Toward a Halakhic-Humanist Worldview: Recovering a Lost Vision

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By the measurable standards of today's corporate-driven society, producers and consumers of Jewish education in America have much to celebrate. More Jewish boys, girls, and adults are learning today in yeshivot, seminaries, Day Schools, kollels, and post-college programs than at any other time in our history. Foundations such as Avi Chai and Mandel, professional organizations such as PEJE, and large metropolitan federations across the country are pumping more dollars, developing more programs, and deploying more human capital—from teacher induction and education to vision-driven curricular deliberations, from managerial expertise to experiential learning initiatives via student missions to Israel and other Jewish communities globally—than ever before. These are surely the best of times, institutionally-speaking, at least; if only we could creatively solve the tuition crisis—no small feat, of course—we'd immediately usher in a new Golden Era of Jewish education, a model for the ages.

Still, despite our strong numbers and increasingly professionalized infrastructure, ask a Modern Orthodox educator how our community is doing, and you'll likely hear ambivalence or frustration at best, apocalyptic predictions of the imminent demise of our movement at worst—certainly not the triumphalism or chest-thumping that our ostensible institutional success would seem to warrant. Alternately identified as an eclipsing of *yir'at shamayim*, a lack of passion or punctiliousness in *shemirat haMitzvot*, a religious behaviorism that belies the richness and depth of an authentic religious sensibility of inwardness and meaning, or some other such critique, this prognosis now coexists side-by-side with the increasingly clichéd "slide to the Right" and the phenomenon of "Flipping Out"—every comfortable Modern Orthodox parent's worst nightmare. With her flanks falling off to the sides, the center just won't hold. The martial metaphor here is apt: our educational institutions, starting first with the family, are engaged in nothing less than a counter-cultural struggle against the forces of consumerism, sound-byte oversimplification, and functionalism, on the one hand, and an often disdainful and stifling parochialism that denies the Divine Presence in the totality of the order of creation, on the other. Unsurprisingly, the sociological and cultural dispositions of both these unhappy alternatives feed off of each other in a vicious circular frenzy, further eroding the chances for a healthy and vibrant culture of critically engaged Orthodoxy. To name these troubling spheres of influence for the hearts and minds of our children and students is not to equate the threat posed by each to the religious well-being of our constituent population. The one necessary thing—the cultivation of an unapologetic life of *avodat Hashem*—must always be paramount. But the emotional and intellectual fallout from this communal tug-of-war has created nothing short of a profound crisis of meaning for many of our students.

Recent conversations, mainly in Israel but slowly trickling stateside, on the omnipresence of Talmud in the traditional yeshiva high-school curriculum and the perceived crisis of value looming in the *dati-le'umi* horizon have sharpened the focus of this educational deliberation. Much of the discussion to date has centered around the question of "relevance" in our contemporary Talmud curriculum, with the sides of traditional Brisker *lomdus* squaring off against the newer schools of applied, contextualized, values-driven interpretation and teaching. I also want to raise the issue of relevance, not only in the relatively thin sense that *shor sheNagah et haParah* will not naturally resonate with today's suburban students as much as it did with our farm-friendly ancestors but, far more significantly, in the more robust, foundational sense that our students do not perceive the worlds of knowledge, experience, or meaning through the lenses of a Torah-centered consciousness. Simply put, Modern Orthodoxy struggles to articulate and transmit a coherent, compelling, and systematic worldview for its students, a worldview that gives consistent meaning and value to the welter of experience comprising our engagement with reality. This lack of a comprehensive worldview impacts many areas of a student's religious life and development, from an inability to identify and articulate basic theological principles and commitments to a widespread confusion regarding the viability and parameters of our community's engagement with modernity, civil society, and both high and popular culture. The vast majority of our students are unable to articulate what an authentically traditional position might be on a host of live issues facing them in today's world, that is to say, *what* to think Jewishly. Furthermore, they appear even far less equipped to begin the deliberation of *how* one would go about thinking Jewishly, how to frame or perceive an issue from a place of authority, meaning, and Jewish understanding.

Thomas Mann once defined authenticity as a kind of "life full of citations," a way of being that draws on our lived and total engagement with our textuality, that constructs our consciousness out of the shared storehouse of our sacred scriptures, texts, and sources for our deepest sense of meaning and purpose. Our educational institutions fall far short of this ideal not just in the obvious inability of the vast majority of her students to quote or even simply recognize biblical verses, sayings of our Sages, or other sources from *tefilla, mahshevet yisrael, mussar*, and *Hassidut*—although talking to most Modern Orthodox high schoolers today will easily confirm this sad reality. Torah doesn't merely have something to say about everything we encounter in our lives, public and private, from politics to popular culture (often confused these days in our media-drenched society), from economic theory to sports, and everything in between; it is the very ground of our thinking, the prism through which we ought to understand all reality—*beOrkha nir'eh or*. This is first an epistemological claim, and only secondarily a pedagogical one. In both keys, this lack of a coherent and comprehensive *hashkafat olam* precludes our students from seeing knowledge, beauty, and experience in a religiously relevant fashion. (Although the literature on the religious significance of "worldview thinking" is rapidly growing in the communities of Christian academic and educational inquiry [see, most recently, James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as Concept*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Il, 2004], to date, little has been contributed to the world of Jewish Thought in this important area. Two exceptions to this lacuna in our contemporary theological literature are Max Kadushin's classic, *The Rabbinic Mind*, and, more recently, an important article by Jonathan Cohen, "Deliberation, Tradition, and the Problem of Incommensurability: Philosophical Reflections on Curricular Decision-Making" in *Educational Theory* 49 (1), pp. 71–89. Needless to say, more must been done to creatively appropriate this useful concept in Jewish educational circles.) There are, blessedly, study halls in Israel that are just beginning to seriously engage in this explicit work of worldview-formation from the rich depths of our *mesorah* and its robust application to the realia of cultural and political life. I have in mind here places such as Beit Morasha, Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak's Machon Bina l'Itim, Beit Midrash Ra'avah, and, on a more public scale, the Shalem Center. However, nothing remotely like this is happening in our Day Schools, yeshivot, or other *mekomot haTorah* in America—nor are there any signs that this vision- and value-driven talmudic inquiry is likely to take hold in major institutions of Torah study in the United States. We seem to be stuck in a sort of collective communal time-warp when it comes to our Talmud Torah, bound by modes of mechanical mastery of a technical or conceptual nature. Without the kind of values-driven, reflective halakhic study we're describing here, Modern Orthodoxy in America will remain a religiously minimalist community of affluence and mediocrity, a spiritual halfway house for those on a serious quest for meaning, unable to provide its adherents with the religious and cultural resources to realize its ambitious and holy mandate.

To illustrate what I'm trying to capture in this call for the cultivation of a comprehensive worldview, I want to briefly focus on one particular area where I think our failure is most obvious and acute. For all the talk about the primacy of *mitzvot bein adam leHaveiro* in our tradition, I submit that our yeshivot and Day Schools would look very different if we didn't merely pay lip-service to this domain of religious life, but, instead, really lived as our faith requires. What would our curriculum look like if we

took seriously Hillel's maxim that the entire Torah can be distilled into the principle of *veAhavta leReakha kaMokha*, and that the rest of the Torah is simply an elaboration of this ideal? What would our Day School and yeshiva graduates look like if they lived their lives as if the closest we came to the Divine Other in this world was in the divine face of the human other, if they really internalized C. S. Lewis's powerful expression from his war-time sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal…but it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit"? Something like Levinas' transformational reading of Rav Hayyim Volozhin or Rav Simcha Zisl's ideal of acquiring Torah by "bearing the burden of the Other," is what we're programmatically—in the most tentative, telegraphic form—grasping at here. (For Levinas' ethical-theological reconstruction of *Nefesh haHayyim*, see "'In the Image of God' According to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner," reprinted in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 148–163. For Rav Simcha Zisl, see *Hokhma U'Mussar*, chs. 1–4 *MeOrei Qrot haMussar*, vol. 2, ed. Simcha Zisl Levovitz (Jerusalem, 2003) and the thoughtful analysis in Ira F. Stone, *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Musar*, (New York: Aviv Press, 2006.) But where is this embodied ethical learning and teaching taking place in Modern Orthodox America, or in most places in Israel, for that matter? Let me leave the reader with a couple of suggestions toward cultivating a mussar consciousness in our communities, one curricular, the other centered around school culture—before closing on a more hopeful note.

First, our choice of texts and topics—especially the way in which we study our traditional texts—should more concretely reflect this goal of making explicit the mostly implicit value-system or worldview contained within our *mesorah*. From *Nezikin* to *Nashim*, as well as in the more straightforward areas of ethical inquiry embodied in the halakhot governing *shemirat haLashon*, *tsedakah*, *bikkur holim*, *ribit veOna'ah*, *kibbud av veEim*, *tseni'ut*, and *kavod haBeriot*, to name just the most obvious cases, our curriculum must raise the questions of human value, of personal identity, of conceptions of gender and community, of social and political justice, and, above all, of the radical commitment to an ethic of religious humanism, a theological anthropology, that saturates our tradition. Obviously, more attention should be paid to classics in *mahshava*, *mussar*, and *Hassidut*, which treat these concerns in a direct manner (again, read and studied in a deliberate and reflective fashion—*Mesillat Yesharim* can be taught, and usually is, I'm afraid, in a way that bypasses almost all of these concerns, making it less, not more, of a source of real, transformative power), but the *yam shel Talmud* and halakha are still the most significant sources for this sort of study. Second, our schools and yeshivot need to create the spiritual space for faculty, rebbeim and teachers, to engage in their own religious and ethical growth and development, a personal-pedagogical discipline of *heshbon haNefesh*. Rav Dov Singer, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Makor Hayyim in Kefar Etzion and one of our community's most thoughtful educators, once told me that when his yeshiva's students are not experiencing *tefilla* with the proper *kavana*, or are becoming too competitive and not forming a cohesive cohort, or are otherwise not striking a healthy balance between an appropriate work ethic and a sense of the larger goals of learning, the faculty look inward, and search within themselves for the latent sources of dysfunction. Institutional and classroom leaders must model this kind of introspective habit if our students are to see spiritual practice in action and be receptive to its proper place in their own lives.

In 1789, Samuel and John Phillips founded their academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and wrote the following lines, elegantly articulating the very kind of comprehensive religious and moral educational vision we've just outlined:

> But above all, it is expected that the Master's attention to the disposition of the minds and morals of the Youth under his charge will exceed every other care; well-considering that, though goodness without knowledge…is weak and feeble; yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous; and that both united form the noblest of character…the first and principal object of this institution is the promotion of Piety and Virtue. (Cited in F. Washington Jarvis, *With Love and Prayers: A Headmaster Speaks to the Next Generation*, [Boston: David R. Godine Publishers, 2000], xxi.)

Less than a century after the founding of the Phillips Andover Academy and halfway around the world, Rav Yisrael Salanter made a similar claim for the priority of ethical education over traditional forms of talmudic scholarship, of charity over theory, radically revolutionizing the landscape of Jewish education for the next fifty years. If not for the destruction of European Jewry in the middle of the past century, the Mussar Movement may still have been advancing the aims of reflective, practice-based

character education, stemming from a comprehensive worldview grounded in the sources of our *mesorah*, to ever more sophisticated heights. Perhaps what this postmodern world needs most, with its deep skepticism toward abstract rationality divorced from pragmatic value, is another kind of Salanter-inspired renaissance.