

An Educational Manifesto

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I.

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 rabbinate's 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*.

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

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, then 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

