Inside Out

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> The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers.
> —Socrates, over 2,000 years ago

There is nothing new under the sun. —*Kohelet*

And yet, in the twenty-first century, we still worry about children and about the adults they grow up to be. How is it that Orthodox Jews, people who literally live by the Torah and the Talmud, are guilty of immoral and sometimes criminal acts that should be anathema to them? Rabbi Marc Angel asks, “How can we do better? How can we go from teaching texts or sponsoring random *hessed* projects, to getting students to actually internalize the message and become morally strong?”

Though I am not the ultimate authority, the challenge remains an intriguing, often daunting one. Let me begin by asserting that I believe that it is possible to create an environment where *middot, derekh eretz*, and moral uprightness is the norm rather than the anomaly. It is my strong belief that if we accept the premise that we are created in the image of God, then we are intrinsically good. The dilemma is how do we harness this intrinsic internal goodness in the young so that they keep it with them as they grow up? Truthfully, neither random *hessed* projects nor lectures about being virtuous seem to work. We have seen repeatedly that working from the outside is not effective; it hasn’t worked in the past, and it won’t work in the future. Recognizing that internal goodness is like a muscle, it follows that internal goodness must be exercised in order to be strengthened.

What form does that exercise take? How do we strengthen that muscle so that it becomes internally strong and will manifest itself in external goodness?

We must start at the earliest time possible. “Teach a child good manners during babyhood,” advised Reb Nachman of Breslav. Most children, before culture is superimposed upon them, are basically goodhearted. Nurturing that goodness and reinforcing it constantly should be our goal. It means creating and sustaining a clear, robust, and intentional environment that, in every decision, communication, conversation, or discussion, expresses a level of concern for others. If we are truly to emulate God and do His will, we must emphasize the importance of *middot* and character, and model that by being kind, compassionate, and just. If even God is held to ethical standards—“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?” (*Bereishith* 18:25)—should we not hold ourselves similarly accountable?

Everything that we learn reinforces this message. God visits Abraham after his *berit milah*, but Abraham leaves Him to minister to the “*malakhim*” who arrive on the horizon. Abraham’s desire to be gracious to them is greater even than his wish to commune with God.

That is the message educators at every level must drive home, creating environments where we model behavior that is kinder and gentler. We say “good morning” to a custodian, “please” to a secretary, “thank you” to a cafeteria worker. When we see a person struggling with a task, we ask if we can help. At our school, each class has a greeter who welcomes guests, and children rise in respect of that guest, no matter who the guest. We take children’s internal goodness and animate it, concretize it. By encouraging the inner goodness to express itself in tangible action, we reinforce the goodness that is within. The goal? To create a school environment that makes it almost impossible for a child not to externalize what is internal and internalize what is external.

We live in an age of self-absorption and self-centeredness. As educators, our job is to help children focus on others, moving away from the self-interest that characterizes a young child. But making the process intentional and focused is certainly not easy.

We try so hard to satisfy our children’s desires, mollify their anxieties, and ameliorate their pain. “Helicopter parents” have given way to “snowplow parents,” who try to smooth the way for their children, plowing over their mistakes and challenges and focusing on their immediate gratification. And this is where I believe we begin to go wrong. In our schools today—and in our lives in general—emphasis has shifted to that which is cerebral, performance-oriented, and ritual-bound, but devoid of character development. In too many of our schools, there is such a strong emphasis on academics, on intellectual rigor, that we sometimes forget that the goal of our learning of the mitzvoth is, as the Rambam says to refine us so that we can have a positive impact on others. We end up without a sense of authenticity in terms of what a Jew is supposed to be. When we celebrate the “*mitzuyanim*” or those who are “better” or “stronger” or can learn more Gemara, we are not modeling moral behavior; we are rewarding acquisition of knowledge.

Rav Ezra Bisk points out that

[T]here are no mitzvoth that reflect merely the will of God, without any logic or reason or goal. The goal of all mitzvoth is always, according to the Ramban … human-oriented. The goal of God in commanding the mitzvah is not to increase His own glory, which is irrelevant to Him, not to somehow do something for the majesty of God, but is to improve and to correct, to develop the person who is observing the mitzvoth.

Educators cannot lose sight of this. The true outcome of knowing that Torah is truth—is to live by it.

In “Is there a Disconnect between Torah Learning and Torah Living?,” Aharon Hersch Fried tells the sad story of a very good student in a yeshiva high school who chose two strong fellow students to learn with for two “*sedarim*,” and a weaker one to learn with during the third “*seder*.” His magid shiur

berated him for choosing to learn with and help the weaker student, saying, “You can learn a lot more with a stronger *havruta*.” When it comes to choosing partners for Torah learning, the Rebbe explained, the operative principle is—your life takes precedence over any considerations of helping and learning with another possibly weaker student. He concluded by saying, “There is no *hessed* when it comes to Torah!” Fried responds to the story by remarking,

I don’t know what the source for this attitude would be. In fact, I’ve heard that *gedolim* of the previous generation … taught the precise opposite. Reb Chaim told his *talmidim* that doing *hessed* in Torah will grant one the Heavenly assistance needed for success in Torah. But even if there was a basis for the other approach, should we not be worried that teaching such an “every man for himself” approach to Torah will result in an “every man for himself” approach to life, and will contribute to our developing a selfish “dog-eat-

dog” society?!

Dr. Hayim Soloveitchik raises similar concerns in “Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy”:

Zealous to continue traditional Judaism unimpaired, religious Jews seek to ground their new emerging spirituality less on a now unattainable intimacy with Him, than on an intimacy with His Will, avidly eliciting Its intricate demands and saturating their daily lives with Its exactions. Having lost the touch of His presence, they seek now solace in the pressure of His yoke.

Avidly following laws and rules without understanding the underlying rationale for them is fruitless. Should we not be teaching, *“Derekh eretz kadma laTorah,” Derekh Eretz* comes before the acquisition of Torah knowledge?

Derekh eretz is an element of religiosity that we often do not emphasize. If you ask the question, “How do you define a *religious* Jew?” chances are the response will reference Shabbat, kashruth, and dress. But if our children do not describe a religious person as a kind, compassionate, and caring person, we haven’t done our job as educators, because we need to see character and kindness *as* religiosity:

Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before Him with burnt-offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God. (Micah 6:8)

If you’ve completed a segment of Mishnah or Talmud but in the process mistreated a fellow human being, I would submit that God is not so happy to take that learning as an offering. If we are truly believers, we will realize that interpersonal mitzvoth must be at least as important as ritual mitzvoth between us and God. What God wants from His chosen people is not just study, but actualization of that study, *gemilut hassadim*, deeds of lovingkindness. “Bring no more vain oblations; it is an offering of abomination unto Me; New moon and Sabbath, the holding of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity along with the solemn assembly” (Isaiah[RA1]). You are not devout if you don’t have character.

Offerings are in vain if they are empty of virtue, compassion, and kindness.

Under this scenario, all of our schools should be designed to create an environment in which students of every age engage in acts of kindness. They should be taught to help one another. The pictures on the walls should not be only of "*gedolim*" but of children helping other children, people actually doing something for someone else. Schools should be places where everyone assists the child or adult who falls, in reality and metaphorically. Goodness should be an expectation, not an aberration.

In an ideal school system, good character would be the norm. If someone does something hurtful or cruel, the response would be consistently: "Something is wrong. That's not how we act." We would create spaces where everyone was expected to be kind, where peer pressure would not encourage others to be cruel or supercilious but rather to be thoughtful and caring. It sounds simplistic but there's nothing superficial about helping children and young adults understand what the truly important values of Judaism are.

My ideal school system would be founded on a belief in the sanctity of each member of the school community, created in the image of God and therefore deserving of compassion and respect. Everyone—teachers, fellow students, staff, administrators—would be valued for the unique contributions they bring to the schools. From an early age, students would be taught the importance of honorable and respectful behavior toward others. From preschool to high school, students would embrace the value of being a person of integrity and honor, who treats others well. "One must behave before others as one must behave before God," we are told in *Shekalim*. This would be our school system's motto.

Children emulate the behaviors they see around them. If we look askance at a child who does not treat others well, conformity and peer pressure become forces for good rather than evil. In my school (and in my hypothetical school system), students thank teachers for their lessons. We begin every program by saying "*toda raba*" loudly and collectively, thereby teaching children that it's not just about them. The famous story is told of the Baal HaTanya, who came knocking at the door of the Mezritcher Maggid. "Who is it?" asked the Maggid. "*Ich*. It is I," said the Baal HaTanya. "Who?" the Maggid asked once again. And once again the answer was "*Ich*." "*'Ich,'* you said?" said the Maggid with a tormented sigh. "*'Ich'*? I have worked for 20 years to eradicate the '*Ich'* from you, and you come brazenly to my door and say '*Ich*'?" The goal of our moral pedagogy is to remove our "*Ich*," and embrace the centrality and importance of others, not ourselves.

But it's not just about giving children opportunities to exercise the goodness muscle. You create goodness by doing good and believing in the premise. Moral education must be systemic and systematic. Educators must set the goals and the stage at the very outset, and keep coming back to them and reinforcing them. Children often do not listen to what we say because our words are drowned out by what we do. Right from the beginning, children see the difference between what they experience at school and what they experience in the world around them. So moral education cannot stop at the boundaries of the schoolyard. It must also reach into the home, helping parents understand our common language, giving them a lexicon that can be used to reinforce these principles. *Derekh eretz* must be extended into all aspects of students' lives. All of the adults in a child's life must model it and look askance at behavior that is antithetical to it. The home as well as the school and the synagogue must model, reinforce, and help children do good—with their bodies not just their words (help at a soup kitchen, visit a person in the hospital, make a *shiva* call) so that they understand that kindness and compassion are not theoretical—they are real, actionable, concrete.

"Torah is meant to be a living Torah, a guide for life," writes Dr. Fried, emphasizing that we must connect learning to living. He stresses that true moral education recognizes that cognition, the understanding of morality, is not sufficient; that teaching sensitivity is important and that "understanding the role of emotion is crucial and requires teaching empathic distress, fostering intuitive judgment and seeing *derekh eretz* as *frumkeit*." He sums up, "We must teach our children sensitivity to the feelings of others, and make them aware of the feelings of others, and immerse them

in a web of communal and familial experiences that foster growth in this area." These are the principles that would guide my ideal educational system.

True educators respect the humanity of their students, just as they expect their students to respect the humanity of others. We are reminded of this in so many places. In *Mishlei Yehoshua* we read, "It is better to know well than to know much." In *Pirke Avot* (3:13) we read, "The crown of a good name is greater than the crown of learning." In the Talmud (*Menahot* 110a) we read, "Study is worth as much as ritual sacrifice." As moral educators, who joyously affirm the beauty, timelessness, and sanctity of Jewish life, we must follow the example of Aaron haKohen: loving others and bringing them closer to Torah. Only through showing unconditional love for our students, respecting their *tzelem Elokim* and intrinsic goodness, and sharing with them our love of Torah and our commitment to *derekh eretz*, can the principles, guidelines, and mitzvoth of Torah become actualized throughout their lifetimes.

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