A Philosophical-Ideological Platform for Modern Orthodox Education

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"*Wisdom has built her house on seven hewn pillars." (Mishlei 9:1)*

My first inclination was to decline to respond to this symposium on the grounds that I am not a school leader—or even a practitioner for that matter—and therefore unable to answer such situational questions as you have posed. My next inclination was to formulate alternative, theoretical, questions that are better suited for a broad-based conversation. In the end, I followed neither inclination; my remarks hover intentionally in the ether that separates theory from practice—but, on the other hand, also connects them to one another.

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Is there a coherent and cohesive philosophical preference or prejudice that ought to animate Modern Orthodox Jewish education? Some of our educational policies (notably, those that pertain to *limmudei kodesh*) resemble the "perennialist" approach associated with traditional education, while others (notably, those of General Studies) tend to look more like the "pragmatic" approach identified with progressive education. Are we philosophically hermaphroditic (possessing the distinctive characteristics of both philosophies), androgynous (having neither philosophy's idiosyncratic characteristics), or, perhaps, are we agnostics, content to conduct educational business as usual without admitting to any particular philosophy? In an unintended parody of Descartes, do we appear to proclaim: "I think not, therefore I can do whatever I please!"?

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The absence of a clearly articulated educational philosophy does not serve us well. The road of curriculum design, development, and implementation is notable for its many obstacles (insufficient time, inadequate resources, and so forth) that frequently compel detours from the *derekh haMelekh* of nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, twelfth-century Muslim Spain, fifth-century Sura and Pumbedita, first-century Alexandria, or whatever historical precedent we cite in affirmation of our received educational practice. At these critical junctures, a philosophy is a lodestar whose sighting keeps us securely on our chosen path and acts as surety for our eventual arrival at our proposed destination. Without a clear philosophy, we are only star-gazing—and as inspirational as that may occasionally be, it only thwarts our purpose and obscures our objective.

Schools—not their current (and, regrettably, all too transitory) leaders—should have educational visions that "drive" their missions. A school that is "mission-driven" without the mission itself being motivated by a coherent philosophy is a will-o'-the-wisp. It gives the external appearance of direction and purpose while actually lacking both. A school's approach to "gender equality," like its views on "integration," should similarly be determined by its philosophical predisposition.

How do schools acquire philosophies? Unless a school community is blessed with an informed philosopher, the best way I know is via committee. The "dromedary principle" admonishes us that in its desire to fashion a horse, the committee may produce a camel; still, a camel is superior to no transportation at all. We are not looking for philosophical purity but for contemplative introspection, and a synthetic philosophy is patently acceptable.

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In this light, I should like to offer for your consideration a platform comprising seven philosophical-ideological positions that I would advocate for a school that wishes to be recognized as Modern Orthodox. (These principles are the products of a consultation undertaken several years ago. I am grateful to Dr. Joel Wolowelsky of the Yeshiva of Flatbush for his input, the responsibility for their formulation rests entirely with me.)

Modern Orthodox Day Schools and yeshiva high schools should recognize:

? ***The preeminence of Torah and the fulfillment of mitzvoth according to halakha***

A Modern Orthodox school will give priority in funding, staffing, and scheduling to those classes and activities that promote the study of Torah and the fulfillment of mitzvoth. It will concern itself with students' religious behavior and attitudes both in school and outside. It will, if necessary, engage in parent education (in conjunction with synagogues, if possible) to ensure proper modeling of religious behavior.

? ***The need for excellence in both General and Jewish Studies***

Modern Orthodoxy sees the accomplishments of modern science and culture as expressions of the biblical imperatives to conquer the earth and preserve it. A Modern Orthodox school will provide all its students with an acquaintance with the basic principles of science, disciplines in the behavioral and social sciences, and in the humanities. It will likewise ensure that the pursuit of these disciplines does not become a goal unto itself, divorced from their Jewish identities and responsibilities.

? ***The primacy of moral virtue and ethical integrity in personal, business, and professional life***

A Modern Orthodox school will implement curricula that provide instruction in both *mitzvot bein adam laMakom* (laws that govern our relationship to God) and *mitzvot bein adam leHaveiro* (laws that govern interpersonal relationships) and nurture a school culture that values and promotes the ideal of *hessed* (such as community service or social action). It will not condone unethical behavior on the part of its staff and students and will condemn such behavior on the part of any member of the Jewish community.

? ***The need to set common educational goals for boys and girls, young men and young women***

In a Modern Orthodox school, boys and girls will be given equal opportunities to study Torah and halakha. The equality of opportunity does not necessarily mean identical curricula, but no subject in Jewish studies should be officially declared "off limits" to any student. Modern Orthodoxy neither promotes nor prohibits coeducation; it supports individual schools in the educational decisions that are best for them.

? ***The centrality of the State of Israel to the religious and national existence of the Jewish people***

A Modern Orthodox school will advise all its students to personally experience life in Israel, to be cognizant of its needs and goals, and to have a working knowledge of Modern Hebrew. It may also call upon them to plan for *aliyah* to Israel, and to become actively involved in promoting Religious Zionist values in both Israel and the Diaspora. A Modern Orthodox school will say *Hallel* on Yom Ha'Atzma'ut and Yom Yerushalayim.

? ***The value of all segments of the Jewish community***

A Modern Orthodox school will emphasize to its students that the major events of Jewish history, which have shaped our national identity, have involved and affected all Jews. It will admonish its graduates to love all Jews, maintain contact with them, and work with them on communal issues without regard to their denominational affiliation. It will not decline to participate in Jewish communal events due to the participation of non-Orthodox Jews.

? The Torah as the possession of all Jews

A Modern Orthodox Day School will enroll children of non-Orthodox, non-observant homes as students in the belief that the opportunity to study Torah should not be denied to anyone of the Jewish faith.