The Limits of the Orthodox Classroom

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Few would deny that what differentiates Orthodoxy as a standpoint is largely the boundaries it places. These boundaries are notably stricter and more delineated than those of the non-Orthodox movements. This is not to deny the role of beliefs, ideals, and other emphases in structuring Orthodox life; however, even these rely to some extent on a set of strong borders to preserve them.

Borders are critical in defining identity. Orthodox Judaism's relatively clear parameters can appear to good advantage, especially when placed against a background of Western culture, which arguably often fails its adherents, leaving them adrift in a sea of contradictory recommendations from scientific and cultural mavens. When one's personal borders of behavior and creed are firmly established, one is freed from the need to constantly create and adjust them. One can then focus on creating the content rather than the vessel in which to hold it.

In an ideal world, Orthodox parameters would serve to minimize confused wandering and searching. Furthermore, while some measure of dynamic dialogue is unavoidable as individuals change and grow, the overall picture would be one of a stable, rich lifestyle in which one's religious, intellectual, and behavioral impulses are in synch, both within oneself and also vis-à-vis the surrounding community. And indeed, many are drawn to Orthodoxy precisely for this kind of clarity. Yet limits, boundaries, and borders may also be extremely stifling, and may in fact—especially when driven by fear rather than existing organically as part of a secure identity—overly curtail individual autonomy and choke off important spiritual and existential processes necessary to religious life.

The Orthodox classroom or other study forum reflects the above truths. I'd like to explore briefly some of the boundaries—both of content and form—placed within the Orthodox classroom. Some of the questions to be dealt with include:

- In terms of content, what is studied and embraced as positive, and what is deemed inappropriate or dangerous and is kept out of the classroom, either by omission or by active suppression?
- In terms of form, in what fashion do the students learn? How much control does the teacher appropriate or relinquish, and how much autonomy and self-expression is granted to the students within the learning process?

For the purposes of this discussion, I will borrow two categories applied by Dr. Marla Frankel (who in turn utilizes Professor Michael Rosenak's educational terminology and theory) in her analysis of the work of Nehama Leibowitz *z"l*. An examination of Leibowitz's work will demonstrate for us a

model of a lesson that contains both openness and limits; and through it we can arrive at a general discussion of the limits of the Orthodox classroom.

Frankel suggests that Leibowitz wore at least two teaching "hats," and that this granted her a large measure of flexibility, a trait critical to good educating. The first "hat," or role, is that of the facilitator. This kind of teacher steps back from the students, enables discussion, challenges them intellectually, and trains them in problem-solving. It is the process, not the solutions, that is important. The facilitator's religious focus is on existential, emotional dimensions rather than on enforcing norms and laws. The second "hat" is that of the pedagogue. This type of teacher presents a discourse or lecture, using rhetorical and analytical skills to answer his or her own questions instead of letting the students answer them.

In the first model, the individual student is important; in the second, it is the community and the content that matter as vehicles for belief and practice. These two broad roles (though obviously other models are possible) will help us organize what otherwise appears a confusing patchwork of contradictory elements in Leibowitz's pedagogy, and to see that ultimately she implemented what may be termed "pluralism within limits."

This was true of both the content of Leibowitz's classes and also their form. In terms of content, we see both the facilitator and the pedagogue in action. Leibowitz believed in offering a diversity of interpretation, and the method she invented of presenting different commentaries side-by-side was very much a facilitator's technique. It activated the students—and also taught them that many options existed, and that their questions were not heretical. As Leibowitz states: "It is important to include this opinion too so that the students will not assume that Rashi's explanation is the only one possible, and anyone who is bothered by it… is, so to speak, an utter heretic who has no part in the Torah of Moses."

Overall Leibowitz's method was pluralistic relative to her contemporaries and to the traditional approaches that preceded her. The Tosafists, for example, aimed to reconcile discrepancies, while Leibowitz loudly broadcasted them. When educators expressed to her their concern that students, especially children, could not easily grasp that multiple opinions may co-exist, she retorted: "We are not Catholics! We have no Pope to decide who is right!"

Furthermore, Leibowitz opened up the limits of her classroom and writings to include non-Orthodox and non-Jewish sources in the study of Torah. These sources were not only used to bolster traditional sources (an agenda palatable to conservative elements, as it served to show "how correct our sources are") but also to unearth new layers of the Torah. This was far more radical, implying that thinkers outside Orthodoxy can reveal dimensions in the Torah overlooked by traditional commentators. Leibowitz believed she could eat the "fruit" of these thinkers, while throwing away the "peel."

However, Leibowitz took the facilitator role only so far before putting on the pedagogue's hat. The students were allowed to choose, but only from a certain range of sources selected by her. She placed constraints on the use of universal sources—worldly wisdom was not to be equated with Torah, and the non-Orthodox sources referred to always remained a precisely selected minority, approached with caution and never given the pride of place that the traditional commentators claimed.

In terms of form, Leibowitz encouraged open discussion in her classroom. She paid personal attention to each student as far as she was able, and she was seen as an accessible teacher. She hated the idea of lecturing, believing that when the teacher talks too much it limits the interaction essential to learning. Instead, her lesson consisted largely of group discussion of a topic, with the teacher interspersing her comments and never talking for more than a couple of minutes at a time. Students forgot that they were being educated, as the discussion flowed as naturally as a conversation. Though not lacking in personal charisma, Leibowitz did not rely on it as the driving-force of the lesson. Rather, she chose questions that would open up discussions, and she deferred her own opinion until after the students had had a chance to reflect. In permitting such interactivity, she relinquished control to the students, functioning as a facilitator and anticipating contemporary trends to a certain extent.

Today's students are encouraged to express their opinions and to create personal connections to the subject matter, whereas the teacher's role is to validate the students, not to critique them or guide

them too strongly. Leibowitz's lesson partly conformed to this model, in its encouraging of maximum participation and lively discussion. Ultimately, however, she kept a tight rein on what was considered the correct answer, using a formula of positive and negative reinforcements and not hesitating to announce "*Bikhlal lo*!" ("Totally incorrect!") when she disagreed, an experience that could be mortifying for the student. Few educators in tune with today's trends would read a student's answers out in front of everyone and then declare, "That's completely wrong!" She ran a strict classroom, not permitting the lesson to stray off on random tangents and insisting on punctuality and proper preparation. She expelled students who did not have a basic understanding of the material, or who arrived empty-handed, *sans* Tanakh. When two young yeshiva students admitted they had brought neither Tanakhs nor notebooks, Leibowitz announced to the roomful of students, "It's the TV generation! They come to sit and watch!" Many found her harangues somewhat intimidating; some even left, never to return. In all this, she acted as the pedagogue; and some might even label Nehama's style authoritarian, though she herself would be repulsed by such a term.

In her approach to the text, Leibowitz also demonstrated such mixed tendencies. While on the one hand she encouraged her students to read the text closely and directly, ultimately the commentators' lead was to be followed when studying text critically, with the student's own ideas in second place.

Students' responses to Leibowitz's classroom varied, in line with the diverse elements mentioned above and with the students' own personalities. For many, her teaching techniques were their first experience of the teacher as facilitator. The fact that her class was founded upon dialogue between commentators of different periods and spirited discussions between participants constituted a breath of fresh air. Unlike old-school lecturers, Leibowitz was open to diverse viewpoints in her lessons, and students were even allowed to contradict her, though not the text. She was interested in the individual student and in nurturing original thought; her aim was active learning.

Yet she also firmly steered her class, rigorously training her students to approach the text correctly as she saw it. There were limits to her tolerance of critique of faith-based principles in her lesson. Those who studied with her remember occasions when students disagreed with her—and it was obvious to all present that such "insolence" was out of place. Leibowitz was controlling the class, and for a student to introduce some new agenda was completely inappropriate. Students were there to learn from the teacher, not to advance their own theories. She countered opposition with responses such as: "You didn't understand," "You need to learn more about this issue," or "This is off the topic." One student challenged: "But Nehama, aren't there seventy facets to the Torah?" She replied, "Yes, but what you said is not one of them!"

Many students liked the balance Leibowitz struck between her two roles. They enjoyed the discussion, while also appreciating her firm control of the class, which, by preventing too much digression, allowed mastery of a specific topic. She allowed arguments to continue for just so long, knowing exactly when to interrupt and return to the original point that she had made. For these students, what Leibowitz lost in openness of discussion, she gained in sharpening the student's mind. With a firm hand, she invited them into a new way of looking at a text, beyond their existing opinions, and she restrained overimaginative students with unsupported interpretations. In her class, even highly opinionated and voluble people learned to defer to her in order to gain what she could give. One charismatic educational figure, today the director of several institutions, recalls, "She would tell me what she thought, and I learned to keep quiet."

But this policy frustrated those who wished to broaden the field of inquiry, or who thought along different lines than hers. A free-spirited person might feel uncomfortable in her class; individualistic or critical students might experience the classes as rigid, with her constant demand to justify oneself using strict and rational tools serving to cramp a looser, more associative relationship with the text. Leibowitz was also not (barring a couple of isolated statements, not backed up in practice) interested in personal and emotional reactions to the text. On the contrary, she believed that they interfered with correct interpretation: "When analyzing or interpreting a literary work… [there is a risk] that the interpreter will speak about himself… about his own elevation of spirit, about what is going on inside himself… instead of about the text." She cared greatly about general relevance, but not

about the personal relevance for each individual. Class time was reserved for the correct answers, of which Leibowitz had a very clear idea. Personal issues and questions, even those of existential urgency for the student, must be saved for outside the classroom walls.

One last significant point to be made is the fact that Frankel, along with Erella Yedgar, discovered through careful analysis that the limits of Leibowitz's classroom changed depending on the students. The more knowledgeable and committed students generally were allowed more leeway.

The picture that emerges from all of the above is that of a complex approach, enabling Leibowitz to reach many different kinds of people simultaneously. It appears that Leibowitz achieved a good balance of elements in the classroom, creating openness and space and yet firmly setting limits so that various lines would not be crossed. She gave the impression of teaching from within a secure, non-defensive, open Orthodoxy (except perhaps when it came to biblical criticism and the historicizing of the Bible, around which she had extremely strong feelings that might lead to defensiveness); and that the limits she set were simply those of a teacher invested in guiding students to think in a certain way, rather than creating the free-for-all that sometimes passes for pluralism today.

We must, however, be careful before applying the Leibowitz model as an ideal for contemporary Modern Orthodox education, so many decades after it was developed. In the hands of the wrong (read: insecure, unimaginative, or authoritarian) teachers, or as part of a rigid system—for example, as widely applied through the Israeli matriculation exam—there is a risk of it becoming dry and mechanical, with the more limiting and inflexible aspects dominant. Moreover, today's educational mindset, in line with changes in general global sentiments, has shifted in the direction of the facilitator. Hence, the elements of the pedagogue in Leibowitz's style run even more risk today of alienating creative and independent-minded students, who expect and desire to be allowed to express their opinions and have them considered with respect. For this reason, some of her students who continued her method in their own teaching chose to modify it and extend its limits; for example, allowing more direct access to text without mediation by commentaries.

We can argue, on the other hand, that precisely *because* the world of education has shifted so far toward interactive discussion and away from making definitive statements, Leibowitz's model of pluralism within limits has much to offer. Those educators for whom pluralism means never disagreeing with someone's interpretation—however illogical or textually inconsistent—for fear of offending, would do well to take a leaf out of her book and learn to make firmer statements and guide toward a worldview. These, however, are often the problems of the non-Orthodox, while Orthodoxy by its nature risks the opposite, namely excessive ridigity and over-imposed limits.

This article has not set the ideal borders for the Orthodox classroom; such an aim would be too ambitious—and also arrogant. This is a multi-faceted, ongoing discussion, and will vary from educator to educator, institution to institution, and sector to sector. My purpose has been to raise the issues and show some of the prices to be paid for moving too far in one direction or another; and to present at least one model that incorporates both poles, so that educators may work out for themselves what proportion of "facilitator" versus "pedagogue" role is worthwhile adopting in their own lessons. I would also challenge the educator to introspect and ascertain how many of the limits he or she imposes upon the classroom derive from personal fears (such as that of relinquishing control), and how many constitute a thought-out *a priori* model.

On a final, personal note, as a product of an Ultra-Orthodox high school and some elite Modern Orthodox institutions of higher learning, I personally suffered greatly from the cramped limits of Orthodox classrooms. There was little space available for my questions and self-expression. My opinions were at best tolerated, rather than engaged or valued, and at worst seen as threatening, though they stemmed from an entirely genuine searching place. As for my creativity and imagination, it found no place at all. Many of the lessons strait-jacketed and silenced me rather than allowing me to emerge feeling more engaged, more connected, and more self-appreciating.

As an educator, I have since tried to rectify this by engaging in open debates where I value my student's opinions as a genuine source of wisdom for me. I try to engage with them with respect for their insights, while at the same time not abrogating the value due to my own knowledge. I have also adopted creative techniques that encourage self-expression and free the mind to go broader and deeper

than is generally accepted in Orthodox circles. One example of the latter is Bibliodrama, a marvellous role-playing technique of “spontaneous midrash” that, when done correctly, with firm steering and with faithfulness to the text, can achieve superb results in terms of deepened identification with the Torah, without straying from what feels comfortable for an Orthodox population. Here, I aim to stretch the limits but not breach them—and I feel it is important to do so. I trust that this question of what the limits are, and when and how to expand them to their maximum, may spark discussion in the right quarters.