MiTalmidai Yoter miKulam: Reflections on Jewish Education

View PDF



Mrs. Zipora Schorr has served as Director of Education of Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School in Baltimore, Maryland for more than three decades. She is the recipient of the 2003 Covenant Foundation Award for Exceptional Jewish Educators, serves as a member of the Board of Directors of RAVSAK, is the chair of the Principals' Association of the Day School Council of Baltimore, and lectures widely on best practices in education and on Board Development and Governance. Mrs. Schorr has done her Masters' work in education at Johns Hopkins University, and is a doctoral candidate at Gratz College. This article appears in issue 25 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Mrs. Zipora Schorr has served as Director of Education of Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School in Baltimore, Maryland for more than three decades. She is the recipient of the 2003 Covenant Foundation Award for Exceptional Jewish Educators, serves as a member of the Board of Directors of RAVSAK, is the chair of the Principals' Association of the Day School Council of Baltimore, and lectures widely on best practices in education and on Board Development and Governance. Mrs. Schorr has done her Masters' work in education at Johns Hopkins University, and is a doctoral candidate at Gratz College. This article appears in issue 25 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

All eight of us—all my mother’s children—are in Jewish education in one capacity or another. We are teachers or principals in schools as diverse as Hareidi yeshivot, Modern Orthodox Day Schools, and Community Schools. We have taught English and Math, Hebrew language and Talmud, Parsha and Parshanut. We have led preschools, lower schools, and high schools, have taught special

education and adult education, have educated developmentally disabled children and those who are intellectually gifted. Through all of these experiences, we have each grown up with our schools, and have stayed in those schools for many years.

That, in and of itself, is an anomaly. In a field where only 11 to 15 percent of Jewish educational professionals remain in the same positions for 15 years or more, we defy the norm. We have each been in our positions for the greater part of our professional lives; all but three are principals, and two are teachers working for one of their siblings. Six of us are women, two are men, and our collective experience adds up to about 200 years.

All of this is meant to provide a backdrop and a context for some of the conclusions drawn and reflections shared in this essay. While this is clearly not a research article, I would submit that the anecdotal information and the experiences recounted would serve to provide an accurate picture of the landscape of Jewish education over the past 40 to 50 years. Perhaps this is too bold a claim—yet I cannot imagine a more authentic description of the field than that distilled out of the numerous conversations, discussions, conclusions, analyses, frustrations, and triumphs we brothers and sisters have shared. The very familiar relationships conjure up late-night talks, intimate and honest, always reminding us of the universality of our experiences, and the depth of our feeling for our field.

And herein lies the kernel, the core, the essence of what I share, speaking in my voice and in the voice of seven others, all in the same key—different tunes, assuredly, representing different educational environments, but variations on the same theme, ending with the same chorus.

Thoreau said, “Most men lead lives of quiet desperation, and go to the grave with the song still in them” (Civil Disobedience and Other Essays). We eight, in contrast, feel we lead lives of deep meaning, and we do so with a sense of joy and passion. Because at the heart of what we do is exactly that: heart. In short, we love what we do because we love why we do it: We love our students, and through them, we touch the future.

Although this may read like a cliché, we would each assure you that we mean it, and you have only to ask our students and they would confirm it. They know, without a doubt, that we care deeply about them, and we help them to care deeply about themselves—no easy feat in the complex and troubling world in which they find themselves.

A brief history: I have always wanted to be a teacher, always assumed I would be one. My early years were spent in the Kindergarten classroom of my older sister, who was my second teacher.

My first teacher was my mother, widowed at the age of 44, who was a model of strength and compassion, resilience and joy for all of her children, whom she raised alone, though she would have denied that. “Ich nem dem Aibishter bei dem hant,” she would say, “I take God by the hand, and he takes me where he needs me to go.” Simple and elemental, this is where my belief and my faith had their roots.

My first teaching job was at the age of 12, when I taught Sunday School for yet another sister, and learned to demonstrate authority and confidence, even when I didn’t feel it. I subsequently went on to become a high school English and Math teacher, a teacher of Humash and Jewish Thought, and then became the founding principal of a school for which I was expected to hire teachers, develop curriculum, order books and supplies, read architectural plans, and meet with the contractors of our new building. I was 25 years old. What I had was chutzpah—but even then I also had the passion that has never abated.

“MiKol melamdai hiskalti.” I learned a great deal in those years, some things by trial and error, but mostly through my mentors: my sisters and brothers.

“MiTalmidai yoter miKulam.” But it was from my students I learned the most, learned by listening carefully to the “small still voice” that trusted me enough to teach me.

And so, the first thing I learned was that, in order to teach, you need to have a safe space in which your students can learn. More than ever, creating a sense of sureness and stability is central to the emotional climate of our students. Of course we are institutions of learning, and of course the discourse must be stimulating and challenging. But our children cannot learn if they are unavailable for instruction, and they cannot be available for instruction if their emotional health is compromised by a sense of insecurity.

Needless to say, our partnership with parents becomes more important as we strive to provide that safe environment, but here, too, changes in society militate against our ability to provide that sense of safety and security. Specifically, I am referring to the upheaval in the structure of the American Jewish family, held hostage by the changes in society at large.

I have learned that our Jewish families are not immune from those changes, and in some cases are most vulnerable, because our culture expects us to produce the best and the brightest. Changes in gender roles, children who are over-subscribed and over-programmed, parents who are financially challenged, families where both parents work full-time, the demise of the extended family and the lack of support systems once provided by neighboring relatives—all of these factors contribute to the weakening family.

I have learned that the strength of the family is necessary for the strength of the school, and is crucial to the reinforcement of the principles and values a school strives to teach.

I say this despite the fact that one of the seminal articles on contemporary Orthodoxy, Haym Soloveitchik's 1994 essay in Tradition magazine, describes the replacement of the religious authority of the family, the mimetic expression of religious norms, by the authority of the school.

The "superior" textual knowledge of the teachers and rebbeim is seen in sharp contrast to the less Jewishly educated, or perhaps more organically educated parents.
While I see this trend very starkly, whether in yeshivot or community Day Schools, it leads me to a conclusion that seems self-evident but is often ignored: I have learned that, to fully educate a child Jewishly, we must educate the family as well. Our children have not simply sprung from the earth. They come to us with values and norms that are formed in the home, and if those values and norms are not brought into consonance with those of the school, at best there will be dissonance, at worst rejection of one or the other.

I have learned, then, that "the parents are not the enemy," but vital partners and co-learners of all that we attempt to instill in our children. V'heishiv lev avot al banim veLev banim al avotam. The only way that we can actualize this "premise of partnership," however, is for both parties to have respect and regard for the other. And that can only happen with a deep understanding on the part of the teacher that, as one parent put it, "my child is a piece of my heart walking around outside of my body." I share an astounding insight that I have consistently found: I have hired teachers who were single or married without children. They may have been excellent educators to begin with, but the transformation that takes place as soon as they have children of their own is very real, as these teachers begin to relate, in a profound way, to the depth of feeling the parents of their students have for their children. And, along with that, teachers further need to acknowledge the sophistication, intelligence, and indeed independence of parents

who are no longer of the generation where what the teacher says is sacrosanct.

But in order for there to be mutual respect, the teacher too must earn the respect of the parent. Since the role itself has ceased to command the respect of bygone times, there must be other factors that could encourage this respect.

I have learned that a teacher who is well-schooled in best practices, who is professional and prepared, who knows his or her subject matter and can convey it clearly, who is open to suggestion and seeks guidance, will be the kind of teacher that a parent can and will respect.

Therein lies a major challenge for our times, because our finest minds are not going into the field that I consider the most important calling of all: educating the hearts and minds of our children—which brings me to a crisis in the world of education that is shared by those in the general education world as well as those in the Jewish education world: the dearth of qualified personnel.

And it seems as though the only way that can change is if the respect factor toward teachers and toward teaching as a viable choice of profession can be increased, and that requires more than just teacher training centers. It requires a societal shift that sees the teachers of our children as valued partners in raising and nurturing our next generations.

It requires more than respecting teachers; it requires respecting the profession, the calling that teachers have chosen, and elevating that calling to a place of prestige. I wish I would hear parents declaring that their son or daughter is a teacher with the same pride I hear when they declare that their son or daughter is a doctor or lawyer.
I have learned that if parents hold teachers in high esteem—in overt and in subtle ways—that maybe their children will see teaching as a profession and calling that brings with it respect and high esteem.

And it is not this attitude alone that children reflect. Our children accept—or reject—our worldview and values not from what we tell them, but from what they see and what they observe from their teachers and their parents.

I have learned that children often do not hear what we say, because the words are drowned out by what we do. Research shows that 30 seconds in to a lecture accompanied by a wagging finger, a child’s attention is lost. By contrast, that same child will watch her teacher or her parent talking during prayer, and that lesson will follow her into adulthood.

Our teachers would likely be amazed at the actual practice in the homes of their students, practice that differs widely form the image those parents try to project. I have learned, therefore, that we really cannot know in what circumstances our students are brought up, what things they see and what words they hear. Our schools are much more diverse than ever before, because our communities are more diverse, with an influx of ba'alei teshuvah, Jews from the former Soviet Union, Iranian Jews, and other Jewish ethnic groups. Although this multiculturalism is enormously enriching for our children, the challenge is helping our families welcome these groups as part of klal Yisrael, not as the Other. The challenge for our teachers is understanding the cultural differences not only in these groups, but in the larger school community, with differences in lifestyle and in religious observance.

I have learned, therefore, that every child, every issue, every demanding situation has a context, has a back story, and no judgment, no policy, and no decision can be made without contextualizing the situation. When a teacher bemoans the "breakdown of standards," I ask him or her to "quantify." Are we describing a widespread malady, I ask, or is it an anomaly within the group, an outgrowth of a cultural attitude? When a discipline issue surfaces, I ask the teacher to make sure she understands the way some families communicate, and ask that teacher to understand the behavior within the context of the child's reality.

This is not to say that schools should be places of chaos and disorder.

But I have learned that without quantifying, and without considering context, no story is complete. Decisions and policies made in a vacuum, therefore, are purely cosmetic, because they are not responding to real-life situations, but to a theoretical construct that bears no resemblance to reality. Must a child understand the consequences of his actions, and be ready to accept those consequences? Of course.

But I have learned that, without considering all of the background information and the child's own reality—cultural, emotion, familial—the policy is meaningless. Perhaps we find comfort in the consistency of the words in the rule book, but let us then admit that we are not dealing with the young person standing before us, in all of his complexity, with tears in his eyes, and pain in his heart.

Which brings us full circle to our purpose, our goal, our reason for being, the cause to which we are dedicated: the heart and soul of our holy charges.

A Hassidic story captures it best. The story is told of the Baal HaTanya, who came knocking at the door of the Mezritcher Maggid. “Who is it,” asks the Maggid. “Ich, it is I,” said the Baal HaTanya. “Who?” he asked once again. And once again the answer was “ich” (“I” in Yiddish). “’Ich,’ you said?” said the Maggid with a tormented sigh. ‘Ich’? I have worked for 20 years to eradicate the ‘ich’ from you, and you come brazenly to my door and say “ich?”

Our goal is to remove our “ich,” and embrace the centrality and importance of our children, not ourselves. Jim Collins, author of the management manifesto Good to Great, speaks of Level V Leadership, the level of leadership to which we aspire, whether as teachers, as institutional leaders, even as parents. The core of Level V Leadership?

Humility, no different from the description the Torah gives of the quintessential icon of leadership, Moses. “Ve-haIsh Moshe anav me’od miKol adam,” “And the man, Moses, was humblest of all people.” Moses was indeed only a man, not a god, but his greatness was that he knew that, and he acted as a “servant leader.”

Author and educational philosopher Thomas J. Sergiovanni, in his groundbreaking work “Moral Leadership” cogently articulates this concept, and in so doing captures so many of our Torah values. “Truly effective schools are those with a …covenantal relationship…sacred authority…” with the leader case in the role of “servant leader.”
How strikingly resonant of the description of Moses, eved Hashem, servant to God, but steward too, of his people, whom he guided with humility.

All of this informs my vision of Jewish education for the future. You will notice that I did not touch upon technology and scientific advances, curriculum and administrative structure, enrollment and recruitment, affordability and sustainability, fiduciary responsibility and fiscal viability. All of these are topics that are important and real; all of these are issues with which we grapple each day, and which certainly require our attention. But these are all the corporeal manifestation of schools, akin to the body that God has created. While the body is the medium through which we serve, it is ultimately only a vessel, one that houses the heart and the soul.

And it is, ultimately, the heart and the soul with which I am concerned, the heart and the soul of the child whom I serve, the heart and soul of the school within which I serve.
My vision, therefore, of the ideal Jewish school, begins with the underpinning of humility in leadership, open to ideas, to innovation, to creativity. It is a school that

has well-trained, committed and passionate teachers and leaders, who are respected by the stakeholders as professionals and partners, and who themselves are respectful of the “tselem Elohim” in the holy children they teacher.

It is a school that teaches not only children but families, a school where the role of the family is acknowledged and valued, a school where it is understood that the family and school have an important symbiotic relationship which enhances both.

Finally, this physical space called a school is reshaped into a “mikdash me’at,” a safe and secure haven where questioning and learning and growing can take place, where passion and joy are the engines that drive the entire endeavor, and where the hearts and souls of all who enter are touched and transformed.