Towards a Character Education Movement in Jewish Day Schools

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Rabbi David Teller is the Principal of the Stark High School at the Fuchs Mizrachi School in Cleveland, Ohio. After completing his Semicha and Masters in Education at Yeshiva University, Rabbi Teller completed his Masters in Clinical Mental Health Counseling at John Carroll University. Most recently, he completed his Masters in Independent School Leadership at the Klingenstein Center at Columbia University, Teacher's College.

The early life of Benjamin Franklin is a case study in personal character development. Already an acclaimed inventor in his late twenties, Franklin was known for his ability to see the potential in ordinary things, eventually applying that same philosophy to himself as he began to pursue a new life goal: achieving moral perfection. Franklin believed that the good life is one in which you develop your talents, actualize your potential, and become your true innate self. He developed a moral 'training regimen,' choosing a list of 13 virtues, each attached to specific behaviors that he set out to improve. He then graphed it: the Y-Axis listed the days of the week; the X-axis, these specific virtues. Each week he focused on one of them. If Franklin failed to live an entire day aligned with a particular virtue, he put a black dot on the daily square on his graph. Over 13 weeks he went through each virtue, counting up the black spots, ambitiously striving to last an entire week without falling short of achieving a perfect score. Reflecting on this experience years later, Franklin wrote in his autobiography, "I was, by the endeavor, a better and happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it."[1]

The intentional inculcation of virtue. A structured and regimented plan to develop character. Franklin's story is extraordinary and almost unbelievable especially as we consider our lives today and the goals we deem most important for ourselves and our children. Where does achieving moral perfection rank on our lists?

[I] The Problem

The intentional inculcation of character is not a strategic priority in most of our Jewish day schools. And it should be, especially as societal trends indicate there is a concerning decline in the moral attitudes and mindsets amongst our adolescent population. In a 2016 Atlantic article, Paul Barnwell argued that with schools adopting Common Core standards and the quantification of performance, the increased pressure and overemphasis on pure academic achievement has overshadowed "other noble goals of schooling."[2] One of these noble goals was moral and character education. Barnwell cited the 2012 Josephson Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth, where 57% of teens stated that successful people do what they have to do to win, even if it involves cheating. Fifty-two percent reported cheating at least once on an exam.[3]

There is clearly a tension between the values we as adults believe we are messaging to our children and what they are in fact hearing and internalizing. A 2014 Harvard study through the Making Caring Common project, surveyed over 10,000 youth and found that 80% listed 'happiness' or 'achievement' as their top priorities while only 20% listed 'caring for others.'[4] But even more alarming was the data collected on adolescents' perception of what their *parents* most cared about. Teenagers are three times more likely to agree than disagree with the statement "my parents are prouder if I get good grades than if I'm a caring community member." This is not necessarily because parents are actively messaging this value hierarchy. A 2012 study from a group of researchers at the University of Virginia's Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture found that 96% of parents say "moral character in children is very important if not essential," yet that same study found that 81% of children think happiness or achievement are their parents' top priority.[5]

Clearly messages are getting stretched, crisscrossed, and redefined. Whether perception or reality, the troubling fact remains, the majority of our children are not necessarily hearing or absorbing the value-laden messages that we adults are trying to articulate and share. Instead, our teens are using our words to amplify their own understanding of the relative weight of ethics and morals within their personal value and decision-making framework, especially when there might be a perceived conflict between morals and ethics versus potential sources of happiness and achievement.

Lest we think that this conversation on the declining ethics in adolescents is limited to the realm of academic dishonesty, that same 2012 Josephson Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth found that 24% believe it is okay to threaten or hit someone when angry and 49% percent of students reported being bullied or harassed in a manner that seriously upset them. Our teens' views on sexual ethics and relationships including the desensitization to sexting, pornography, and consent is also a source of concern. According to a 2018 study in JAMA Pediatrics of over 110,000 12–17-year-olds, approximately 1 in 7 (14.8%) report that they have sent explicit text messages, and approximately 1 in 4 (27.4%) report having received them.[6] These numbers represent a significant increase from a 2009 Pew research center study that found those numbers at 4% and 15% respectively. Within our own Jewish day school contexts, we may justifiably feel that these percentages aren't reflective of our student body, but outside of clear metrics that suggest otherwise, we should assume that even if more limited, surely these percentages exist at a rate that is troubling.

Barnwell concludes his argumentative essay in the Atlantic, "It's time for critical reflection about values our schools transmit to children by omission in our curriculum of the essential human challenges of character development, morality, and ethics."[7] Similarly, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt''l emphasized in numerous articles that education is both the driving force and the most significant way in which we can change the world. "Children must be taught the importance of justice, righteousness, kindness, and compassion. They must learn that freedom can only be sustained by the laws and habits

of self-restraint."[8] But let us take a moment and ask ourselves honestly: to what extent are our day school students engaged daily (weekly? monthly?) in the learning, reflection and actualization of justice, righteousness, kindness, compassion, and habits of self-restraint?

[II] A Proposition

Rav Aharon Soloveichik in a discourse on Jewish education argued that the success of Torah education should be determined on the basis of the enduring piety and character development that the teachers effect in their students.

> If yeshiva children are proficient in Chumash and Talmud, it does not necessarily mean that their Torah education achieved fulfillment. Conversely it is equally true that if yeshiva children are not proficient in Chumash and Talmud, it does not necessarily mean that their Torah education did not have any fulfillment. *Education in the realm of Torah has fulfillment only if the theoretical Torah*
>
> *knowledge acquired by the child is coupled simultaneously with the molding of the child's character, as well as with the child's conscientious compliance with the precepts of the Torah* (my italics).[9]

Academics and Character. Learning Torah and *Middot*. Our Jewish day schools have traditionally emphasized the intentional development of the former and assumed the acquisition by osmosis of the latter. So we dive into our learning while taking the moral life and character development as a given. We save 'deeper discussions' for a Friday Q & A session, or we await a once-a-year culture shifting school-wide shabbaton. And we expect that through the occasional *sicha*, or organic class conversation, that our educational institutions have covered our responsibility of ensuring the moral and character refinement of our emerging young adults. These various pieces are meaningful and definitely contribute, but lacking a more holistic framework, they underachieve in reaching our more ambitious character development objectives.

I am advocating for a more intentionally designed school wide strategic priority where an overarching goal of developing more moral, ethical, holy and refined children drive our curricular decisions, through our big ideas, essential questions, content and skills as well as our experiential programming. I believe we have to be more nuanced in what the driving goals of our Torah classes are, and to genuinely ask ourselves if we are achieving those aims and objectives.[10]

But let me also be clear: we have no excuse. As schools that claim using a variety of language to build responsible citizens and passionate Jewish contributors, we need to find the time, the resources, and the will to dedicate what is necessary for our students to explore the big questions and values of our way of life. What do our Torah classes teach our students about inculcating a deep sense of meaning and purpose? How is our way of life a living embodiment of *kedusha?* Are we building a learning environment where "*the theoretical Torah knowledge acquired by the child is coupled simultaneously with the molding of the child's character?"****[11]***

Of course, schools alone cannot, nor should they be, the only forces responsible for developing character. There is an equally important role for parents, synagogues, and our broader community to play in this important educational conversation. However, for the purposes of this article, I am going to focus on what is within the locus of control of our schools although many of the examples can be applied in other communal contexts and even at home. What can we do, as a Jewish community, to more intentionally develop character in our classrooms and institutions? **How do we begin to make a character education movement a reality? What are some practical first steps for schools that may be interested in starting this journey?**

[III] A Framework for Change: The Rider, The Elephant, and The Path

In an effort to provide a visual image as to how the powers of change operates, Professor Jonathan Haidt revised a centuries old metaphor initially developed by Buddha, about the rational mind's ability to keep temptation and emotion in check.

> The image that I came up with for myself as I marveled at my weakness, was that I was a rider on the back of an elephant. I'm holding the reins in my hands, and by pulling one way or the other I can tell the elephant to turn, to stop, or to go. I can direct things, but only when the elephant doesn't have desires of his own. When the elephant really wants to do something, I'm no match for him.[12]

In 2010, Chip and Dan Heath asked Haidt's permission to use his rider-elephant metaphor as the guiding framework of their book, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*. According to the Heaths, there are two parts of our minds that must be appealed to for any change initiative to be successful: the Rider and the Elephant.

The 'Rider' refers to the rational, logical parts of my mind which allows me to think deeply, categorize and understand the world around me. The Rider's strength is the ability to think analytically and plan; the weakness is a tendency to overthink and the possibility of analysis paralysis. The greatest threat which prevents or "blocks" the Rider from change is a lack of understanding, clarity, or specification around what I am supposed to do. The solution to most Rider problems is increasing clarity and understanding.

The 'Elephant' refers to the emotional and affective parts of my mind which form my instinctual perceptions of the world around me. The strength of the Elephant is the ability and drive to really get things done; the weakness is a tendency towards more immediate gratification and short-term bursts of energy. When there is a lack of emotional connection or when I don't feel particularly inspired by an idea, I have an Elephant problem or "block" preventing change. I might be completely aware of what I am supposed to do (solving the Rider challenge), but I have other competing, more exciting or pressing demands on my time, energy, and focus. The solution to most Elephant problems is increasing motivation and emotional connection.

But there is a third dimension that must be taken into account as well: the “Path.” The Heaths describe the Path as the surrounding context, including the system itself that may be getting in the way of a particular change effort. This problem could be based on time, space, or other cultural and contextual obstacles that are making it harder for people to conform to, or change towards, a certain expectation or goal. Solving a Path issue often involves looking at the surrounding context and manipulating certain variables to achieve better results.

A great example of how the Rider, Elephant, and Path interact for teachers is every year around report card time (joy!). A teacher that does not complete their reports on time might be struggling because of a lack of clarity of *expectations.* Maybe the principal forgot to remind everyone in a timely fashion, or the technological learning management system is new and complicated. These are Rider challenges, rooted in a lack of understanding or clarity. Alternatively, it could very well be that the school administration has written clear, screenshot embedded emails detailing every micro-nuance in the process and have given more than ample warnings. Report cards aren’t coming in because the teacher doesn’t think that the agreed upon timeline is such a big deal, or they have tickets to a big event which pulls them both emotionally and physically in another direction. However, a third possible “block” could be the Path: for example, the numerous conflicting demands on a teacher’s time ‘down the stretch’ of a particular semester. Taking a step back, a school administration might notice that asking teachers to write and then grade exams, write meaningful report card comments and respond to administrative feedback on those comments is too arduous a task within a five-day window at the end of a semester with other tangential demands on time including end of semester teacher meetings. Solving a Path issue often involves looking at the surrounding context and manipulating certain variables to achieve better results.

Knowing the source of the change resistance is essential in determining the best intervention. A teacher struggling because of Elephant challenges needs an entirely different conversation and follow up approach than one who is blocked from the vantage point of an individual’s Rider.

Once you begin to look at the world through the lens of Rider, Elephant, and Path, you see change opportunities, and the obstacles to said change everywhere, well beyond the educational context. What gets in the way of people recycling? A Rider block would be a lack of clarity of what can and cannot be recycled. With a lack of clarity comes a lack of patience; an individual then chooses just to throw everything in the trash (“I would be recycling wrong anyways.”) An Elephant issue involves a lack of emotional connection to the positive effects recycling can have on a community and the broader ecological reality of the planet. If I am not emotionally invested in the role my singular actions can make on the globe, I will not be inspired to change. A Path issue can simply be setting up recycling bins in more locations. If the act of recycling becomes easier, if minimal tweaks to my surrounding environment enables me to do so, I will make sure to throw my paper into a well-positioned bin.

This paradigm can also apply to our question above: what gets in the way of a sincere effort to foster and embed a more purposeful and intentional approach towards character and moral education in our Jewish day school institutions? I believe we will be better positioned to take meaningful steps forward when we name the Rider, Elephant, and Path obstacles in front of us. Only then can we plan the most appropriate interventions to address them and create the change that we should be looking for.

A. The Rider

Dr. Martin Seligman became president of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1998. Seligman's inaugural address to the APA set out a sweeping vision of what would become Positive Psychology. "The aim of Positive Psychology is to catalyze a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life." [13] With the help of fellow researcher Christopher Peterson, Seligman sought to identify the core elements of character across cultures and religions, ultimately arriving at 24 signature character across six broader virtue categories: Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence. In 2004 he published *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification*, an 800-page tome that lists all 24-character strengths to more accurately define and characterize the moral universe. In the introduction Seligman makes clear that his purpose for writing the manual was to serve for the world of character, what the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual serves for psychological disorder diagnosis: a shared language to both speak about and assess the inculcation of values.

It is an impressive work that both launched and focused positive psychology towards classifying and defining character. Over the last two decades the positive psychology movement has built an extensive network of research, books, conferences, professional affiliations, and even a graduate school to deepen the study of character and human flourishing. Curricula abound with different formulations of social, emotional, and character learning targets. In this regard, the world of psychology has not only caught up with religion in terms of the systematic study of character, it has surpassed it. Which makes the first step of a Jewish day school 'character movement revolution' both clear and daunting. We need to build an intentional, specific, shared character language within our Jewish day school institutions.

A lack of clarity and specificity is the primary change obstacle of the Rider. A Rider block to change is a lack of understanding or transparency in what is being asked of us. When we consider the change efforts involved in developing a holistic educational approach to teaching character in our Jewish day schools, we need to start by defining our terms and building a shared language. What are the specific aspects of *derech eretz*, *middot*, and character that we are striving to build? What are *our* core 'character strengths' that we want every student to learn, identify with, reflect on, and seek to develop? No longer can 'becoming a *mentch*' be enough. We need to be as exacting in defining this language as we are about defining the key concepts and big ideas in Tanach and Gemara class. Lacking specificity in our ultimate character objectives for our schools, our hopes of building this character into the hearts and minds of our students is highly unlikely. So where should we begin?

Step #1: Defining Character: Moral vs. Performance

In 2012, Paul Tough published his best seller, *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character.* Tough spent years investigating different school systems beginning to utilize various character education approaches, most rather unsuccessfully. A major barrier was the tendency of different schools or even stakeholders within the same building to define character in completely different ways. To address this challenge, the Character Education Project, a national organization founded in 2008 to help bring clarity to these differing conceptualizations, began distinguishing between two broad character categories that schools were using interchangeably: moral character and performance character. *Moral character* is what we might describe as our typical *middot* programs or workshops. It includes moral principles like respect, avoiding gossip, fairness, honesty, and kindness to others. *Performance character* on the other hand refers to values and behaviors that foster and amplify school and career success. Examples include optimism, social intelligence, grit, creativity, curiosity, and self-control.

An important first step for our Jewish day schools is to carefully distinguish between our moral and performance character goals. There is overlap, but which specific values and character strengths- both moral and performance- do we naturally and instinctually identify as needs, deficits, and strengths in our institutions? In our current systems, do we emphasize one of these categories over the other? As we begin to shape our common language it can be a healthy and helpful exercise to distinguish between these two character conceptualizations and as we progress through the next steps of building a shared language, to become aware if we disproportionately lean more one way than the other. That shouldn't necessarily make us pause or strive for 'balance,' but it can build organizational self-awareness as to our overarching character goals, better amplify diverse voices in our organizations as we engage in this process, and focus the active messaging to all of our stakeholders (teachers, students, parents, board members) for why we are directing resources at an intentional character development initiative.

Step #2: Investigating Existing Language

With a base understanding of moral and performance character, schools can investigate

existing character frameworks to develop their shared language. Our schools do not need to reinvent the wheel of creating domain specific character language. Working off existing frameworks can help focus the process and prevent analysis paralysis.

Examples of these existing frameworks are numerous. Dr. Angela Duckworth, one of Seligman's prized students and the originator of making grit a schoolwide and cultural phenomenon, has deepened the work and research base around performance character in particular. In 2013, Duckworth founded the 'Character Lab' which brings together some of the world's leading

researchers in human performance and character, bridging research and practice on a frequently updated website with free distributable material for any school to implement.[14]

There are many other character language formulations that schools can work from. Summit, the online personalized learning platform currently boasts a list of 16 ‘habits of success’ arranged in ascending order from foundational pieces in ‘healthy development’ to higher goals of ‘independence and sustainability.’ The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) provides a more social-emotional based framework, built on a core of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Harvard’s graduate school of education’s website provides 37 additional frameworks from different organizations and the ability to compare and contrast domains and related skills.[15]

The language of these various organizations intersects and overlaps. And I ultimately don’t believe the specific language matters as much as the critical first step of collaboratively *establishing* that language within our school contexts in the first place.[16] Surely, we have to be discerning in our evaluation of the character traits and values we hold in the highest esteem. But this process of looking through existing character language- an essential first step- should not cause an inordinate delay towards the *driving* component of this work: implementing actionable next steps of how to teach and embed this essential language in our schools.

Step #3: Building Our Language

After establishing some baseline character language from existing frameworks, we can actively build in our own Torah and Jewish language to reflect our school’s core values. One approach would be replacing certain values that we established in step two, by translating that character language using Torah concepts or Hebrew words, or simply adding values to our framework that are unique to our Jewish day schools.

A second approach is aligning our character language with an existing foundational Torah text. For example, Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman has started this process using *Pirkei Avot* as a base text to build a character curriculum. Other texts could be the step-by-step matrix of the *Mesillat Yesharim* (*zehirut-zerizut-nekiyut* etc.) or certain ‘gates’ in the *Chovot ha’Levavot.* A possible framework that emphasizes moral character might be the 13 *Middot shel Rachamaim*, G-d’s attributes of mercy. Building a character mission based on the principles and values of:

1. ***Rachum***- Care and Compassion, Empathy

2. ***Chanun***- Grace and Humility

3. ***Erech Apayim***- Self Control

4. ***Chesed***- Kindness

5. ***Emet***- Truth, Honesty, Integrity and Learning

We can also build a common language based off of rich and meaningful values within our *mesorah*, but compiled anew. A framework that considers both moral and performance character could be:

1. *Chochma*- Purpose and wisdom

- Includes: Big Ideas, Love of learning, Curiosity, Emotional intelligence

2. *Chesed*- Care, Compassion and Contribution

- Includes: Kindness, Empathy, Appreciation, Responsibility, Community

3. *Hishtalmut*- Dynamic Growth

- Includes: Grit, Resilience, Persistence, Drive, Courage

4. *Kedusha* or *Tzidkut*- Holiness or Righteousness

- Includes: Honesty, Integrity, Hope, Torah/Tefilla growth, Obligation

5. *Anivut*- Humility

- Includes: Emotional Regulation, Respect, Self-control

School leaders and stakeholders can individually build their moral and ethical language based on their school communities. A list of 20 or 30 values will present the Rider with too much choice and not enough clarity. But through an engaging process with staff, students, and other stakeholders, a common language of 4-5 core values can be established, communicated, and embedded within our school cultures.

Of course this represents only a first step, establishing language and knowledge, which is a necessary strategy to direct the Rider. But it does nothing for the Elephant and our emotional decision making. Knowing what is good versus actually *living* good is a significant chasm to overcome. For our staff and students to teach, model, learn, and develop character, we need to not only appeal to the mind but to the heart. After we establish our character goals and specific language, what strategies can we employ to evoke a charge amongst the stakeholders in our building to feel and live differently?

B. The Elephant

As explained previously, an “Elephant” block to change is not feeling an emotional connection to what is being asked of me. I’m not inspired to change. I might be completely aware of what I am supposed to do (solving the Rider challenge), I just have other competing drives and more exciting or immediate demands on my time, energy, and focus. To solve Elephant challenges, we have to appeal to the heart as much as the mind. We need to appeal to human emotion.

Confucius reportedly compared moral development with learning how to play music: both require an understanding of text, but both also need careful observation of role models and many years of consistent practice to develop. A starting point for channeling the Elephant in the right direction may be exactly that: establishing and observing role models and setting up deliberate opportunities for practice.

(1) Role Modelling

Role models are meant to elicit a feeling of humility, admiration, and awe. Teachers are natural mentors and role models that find themselves in a very privileged position in the lives of young people. A teacher is one of the first adults that a child interacts with outside of the immediate home, and gives children the opportunity to see themselves in new ways, construct different possible selves, and consider alternative ways of being.[17]

Between teachers in the classroom and different advisory based systems, our schools should ensure that every student is more formally connected to at least one caring, natural adult mentor in the building. By ‘natural,’ I refer to organic ‘Tier One’ relationships that are accessible to all students: a teacher, academic coach, or advisory program which all students partake in. This is in contrast to more intensive ‘Tier Two’ mental health or academic support that only a fraction of the student body may directly receive.

This role modeling takes place naturally in class and advisory rooms, especially if faculty have an agreed upon list of virtues that they can continually model, reinforce, and highlight. This can also take place in structures like a weekly *sicha* or assembly where different teachers in school, and perhaps parents and guests from outside who embody a particular value, can share with the entire student body about their life experiences or further teach about these specific attributes from a Torah and Jewish communal perspective.

However, the opportunity for role-modeling in our Jewish day schools extends beyond these more formal adult-student relationships. A powerful way to influence the Elephant is through intentional

peer-to-peer role modeling. Which students are celebrated in our schools? Who has the loudest voice or receives the most recognition? What do our sports teams look like and stand for? Who is on our student council and other student leadership platforms? What do our award ceremonies look like? Which values are publicly recognized? Are there more opportunities to celebrate, compliment, and publicly recognize specific aspects and acts of character and middot? Can this be done both for students and for staff? More consistent celebration of success and public reinforcement of core values would significantly impact institutional culture.

There are specific exercises and activities that can help build role modeling as well.

Dr. Martin Seligman describes an activity where students identify signature strengths within themselves (through his VIA Character survey[18]) and then identify one student and one adult that are paragons of a particular character strength that they admire. These values could also be determined based on the core values that a school has established through the Rider step mentioned above. Students can then interview those adults and peers that are models of particular character strengths or simply write about how that individual embodies those traits. This is also a great opportunity for students to express *hakarat ha'tov* towards staff members (gratitude is also a core character strength) as well as an opportunity to notice and share positive feedback with students who embody values and positive character traits that are not often celebrated or noticed.

Seligman's signature strength interview activity can also be channeled into curricula. For example, students reading a particular literary piece could identify signature strengths or core school values represented or lacking in a novel's protagonist. Historical personalities can also be analyzed and assessed through different paradigms of character. This is a more ambitious project, one that connects with a broader curricular aim described further in the "Path" section below.

(2) Practice and Habit

Aristotle wrote:

> Men become builders by building houses, and harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, we grow just by practicing just actions, self-controlled by exercising our self-control and courageous by performing acts of courage. [19]

The Elephant is influenced by emotion which falls under the domain of action more than thought. As the Sefer Ha'Chinuch expressed, *Acharei Ha'Peulot Nimshchim ha'Levavot*, the heart follows concrete action. If we want our students to build character, we have to create platforms and access points for students to practice and develop those strengths of character.

This can take the form of more intentional *chesed* and *tzedaka* committees among students, more coordinated out of school trips and experiences that promote the development of students' consideration of 'other.' These experiences should be both framed and later reflected on by students using specific character language developed by the school. The development of these more intricate and coordinated initiatives and experiences falls outside the realm of this article. There are organizations that are doing this well and can model how to set up these experiences as more than one-off trips, but spiraled experiential curricula where the out-of-school opportunities build off each other and promote specific values and character.[20]

However, schools do not have to commit to an enormous undertaking of time, energy, and resources that such an experiential approach requires to promote the practice and habits of a predefined list of character goals. Integrating intentional time for reflection within classes around 'actionable character' can both promote these values, serve as role modeling opportunities between students, positively reinforce specific types of behaviors, and inspire students to look for opportunities to engage in meaningful character-building moments in and outside of school. Examples such as the following can be integrated into a Judaic studies class with minimal time interference.

[i] LIDs (Learned-Inspired-Did Reflection)- Students submit a weekly reflection on one thing that they **L**earned that week that was interesting, resonated, or provoked curiosity and why. One thing that **I**nspired them, that was meaningful and triggered an emotional reaction. And one concrete thing that they **D**id that made the world a better place to be. The "did" prompt can be changed to promote and reinforce any specific character language (for example: one thing that you did that displayed empathy, self-control, *anivut*, etc.). Teachers, with student permission, can share 'bright spots,' models of exemplary work for the whole class to see the depth and thoughtfulness of other student responses (another way to promote and celebrate students as well).[21]

[ii] Holy moment of the week- class can start with what Rabbi Dov Singer at Mekor Chaim calls '*Bracha Rishona*,' a way for every voice to be heard in order to build a shared community of listening and sharing. Teachers can model by presenting first and then asking every student to share something. You can replace '*holy*' moment with any other specific *middah* that you are emphasizing as a class or school. This collective sharing is another vehicle to appeal to the Elephant, generating a sense of group camaraderie around ethical, moral, and spiritual values.[22]

These ideas are examples of creating shared experiences around character. By promoting action, as well as the reflection of said action, we also appeal to the Elephant in the sense that our children begin to build within their neurochemistry the need to seek out character and *kedusha* building experiences outside of the classroom. If I know I need to share something weekly, as time goes on and this becomes a part of my class culture, I begin to proactively design opportunities to engage and fashion the world around me to enable additional character-building experiences. As *Pirkei Avot* declares, "*mitzvah gorreret mitzvah**[23]*** when I am engaged in mitzvah, opportunities for additional mitzvot present themselves as well.

(3) Emotional Punch

In addition to role modeling and building habits, the third way to inspire the Elephant- which needs to be utilized with caution- is harnessing the power of 'emotional punches.' Haidt shares a fascinating story of why he decided to temporarily give up red meat. As a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, Haidt read *Practical Ethics* by the Princeton philosopher Peter Singer which includes a persuasive section on the ethics of killing animals for food.

> Singer's clear and compelling arguments convinced me on the spot and since that day I have been morally opposed to all forms of factory farming. Morally opposed, but not behaviorally opposed. I love the taste of meat and the only thing that changed in the first six months after reading Singer is that I thought about my hypocrisy each time I ordered a hamburger.[24]

But something changed during Haidt's second year of graduate school. Working on a study on the human emotion of disgust, Haidt and a fellow researcher showed student participants videos that would elicit disgust, including graphic video taken inside a slaughterhouse. Watching these videos elicited a visceral reaction and Haidt stopped eating all forms of red meat and chicken for three weeks and still to this day eats less red meat 18 years later.

This third option to trigger the Elephant may be the most powerful, but it is also the most complex. Teachers and school administration may be reasonably uncomfortable with 'playing' on teenagers' emotions to promote specific actions and behaviors. But I don't believe-and I think most will agree- that engaging with students on an emotional level is completely out of bounds. Careful attention, nuance, and sensitivity must be utilized by a committee of staff as to how and when to utilize strong emotional experiences.

To an extent many of our schools do this well over the period of the YOMs (*Yom Ha'Shoah, Yom HaZikaron, Yom Ha'Atzmaut*) as we try and connect our students to the horrors of the Holocaust or the self-sacrifice of Israeli soldiers and victims of terror. We don't simply read accounts out of textbooks. We show videos of heroic acts of courage, family members remembering their loved ones, and the shared sense of commitment and purpose that modern day Israelis exhibit in defending the State of Israel. I believe that a similar approach can be used to promote other *middot* by designing intentional platforms to distribute emotionally engaging content around character development.

This is where annual school shabbatons and retreats, and the power of a passionate kabbalat shabbat story, or engaging multimodal programming is so important. This is where inviting students over for a Shabbat meal, school wide onegs and joyful Simchat Torah and Purim dancing is so critical. A weekly faculty sicha or address, showing a thought-provoking movie clip or bringing in a motivating speaker all centered around agreed upon character language can stimulate powerful emotional responses. We need to frequently ask: how are we making these *middot* emotionally meaningful to

our young people in a way that inspires, but not manipulates, and gives them reason to pause, consider and reflect on the moral development of their emerging selves.

C. The Path

We can have the clearest language, identifying and communicating specific values and acts of character, appealing to our students and staffs' Riders. We can create more intentional platforms for role modeling, practicing and reflecting on values, and providing opportune moments of emotional 'punch' to appeal to our students and teachers' Elephants. But without considering the Path, the surrounding context, processes, and systems through which our schools operate, we will not experience a more permeated school wide change. Common Path obstacles are based on time, space, or other cultural and contextual obstacles that make it harder for people to conform to a certain change initiative.

The greatest Path obstacle to any school led change initiative is time. Saying yes to a character development initiative means saying no to other essential student experiences including class time. These ultimately becomes value questions, which is why the first step in this process, clarifying core values and building a common language, is so important. Our current schedules and time choices reflect deep seated beliefs, values, and assumptions. They may be implicit or explicit, but there is a default value operating system at work in all of our institutions. If we have nine periods of Gemara a week, offer multiple science course options, or have designated times for "programming," these smaller decisions all reflect overarching values that have been put into place by administrative predecessors or ourselves, and it can be a useful exercise to give voice to these underlying assumptions and beliefs that have given rise to the current schedule and arc of learning and programming over our school year.[25]

This is not mere philosophizing. Any conversation about 'finding time for X' is not a technical problem; it is an adaptive change question that requires the key stakeholders in the institution to determine and discuss based on conflicting values. Instead of "do we have time to discuss character?" a better question is "do we value the promotion of character value X, Y, Z over value A, B, C?" If yes, where in the existing schedule can the promotion of values X, Y, and Z happen most naturally and consistently? Our school schedules are a living and breathing expression of our values. If a program, class, or initiative is not stitched into the fabric of the school schedule in a consistent way, it will always be viewed as an appendage to the school experience by students and staff alike with the corresponding perceived importance of such 'programs' remaining relatively low. Assuming school leadership believes that the promotion of character and values in our students is essential to our core mission, our next natural question is: in what way does our schedule currently reflect that?

This is our Path challenge. How do we construct the time and space within our school day and year to accommodate a more intentionally built character development plan? I believe the most constructive way to think through these challenges is from two vantage points: the "micro-path" and the "macro-path."

(1) Micro-Path

On a micro-scale or path, school leadership can ask: in what consistent way can we build intentional character education onto our *existing structures*. This can be reappropriating the usage of "Friday *machshava*" (an amalgamation of ways in which many teachers' independently decide to use their Friday periods) into a more holistic and intentional platform for character development education. It can happen by more intentionally directing how advisory time is utilized. As an example, our school has gone through several revisions of advisory models and have now settled on what we call Academic Coaches.

In addition to *monthly* individual coaching sessions and longer 45-minute group sessions on a broader topic in executive functioning and social emotional development, this year we added a *weekly* 15-minute 'Team Meeting' into the schedule. Every Tuesday students meet with their coaches for 15 minutes at the beginning of the day after tefilla. Simply embedding this into the schedule in a more ongoing capacity has transformed the way students perceive this initiative, while creating an additional platform to utilize for character education. Structures such as advisory that meet in such a concrete, consistent way can be a viable platform to increase character development in school and fix the time-path challenge.

(2) Macro-Path

A much more audacious goal on a macro-scale would be using our core value and character language as filters through which we make key curricular decisions. Instead of looking for opportunities to add character education as additional building blocks to existing structures, schools instead could begin the much more intensive work of *embedding* character education *into the existing curricula*. As with the schedule, we are already making decisions on curricula, what units we focus on, and what texts we use based on an established set of pre-existing, default values. Whether those values are implicit or explicit, they are driving our current curricular decisions both in Judaic and General studies classes. What you believe in has to be in your curriculum for transformational change to take place. Are we making curricular decisions based on a default paradigmatic value orientation or can the values that we have identified as core to what we are aspiring to build in our students and school be the impetus and filter by which we choose units, texts, and areas of study?

Of course, we shouldn't allow themes to determine *every* choice and force square pegs into round holes. Alignment shouldn't override common sense; we do have to be nuanced enough to appreciate that there will be areas of learning that are important that may not fit cleanly into one of our established value boxes. But should this not at least be a significant factor in those deliberations and debates as to what is the most important usage of our students' time while they are learning in our Torah and educational institutions?

[IV] Conclusion

When you lie awake at night, looking up at your ceiling and allowing life's bigger questions and thoughts to flow around your mind, ask yourself: what do you ultimately want for your children and students? As parents and educators, what are your dreams? What are the most essential lasting influences, ideas, and mindsets that you want to see in your children when they graduate high school?

Some will answer "keys to a better life and opportunities for the future." You hope for good grades and open doors, maximizing possibility as these young adults enter the threshold of yeshiva and seminary in Israel and then college. But I believe most of you, holding off sleep for a few more minutes, will start directing your thoughts higher: to the great ideals and noble aspirations of the human spirit.

We want children who positively contribute to the world around them, building families, joining community, and in their own small but essential way contribute to the unfolding drama of the Jewish story. We want children that develop a love for Torah learning and Jewish living and recognize their essential role as torch bearers for our shared Jewish future. We want children who are *mentches,* children who are humble, honor their elders, and speak politely but firmly even when they disagree. We want children who can take calculated risks and bounce back from setbacks, resiliently and relentlessly pursuing their life goals and purpose. We want children who pursue justice and blend that with compassion, that can look at complex situations from multiple right angles. We want children who can exhibit the necessary self-control that can allow them to function as adults while unleashing their personal creativity which is dependent on self-regulation and healthy habits. We want children who demonstrate *kedusha*, who can abstain from negative forces and strive for higher ideals, who live their lives asking "what does G-d want from me in this situation?" We want our children to be forces for good, leaders and followers that can live meaningful, purposeful lives instilled with an ethic of contribution.

Your list may look differently than mine. It should. But ask yourself: to what extent is your family, school, or community intentionally building an experience that is developing and amplifying those ideals? And what are you doing to move that list, that vision, forward? Through investigating change from the lens of the Rider, Elephant and Path we can better understand the daunting task ahead of us. But that should not deter us from starting or continuing it. As Jewish days schools and Torah institutions, it is within the core of our ethos to make the character development of our children a fundamental aspect of their Jewish educational experience. I have attempted in this article to continue this conversation with some suggested first steps. Let's build this movement together.

[1] Jonathan Haidt (2006), The Happiness Hypothesis, pg. 158.

[2] https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/07/students-broken-moral-compasses/492866/

[3] https://charactercounts.org/2012-report-card/

[4] https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/children-mean-raise

[5] http://www.iasc-culture.org/survey_archives/IASC_CAF_ExecReport.pdf

[6] https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2673719

[7] https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/07/students-broken-moral-compasses/492866/

[8] Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2015), Lessons in Leadership, Parshat Bo

[9] Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik (1991), Logic of the Heart Logic of the Mind, pg. 15

[10] See Rabbi Rick Schindelheim's recent piece 'Choosing Meaningful Content' for more on this strand https://www.lookstein.org/journal-article/meaning-making-in-jewish-education/choosing-meaningful-content/

[11] Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik- see above note 10

[12] Jonathan Haidt (2006) The Happiness Hypothesis, pg. 4

[13] Seligman, M. E. P., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist*, *55*(1), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5

[14] https://characterlab.org/

[15] http://exploresel.gse.harvard.edu/

[16] An example of an effective protocol on this regard is the Paper Passion Purpose Tool (P^3T) http://www.coloradoedinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/D.-Langford-P3T.pdf

[17] Understanding Youth, Nakula and Toshalis, Chapter 3

[18] https://www.viacharacter.org/

[19] Aristotle. Nichomachean ethics

[20] For example, see: Wexner Service Corps. https://www.wexnerfoundation.org/programs/wexner-service-corps/

[21] The Learned-Inspired reflection also aligns with the Rider-Elephant elements of change we've been discussing

[22] For more on this theme, see: Dr. Bruce Powell and Dr. Ron Wilson (2021) Raising A+ Human Beings

[23] Pirkei Avot 4:2

[24] Jonathan Haidt, The Happiness Hypothesis, pg. 165

[25] For more on this theme see: The Practice of Adaptive Leadership (2009) by Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky