Born in Another Time

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A Braver New World?

Back when I was a principal at the Yeshivah of Flatbush, I had several bookcases that held a set of Talmud, Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe, and assorted other titles on one side of my office. Across, on the opposite side, stood a six-foot tall cardboard stand-alone Batman figure that I begged from one of the parents who operated a video store. On my desk, centered between the bookcase and the cardboard Dark Knight, was a mason jar filled with Laffy Taffy. My associate principal, faculty colleagues, and I turned many kids on to Torah and poetry in that little office, and I can honestly laughingly suggest that I'm not sure which had the greater influence at any given time, the Talmud Bavli, Poe’s “Raven,” or Batman (the hashpa’ah, influence, of the banana taffy was indisputable).

Nowadays, however, in addition to such invaluable educational tools of the trade as a sefer, a story, a master teacher, a life-size superhero cutout, and a candy wrapped in a cute riddle, Jewish educators have to manage a burgeoning array of digital resources. Today's technologies—incorporating both traditional texts and hypertexts, computer simulations, virtual-reality time travel, educational game platforms, and multimedia interactivities—promise to provide unique and engaging experiences to our younger generations of Orthodoxy and to impact an

audience larger in numbers than that at ma'amad Har Sinai many times over. It’s up to us, as responsible and responsive Jewish educators, through foresight, insight, and intentionality, to balance and blend these newer technologies with more traditional texts and practices, and to inspire our younger generations to navigate this “braver” new world with thoughtfulness, ironic distance, and critical intelligence. Tacking toward the tradigital could conceivably spark untold opportunities to influence the future course of Jewish education in both Torah and General Studies, and, thereby, to influence as well the future course of Orthodox Jewish thought, culture, and continuity.

The question is: How should we be doing this?

Reading Between the Subject Lines

“WHAT WILL EDUCATION LOOK LIKE IN A MORE OPEN FUTURE? … TECHNOLOGY AND RAPIDLY EVOLVING STUDENT NEEDS…THE GLARING PROBLEM OF OUR OUTDATED EDUCATION… GROUNDBREAKING TECHNOLOGY TRENDS FOR THE YEAR AHEAD… TIME TO IMPLEMENT DISRUPTIVE INNOVATION!” This is just a small sampling of the often-melodramatic subject lines that appear daily in my office email. True, once in a while someone throws out a reminder regarding measurement of skills and assessment of knowledge. Still, it’s troublesome that some major educational concerns of broad general import are noticeably absent from the blaring headlines.

With all the emphasis on ever new means and methods, where is there shown a similar level of concern for subject matter itself? Where is the hot-button item asking “What content will encourage our younger generations to build a life extraordinaire (and in our case, a Jewish life), and why we should be teaching it?” What “groundbreaking” moral values are we urging our educators to model and extol in their daily conversations and explorations in our classrooms, and why? What “innovative” (a word to be used cautiously, if not skeptically) opportunities for inventiveness, imagination, creativity, and sheer joy and excitement are we embedding in our course of studies and in our ways of learning in our Jewish educational institutions … and why not?

Do Not Confine Your Children to Your Own Learning

These are not meant to be the wide-eyed queries of a naïf, the rants of a curmudgeon, or the proposed articles of a Luddite convention platform. As should be obvious from sentiments expressed earlier, we ought never turn our backs on new technologies and better methodologies; rather, as educators we must pledge

to embrace these advanced and advancing tools, to exploit them, experiment, distinguish among them and, finally, to borrow Chazal's metaphor of the model student in Pirkei Avot, like a human sieve to judiciously separate the fine flour from the coarse.

"Do not confine your children to your own learning, for they were born in another time." So goes an ancient Hebrew proverb I'd once come across. Or is it talmudic, or Arabic, or Chinese? The all-knowing internet is uncertain and I've yet to find a classical Jewish source that mirrors these exact words. Still, the spirit is certainly recognizable in Jewish tradition, while it clearly reflects a universal sentiment as well. Indeed, who would deny the otherness, the "other-timeness" of each generation? What teacher would not acknowledge that the vernacular of the day, the sefat haRekhov so to speak, is a resource of first resort for meaningful discourse with students? That the cultural signposts of the day offer quick reference points and easy analogy? That the technology tools of the day are indispensible for compatible communication and hooking students' attention?

Not long ago, a medical surgeon posted this on his blog:

Without acknowledging that new generations learn differently from previous generations, we will never be able to "transform" education so that it is fit for purpose in the future…

If one of my teachers had asked me about the supraspinatus muscle, it would have elicited a cascade of learning…. I would have gone to the library or to one of the standard textbooks… visited the dissection room… sought further knowledge [from] an anatomy demonstrator… . [Instead, while] writing this blog, I have googled "supraspinatus." In 0.12 seconds… I have access to 858,000 pages of information, 137,000 images and 34,000 videos of this muscle.

And more recently, David Leonhardt of The New York Times described a similar rejiggering in the field of journalism:

One of the main lessons we've learned is that journalists have not been fully using all of the tools that are now available to us. For decades, the traditional article … has dominated newspaper and magazine journalism…. But … [i]t's no accident that many of the most-read New York Times articles of the last few years have been complex takes on serious subjects in a form other than a traditional article: an explainer of the Ebola crisis, a photo essay on aging, a video on ISIS… the rent-vs.-buy calculator, a graphic on nonemployed men, a map on poverty and an interactive on generational politics.

Leonhardt makes an articulate, convincing argument that we might do well to echo in our own field of Jewish education. Still, let’s add the necessary caveat: Tools for their own sake, rather than as the product of mindful, well-analyzed, and well-argued strategies for the future, are of dubious pedagogical effectiveness. To merely toss technology into classwork like so many chickpeas into a salad, to have students click and play and cut and paste, is not the sine qua non for attending school. A live Jewish Day School classroom is a sacred place to inhabit, an environment within which to benefit and grow, a unique and inimitable communal gathering of diverse critical minds and personalities, with its give and take of human discourse rich in ideas and emotions and activities.

But what gives this coming together of participating students and teachers, staff, and administrators, its grand purpose and shape?

It’s the Curriculum, Stupid!

In addressing the topic of Jewish education for our younger generations, it is imperative—even before one student has an iPad in her hand, even before a single teacher powers on his wall-hung Smart Board—to direct the spotlight on the curriculum that underlies it all. I define curriculum in this context as the central nexus of a school, the overarching course of studies that represents the integrity and ethos of Jewish education, the proud purpose of which is to explore the infinite interconnections between all its activities and teachings. While every class lesson in such a curriculum possesses its own integrity by subject and grade, it is situated at the same time responsibly, even inevitably, within the school’s entire course of studies and, it is hoped, ultimately within the whole lifetime of an individual or group’s Jewish and General education.

In such a curriculum, it's not the technology that drives the success of our educational endeavors but the content—the chosen stories, explorations, and shared values and experiences that are delivered via that technology, be they in the form of multimedia blasts across the internet, broadcast to mobile devices, or beamed down to smart wristwatches and eyeglasses. As the politicians (and, unfortunately, many educators) often fail to note, "It's the curriculum, stupid."

What We Talk about When We Talk about Jewish Education

A yeshiva Day School, with its dual-curriculum of Torah Studies and General Studies, has a special responsibility.

A yeshiva Day School is not a Talmud Torah grafted onto a public school with two distinct realms of study meant to compete for the time and attention of teacher

and student alike. It is certainly not a language-themed Hebrew charter school, where the emphasis on contemporary Israeli life, language, and culture is both devoid of religious devotion, tradition, and Jewish practice, and constrained within legitimate legal guidelines that mandate a strict separation of church and state.

Rather, the ideal Jewish Day School is an organic unity within whose walls our younger generations learn to live as whole beings whose Jewish identity is evidenced by familiarity with Torah texts that span centuries, by facility in classical biblical, mishnaic, and contemporary Hebrew languages (and, it is hoped, acquaintance with medieval, enlightenment, modernit, and meduberet versions of Hebrew, not to mention awareness of Ladino, Yevanic, Yiddish, and other polyglottal variants in between), and by informed participation in the religious practices of a vibrant Jewish community. Within these walls they learn to live as whole beings whose Jewish identity is at the same time intrinsically bound up with their intellectual, spiritual, and social-emotional growth, with their studies in the liberal arts and sciences, and with their positive participation in society at large.

A modern yeshiva Day School has every obligation to exploit technology but, uniquely, the very spirit of traditional Torah training and the halakhic parameters of Shabbat and the mo'adim that are at the heart of such an education demand that our children develop a comfortable facility in ancient methods of text study and acquire learning skills that are not dependent on access to electronic technology and digital resources. Such "Sabbath skills" are invaluable in the 24/7 hustle bustle of today's world—they foster conversation, contemplation, introspection, and mindfulness, and they transfer seamlessly to General Studies classes and activities with enormous benefit.

Of course, "Jewish learning," in this discussion, encompasses Jewish and General education, and it is never imparted in completely separate silos. In their roles as Jewish, American, and global citizens, our younger generations must engage on a daily basis not only with the interconnectedness of Jewish and General texts (some use the term "secular," which is too often intended and/or perceived pejoratively), but with the world itself as "text." If we need a model for this approach, let us turn to Heaven, where, as the Gemara in Avodah Zarah describes it, God spends one quarter of every day teaching Torah to schoolchildren and playing with the majestic whale-like creature Livyatan at the same time. A free interpretation: Here we see God both teaching the children Torah text and taking them on an experiential fieldtrip to the aquarium to visit Livyatan; here we confirm the words of Sefer Tehilim, ""Lashem Ha'aretz U'mlo'ah," the profusion of

delights in this world is the Creation of God, and the most magnificent of all is the biological phenomenon of the Livyatan. God teaches the schoolchildren a wonderful lesson in Torah and a wondrous lesson in science interconnected and all wrapped in one.

“All forms of knowledge are interrelated and interdependent, and we are put on earth to know and to make known the correspondences between them all,” affirmed the non-Orthodox art historian Meyer Schapiro, a truth that could have been uttered by any of his Orthodox talmudic scholar forebears. It is a wise axiom to guide our curricular thinking.

In addition, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr., the arc of a modern Jewish curriculum is long and should bend its participants toward lives of character and hessed, critical intelligence and kindness, personal virtue and keen awareness of the world around them. Twenty-first-century Jewish Orthodox education owes our younger generations a curriculum framework that moves beyond facts, factoids, and information. True learning is learning that grows into know-how, knowledge, self-knowledge, understanding, and, ultimately, “the search for self-transcendence, the enterprise of trying to become a different or a better or a nobler or more moral person,” as writer Susan Sontag, a passionate teacher herself, noted. All of this must be built upon an immutable foundation, the dictum of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (a great gaon and a paragon of pedagogy) that the learning of Torah is the very soul of Judaism.

Nor should we neglect, in creating successful and cutting-edge curriculum in the twenty-first century, to acknowledge that the daily world we immediately inhabit, the aggressively fast-paced world of popular culture and mobile device, is alluringly attractive and all-encompassing. That is why principals and teachers responsible for curriculum experiences should, in designing units of study, find ways to incorporate age-appropriate, grade-appropriate, and Jewish values-appropriate classic films, best-selling children’s books, popular music, internet trends, and a host of elements from pop and academic cultures. Such elements elicit instant recognition, trigger lively discussion, and serve as thematic touchstones in subject areas of all sorts. Comic books and Ben & Jerry’s, Swatch Watches and Radio City Music Hall, Twitter, TV commercials, and Six Flags Great Adventure all have something important to say about our society and our selves. How can we as educators afford not to guide our younger generations in understanding and critiquing the society they inhabit?

Youth, as Rav J. B. Soloveitchik has characterized it, is full of “simple faith and fiery enthusiasm,” and only children, he adds, “can breach the boundaries that

segregate the finite from the infinite.” We must, thus, speak to the hearts and minds of our younger generations of learners, and provide them inviolate non-judgmental breathing space for individual wrestling with questions of identity, religious belief and practice, and spiritual growth. We must deliver them both the means and reasons to sustain a continued visceral, religious, and intellectual connection to Jewish learning and observance and the means to be competitive with the best in the world- at- large.

We must impart to our Orthodox younger generations a desire to go on learning, as philosopher John Dewey advocated. We must inspire them to rise from their Torah learning and, as the Ramban writes in his celebrated Iggeret, to immediately translate that learning into action. We must exhort them to act in the spirit of Rabbi Abraham Kook’s exuberant lyric, “Ani ohev et haKol,” “How I love all things!” so that they grow to appreciate and celebrate the varieties of Jewish experience, to practice Torah and mitzvoth meaningfully in their daily lives, to use the liberal arts and sciences as a means to understand the nature of humankind and the world it inhabits, and to recognize their roles and responsibilities as global citizens.

Permit me, finally, to tweak the proverb quoted above, from which this essay derives its title, and give it a decidedly Orthodox Jewish slant, its ambiguous origin notwithstanding. “Do not confine your children to your own learning, for they were born in another time.” The Gemara in Shavuot and the Midrash Tanhuma tell us that all Jews were present at the Revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai and that the souls of all as yet unborn future generations of Jews joined in attendance with the Israelites of the Exodus at that moment. So, when we speak of our Jewish students as being “born in another time,” we are not only referring to them as the younger generation that succeeds us but as our compeers at Mattan Torah, our fellow standard bearers in tradition.

Dor holekh ve’dor ba, always a next generation, intones the ancient Megillat Kohelet, a conceit that finds a modern counterpart in lines from the poet T. S. Eliot’s Four Quartets, “For last year’s words belong to last year’s language / And next year’s words await another voice…”. Another voice. Another time. “Another time” in Judaism is always a glance backward more than 5,000 years to our origins and a glance ever forward towards an ideal world to come. That is what a tradigital curriculum is meant to honor, preserve, and anticipate. As Ben Franklin expressed it back in 1786, "We are, I think, in the right road of improvement, for we are making experiments.