Who Is (and Is Not) teaching in Modern Orthodox Schools: A View from Israel

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During the past several years as an educator in the fields of Tanakh and Jewish studies, I have come across a prevalent and disturbing phenomenon: most of the religiously observant student teachers whom I have met are not at all interested in teaching in the mamlakhti-dati school system (the religious public school system in Israel). When the time comes for them to decide on a professional placement, they apply to secular schools, or to the new model of specialized dati-hiloni schools (religious/secular schools), or to pluralistic religious schools. Several years ago, as the head of the Tanakh department of such an experimental dati-hiloni high school, I found that more than half of the Jewish studies faculty was comprised of incredibly dedicated and talented religious young people. When I asked them to describe the thought process that brought them to an experimental framework, (in our case, a particularly demanding one), the majority of them admitted to never having even considered Mamad (religious public school system) as a professional option, for reasons that will be discussed in this paper. Some had tried to teach in the Mamad system and had given up.

Why is this true? Why are these bright, highly motivated, religiously observant young people, who are extremely knowledgeable in both Jewish and general studies, opting out of the mamlakhti-dati school system? And if they are opting out, then who is teaching our children?

In this article I would like to address these questions by relating several stories that reflect the changes that are taking place in the Mamad schools and in the teachers colleges. I want to examine how and why these changes, which are occurring in both the formal and informal frameworks of the Mamad, are alienating many young, committed and engaged religious student teachers out of its educational system. In addition, I would like to suggest conceptual and practical changes to improve an ever worsening situation.

Observations from the Field: Primary School

A Story about Matisse

When our daughter was in fifth grade at the local Mamad (religious public school), she decided to do her personal project on Matisse. We went to do research at the Israel Museum art library and spent several hours reading his biography and examining books of Matisse's paintings. Some weeks later I bumped into the teacher in the school hall, and couldn't resist asking her what she thought of my daughter's project. Well, she said hesitating, it was a bit skimpy. Skimpy?! I cried in disbelief. She's in fifth grade. She could have chosen "Water" or "Color" or "Why is the Sky Blue?" Instead she picked a difficult topic and handed in work she did herself. What do you mean by skimpy? Well, she said quietly, the truth is... I have never heard of Matisse.

After recovering from the sad implications of this story, we need to ask ourselves some hard questions: Why is a person with so little intellectual curiosity, or basic professional self-respect, hired to teach school children? Once hired, why are such teachers maintained?

The status of teacher knowledge in the secular primary schools is, unfortunately, not much better than that of the teachers in the Mamad system. It is unlikely, however, for a teacher in a secular school never to have heard of Matisse, implausible that she would not refer to an encyclopedia while grading her student's work, and inconceivable that she would look the student's parent directly in the eye and say: "I have never heard of Matisse."

Why are so many Mamad teachers like this, particularly--but not exclusively--in the younger grades? And why does a teacher in the Mamad system feel safe in

doing this? The answers are not pleasant. One: Matisse was not Jewish. [In the eyes of the narrowly Orthodox] non-Jews don't count. Two: Matisse was an artist. Art is irrelevant. If the fifth grader's paper had been a biography of a great rabbinic sage, the teacher would certainly have done her homework. Three: Matisse painted nudes. Nudity is immodest and immodesty is the cardinal sin, greater than ignorance and intolerance (more on this later). In fact, the teacher had asked my daughter to remove one of Matisse's abstract line drawings of a nude from the paper. The principal insisted that it stay in. Poor Matisse, he never had a chance.

So why is this person permitted to teach our children?

The answer lies in the ever changing face of the Mamad teacher. Whereas once the Mamad teacher and principal were observant Jews who prided themselves on their abilty to combine love of Torah with love of all knowledge, today more and more Mamad teachers pride themselves on their insularity, and yes, their ignorance of all things not Jewish.

I would like to underscore this point with 3 stories from my recent experience in Mamad teachers colleges.
Observations from the Field of Teacher Training

Recently, I taught at a well-respected college for primary school educators, considered for years a pillar of dati leumi (religious Zionist) Judaism. For administrative reasons, the college hosts students from an influential hareidi - leumi midrasha (hareidi Zionist school) who pursue their B. ED at the college. They are excellent students, and their influence on the school is great-as are their demands.

Feminist Research

Early on in the semester, in a course on pedagogy, I referred to a research study by feminist scholars on a gender related educational issue. After class, some of the students approached to further discuss my conclusions, but questioned my reference to feminist scholarship.

That night, I received a call from a faculty representative from the midrasha. His official job was liaison between the midrasha and the seminar; his unofficial job was to be a watchdog for religiosity. He asked that I meet him the next day in his office allotted to him by the college.

I was told the following: academic research is not important to us. Please avoid referring to it. Feminist research is anathema to us. If you happen to teach Tanakh, do not teach comparative parshanut a la Nechama Leibowitz. We don't evaluate the great parshanim (classic rabbinic Bible commentators) - they are all equally great. We don't compare and contrast. Who are we, after all?

A Trip to London

Wanting to prevent further such confrontations, I avoided all areas of controversy--not my natural inclination. During a class exercise demonstrating varying approaches to planning, I asked my students to plan a trip to London. I noticed one pair sitting and not working. I approached to ask if they needed help. The following conversation ensued.

We have never been to London.

OK, I said, make believe.

We don't want to go to London.

Ok. I said, (thinking perhaps that they were Anglophobic). How about Paris?

We don't want to go to Paris either.

OK. Where do you want to go?

They thought for a moment and said, To the Golan.

Literary Analysis

Soon after, I began teaching at another dati leumi College intended for junior high and high school educators, also a prominent institution in dati leumi education. The school was eager to develop into an Israeli model of Yeshiva University, a degree granting religious university. In this vein, the school held a half day conference on the topic of literary approaches to teaching Tanakh. All the presenters were religiously observant. I delivered a paper on the topic of thematic reading. When I returned to class, I found my normally compliant students up in arms. How could I apply literary tools to the reading of Tanakh? Tanakh is a sacred book, not literature. It is forbidden to apply literary text analysis to the Torah.

This was compartmentalization at its best. Literary analysis, a gentler cousin of Biblical criticism, has a way of unnerving some religious people. The students' instincts were right; this material is sensitive and troubling. But what struck me

most was the fear, a near panic, at what they had heard, and a refusal to have a discussion. In a house of learning, the response to ideas that challenge our assumptions cannot be flight or fear. That is the hareidi way; it is not meant to be the approach of classical dati leumi education. In addition, these were students preparing for high school teaching. Certainly the day would come when one of their students would question them on this topic. What will their response be?

The colleges and students alluded to are not marginal or atypical. They serve as major feeders of teachers to the Mamad school system. Those students are the teachers of our children today.

What the above stories have in common is that they all reflect the growing influence of the hareidi ideologies on Mamad education via hareidi-leumi teachers and attitudes: lack of curiosity bordering on disdain for all things not Jewish; distrust of academia--even while earning an academic degree; distaste for feminism- even while benefiting from the contribution of feminist activism to the equality of women in the workplace; fear of critical thinking; refusal to recognize and grapple with issues of modernity and post-modernist humanist thought; extensive use of the advances of modern research in areas of medicine and technology, along with an unwillingness to admit or to acknowledge the central role of the university in bringing about these advances.

The hareidi-leumi worldview, while clearly one I do not share, has the right to its input into the religious and political discourse of the State of Israel. But the legitimate place for the dissemination of its values is within its own schools and communities. The dati leumi school system, once the pride and joy of the dati leumi world, is emptying at a frightening rate, because the liberal dati leumi establishment refuses to acknowledge that, despite a shared commitment to the observance of (certain) mitzvoth and to the state of Israel, what divides us is greater than what unites us.

On Sukkot 2005, Ne'emanei Torah V'Avodah hosted a joint conference with Edah[1], an American organization associated with religious Zionism and modern Orthodoxy.[2] In a keynote address, Rabbi Saul Berman delineated the major ideological issues on which the hareidi world and the modern Orthodox world differ: pluralism/tolerance, the religious meaning of Medinat Israel, Jew and Gentile, da'at Torah, Torah u'maddah, humrah, women in halakha, outreach, and activism. On the majority of the issues listed, the hareidi- leumi attitude is closer to the hareidi attitude than to the dati leumi attitude.[3] Aside from the approach towards the State, we differ on the central, most significant issues of modern Jewish life.

These ideological differences weigh heavily upon the young students with whom I have contact. Humanistic in their orientation and pluralist in their outlook, they do not want to teach in the Mamad schools, because they do not want to instill values that are not theirs. They all (women and men) have academic degrees, some in Bible and in Talmud, as well as in literature, history, music, and art. They embrace the world because it is awesome, and they are curious. They cannot teach honestly without alluding to all that they know, nor do they want to.

These dati students have been to China and India, some even to London! They believe Jews are special, but they don't believe that everyone else is devoid of values. They go to concerts, they know who Matisse is, and they know a thing or two about wine. The men know how to cook... and most of the women wear slacks.
They are rigorous in their thinking, but not rigid in their outlook. They struggle to find the interface--often through reexamination of religious sources--between the yeshiva/midrasha and the university, between Levinas and dati leumi, shiurim and shira, Carlbach and Kleinstein. Their challenge is to make these worlds overlap, not to compartmentalize them.

They represent the oft alluded line between dati and leumi, between modern and Orthodox. These are the students who should be teaching our children. Most of them will not.

The Dress Code

A disturbing corollary of hareidi- leumi influence that threatens the caliber of teachers in the dati leumi schools system is the growing obsession with the dress code relating to women. Part of the reason why the teacher in the Matisse story continues to teach in our schools is because she looks the part. She and hundreds like her are teaching in our schools, despite the fact that they may be inferior teachers, because her elbows are covered, her skirts are long, and in the case of married women, her head is covered.
Over the past 10-15 years, the dati-leumi establishment has become obsessed with the dress code of women. Prominent rabbis write outrageous articles measuring centimeters on the neck and on the arms. While the suitability of male teachers is measured in how much they know and the quality of their prayer, in the case of women, the skill of pious dressing can override the skills of good teaching.

Modesty is a significant tenet of Jewish life, but we have begun to lose all sense of proportion. When appearance is secondary to talent in a school system, the big

losers are the children.

A case in point: Several years ago a new Dati Leumi academic school opened in our neighborhood to address the needs of our predominantly liberal dati-leumi population. Most of the parents, working people, professionals and academics, were eager for a superior local school for their children that could compete with excellent schools outside the neighborhood. The girls' school, however, was headed in a different direction. From its inception, it insisted that homeroom teachers wear head coverings at all times, that is, outside of school as well as in. All non- homeroom teachers, that is, art, history, math, were requested to wear a head covering in school, even if they didn't do so in their personal lives. Thus, with one swift religious stringency, the eagerly awaited alternative dati-leumi school committed to excellence, disqualified all outstanding religious teachers who didn't "look the look."[4] While the boys' school, instituted at the same time, searched for the "best and the brightest," the girls' school front line concern was attire. Not only did the students have a dress code, so did the teachers.

It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the halakhic ins and outs of these dress demands. The point of emphasis here is that this stringent dress code does not reflect the norms or the values of the religiously observant parent body. The vast majority of the mothers in this school do not cover their hair and many wear slacks. At the opening ceremony of the school the number of mothers counted with head coverings was 10 out of 150! Thus the unstated message conveyed to girls is that their mothers are not qualified to be their religious role models.[5]

The ever increasing insistence on a dress code for teachers is another reasons my religious students avoid teaching in the Mamad system. It is important to note that some of my married dati students do in fact wear head coverings, but some do not. Some wear head coverings and slacks and want to continue to do so, not because they are rebellious, but because slacks are comfortable and efficient. These young women are halakhically committed, and halakhically informed, many are well versed in Talmudic texts. They know that the ban on slacks is a sociological issue, not a halakhic one , and that head covering has become the sociological equivalent of a kippah only recently. Graduates of midrashot and yeshivot, they spend countless hours examining the sources. Thoughtful and honest, they are looking for ways to be true to halakha and true to themselves.

Thus these young dati-leumi teachers opt for schools that will let them wear what feels comfortable, while retaining their personal sense of modesty; schools that will focus on their thinking abilities, their pedagogic skills, and their ability to

touch the hearts and minds of their students. They are not going to the Mamad system.

Yet, aren't these the very teachers we want teaching in our schools?

Conclusion

The Mamad school system has lost its sense of identity; it is no longer responsive to the needs of its community. The vacuum created is being filled by ideologies that do not reflect the vision and the values of the majority of the pupils' homes and communities. By allowing vast hareidi leumi influence on our schools, we abrogate our responsibility to our own community. Not only are young teachers leaving the system, so are the children.

Talented teachers with a more embracing attitude to the modern world as well as to its challenges will find work elsewhere, in the secular public school system and in other frameworks mentioned in the opening of this paper. But who will teach the thousands of children from liberal dati leumi homes? For now, the majority of dati leumi parents are not looking for alternative frameworks, although with each passing year, more and more are doing so. They are still eager for a neighborhood school that reflects their combined commitment to Torah and general wisdom, in the broadest sense of the word.

In the final analysis, it is the teachers who make a school. In order for children to return to the Mamad system, we need to make spiritual room for the many talented young religious teachers who are grappling with the same issues as the families, teachers whose intricate approach to the world is similar to that of their students.

A Practical Suggestion for Change

The past few years has seen the development of several excellent academic programs throughout Israel which support promising young students financially in exchange for a commitment to teach Jewish studies in the religious public school system for a stipulated number of years. I would like to see the creation of similar programs that would prepare bright and motivated religious university students for teaching in the Mamad system. In exchange for tuition and financial support, perhaps by the religious branch of the Ministry of Education, as well as private donors committed to liberal religious values, they would be asked to commit to several years of teaching in the Mamad.

In addition to the regular courses in disciplinary knowledge and in pedagogy, there would be classes and workshops devoted to issues such as: the implications of the past 100 years' of Biblical research; recent Talmud research; issues related to women; national service; conflicts arising between Synagogue and State; democracy and Judaism; attitude toward non-religious Jews, and so much more. As of now, most of these issues are discussed only in informal youth programs like Gesher. Their place is in the schools.

In order to accomplish this, we need teachers who are not afraid.

There are many options for such a program of study, worthy of a separate paper. But in order for such a program to be effective, there needs to be more than specialized education for students. Just as the general public school system is reevaluating its attitude toward Jewish studies and therefore training teachers to spearhead that movement, so does the dati leumi school system need to do some serious self- reflection. Only then will they be able to bring back young dati teachers who think out of the box, who are committed to halakha and to academic research, who are rethinking old approaches--not rejecting them--who love children, love knowledge, and embrace the world.

[1] Edah was an organization "committed to... Modern Orthodoxy, which maintains a serious devotion to Torah and Halakhah while enjoying a mutually enriching relationship with the modern world."

[2] Closest Hebrew and Israeli equivalent: dati-leumi.

[3] The exceptions being: Medinat Israel, outreach and activism.

[4] The "other" girls' school this school was meant to compete with still retains the educational, and I contend, the religious edge. There is no demand for head coverings from the married teachers, including those who teach religious subjects.

[5] See "Hok ha'Kovah Koveiah," by Esther Lapian, an unpublished paper delivered at the Kolech Conference, 2006.