

Teaching the Wholeness of the Jewish People

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Our heritage is rich and vast and we claim that we teach it. But do we truly understand the wholeness of the Jewish people, or is our knowledge really limited and fragmented? Do we, can we, inculcate the concept of Jewish unity in our students? If we as educators are unaware of or disinterested in Jews who have had different historic experiences than we have had, how can we convey the richness of Judaism? How can we, in fact, demonstrate the sheer wonder of halakhic Jewry without a sense of awe at the halakhic contributions of all our diverse communities throughout the world, throughout the ages?

We may study the Talmud of Babylonia and Israel; the codes of sages in Spain; the commentaries of scholars of France, Germany, Italy; the responsa of rabbis of Turkey, the Middle East and North Africa; the novellae of sages of Eastern Europe; the traditions and customs of Jewish communities throughout the world. We study this diverse and rich literature and confront the phenomenon that all these Jewish sages and their communities operated with the identical assumptions--that God gave the Torah to the people of Israel, that halakha is our way of following God's ways. As we contemplate the vast scope of the halakhic enterprise--and its essential unity--we begin to sense the wholeness of the Jewish people.

If, for example, we were to study only the contributions and history of the Jews of America, we would have a narrow view of Judaism. If we limited our Jewish sources only to a particular century or to a particular geographic location, we would be parochial. We would be experts in a segment of Jewish experience; but we would be ignorant of everything outside our narrow focus.

In order to teach the wholeness of the Jewish people, we need to have a broad knowledge and vision of the Jewish people. We cannot limit ourselves to sources only from Europe, just as we cannot limit ourselves to sources only from Asia or Africa. Often enough, however, Jewish education today fails to include in a serious way the Jewish experiences in Asia and Africa. How many educators can name ten great Jewish personalities who lived in Turkey, Morocco or Syria during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries? How many have studied any works of authors who lived in Muslim lands over the past four to five centuries? And how many have taught this information to their students? And have they learned?

There is a vital need to teach "whole-istic" Judaism, drawing on the great teachings of our people in all the lands and periods of their dispersion. To do this, we ourselves need to study, to think very seriously, to feel genuine excitement in gathering the exiles of our people into our minds and consciousnesses. When we are engaged in this process, we can help our students share the excitement with us. Jews who are "not like us," whose families came from countries other than "ours", should not be viewed as being exotic or quaint. There is more to a Jewish community than a set of interesting customs or folkways. We need to be able to speak of the Jews of Vilna and of Istanbul and of Berlin and of Tangiers with the same degree of naturalness, with no change in the inflection of our voices. We need to see Jews of all these--and all the other--communities as though they are part of "our" community.

Consider the standard Mikraot Gedolot, a common edition of the Bible. There are commentaries by Rashi (France); Ibn Ezra and Ramban (Spain); R. Hayyim ben Attar, the Ohr haHayyim (Morocco); R. Ovadia Seforno (Italy), and many others. The commentaries of the Talmud, Rambam, Shulhan Arukh are also a diverse group, stemming from different places and times. It is important for teachers to make their students aware of the backgrounds of the various commentators. In this relatively simple way, students are introduced to the vastness of the Torah enterprise, and of the value of all communities which have engaged in maintaining the Torah. To quote Sephardic sages together with Ashkenazic sages, naturally and easily, is to achieve an important goal in the teaching of wholeness of the Jewish people.

Most teachers teach what they themselves have learned. They tend to draw heavily on the sources which their teachers valued. It is difficult and challenging to try to reach out into new sources, to gain knowledge and inspiration from Jewish communities which one originally had not considered to be one's own.

The majority of Jews living in Israel are of African and Asian backgrounds. Students who gain no knowledge of the history and culture of the Jews of Africa and Asia are being seriously deprived. They will be unable to grasp the cultural context of the majority of Jews in Israel, or they will trivialize it or think it exotic. But if Jews are to be a whole people, then all Jews need to understand, in a deep and serious way, about other Jews. This is not for "enrichment" programs or for special "Sephardic days"; this is basic Jewish teaching, basic Jewish learning.

I am saddened by the general narrowness I have seen in some schools. There is a reluctance to grasp the need for wholeness on a serious level. Time is too short. Teachers don't want more responsibilities. But Judaism goes far beyond the sources of Europe and America. Giving lip service to the beauty of Sephardic culture; or singing a Yemenite tune with the school choir; or explaining a custom now and then--these don't represent a genuine openness, a positive education.

Standard textbooks don't teach much about the Jews of Africa and Asia, their vast cultural and spiritual achievements, their contributions to Jewish life and to Torah scholarship. Schools often do not make the effort to incorporate serious study of these topics, and so our children grow up with a fragmented Jewish education.

To raise awareness and sensitivity, teachers should utilize the resources within the community--including students, community members and synagogues representing diverse backgrounds, customs and history that can enlighten students. Spending Shabbat with diverse communities, within the United States as well as when visiting Israel, can be a moving way of sharing cultures and customs.

To attain wholeness in Jewish education entails considerable work on the part of administrators, teachers and students. It may cost time and money. But can we really afford to continue to deprive our children and our people of wholeness?

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