On the Need for an Ethical Preparatory Torah Education

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Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook wrote, “The wise do not complain of darkness rather they increase the light.” The Orthodox and greater Jewish community seems racked by scandal after scandal where laymen, political leaders and rabbis are demonstrating what can only be termed ”ethicopathy”- the complete disregard for ethical living and consciousness. While it may be instinctive to invoke the aphorism, ”There is always a bad apple in every bunch” thus placing the onus of responsibility on the individual’s lack of moral scruples, I believe this would not do justice to what I sense is a systemic and communal responsibility in how we are educating are children, adults as well as our rabbis. As a member of the Orthodox community my focus will be on my own religious community which I am most familiar with and which sadly seems as of late quite efficient in producing rare but nonetheless ethicopaths of the first order.

Allow me to begin with a seemingly ridiculous question, ”Does the Orthodox community care about ethical living?” As an Orthodox rabbi I would immediately reply, “Ofcourse we do- what an absurd question! Look at all the commandments that touch on ethical living, look at all the statements of our Talmudic sages that emphasize the importance of ethics in business and in one’s personal dealings, look at all the stories of the righteous past and present and the behavior they have modeled for generation after generation and look at the contemporary books on Jewish ethics available at Judaica stores.” Clearly, everything in the above statement is true, however, if we refine the question in light of the above rebuttal I believe the point that is seeking to be made will crystallize. I mean to ask, ”Do we ‘emphasize’ and ‘prioritize’ ethical living in the education of our children, adults and rabbis?” Now to this question the rebuttal does not come so simply. When I consider what the Orthodox community “emphasizes” and “prioritizes” in all honesty ethical living does not immediately appear to register as very high on the totem pole of concerns. If you will allow me to free associate the emphasis of our community seems to be: Daf Yomi, Daily Minyan, Shabbat, Kashrut, Berachot, Niddah, Eruv’s, Theology, Holidays, Tzniyut and Women’s Issues, Conversion, Carlebach davening and Israel. Our children spending the vast majority of their sacred studies school time focused on classical text study of Chumash, Nach, Mishna, Talmud and Mishna Berurah with a dose of Hebrew Language and Zionsim within the more Modern contexts and yes we will attend a Darfur rally as well.”

Now, a little voice inside me says, ”I know this may not sound like we emphasize and prioritize ethics but they are laden within all the Torah we are studying and in our communal way of living.” Now, this answer albeit sincere is what I will call the theory of ethical development through “osmosis”. This approach was once marshaled against Rabbi Yisrael Salanter zt’l the founder of the 19th century Mussar movement who attempted with limited success to instill a particular focus on psychological awareness and ethical cultivation within the traditional Yeshiva system. His rabbinic opponents then and now argued that Torah alone sufficed for generations and there was no special need for “wasting time” from Torah study for Mussar. His response was that while a spiritual diet of Torah alone may have sufficed for prior generations this was not viable in the historical situation they found themselves in -think late 19th century! So, if we fast forward to the early 21st century and we survey our receding moral landscape let us ask some very simple questions: Is there any Orthodox High School from Left to Right that offers its students a 6 month class 1 hr a week in “Ethical Living in the Modern World”? Are any of our rabbinical seminaries from the Left to Right preparing our rabbis to deal with the ethical and psychological challenges they will face in their professional capacities as teachers, counselors, mentors and fundraisers?

I believe the answer to these questions are as follows: There is no such High School program within Orthodoxy focusing on ethical living in a modern context according to Torah. To the extent that any rabbis are being prepared for the ethical and psychological challenges of the rabbinate this is at best limited to Modern Orthodox seminaries like Yeshiva University and Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and this is quite recent and what further questionable how well and thoroughly they are being prepared.

So if we are operating on an ethics by osmosis educational theory than we should not be surprised that some individuals even rabbis have less an ability to develop into ethical human beings via this method. Consequently, they produce the outrageous moral scandals and immoral wonders of the rabbinic world that we get to read about in the paper to our shock, indignation and horror. Alternatively, and what is more often the case these ethical failings are kept under wraps or are simply unknown until at times an all out catastrophe occurs. Then we all lament the gross desecration of God’s name for a week and then go back to “Torah life as usual” until the cycle repeats and the next ethicopath surfaces in the headlines. If we would take the “Salanterian approach” or the,” What would Rav Yisroel do?” We would make the focus on both psychological awareness and ethical cultivation a fundamental part of our schooling of both our children, adults and our rabbis. In my opinion we are not doing this. We are placing our emphasis on learning limited and narrow portions of Tanakh, Mishna, Talmud and Halakha- the halakhic portion of which mostly revolves around the holidays, shabbat, prayer and daily ritual life. In the Modern Orthodox community we also emphasize and prioritize that our children learn Modern Hebrew and get a “College” preparatory education. Make no mistake I would be very happy for my children to go to Harvard, Columbia, Penn, Princeton or Stanford and for them to make aliyah but like you I do not want any of them ending up with the moral profiles of some of the rabbis, political leaders or laymen that have been dis-gracing the newspapers and television networks.

Now, one could argue that if ethics are so dear to me than I should focus on this at home. However, this suggestion strikes me as prima fascia absurd as I do not believe it is asking very much (for 15-25k a year per pupil) for rabbis who are dedicating their lives to Torah education and in light of the recent and not so recent scandalous events to realize the importance of incorporating a contemporary moral and ethical curriculum into the very fabric of our Torah High Schools. If our Yeshivot were living and breathing an ethical vision and emphasis than those individuals who for whatever reason of nature and nurture are psychologically and morally challenged they will have a more supportive environment within which to grow and will feel more of a responsibility to live up to the standards we all hold dear. Our Torah curriculum cares primarily about mastering basic and intermediate Biblical, Talmudic and Post Talmudic textual skills, covering what are designated as essential Talmudic texts, getting into the routine of twice or thrice daily prayer with as much attention and meaning as possible, learning Modern Hebrew and learning about the holidays, basic Jewish thought and history. Again, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with this curriculum, however please do not imagine that our schools are focused on creating ethically sensitive and educated young adults who are prepared for the ethical challenges of modern living- they are not and do not expect a university education even at Yeshiva University to be of much assistance either.

Let me be clear, that attention to “Middot” (Character Development) while important, is necessary but not sufficient. Ethical living involves the application of Middot in highly charged real life contexts that transcend being nice to one’s classmates and not speaking Lashon Hara. Additionally, I do not believe that any school really makes even Middot a true focus (unless you consider derech eretz for teachers the summum bonum of ethics and being quiet on a bus or hallway a predictor or ethical refinement). Rather, even Middot are a side dish for the “meat, bread and potatoes” and is typically given tangential emphasis with a little story sent home in the bulletin or a tidbit of a story shared in class. Usually “Middot” only becomes a real focus when a child has real behavioral problems. Just because one’s child is not problematic does not mean that one’s child is being ethically cultivated and groomed.

It would be quite wrong to presume that holiness, devotional piety, Torah knowledge and observance of ritual law are identical with or somehow per force lead to ethical behavior. In reality, holiness, devotional piety, Torah knowledge and observance of ritual law are not only not identical to ethical behavior they sometimes can mislead a person into believing that they are beyond the need for ethical behavior! Additionally, the analytic and highly complex interpretive methodologies one is trained in, the rabbinic legal fictions one is exposed to and the endless divergence of opinions and divergences of opinions built on divergences of opinions can be enlisted to rationalize unethical behavior. Think this is the ramblings of a Modern mind who has studied too much Freud and Kant? The tradition itself points these concerns out, ”Once (Torah) wisdom enters a person cunning enters within them.” (Talmud Bavli Sotah 21b) The sages warned against becoming a, ”Pervert with permission of the Torah.”(Rambam on Parashat Kedoshim 19:2) They also shared with us a story of two Kohanim (the embodiments of holiness) racing up the altar (the embodiment of divine service) so that they could be first to perform the initial temple service of the day. What is the result of these holy aspirants eagerness to express their religious devotionalism? One Kohen stabs and kills the other! (The embodiment of a lack of ethics). Then the top concern of the Kohanim becomes preserving the ritual purity of the knife! (embodiment of observance of ritual Law). This is the knife that is still stuck in the heart of the dying Kohen who is withering around in pain and blood. This Aggadah is teaching us explicitly what distorted religious priorities and values look like. The rabbis in the Talmud reflecting on this story say that,”The purity of ritual vessels was greater to them in importance than murder!” (Talmud Bavli Yoma 23a) Just in case you are wondering what the end game was it was called the Destruction of the Second Temple. Of the rare individuals who are listed in the Mishna Sanhedrin (10:2) as not having a portion in the World to Come a couple of them were among the greatest Torah scholars of their generation, were I imagine quite frum and ofcourse were prominent members of their rabbinic associations and their Yeshiva Alumni. There is a reason our rabbis tell us these stories and teachings- yet do we really collectively take them in? Do we allow them to change how we are educating?

What would such an ethical preparatory Torah curriculum look like for a Torah High School? I will share a few ideas with the disclaimer that we have many great and creative Torah educators and if they put their minds to it I am sure it will be the finest program in the world. I would say that for High School students the course should include a combination of case study and text study using a multi-media approach incorporating news articles, T.V. clips and where available documentaries. We take a case of a person who violated a Torah ethic and we examine how this played out for them. What was their life like before and after? What were their likely motivations for doing this? How did their unethical behavior impact others and their families? After having gotten this real life exposure to a practical expression of unethical living and the ensuing disaster, now let us examine with classical texts what the Torah says on these ethical and psychological issues. This could then generate class discussion and creative writing assignments with an emphasis on how students potenially may feel at all challenged in similar ways and how they can in the present and future cope with such challenges. I would also dare suggest that the class take a visit to a minimum security prison for white collar criminals and meet with some of the Jewish inmates and have a frank discussion with them about how they view their choices and what was going on with them that led to such choices. We could also bring in various professionals from the community and have them share how they have been challenged ethically in their respective professional lives and how they have navigated these challenges. Lastly, even the core curriculum that we teach can be taught in a way that emphasizes the ethical insights, fundamentals and applications of what is being learned. I am quite confident that this course if done

correctly would be the most interesting and memorable course in Torah our students ever had!

In regards to preparing rabbis for their many psychological and ethical challenges they will face I would say that two things are utterly necessary and easily doable. Firstly, rabbis who function inevitably as psychological counselors, mentors and confidants should be made to undergo at least two years of individual or group psychotherapy to become simply said, ”more aware of themselves.” *It is very unwise to create rabbis who know the rabbinic tradition infinitely more than they know themselves.* The depth of one’s Talmudic or Halakhic learning will not directly help a rabbi in certain trials that rabbis face whereas knowing one’s underlying motivations, typical defense mechanisms and character weaknesses will. In addition, rabbinical students should be presented with in crystal clear and graphic terms the ways that other rabbis have morally failed and this should be dissected for them psychologically and halakhically no different than they pour over a Tosafot, Shach or a Bet Yosef. It would be quite helpful for rabbinic seminaries to bring in as possible the moral failures of the rabbinate (the repentant varieties) and have them share how they made the mistakes they made, what they think they should have done different and how in their view these mistakes could have been avoided. I think the shock value of even one of these morbid and heartbreaking lectures would do a lot of good. If its not realistic that it be firsthand then let it be second hand from someone who was close to them and watch it go down. It is only, in my view, through these two methods in tandem that there is any hope that those individuals who may be prone to moral failure will be given a head start at preempting their eventual moral decline and debasement.

Ask yourself of any of the rabbis who have morally collapsed that you are aware of –did any of them have any preparation for the psychological and ethical challenges they were to face? I can tell you from personal experience of knowing more than half a dozen of them throughout my twenty year student/teacher career-the answer is NO. Unless you consider: Parashat Hashuvuah, Nach, Talmud, Rishonim, Tur, Bet Yosef, Kabbalah and Chassidut with a dose of Yirat Shamayim shmoozes and Mesilat Yesharim sufficient preparation. Rabbis who molest children, who are sexually promiscuous with their congregants or students, who embezzle charity funds …. These are highly complex, distorted and struggling souls who to make matters worse are often brilliant, charismatic, articulate and highly motivated to learn, teach, lead and change the world-it’s a morally hazardous combination. True, they are a small minority but it is hard for me to believe that the moral and relatively speaking psychologically healthy majority will be harmed by this curricular enhancement and the consequences of not including it are dire for those who fly beneath the radar of their rabbinic teachers which may not at all be attuned to these matters which can be quite psychologically subtle and beneath the surface.

Consider, if lawyers, medical doctors, psychologists and accountants must study the ethical issues that they will face as part and parcel of their studies should not rabbis? This is in today’s vernacular a “no-brainer.” Yet, tell me one Yeshivah outside of Modern Orthodoxy that does anything sophisticated and thorough to prepare its rabbis for these ethical conflicts and challenges. Let me save you some time there are NONE. While there are no guarantees there are precautions that can be taken and we have enough experience to know by now I would hope that precautionary measures are necessary.

If we are at all serious of not producing more ethicopaths who: defraud, steal, molest, abuse their power as clergy, show utter disregard for the life of non-Jewish human beings and collectively do not really take in the implications of desecrating the name of God then we must evolve beyond the educational theory of ethics by “osmosis” to the educational theory of ethics by “active prioritization”. We need to initiate an ethical renewal within Orthodoxy, a renewal that will be welcomed by our fellow co-religionist’s in Judaism and can serve as a bridge where we can all meet on level playing ground. If the first question we are asked when we encounter the heavenly tribunal is, ”Did you conduct yourselves honesty and with faith in your business dealings?” (Talmud Bavli Shabbat 31a) Then, I would imagine that there is an esteemed place for a structured curriculum that seeks to actively and directly inculcate contemporary applications for psychological and ethical awareness and moral development in our children, adults and our rabbis.

Being a light unto the nations and a holy people is quite a challenge but let us at least not be an utter disgrace. The world village that is rapidly emerging and the mass media technologies that provide instant audio and visual communication make it absolutely imperative to our spiritual mission as a people that we become more ethically focused, refined and developed. Please accept this essay as a modest call to that sacred end.