a parent's influence on his child's education is a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week task. However, there is a slight difference between Jewish and secular education. After parents have seen their child achieve a certain academic level, they may, if they choose, kick back and say, "Job well done."

But Jewish education never stops.

One of the biggest problems we face occurs when parents assume that the school is responsible for educating the child. A parent's job is to educate the child. The school's job is to fill in a particular agreed-upon gap.

As for secular studies in a Jewish school, I see them as just a combination of tools that are being given to the student. You do not have time to teach your kid math, and you are happy to pay someone to do it for you. What you want a school to teach a child is only the stuff that you cannot, or do not have the time to teach them yourselves.

Understandably you may not have the time or the skills to teach a child how to learn Talmud. This is fine, and you can find many good schools that will do an excellent job in teaching Talmud. However, if you do not have the time or the skills to teach your child Yiras Shomayim, ahavas Yisroel (love for a fellow Jew), and basic Jewish values, make the time and get the skills. If you leave this to be taught by a teacher from school, you may end up with the child having fear of the teacher instead of fear of God.

Having worked in Jewish communities and Jewish schools around the world, my take is that Jewish education can be divided into two parts:

1) Intellectual study and pursuit of knowledge
2) Developing Jewish values

What can make choosing a Jewish school complicated is that one will often find a clash between what is being taught intellectually—i.e., as in course material—and the values that are highlighted and expressed. You can have an Orthodox school that is academically excellent in Jewish studies, but does not have the Chassidish values particular to your group that you may want. And then there is a school that needs to improve in everything, but has excellent Chassidish values. Or if you have very strong Zionistic feelings, you may find an excellent Yeshiva, but

without the Zionistic values.
If there are any “value” contradictions, or conflict between what is being taught at school and what is being taught at home, the child may grow up confused—more so if the child knows that the parent holds the school in high esteem.

If you feel that the school is in breach of one of your values, you need to talk with the child. Explain that this is a good school where the child can learn lots of Torah, or whatever the positive points are, but some things are not so good. It is perfectly okay for the kid to understand that no single institution will be perfect. But you need to make it clear to them what you feel is good at the school and what is not.

Parent vs. School

Many adults have the tendency to place their children in a school and then spend the next 20 years kvetching (complaining) about and putting down the school and its teachers. Many take it a step further and try to change the school. For some, it is about implementing a small change; but others want to redo the entire curriculum, change the principal, change all the teachers, and even move the school to a different location. If you are a parent who finds yourself trying to redo the system, perhaps it would be best to find a different school or try to re-examine the way you think about the current institution. Parents can successfully implement change in schools to a certain degree, but do not think that you will easily rewrite the curriculum.

In small communities it is understandable that parents may try to make changes. They do not have the luxury of numerous places to choose from to send their kids. However, in larger communities, there is often a choice to send the child to a better school, yet the parent does not take it. Perhaps due to logistical or financial reasons or travel time, or perhaps because of what the neighbors will think, and/or, the parents’ concern for their status.

For some reason that I do not totally understand, it seems to be human nature to try to find problems. If the educational part of the school were perfect, we would find problems with the school cafeteria. There is no end. Of course, sometimes parents do have legitimate issues with the school, and these should be addressed.

Perhaps it is in our blood to complain and look for problems. When the Israelites left Egypt, there they were, totally free from slavery, and they started

complaining, “Remember the cucumbers that we used to eat in Egypt!”

Here we are, experiencing freedom from slavery, witnessing the most incredible miracle performance—and kvetching about cucumbers?

If you do want to change something at a school, ask yourself why you want this change and whether you are being fair and realistic. I have seen parents trying to get programs implemented that would conflict with the curriculum already being taught. I have also seen parents place their children in a co-ed school and complain about every co-ed activity that goes on. Forget complaining; it is a waste of time. If you choose to send your kid to a co-ed school, do not fight the school because they have co-ed activities, and certainly do not make it a big issue so the child feels unsure of which side to take. Often in these situations of “home vs. school” conflict, a child will develop negative feelings toward Judaism.

One of the worst things I see parents doing very often is putting down the school, the teacher, and/or the principal. This is terrible. If you need to voice your dissatisfaction, never do so in front of your child. Not even as a joke. There is only one occasion when I would advocate complaining in front of a child, and that is if there has been a breach in values. You need to explain to the child that you are unhappy about what a teacher has done or about something the school has done, but not by discrediting the school. We can all make mistakes and schools and teachers are no exception. None of us is perfect, and it is not impossible for a teacher or the school to make a mistake—of course, within reason.

Most problems that parents have with schools tend to be value-based—a parent disagreeing with something related to the ethos, i.e., hashkafa, of the school. When this happens, one needs to ask oneself, “Am I right to have this complaint?” I believe that it is fine to have a problem regarding hashkafa if it falls within the boundaries of what the school stands for, but too often, parents have problems with the hashkafa of a school when their complaint is not part of the school’s hashkafa to begin with; for instance, having a problem with co-ed activities when the school is co-ed to begin with, or that the school does not celebrate Israel independence day, when the hashkafa of the school is not to celebrate.

If you send the child to a school that follows a different hashkafa from your own, do not complain. The only exception is when a school does not follow its own hashkafa—then, you should protest. But, as I mentioned earlier, the main objective of the school is to educate the child intellectually. If the kid also turns out with good middot and a hashkafa that matches with your own, take it as an extra benefit. But the responsibility to instill Jewish values, middot, and hashkafa

is on the parent.

The Teacher

A good rabbi or teacher will play a strong role in affecting a child's positive attitude toward Judaism, whereas a bad educator may contribute to a child's going off the derekh. It is crucial to have top-quality educators.

A good rabbi or teacher is someone who can care for his or her students as if they were his or her own children. Without this level of dedication, the children will suffer. Someone who has spent a few years learning in kollel or someone married to the Rosh Yeshiva's son or daughter will not necessarily be a good teacher. Being knowledgeable in a subject does not mean that one has the skills or the sensitivity to teach it.

I have met some brilliant teachers around the world who are born naturals. Their classes are full of fun and enthusiasm, and their students love them. On the other hand, there are some teachers who are not naturals, but with proper dedication and hard work, they do a good job. And then there are teachers who could get a PhD in education and still not be able to teach anything. Teaching done right is very hard. I have taught at different schools over the years—it is not easy.

Many good teachers are not attracted to teaching because of the low pay and general feeling of not being appreciated or valued. Highly motivated, creative individuals who know what they are doing in a classroom will usually find something else to put their talents into, and it will usually also pay better. Perhaps we should learn from the Chinese and the Japanese, in whose cultures a teacher is one of the most respected positions! This should be the same in all factions of Judaism.

A teacher, like everyone, needs to be able to make mistakes. The teacher needs to realize this, and a parent who is dealing with a teacher needs to realize this. A 13-year-old boy in one of my classes, who was a well-known trouble maker, was interrupting continuously. Perhaps I did not sleep well or perhaps I was having a stressful day or week, but I said something wrong to the kid that embarrassed him greatly in front of the class. It drove the kid to tears and he cried silently for the remainder of the period. I felt sick. Not because I had done something wrong—I am sure that most teachers would have sided with me and would have told me what I said under the circumstances was okay—but I felt sick because I had hurt a young boy's feelings and made him cry. I found the boy during break and gave him the most sincere apology. He was in shock, as he thought I was

coming to give him a detention or get him in trouble. He had so much respect for me after this incident and he became one of the best students in the class.

I was his Jewish studies teacher and with this came an extreme responsibility. I have noticed an interesting thing: If a chemistry teacher causes emotional hurt to a student, it is generally unlikely that the student will harbor ill feelings for the rest of her life toward chemistry. The student in such a situation tends to separate the subject from the person. Tomorrow the same teacher may be teaching math or some other subject. Also, this teacher is not teaching his or her own belief system, but rather, exposing the child only to an idea. However, when it comes to teaching Judaism, the teacher cannot be separated from the subject, because they are fused as one. A Jewish studies teacher or rabbi is interested in more than just teaching a few lines of Torah. People in these professions generally want to show the child how to live and act in every moment. Because of this, when a Jewish studies teacher does something wrong, it tends to reflect on the child's relationship with Judaism as a whole.

Where to Educate

(I first wrote this chapter in 2003.)

I started really thinking about this on my last trip to Thailand. I have been to Chiang Mai in the north of Thailand a few times and enjoy the slow-paced life. I came to the realization that I could live there and support a wife and two children on $500 per month. This would include a nice apartment, healthy food, and money to buy the basics of living. I can earn this $500 working online a few hours here and there throughout the month. This would mean that I could enjoy my life there. I could exercise every day, spend a few hours a day studying Torah, eat healthy, natural food, and—the most important part—I would have lots of time for my kids.

Whenever I tell this to anyone in the Jewish community, I'm usually met with, "What about Jewish education, community, and kosher food?"
I reply by asking, "Can you recommend a place with good Jewish education and kosher food?"

Most people I meet do not sing praise about the schools in their communities, but perhaps I have not visited enough. Though I will say that, in my travels around the world, I have met some incredible Jewish communities, unfortunately, the vast majority of communities that I have encountered are not places I would want to raise a family.

Community plays a strong role in a child's education. But if the community is rife with arrogance, hypocrisy, and lack of humility, then it is almost certain to have a negative impact on the child. These three character traits are too often found in the religious world, and the people going off the derekh see it. True, these problems are not unique to the Jewish world; however, why should one stay in a system that seems no better than anyone else? But again, I have been through a few places where I found the communities beautiful and inspiring. Where there is love and harmony, the Jewish schools are functioning, hessed groups are organized to help each other, and there is an overall feeling of peace and unity. Unfortunately I find that these communities are the exceptions.

What about kosher food?

In my six years of living in Sydney, Australia, where there is a population of 40,000 Jews, there were usually only one to two functioning kosher restaurants. In North Thailand, there is one Chabad house with a kosher restaurant for a population of a few Jews where the rabbi himself does the shehita (ritual slaughter), and I'd feel better eating the meat there than in a big place like Monsey, New York, where the meat could be coming from anywhere.

When I grew up in Montreal, surrounded by kosher food, nothing seemed to be kosher. One day a kosher-certified product was okay, and the next day it wasn't. Many fruits at one point were not kosher because they were coated with treif wax. Perhaps it was okay if you peeled it. Tuna was often not kosher because there could be dolphin or octopus mixed in, and a wide range of other foods may have had a real problem with bugs or a problem thought up by someone who thought they saw a bug, so those products, too, were not kosher.

In Chiang Mai it is easy to keep kosher. There is one kosher restaurant, one hashgaha, one shohet, and I can go to the market and purchase rice and raw fruits and vegetables.

The next issue is community: In Chiang Mai there is one shul with a beautiful minyan every Shabbos, a communal Friday night dinner and Shabbos morning lunch with lots of high-spirited Israeli travelers singing and sharing stories. I can also practice speaking Hebrew, something I do not get to do when I am in Israel, where everyone speaks English to me.

Shabbos meals and davening are beautiful. Sometimes there can be up to 200 travelers davening and singing together. I like the sense of community and look forward to going to shul there every Shabbos. Also, in this community, no one

cares what your profession is; it is the real person you are that is important. I like this feeling of truth that bonds us together. I would struggle to live in a community where life is all about what your job is and, unfortunately, this is the case in many communities.

When I am in Sydney, New York, or Montreal, I have a choice of half a dozen shuls that are within walking distance. It usually takes me a long time to decide where to go. It depends on my mood; how much do I want to daven, who do I want to talk to, am I relying on a Kiddush for my dinner or lunch, do I want to listen to a hazzan and choir, and if so, which hazzan and which choir? Which rabbi do I not want to hear give a sermon, which rabbi will talk for too long, which shul starts late, and which shul finishes early, at which shul will the people not have a problem with the color of my tie, or perhaps the lack of tie? Where will I get evil looks because I am not wearing a black hat? After a few minutes of this, I end up with “analysis paralysis” and do not want to go to any shul. I usually do not want to go to any of them to begin with and grudgingly end up having to choose the best of the worst. Most people seem to have at least one shul that they will not go to, and I, being more complicated than most, have more than one!
And what about the need for Jewish education, when living in some far-out place? Where can you educate your kids in Thailand?

People I meet seem to complain and kvetch about the state of poor Jewish education that exists in their communities, from New York to Sydney, Australia. I do not recall anyone ever raving about how wonderful and brilliant the Jewish education was in their community. On second thought, perhaps once every few months, I will meet someone who speaks wonders about the Jewish education in their community, but for most, it is either too frum or not frum enough, too strict or not strict enough, too many Jewish students or not enough Jewish students. Too much secular studies, or too much religious studies, and on goes the list.

Living in Chiang Mai and having lots of free time would mean that I could give my children the proper attention needed, whereas if I were caught in a big-city rat race, paying large-city bills and working large-city hours, making time for children would be a challenge. I would also have more time for my wife and personal Torah study. And to get a good charge of Jewish religiosity, I would fly us to spend Tishrei and Pesach in Israel.
So is this a good Jewish education? Maybe yes, maybe no. Maybe this whole Chiang Mai thing is just an interesting fantasy?

My purpose here is not to convince you to pack up your bags and move to Chiang Mai. My purpose is to get you thinking about how you do things and why you do

them. If all the “conventional” systems that we have in place are not working well, perhaps we need to be a little “unconventional.”