

# The Condition of Modern Orthodox Education

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More than forty years ago, one of the stirring voices of Jewish conscience was Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel. Although remembered primarily for his calls to activism in the realms of social and racial justice, Heschel was first and foremost a teacher to rabbis and educators. His words were a charge to me, then a neophyte to the field of Jewish education. He said, One of our errors has been the *trivialization of education*. The superficial kind of religious education acquired in childhood fades away when exposed to the challenge and splendor of other intellectual powers in an age of scientific triumphs. What young people need is not religious tranquilizers, religion as diversion, religious entertainment, but spiritual audacity.<sup>1</sup>

The proliferation of Day Schools and yeshivot can be seen as a response to this view of the needs of students and communities. When Jewish education began to be the subject of research studies in the post-World War II period, only 5 to 7 percent of the population of students in *any* form of Jewish school attended Day Schools or yeshivot. Haym Soloveitchik observes that sixty year ago, it was generally held that "Jewishness was something almost innate, and no school was needed to inculcate it." But, he continues,

in contemporary society...Jewish identity is not inevitable. It is not a matter of course, but of choice: A conscious preference of the enclave over the host society. For such a choice to be made, a sense of particularity and belonging must be instilled by the intentional enterprise of instruction...identity maintenance and consciousness raising are ideological exigencies, needs that can be met only by education.<sup>2</sup>

Thus it is not surprising that today, by various estimates, some 30 percent of Jewish school-age children in the United States—205,000 young people—attend Day Schools or yeshivot. Eighty percent of these students are enrolled in Orthodox schools.<sup>3</sup> Further analysis tells us that 47,416 students (23 percent) attend 165 institutions described as "Centrist" or "Modern Orthodox."<sup>4</sup> The territory has expanded.

Despite qualitative and quantitative growth, the educational landscape is littered with doubt among educators, parents, and students. Yaakov Bieler states the challenge as follows: Questions are increasingly raised about whether these educational institutions really provide a Modern Orthodox education and produce Modern Orthodox young people. To find the reasons for this malaise we must gauge the effectiveness of the Modern Orthodox Day Schools that go beyond such obvious facts as the manner in which the school day is organized, what extracurricular activities are available, and where the graduates continue their education.<sup>5</sup>

Urgency notwithstanding, most of the meetings, discussions, plenaries, and public documents do not go deeply into the core issues of schooling. The most well-meaning of presentations by policymakers or researchers that do not bring education professionals into the dialogue may result in half-baked ideas, at best. It is, after all, these professionals who are the "first responders" to the students. It is they who articulate, develop, and implement with teachers the curricula, programs, and strategies that drive their schools. It is they who are uniquely poised to be the agents of change and the conservators of tradition in the lives of students and their families.

And so we hold this conversation. Through this issue of *Conversations* and follow-up exchanges using the electronic media, we hope to engage educators and others interested in the role of schooling in Modern Orthodoxy in an open and clarifying presentation and discussion of ideas. There are many good things happening in our schools that are not shared with colleagues. There are difficult experiences that we all encounter and these, likewise, remain dark secrets. This is an opportunity to teach and learn from our colleagues.

We have selected four questions in areas that are commonplace for our schools:

1. How should a school leader express his or her vision of Jewish education? Can there be a clear line from the school's mission to what happens in the classrooms? Is there a substantive difference between schools that are "mission-driven" and those that are not?
2. How does an educator experience the personnel shortage in our schools? Does this find expression in General and Judaic Studies? What impact, if any, does this shortage have on a school's ability to meet its mission and goals?
3. How should Modern Orthodox schools address women's education and gender equality in terms of content, mastery, and Jewish practice? To what extent is this a divisive issue in the community, and how can a school deal with this?
4. How should Modern Orthodox schools address issues in contemporary culture that conflict with traditional norms? What is the impact on a school's reach for integration of Judaic and General Studies?

We arranged the conversation as follows:

- An essay by Dr. Moshe Sokolow, which frames the issues
- An article by Rabbi Mark Gottlieb, which addresses *hashkafa* in our schools
- The four questions above and responses by a panel of education professionals

Since it is neither responsible nor useful to ignore the present fiscal realities, we have included a proposal by Mrs. Zippora Schorr and Rabbi Aaron Frank, which may be instructive for other schools and communities.

We hope that these essays, questions, and replies will initiate further conversation in the Member's Forum at [www.jewishideas.org](http://www.jewishideas.org).

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<sup>1</sup>Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Values of Jewish Education," in *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly* (New York, 1962): 83.

<sup>2</sup>Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," in *Tradition* (Summer, 1994): 90, 93.

<sup>3</sup> Jack Wertheimer, "The Current Moment in Jewish Education: An Historian's View," in R. L. Goodman, et al., *What We Now Know About Jewish Education* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura, 2009): 15.

<sup>4</sup> Marvin Schick, "A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States, 2003–2004" (New York: Avi Chai Foundation, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Jack Bieler, "Preserving Modern Orthodoxy in Our Day Schools," *Edah Monograph Series* 2: 1.