CONVERSATIONS

Orthodoxy and Religious Education

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CONVERSATIONS

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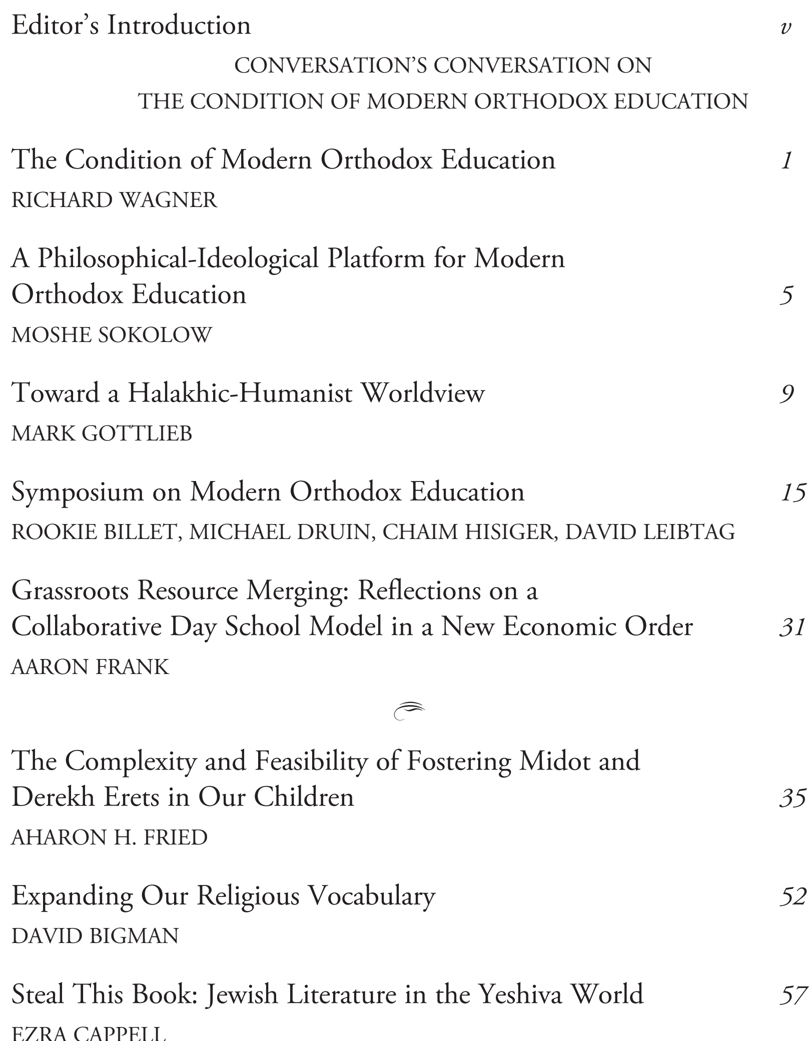

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SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES

If you wish to submit an article to *Conversations*, please send the editor (mdangel@jewishideas.org) a short description of the essay you plan to write. Articles should be written in a conversational style, without footnotes, and should be submitted typed, double spaced, as word documents.

Articles reflect the views of their authors, and do not represent official positions of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Conversations welcomes "letters to the editor," commenting on articles that appear in its pages. Letters should be emailed to the Editor.

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Editor's Introduction

> And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him and serve the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul; to keep God's commandments and His statutes that I command you today, for your own good. (Devarim 10:12–13)

The Torah spells out what God expects of us: "only" to be incredibly perfect! For Moses, these things may have seemed simple; but for the rest of us, they are an enormous, life-long challenge. God assures us, though, that our efforts will be rewarded, since living a Torah life is for our own benefit and fulfillment.

Judaism is a quest to walk in God's ways—to be righteous and compassionate; to study Torah and fulfill its commandments; to develop our human talents in the service of God and our fellow human beings. This is a lofty agenda that has inspired the people of Israel for 3,500 years. And we are still working at it diligently today! Our challenge is to live up to these aspirations. Our greater challenge is to communicate these ideals and values to our children and grandchildren—to continue the transmission of Torah from generation to generation.

This issue of *Conversations* focuses on Orthodoxy and Religious Education. It explores what we are doing well, and where we might improve. It offers suggestions—some quite far-reaching in their implications—about how we ought to be educating the next generations of Jews so that they will walk in God's ways according to the best teachings of the Torah tradition.

We invited Dr. Richard Wagner, a veteran Modern Orthodox educator, to involve some of his professional colleagues in a discussion of the current condition of Modern Orthodox Education. The first section of this issue of Conversations includes Dr. Wagner's comments, as well as articles by Dr. Moshe Sokolow and Rabbi Mark Gottlieb. We then present a sym-

posium of four leading Jewish educators: Mrs. Rookie Billet, Rabbi Michael Druin, Rabbi Chaim Hisiger, and Rabbi David Leibtag. This section concludes with an essay by Rabbi Aaron Frank offering practical advice on how schools can pool resources.

We next turn to the area of *midot* development. How do we educate our children not only to understand texts, but to be courteous, moral, kind human beings? Dr. Aharon Fried presents his suggestions for this area of education.

How are we to encourage intellectual growth in our children and grandchildren? How can we give them a sophisticated vision of Judaism that will imbue their worldview and give them strength and happiness? Rav David Bigman discusses the need to expand our students' religious vocabulary. Dr. Ezra Cappell wants our younger generation to be familiar with American Jewish literature. Rabbi Francis Nataf and Ms. Yael Unterman suggest ways of engaging students by expanding their intellectual and emotional horizons. Mr. Howard Blas addresses the issue of religious education for children with special needs.

We gain insight into the views of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch on the importance of secular education in an article by Mr. Elliot Resnick. Dr. Pinchas Polonsky explains how Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook taught us to draw spiritual strength and insight even from those with whom we disagree theologically.

This issue closes with three personal essays, reflecting on important issues in our educational system. Rabbi Steve Golden offers a parent's perspective on Torah education. Mrs. Elana Beth Nussbaum tackles the issue of homework for children—how much is too much?

We then include an anonymous article by an Orthodox woman who converted to Judaism many years ago. She describes her experiences within the Orthodox community, reminding us that our educational system—including our schools and synagogues—need to do quite a bit more to teach love and respect for the proselyte.

We hope that this issue of *Conversations* will lead to ongoing discussions, suggestions, improvements. We pray that it will help us, our children and grandchildren walk more righteously and wisely in the ways of God.

CONVERSATION'S Conversation on the Condition of Modern Orthodox Education

RICHARD WAGNER

(Richard Wagner is an independent consultant to Jewish schools, synagogues, and agencies.)

More than forty years ago, one of the stirring voices of Jewish conscience was Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel. Although remembered primarily for his calls to activism in the realms of social and racial justice, Heschel was first and foremost a teacher to rabbis and educators. His words were a charge to me, then a neophyte to the field of Jewish education. He said,

> One of our errors has been the *trivialization of education*. The superficial kind of religious education acquired in childhood fades away when exposed to the challenge and splendor of other intellectual powers in an age of scientific triumphs. What young people need is not religious tranquilizers, religion as diversion, religious entertainment, but spiritual audacity.[1]

The proliferation of Day Schools and yeshivot can be seen as a response to this view of the needs of students and communities. When Jewish education began to be the subject of research studies in the post-World War II period, only 5 to 7 percent of the population of students in *any* form of Jewish school attended Day Schools or yeshivot. Haym Soloveitchik observes that sixty year ago, it was generally held that "Jewishness was something almost innate, and no school was needed to

inculcate it." But, he continues,

> in contemporary society . . . Jewish identity is not inevitable. It is not a matter of course, but of choice: A concious preference of the enclave over the host society. For such a choice to be made, a sense of particularity and belonging must be instilled by the intentional enterprise of instruction . . . identity maintenance and consciousness raising are ideological exigencies, needs that can be met only by education.[2]

Thus it is not surprising that today, by various estimates, some 30 percent of Jewish school-age children in the United States—205,000 young people—attend Day Schools or yeshivot. Eighty percent of these students are enrolled in Orthodox schools.[3] Further analysis tells us that 47,416 students (23 percent) attend 165 institutions described as "Centrist" or "Modern Orthodox."[4] The territory has expanded.

Despite qualitative and quantitative growth, the educational landscape is littered with doubt among educators, parents, and students. Yaakov Bieler states the challenge as follows:

> Questions are increasingly raised about whether these educational institutions really provide a Modern Orthodox education and produce Modern Orthodox young people. To find the reasons for this malaise we must gauge the effectiveness of the Modern Orthodox Day Schools that go beyond such obvious facts as the manner in which the school day is organized, what extracurricular activities are available, and where the graduates continue their education.[5]

Urgency notwithstanding, most of the meetings, discussions, plenaries, and public documents do not go deeply into the core issues of schooling. The most well-meaning of presentations by policymakers or researchers that do not bring education professionals into the dialogue may result in half-baked ideas, at best. It is, after all, these professionals who are the "first responders" to the students. It is they who articulate, develop, and implement with teachers the curricula, programs, and strategies that drive their schools. It is they who are uniquely poised to be the agents of change and the conservators of tradition in the lives of students and their families.

And so we hold this conversation. Through this issue of *Conversations* and follow-up exchanges using the electronic media, we hope to engage educators and others interested in the role of schooling in Modern

Orthodoxy in an open and clarifying presentation and discussion of ideas. There are many good things happening in our schools that are not shared with colleagues. There are difficult experiences that we all encounter and these, likewise, remain dark secrets. This is an opportunity to teach and learn from our colleagues.

We have selected four questions in areas that are commonplace for our schools:

1. How should a school leader express his or her vision of Jewish education? Can there be a clear line from the school's mission to what happens in the classrooms? Is there a substantive difference between schools that are "mission-driven" and those that are not?
2. How does an educator experience the personnel shortage in our schools? Does this find expression in General and Judaic Studies? What impact, if any, does this shortage have on a school's ability to meet its mission and goals?
3. How should Modern Orthodox schools address women's education and gender equality in terms of content, mastery, and Jewish practice? To what extent is this a divisive issue in the community, and how can a school deal with this?
4. How should Modern Orthodox schools address issues in contemporary culture that conflict with traditional norms? What is the impact on a school's reach for integration of Judaic and General Studies?

We arranged the conversation as follows:

- An essay by Dr. Moshe Sokolow, which frames the issues;
- An article by Rabbi Mark Gottlieb, which addresses *hashkafa* in our schools;
- The four questions above and responses by a panel of education professionals.

Since it is neither responsible nor useful to ignore the present fiscal realities, we have included a proposal by Rabbi Aaron Frank, which may be instructive for other schools and communities.

We hope that these essays, questions, and replies will initiate further conversation in the Member's Forum at www.jewishideas.org.

NOTES

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Values of Jewish Education," in *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly* (New York, 1962): 83.
2. Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," in *Tradition* (Summer, 1994): 90, 93.
3. Jack Wertheimer, "The Current Moment in Jewish Education: An Historian's View," in R. L. Goodman et al., *What We Now Know About Jewish Education* (Los Angeles: Torah Aura, 2009): 15.
4. Marvin Schick, "A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States, 2003–2004" (New York: Avi Chai Foundation, 2005).
5. Jack Bieler, "Preserving Modern Orthodoxy in Our Day Schools," *Edah Monograph Series* 2:1.

A Philosophical-Ideological Platform for Modern Orthodox Education

Moshe Sokolow

(Dr. Sokolow is Fanya Gottesfeld Heller Professor of Jewish Education and Associate Dean at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration of Yeshiva University.)

"*Wisdom has built her house on seven hewn pillars.*" (*Mishlei* 9:1)

My first inclination was to decline to respond to this symposium on the grounds that I am not a school leader—or even a practitioner for that matter—and therefore unable to answer such situational questions as you have posed. My next inclination was to formulate alternative, theoretical, questions that are better suited for a broad-based conversation. In the end, I followed neither inclination; my remarks hover intentionally in the ether that separates theory from practice—but, on the other hand, also connects them to one another.

• • •

Is there a coherent and cohesive philosophical preference or prejudice that ought to animate Modern Orthodox Jewish education? Some of our educational policies (notably, those that pertain to *Limudei Kodesh*) resemble the "perennialist" approach associated with traditional education, while others (notably, those of General Studies) tend to look more like the "pragmatic" approach identified with progressive education. Are we philo-

sophically hermaphroditic (possessing the distinctive characteristics of both philosophies), androgynous (having neither philosophy's idiosyncratic characteristics), or, perhaps, are we agnostics, content to conduct educational business as usual without admitting to any particular philosophy? In an unintended parody of Descartes, do we appear to proclaim: "I think not, therefore I can do whatever I please!"?

• • •

The absence of a clearly articulated educational philosophy does not serve us well. The road of curriculum design, development, and implementation is notable for its many obstacles (insufficient time, inadequate resources, and so forth) that frequently compel detours from the *derekh haMelekh* of nineteenth-century Eastern Europe, twelfth-century Muslim Spain, fifth-century Sura and Pumbedita, first-century Alexandria, or whatever historical precedent we cite in affirmation of our received educational practice. At these critical junctures, a philosophy is a lodestar whose sighting keeps us securely on our chosen path and acts as surety for our eventual arrival at our proposed destination. Without a clear philosophy, we are only star-gazing—and as inspirational as that may occasionally be, it only thwarts our purpose and obscures our objective.

Schools—not their current (and, regrettably, all too transitory) leaders—should have educational visions that "drive" their missions. A school that is "mission-driven" without the mission itself being motivated by a coherent philosophy is a will-o'-the-wisp. It gives the external appearance of direction and purpose while actually lacking both. A school's approach to "gender equality," like its views on "integration," should similarly be determined by its philosophical predisposition.

How do schools acquire philosophies? Unless a school community is blessed with an informed philosopher, the best way I know is via committee. The "dromedary principle" admonishes us that in its desire to fashion a horse, the committee may produce a camel; still, a camel is superior to no transportation at all. We are not looking for philosophical purity but for contemplative introspection, and a synthetic philosophy is patently acceptable.

• • •

In this light, I should like to offer for your consideration a platform comprising seven philosophical-ideological positions that I would advocate for a school that wishes to be recognized as Modern Orthodox. (These principles are the products of a consultation undertaken several years ago. I am grateful to Dr. Joel Wolowelsky of the Yeshiva of Flatbush for his input; the responsibility for their formulation, however, rests entirely with me.)

Modern Orthodox Day Schools and yeshiva high schools should recognize:

• *The preeminence of Torah and the fulfillment of mitzvoth according to halakhah.* A Modern Orthodox school will give priority in funding, staffing, and scheduling to those classes and activities that promote the study of Torah and the fulfillment of mitzvoth. It will concern itself with students' religious behavior and attitudes both in school and outside. It will, if necessary, engage in parent education (in conjunction with synagogues, if possible) to ensure proper modeling of religious behavior.

• *The need for excellence in both General and Jewish Studies.* Modern Orthodoxy sees the accomplishments of modern science and culture as expressions of the biblical imperatives to conquer the earth and preserve it. A Modern Orthodox school will provide all its students with an acquaintance with the basic principles of science, disciplines in the behavioral and social sciences, and in the humanities. It will likewise ensure that the pursuit of these disciplines does not become a goal unto itself, divorced from their Jewish identities and responsibilities.

• *The primacy of moral virtue and ethical integrity in personal, business, and professional life.* A Modern Orthodox school will implement curricula that provide instruction in both *mitzvot bein adam laMakom* (laws that govern our relationship to God) and *mitzvot bein adam leHaveiro* (laws that govern interpersonal relationships) and nurture a school culture that values and promotes the ideal of *hessed* (such as community service or social action). It will not condone unethical behavior on the part of its staff and students and will condemn such behavior on the part of any member of the Jewish community.

• *The need to set common educational goals for boys and girls, young men and young women.* In a Modern Orthodox school, boys and girls will be given equal opportunities to study Torah and halakha. The equality of opportunity does not necessarily mean identical curricula, but no subject

in Jewish studies should be officially declared "off limits" to any student. Modern Orthodoxy neither promotes nor prohibits coeducation; it supports individual schools in the educational decisions that are best for them.

• *The centrality of the State of Israel to the religious and national existence of the Jewish people.* A Modern Orthodox school will advise all its students to personally experience life in Israel, to be cognizant of its needs and goals, and to have a working knowledge of Modern Hebrew. It may also call upon them to plan for *aliyah* to Israel, and to become actively involved in promoting Religious Zionist values in both Israel and the Diaspora. A Modern Orthodox school will say *Hallel* on Yom Ha'Atzma'ut and Yom Yerushalayim.

• *The value of all segments of the Jewish community.* A Modern Orthodox school will emphasize to its students that the major events of Jewish history, which have shaped our national identity, have involved and affected all Jews. It will admonish its graduates to love all Jews, maintain contact with them, and work with them on communal issues without regard to their denominational affiliation. It will not decline to participate in Jewish communal events due to the participation of non-Orthodox Jews.

• *The Torah as the possession of all Jews.* A Modern Orthodox Day School will enroll children of non-Orthodox, non-observant homes as students in the belief that the opportunity to study Torah should not be denied to anyone of the Jewish faith.

Toward a Halakhic-Humanist Worldview: Recovering a Lost Vision

Mark Gottlieb

(Rabbi Mark Gottlieb is the Principal of Yeshiva University High School for Boys, New York City.)

By the measurable standards of today's corporate-driven society, producers and consumers of Jewish education in America have much to celebrate. More Jewish boys, girls, and adults are learning today in yeshivot, seminaries, Day Schools, kollels, and post-college programs than at any other time in our history. Foundations such as Avi Chai and Mandel, professional organizations such as PEJE, and large metropolitan federations across the country are pumping more dollars, developing more programs, and deploying more human capital—from teacher induction and education to vision-driven curricular deliberations, from managerial expertise to experiential learning initiatives via student missions to Israel and other Jewish communities globally—than ever before. These are surely the best of times, institutionally-speaking, at least; if only we could creatively solve the tuition crisis—no small feat, of course—we'd immediately usher in a new Golden Era of Jewish education, a model for the ages.

Still, despite our strong numbers and increasingly professionalized infrastructure, ask a Modern Orthodox educator how our community is doing, and you'll likely hear ambivalence or frustration at best, apocalyptic predictions of the imminent demise of our movement at worst—certainly not the triumphalism or chest-thumping that our ostensible institutional success would seem to warrant. Alternately identified as an eclipsing of *yir'at shamayim*, a lack of passion or punctiliousness in *shemirat haMitzvot*,

a religious behaviorism that belies the richness and depth of an authentic religious sensibility of inwardness and meaning, or some other such critique, this prognosis now coexists side-by-side with the increasingly clichéd "slide to the Right" and the phenomenon of "Flipping Out"—every comfortable Modern Orthodox parent's worst nightmare. With her flanks falling off to the sides, the center just won't hold. The martial metaphor here is apt: Our educational institutions, starting first with the family, are engaged in nothing less than a counter-cultural struggle against the forces of consumerism, sound-byte oversimplification, and functionalism, on the one hand, and an often disdainful and stifling parochialism that denies the Divine Presence in the totality of the order of creation, on the other. Unsurprisingly, the sociological and cultural dispositions of both these unhappy alternatives feed off of each other in a vicious circular frenzy, further eroding the chances for a healthy and vibrant culture of critically engaged Orthodoxy. To name these troubling spheres of influence for the hearts and minds of our children and students is not to equate the threat posed by each to the religious well-being of our constituent population. The one necessary thing—the cultivation of an unapologetic life of *avodat Hashem*—must always be paramount. But the emotional and intellectual fallout from this communal tug-of-war has created nothing short of a profound crisis of meaning for many of our students.

Recent conversations, mainly in Israel but slowly trickling stateside, on the omnipresence of Talmud in the traditional yeshiva high-school curriculum and the perceived crisis of value looming in the *dati-le'umi* horizon have sharpened the focus of this educational deliberation. Much of the discussion to date has centered around the question of "relevance" in our contemporary Talmud curriculum, with the sides of traditional Brisker *lomdus* squaring off against the newer schools of applied, contextualized, values-driven interpretation and teaching. I also want to raise the issue of relevance, not only in the relatively thin sense that *shor sheNagah et haParah* will not naturally resonate with today's suburban students as much as it did with our farm-friendly ancestors but, far more significantly, in the more robust, foundational sense that our students do not perceive the worlds of knowledge, experience, or meaning through the lenses of a Torah-centered consciousness. Simply put, Modern Orthodoxy struggles to articulate and transmit a coherent, compelling, and systematic worldview for its students, a worldview that gives consistent meaning

and value to the welter of experience comprising our engagement with reality. This lack of a comprehensive worldview impacts many areas of a student's religious life and development, from an inability to identify and articulate basic theological principles and commitments to a widespread confusion regarding the viability and parameters of our community's engagement with modernity, civil society, and both high and popular culture. The vast majority of our students are unable to articulate what an authentically traditional position might be on a host of live issues facing them in today's world, that is to say, *what* to think Jewishly. Furthermore, they appear even far less equipped to begin the deliberation of *how* one would go about thinking Jewishly, how to frame or perceive an issue from a place of authority, meaning, and Jewish understanding.

Thomas Mann once defined authenticity as a kind of "life full of citations," a way of being that draws on our lived and total engagement with our textuality, that constructs our consciousness out of the shared storehouse of our sacred scriptures, texts, and sources for our deepest sense of meaning and purpose. Our educational institutions fall far short of this ideal not just in the obvious inability of the vast majority of her students to quote or even simply recognize biblical verses, sayings of our Sages, or other sources from *tefilla, mahshevet yisrael, mussar*, and *Hassidut*—although talking to most Modern Orthodox high schoolers today will easily confirm this sad reality. Torah doesn't merely have something to say about everything we encounter in our lives, public and private, from politics to popular culture (often confused these days in our media-drenched society), from economic theory to sports, and everything in between; it is the very ground of our thinking, the prism through which we ought to understand all reality—*beOrkha nir'eh or*. This is first an epistemological claim, and only secondarily a pedagogical one. In both keys, this lack of a coherent and comprehensive *hashkafat olam* precludes our students from seeing knowledge, beauty, and experience in a religiously relevant fashion. (Although the literature on the religious significance of "worldview thinking" is rapidly growing in the communities of Christian academic and educational inquiry [see, most recently, James W. Sire, *Naming the Elephant: Worldview as Concept*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Il, 2004], to date, little has been contributed to the world of Jewish Thought in this important area. Two exceptions to this lacuna in our contemporary theological literature are Max Kadushin's classic, *The Rabbinic Mind*, and,

more recently, an important article by Jonathan Cohen, "Deliberation, Tradition, and the Problem of Incommensurability: Philosophical Reflections on Curricular Decision-Making" in *Educational Theory* 49 (1), pp. 71–89. Needless to say, more must been done to creatively appropriate this useful concept in Jewish educational circles.) There are, blessedly, study halls in Israel that are just beginning to seriously engage in this explicit work of worldview-formation from the rich depths of our *mesorah* and its robust application to the realia of cultural and political life. I have in mind here places such as Beit Morasha, Yeshivat Siach Yitzchak's Machon Bina l'Itim, Beit Midrash Ra'avah, and, on a more public scale, the Shalem Center. However, nothing remotely like this is happening in our Day Schools, yeshivot, or other *mekomot haTorah* in America—nor are there any signs that this vision- and value-driven talmudic inquiry is likely to take hold in major institutions of Torah study in the United States. We seem to be stuck in a sort of collective communal time-warp when it comes to our Talmud Torah, bound by modes of mechanical mastery of a technical or conceptual nature. Without the kind of values-driven, reflective halakhic study we're describing here, Modern Orthodoxy in America will remain a religiously minimalist community of affluence and mediocrity, a spiritual halfway house for those on a serious quest for meaning, unable to provide its adherents with the religious and cultural resources to realize its ambitious and holy mandate.

To illustrate what I'm trying to capture in this call for the cultivation of a comprehensive worldview, I want to briefly focus on one particular area where I think our failure is most obvious and acute. For all the talk about the primacy of *mitzvot bein adam leHaveiro* in our tradition, I submit that our yeshivot and Day Schools would look very different if we didn't merely pay lip-service to this domain of religious life, but, instead, really lived as our faith requires. What would our curriculum look like if we took seriously Hillel's maxim that the entire Torah can be distilled into the principle of *veAhavta leReakha kaMokha*, and that the rest of the Torah is simply an elaboration of this ideal? What would our Day School and yeshiva graduates look like if they lived their lives as if the closest we came to the Divine Other in this world was in the divine face of the human other, if they really internalized C. S. Lewis' powerful expression from his war-time sermon, *The Weight of Glory*, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal . . . but it is immortals whom we joke with, work with,

marry, snub, and exploit"? Something like Levinas' transformational reading of Rav Hayyim Volozhin or Rav Simcha Zisl's ideal of acquiring Torah by "bearing the burden of the Other," is what we're programmatically—in the most tentative, telegraphic form—grasping at here. (For Levinas' ethical-theological reconstruction of *Nefesh haHayyim*, see "'In the Image of God' According to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner," reprinted in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures* (London and New York: Continuum, 2007), 148–163. For Rav Simcha Zisl, see *Hokhma U'Mussar*, chs. 1–4, *MeOrei Orot haMussar,* vol. 2, ed. Simcha Zisl Levovitz (Jerusalem, 2003), and the thoughtful analysis in Ira F. Stone, *A Responsible Life: The Spiritual Path of Mussar* (New York: Aviv Press, 2006.) But where is this embodied ethical learning and teaching taking place in Modern Orthodox America, or in most places in Israel, for that matter? Let me leave the reader with a couple of suggestions toward cultivating a mussar consciousness in our communities, one curricular, the other centered around school culture—before closing on a more hopeful note.

First, our choice of texts and topics—especially the way in which we study our traditional texts—should more concretely reflect this goal of making explicit the mostly implicit value-system or worldview contained within our *mesorah*. From *Nezikin* to *Nashim*, as well as in the more straightforward areas of ethical inquiry embodied in the halakhot governing *shemirat haLashon*, *tsedakah*, *bikkur holim*, *ribit veOna'ah, kibbud av veEim, tseni'ut,* and *kavod haBeriot,* to name just the most obvious cases, our curriculum must raise the questions of human value, of personal identity, of conceptions of gender and community, of social and political justice, and, above all, of the radical commitment to an ethic of religious humanism, a theological anthropology, that saturates our tradition. Obviously, more attention should be paid to classics in *mahshava, mussar*, and *Hassidut*, which treat these concerns in a direct manner (again, read and studied in a deliberate and reflective fashion—*Mesillat Yesharim* can be taught, and usually is, I'm afraid, in a way that bypasses almost all of these concerns, making it less, not more, of a source of real, transformative power), but the *yam shel Talmud* and halakha are still the most significant sources for this sort of study. Second, our schools and yeshivot need to create the spiritual space for faculty, rebbeim and teachers, to engage in their own religious and ethical growth and development, a personal-pedagogical discipline of *heshbon haNefesh*. Rav Dov Singer, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat

Makor Hayyim in Kefar Etzion and one of our community's most thoughtful educators, once told me that when his yeshiva's students are not experiencing *tefilla* with the proper *kavana*, or are becoming too competitive and not forming a cohesive cohort, or are otherwise not striking a healthy balance between an appropriate work ethic and a sense of the larger goals of learning, the faculty look inward, and search within themselves for the latent sources of dysfunction. Institutional and classroom leaders must model this kind of introspective habit if our students are to see spiritual practice in action and be receptive to its proper place in their own lives.

In 1789, Samuel and John Phillips founded their academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and wrote the following lines, elegantly articulating the very kind of comprehensive religious and moral educational vision we've just outlined:

> But above all, it is expected that the Master's attention to the disposition of the minds and morals of the Youth under his charge will exceed every other care; well-considering that, though goodness without knowledge . . . is weak and feeble; yet knowledge without goodness is dangerous; and that both united form the noblest of character . . . the first and principal object of this institution is the promotion of Piety and Virtue. (Cited in F. Washington Jarvis, *With Love and Prayers: A Headmaster Speaks to the Next Generation* [Boston: David R. Godine Publishers, 2000], xxi.)

Less than a century after the founding of the Phillips Andover Academy and halfway around the world, Rav Yisrael Salanter made a similar claim for the priority of ethical education over traditional forms of talmudic scholarship, of charity over theory, radically revolutionizing the landscape of Jewish education for the next fifty years. If not for the destruction of European Jewry in the middle of the past century, the Mussar Movement may still have been advancing the aims of reflective, practice-based character education, stemming from a comprehensive worldview grounded in the sources of our *mesorah*, to ever more sophisticated heights. Perhaps what this postmodern world needs most, with its deep skepticism toward abstract rationality divorced from pragmatic value, is another kind of Salanter-inspired renaissance.

Symposium on Modern Orthodox Education

The Respondents:

Mrs. Rookie Billet, *Principal of Ma'ayanot High School, Teaneck, NJ*
Rabbi Michael Druin, *Rabbinic Dean of Hillel, North Miami Beach, FL*
Rabbi Chaim Hisiger, *Principal of Hillel, Rochester, NY*
Rabbi David Leibtag, *Head of Lower School, Hebrew Academy of the Five Towns and Rockaway, NY*

1. How should a school leader express his or her vision of Jewish education? Can there be a clear line from the school's mission to what happens in the classrooms? Is there a substantive difference between schools that are "mission-driven" and those that are not?

Billet:

The school leader is challenged to articulate his or her vision of Jewish education in every aspect of school management, including personal statements, communications in writing and public addresses, through deeds that are not accompanied by speech, and of course by personal role modeling. This vision is reflected in the hiring of faculty who subscribe to, endorse, and are prepared to execute that vision—and who assure that curricula, style of learning, personal relationships in the school, and co-curricular programming all contribute to the visibility and palpability of the vision in all aspects of daily life at the school.

The head of school should regularly find opportunities to communicate with students, faculty, and parents. Occasions for personally addressing large audiences of parents are rare, but the parent orientation evening, the school dinner, and graduation exercises are three such forums that should be utilized to clarify the vision and ensure that the community is both in the loop and on board. The school newsletter (print or online versions) may incorporate a thoughtful column from the head of school.

Email is a unique venue for contemplating challenging issues the school confronts and commenting thoughtfully upon them at a relevant moment—without delays of production and mailing. Faculty meetings, whether by departments, by grades, or involving the full faculty also allow for discussion of policies and original ideas that implement the school's vision and allow for building consensus about such ideas.

Although there may not be a direct line between the school's mission and what happens in every single classroom every day, the more the content of classes reflects the substance of the school's mission, the more likely the consumers—the parents and the students—will feel that they are getting that for which they "bargained." As the focal point of instruction, the classroom is both the most reliable and dependable source of education; it is also the place where achievement in education is most easily quantified and monitored. Exams and other assessments are a fact of school life; what has transpired in the class is measurable by feedback acquired through essays or answers to exam questions. It is often quite pleasurable for me to review all mid-year and final exams before teachers submit them for duplication. This close reading of every exam given in the school gives me the opportunity to see what material is being covered in the classes; what approach the teacher is taking toward composing assessments; what skills have been emphasized; whether students are required to think, process, and apply knowledge or merely feed it back; and so much more. Measuring the impact of assemblies, guest speakers, extracurricular activities, and personal statements on the part of school leaders is far more difficult than measuring the power of classroom learning.

In schools that are mission-driven, an observer will be able to perceive a consistency in approach in various subjects, an overall signal of similarity of relationships between teachers and students and a running theme in the nature of extracurricular activities. It can be noted whether classes are conducted with more frontal learning or in *havruta* style; whether notes are "dictated" or written on the board; or whether there is a thoughtful dialogue from which students must independently decide what is important. In a mission-driven school, candidates for teaching positions will be interviewed and assessed not only regarding academic credentials and teaching skills, but will be deemed appropriate if they subscribe to the mission of the school and demonstrate a history of personal involvements that reflect a commitment to the mission.

Druin:
I believe a school leader needs to express his or her vision of Jewish education continuously. This should be done by way of a published Judaic philosophy statement that incorporates vision. It should also be done as part of routine operational meetings that always need to be guided by the school leader, within the framework of his or her vision. There is no doubt that the leader's vision has to mesh with the vision of the school; otherwise, there will be practical conflict as to how to steer the school. This potential conflict can indeed impact even specific choices that take place daily in the classrooms. After all, it's the school's mission that guides curricular choices the teacher makes. It guides discussions that take place in the classroom. It guides how much time a teacher chooses to spend teaching one subject or another. And it even impacts the method a teacher will use in disciplining a child.

I believe that a school that is not mission-driven is like a ship drifting at sea without a compass. I know that there are schools that do not have a published mission. However, even in these schools everyone knows what the mission of the school is (based on its affiliation or its school leader). And if they do not all row in the same direction then, it becomes "*Ish kol haYashar beEnav ya'aseh*"—everyone does according to what he or she believes to be correct—and things will be different from teacher to teacher and from year to year. A successful school will ensure that everyone knows what the mission is and that all decisions are mission-based.

Hisiger:
The vision of the school is not in the hands of the school leader. It is a product of a joint sharing of values for all stakeholders involved in the success and survival of the school. There cannot be a clear line of distinction between the mission and the classroom. *What happens in the classroom is the product of the vision.* The mission and vision of the school defines the end result of the education offered. If there is no clear understanding of the mission then we are walking on a tightrope with no net below us. The lack of a clear mission opens the door to an anarchic approach that defines the school as anything anyone is thinking at that very moment. This lack of parameters and definition will not yield a cohesive curriculum or healthy school imbued with a sense of professionalism and purpose. To sum up, if the school is not mission-driven, it may in fact be driving in reverse.

Leibtag:
The mission of a school defines its purpose and distinguishes it from other similar educational institutions. Educational research clearly indicates that a succinctly articulated mission plays a significant role in the long-term success of effective schools. A school that is not mission-driven is analogous to embarking on a journey without a destination. Much time and energy is expended in traveling but you never know when or if you ever arrive at your intended place. It is therefore axiomatic that a successful yeshiva requires a mission that guides and informs its vision, goals, and allocation of resources.

There are two underlying assumptions that must be addressed to fully deal with the question presented. The first assumption is that the school leader's vision is the basis for the yeshiva's mission. The second assumption is that there is a unique difference in the mission of a Modern Orthodox yeshiva from a non-Modern Orthodox yeshiva.

The mission of a school serves as the nucleus of the institution and clarifies its unique nature, who it serves and how it does it. As such, the mission belongs to the organization—its stakeholders—parents, faculty, alumni, lay and professional leadership, and students. Developing a mission is hard work and requires the aforementioned stakeholders to collaborate to develop an idea of a school that fulfills the needs of the particular community. The mission transcends individual beliefs, aspirations, and desires. Because of that transcendent quality, the mission endures beyond the tenure of the principal or other school leader. It is the responsibility of the school to retain the services of an educational leader who embodies the mission of the school. If the mission is solely in the province of the principal, the effectiveness of that mission is compromised because the educational leader cannot singularly impart the beliefs, concepts, and ideas inherent in the school's mission. The principal requires a team to carry out the mission—not unlike the quarterback and his relationship with his fellow football players. The school leader may passionately present the most noble and lofty mission of a yeshiva. However, if the teachers, parents, and board members do not see the mission with the same clarity, then the mission is doomed to simply remain a paragraph in the school handbook. Despite this truism, many school boards abdicate their responsibility, and perhaps because of expediency (or because they do not see the value in mission), ask the principal to develop the yeshiva's mis-

sion. School principals, particularly new appointees, often see this freedom as an opportunity to implement their personal vision of Jewish education. However, this autocratic opportunity, which may lead to short-term educational gain, is often an invitation to failure, as there may not be a supportive community that shares the vision. The principal, nevertheless, must be an active participant and facilitate the process of mission development. In the end, the yeshiva must personally "own" the mission—and in the event of a leadership transition must entrust the mission to the incoming principal.

Among the words that define their unique school character, it is common for many yeshivot to include the phrase Modern Orthodox in their mission statements. However, how do we understand this ubiquitous two-word moniker? What precisely does Modern Orthodox mean within an educational setting? The lack of a clear definition of Modern Orthodoxy has been the subject of many conferences and spawned the creation of new organizations trying to give it meaning. This elusiveness of definition results in ambiguity in the minds of students in Modern Orthodox environments. Asking high-school students (or adults) to answer the question, "What is Modern Orthodoxy?" will demonstrate this fact.

Regrettably, Yeshiva University, the presumptive institutional standard-bearer of Modern Orthodoxy has done little to clarify this enigmatic philosophy or its educational implications. Indeed, a perusal of the YU website will reveal the absence of the term Modern Orthodox or its descriptors in its own mission statement. A review of other websites of major organizations that purport to be Modern Orthodox either do not list a mission statement or fail to explain the characteristics of their ideology. The lone exception is Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, whose website articulates a very detailed understanding of Modern Orthodoxy.

Assuming, for the moment, that we do have a clear understanding of Modern Orthodoxy, the challenge facing educators is how to implement this philosophy of Jewish life in the classroom. This compels us to confront two questions that require further analysis and resolution. Is there a unique pedagogy for Modern Orthodoxy that distinguishes it from the teaching in other yeshivot? How do we prepare faculty for the teaching responsibilities and informal education activities of a Modern Orthodox yeshiva/Day School?

2. How does an educator experience the personnel shortage in our schools? Does this find expression in General and Judaic Studies? What impact, if any, does this shortage have on a school's ability to meet its mission and goals?

Billet:
Availability of appropriate personnel to staff our schools surely depends on the school's location as well as its mission. Environs close to Jewish universities and other institutions of higher learning will yield more personalities interested in the intellectual challenges of a career in education. In fact, it seems to me that there are many more people in the New York-New Jersey metropolitan area interested in teaching Tanakh or Talmud than there are positions available. Interestingly, the "shortage" is experienced in General Studies far more acutely than in *Limudei Kodesh*. My personal experience has been that those committed to teaching in a Jewish school are far more likely to go into the *Limudei Kodesh* fields than into secular disciplines such as science, math, and English literature. I personally have encouraged students gifted in mathematics and the sciences to go into Jewish education to little avail, partially because there are many higher paying and more "prestigious" fields for these scientists and mathematicians to choose over education, and partially because those committed to education seem to feel that they can do more for students' personal growth in Judaic Studies classes than in secular fields. In Jewish education, where the monetary rewards are not great, the spiritual and psychological rewards—such as making a difference in a student's life, or becoming close to and supportive of an emotionally needy student—become that much more important in choosing the subject area in which to concentrate.

I have often heard parents declare some variation of the statement, "a school is as good as the teacher in my child's class that year." No excellence of reputation, no number of gifted teachers in a school can change the situation of a specific child who is not having a successful classroom experience in any given year. Challenges in any area of staffing a school—teaching, programming, administrative, or guidance—certainly make it more difficult to meet the goals and mission of the institution. Even in areas where there is an excess of candidates for positions, many of these candidates are young people, straight out of school, with little teaching experience—but with real potential. We invest in these candidates by hir-

ing mentors to guide them during the challenging early years. Successful, experienced teachers from established schools rarely make lateral moves to growing schools, unless conditions suggest a need for a geographical change for the teacher.

Druin:

Every school leader needs to make decisions on how to best utilize the school's resources, so personnel choices are ultimately his or hers to make. These choices are made based on need as well as affordability. I have no doubt that if a school were to be given significant additional resources, then some would be spent on additional personnel. However, I don't know if this would be the first item on a spending wish list.

Personnel includes teachers as well as support staff. More teachers would mean fewer students in a classroom—and an inevitable increase in the quality of education. More support staff would mean more time for administrators to be out of their offices, guiding the school rather than pushing paper. All of the above would obviously help the Judaic as well as the General Studies. More importantly, this would help ensure that the mission of the school is indeed being carried out to the fullest extent.

Hisiger:

This question in regard to personnel shortage is universal and puts the entire educational enterprise at risk. The General Studies piece is far less an issue—and I have found that great strides are met when the Day School networks with other area private schools. The teachers coming from other private schools have a better understanding of parents' wishes and desires for their children. Equally important is the fact that they are willing to work for the Day Schools, as private schools have similar pay scales. Judaic Studies teachers are a whole different matter. They are as hard to find as diamonds in one's backyard. The Jewish Agency understands this problem and has put forth an initiative in which they are identifying some 120 exemplary candidates in Israel to work a three-year stint in Diaspora schools. This program holds much promise—assuming the candidates can culturally acclimate to the needs and environment of American schools. Another area in which we have had some notable success is networking with Graduate Schools and Rabbinical Colleges. To be sure, there are no easy answers.

Leibtag:
The success of our schools depends both on the quality of the teachers and the quality of the teaching. We need faculty members who both serve as role models and who guide students to be passionate observant Jews in the modern world. The shortage of qualified educators for yeshivot and Day Schools has been a perennial problem in the field of Jewish education. The problem is more profound in the Modern Orthodox community because these schools require teachers who serve as active role models and who are trained in the pedagogy that reflects the school's mission. The irony in America is that those young men and women who passionately embrace Modern Orthodoxy are inclined to live their dream by choosing to make *aliyah*. And even if they decide to teach in a local yeshiva or Day School, their tenure is limited to one to three years; just enough time to gain experience but rarely enough time to have a significant impact on a school or community. This inherent dichotomy limits the available pool of qualified professionals to join the faculty of Modern Orthodox schools.

The Modern Orthodox world also has not succeeded in developing a repertoire of teaching methodologies or strategies to impart life skills to students, skills that are unique to the schools that foster the Modern Orthodox mission. These skills include but are not limited to: critical analysis of text; integrating conversational Hebrew within the classroom; understanding biblical figures in human terms; dealing with apparent conflicts of Torah and science; appreciating the relationship between Midrash/Agaddah and text; imparting a religious Zionistic ethos in the classroom; encouraging acceptance, dialogue, and interaction between Jews of different levels of observance; understanding the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish cultures and peoples; and fostering an awareness that general knowledge reflects *hokhmah baGoyim*, wisdom of the nations. It should be noted that there are a number of educational leaders and scholars in the Modern Orthodox world who are making strides in these areas. However, these initiatives are generally the result of a resourceful principal and/or an itinerant skilled educator. These attempts lack the synergy of a united group effort that should be coordinated by a national organization. The responsibility of leading any school, and certainly a Modern Orthodox one, can be both highly rewarding and exceptionally lonely. Principals rarely have the time to develop and implement these various strategies and methods. But together, under the aegis of a national organization, we have the

potential to develop the curriculum and the concomitant pedagogy to fulfill the mission of Modern Orthodox schools.

3. How should Modern Orthodox schools address women's education and gender equality in terms of content, mastery, and Jewish practice? To what extent is this a divisive issue in the community, and how can a school deal with this?

Billet:
Since almost all of my experience as a high-school educator has been in all-girls' schools, my views on women's education confine themselves to this genre. Modern Orthodox schools would do well to address women's education by combining all the best features of traditional men's education with traditional women's education to derive a new product that is greater than the sum of its parts. Goals for women's education must include developing textual skills in every aspect of Jewish literature, including Tanakh and commerntaries, Midrash, Talmud with the commentaries of *Rishonim* and *Aharonim*, *Posekim*, Responsa literature, primary sources for Jewish History, and any other area that contributes to a well-educated Jew. This includes developing high-level skills in Hebrew and Aramaic, languages that facilitate understanding of Jewish sources. Students should be exposed to both *iyun* and *bekiut* aspects of learning so they can learn deeply and exhaustively, yet also cover ground that helps them achieve mastery of a certain core of content, including more erudite skills in interpreting sources.

Students should be taught to understand that while Judaism is surely a religion based on study, a truly authentic Judaism combines intellectualism with a deep commitment to all aspects of Jewish practice. As Rav Solovitchik taught us, the term *Ish haHalakha* (the halakhic person) is inseparable from the self-definition of the Modern Orthodox Jewish personality, male or female, and we must educate our children to aspire to grow into personalities for whom halakhic observance is paramount. Hence at the same time that women are encouraged to observe carefully all mitzvoth that they are obligated to perform, as well as all those that they are permitted to perform, the concept of being a halakhic person encourages women to embrace all mitzvoth that are part of a broad consensus in the community with which they identify.

Although this should not be a divisive issue within a community, our people have historically been plagued by the glib notion, “two Jews, three opinions.” Most deviations from established customs, whether these customs are halakhically binding or not, have always been controversial. Women eating together and saying *birkat haZimmun* should not be controversial, since it is a practice endorsed by such great figures as the Vilna Gaon; nonetheless, I have seen even this practice educe controversy. A school can deal with issues like this by eliciting the support of a fair portion of the rabbinic leaders in its host community. At the same time, a school must remember that it is not a halakhic authority, and usually, neither is the head of school. Each school is thus wise to choose a *posek* (a recognized halakhic authority) who is accepted by a broad consensus in the host community, who understands and subscribes to the mission of the school, and whom the school trusts implicitly. This *posek* is the final authority in the most difficult and controversial halakhic decisions the school faces. The school and its leadership may then consider themselves on solid ground when required to defend a difficult position endorsed or condoned by the *posek*.

Druin:
I believe that “women’s education” needs to be dealt with by way of “education.” In other words, it is due to a lack of education that “women’s education” becomes an issue. From its inception, a school needs to articulate clearly its Judaic philosophy in this regard and then educate its population on the reason and halakhic bases on which it stands.

In my opinion, in a Modern Orthodox school, women and men should be treated differently only in *tefila* and athletics. The study of Written and Oral Torah in order to know and appreciate how to live as a Jew—a lifestyle that includes a respect of genders—is a necessity for both men and women.

Hisiger:
This question is difficult to provide a blanket answer for, as the issue is often rooted in emotional response and questionable motivation. Thus, what may seem like clear-cut halakhic guidance can be muddled in an atmosphere of recrimination and perceived as insensitivity. This is a divisive issue by its very nature. It needs to be resolved internally and issues adjudicated on a case-by-case basis.

Leibtag:
One of the presumptions of Modern Orthodox education is that it supports equal opportunities for girls to receive the same exposure as boys to the corpus of Jewish teachings. As a leader of one of the larger Modern Orthodox schools in the county, I have experienced very little divisiveness on this issue or a demand for greater exposure to higher learning for women. Larger Jewish communities that have a proliferation of Jewish schools provide parents with options that reduce the divisiveness that is frequently experienced in smaller cities. This fact does not mean that girls are, in fact, receiving the same exposure to the more sophisticated Torah study taught to boys. Particularly at the high-school level, young women do not always receive an equal opportunity to study Talmud, *Rishonim*, and halakhic texts. This is due mainly to limited available administrators and faculty—particularly female—who have been motivated to lead or educated to teach at that level. With the rise of advanced study for women at the post-secondary level, a greater number of women will be available to take key positions in teaching and administration in the near future.

As the halakhic issues in this area have evolved, Modern Orthodox schools have been in the forefront of providing sophisticated learning for women. And although this has been a positive development, this observer has perceived a reverse issue of gender equity in coeducational environments. As the demands on schools have increased and the areas of learning have expanded beyond the core curriculum subjects, boys seem to be having greater difficulty in school. This problem relates to attention, behavior, and ultimately achievement. And girls, in disproportionate numbers, behave better in class, receive higher grades, perform better on achievement tests, and receive more graduation awards. This failure of boys to do well in school has recently been noted in general education writings and should, therefore, be addressed by Jewish educators.

However, the issue of equality in Jewish education and the implications for content, mastery, and Jewish practice should be addressed, not necessarily from a perspective of gender, but rather by differentiated aptitude. In the same way that progressive educators have approached education with the understanding that "one size does not fit all," Jewish educators must take an approach that assures that Torah fits every student. The primary goals of Jewish education are to foster a belief in God, a love of Torah, and a commitment to mitzvoth. In this regard, every Jewish child needs to be an "A" student.

Since our community highly values Jewish literacy, it is vital that every child be structured for success in Torah learning to prevent boredom in the classroom and superficial knowledge. The lack of engagement in Judaic Studies is an invitation to disenfranchisement from the Jewish community—and places a child at spiritual risk, particularly in high school. With record numbers attending yeshivot and Day Schools, Judaic Studies curricula should be arranged to take into account general aptitude, learning styles, interests, and multiple intelligences. At the high-school level, students can be offered various avenues to engage in Jewish Studies, including textual analysis, thematic instruction, or experiential learning. It is at this level where advanced Talmud study should be made available only to those young men or women whose interest level and aptitude would benefit from such a presentation. By providing multiple pathways to successful Torah study, we prepare all students to lead a meaningful life of practice and productivity.

4. How should Modern Orthodox schools address issues in contemporary culture that conflict with traditional norms? What is the impact on a school's reach for integration of Judaic and General Studies?

Billet:
A Modern Orthodox school must address issues in contemporary culture in conflict with traditional Jewish norms because these are issues that confront all of our students in their everyday lives, both intellectually and personally. Failing to address these issues will not make them disappear—and the school is one of the safest and most appropriate places to confront these issues. This is because the school is a home to teachers and personalities who demonstrate to students that an educated and thinking Jew may be troubled by difficult issues, yet still remain committed and observant. That alone is a reassuring position. In addition, the school has many venues (different ones appealing to different students) in which to face issues, including the formal classroom, informal programs such as *mishmar,* the guidance office, extra-curricular programs, or a casual coffee break with a trusted teacher. An open, honest, sensitive approach is always best. This includes validating the student's struggle, the teacher's admission to having grappled, or continuing to grapple, with the issue at hand,

exploring as many authentic Jewish (and other) sources that can be found that discuss these issues, and attempting to understand them with sensitivity. This sensitive approach is imperative to avoid distancing the student, whether the issue is about the truth of our tradition (such as questions of the Torah's authorship; possibilities of multiple truths; authenticity of the Oral Torah); moral dilemmas posed by our tradition (homosexuality; *mamzerut*; the command to kill Amalek); or questions and struggles that teenagers (and adults) face in terms of halakhic practice (*shemirat negiah, tefila,* wearing a *kippah* in secular space). A balanced approach to all issues is always appropriate, whatever the personal opinions of the teacher or mentor may be. Even if the "answer" our tradition offers is not the one our students want to hear—and we must be honest about that as well—one of the most valuable lessons that we can teach our students is that our tradition understands their struggles and is relevant to the things they care about most passionately. Over time, we hope to instill in our students a desire to engage deeply and seriously in the Jewish tradition, even when grappling with matters that are not strictly "religious" or ritual-based. The tradition and the Torah are always relevant, and will have become an integral part of who our students are as religious, social, political, and philosophical beings.

Druin:
I believe in education. I believe that no matter what the issue may be, designated leaders who are decision-makers are thoughtful and collaborative in creating outcomes that will benefit the students and faculty. Thus, an effective communication of this decision coupled with a learning opportunity will resolve most problems. There may be those who challenge the decision or outcome. However, as long as the vast majority appreciates the process used to reach a decision, and is afforded an opportunity to learn more about the issue at hand, the result will be that the vocal minority will lose most of its impetus.

At this stage I believe it's necessary to add in the word *respect*. Respecting the diversity of the school population is essential. Without it, every school will find itself in one way or another at a moment of crisis because one group of parents believes one thing and another group believes another. Respect doesn't mean that one group is correct; rather it means that they have a right to disagree with each other. Now, unless we choose

to have a small school where everyone agrees on every issue, the next best thing is to realize that there are advantages to sending a child to a school where not everyone is exactly alike. Sooner or later a child needs to learn that there will always be people who disagree with him or her; that the *hashkafa* and halakha that govern the Jewish way of life are followed and interpreted differently, even within Orthodoxy. And so, as long as there is mutual respect, diversity of opinion will make life more meaningful.

Integration of Judaic and General Studies is something I think every school should strive for. It shows the students that thinking Jewishly applies even in General Studies. The challenge in implementing this philosophy has to do with curriculum and teachers. Ideally one should have both, for example, an integrated curriculum where science is interlinked with halakha. With regard to teachers, one should have Judaic Studies teachers who can teach the secular component of their curriculum and General Studies teachers who can teach the Judaic components of their curriculum. Realistically, however, one can take small steps in this direction. One can have co-teaching take place where from time to time the Judaic teacher comes into the General Studies class to help teach or discuss an issue, and so too the other way around, where the General Studies teachers come into the Judaic class to help teach an issue. Curricula can be prepared a couple of times a year in which teachers work together in collaboration developing a unit of studies that covers both Judaic and General Studies needs.

Hisiger:

Contemporary culture is so debased that I don't think it holds the allure that it did prior to the postmodern era. The attraction to contemporary currents is more borne out of adolescent rebellion or more as a byproduct of dysfunctional families and communities. Kids take their cues from adults. They also have a tremendous sixth sense for impropriety and hypocrisy. We (not just the schools) must provide models of behavior that are consistent with the morals and ethics the schools espouse. Thus, the "*Hilul Hashem* of the Week," replete with felonies and crimes unimaginable just one decade ago are so commonplace that it leaves one speechless. In the current climate, all students are "Kids at Risk." Education alone will not answer the question. There must be an intense partnership involving the school, synagogue, home, and social services to coordinate a uniform response and

mechanism in dealing with this issue. This partnership will hopefully fulfill the prophecy, *veHeshiv lev avot al banim, veLev banim al avotam*.

An integrated curriculum makes perfect sense as long as we do not confuse the *ikar* for the *tafel*. If our goal is not to produce compartmentalized or schizophrenic graduates who are Jews from 8:00 A.M. until 1:00 P.M. and then somehow morph into "American citizens" not rooted in Judaic values then we must (when appropriate) integrate the curriculum. It certainly makes sense to teach why Jews came to the New World, what their contributions are and the achievements we proudly share. History is the most logical place to integrate curriculum. When possible it should be a team approach achieved through a cooperative effort of *Limudei Kodesh* and *Limudei Hol* teachers. It is not an easy task but when done correctly yields an enormously worthwhile product. I would also suggest that science be taught from a Jewish-values perspective. I am not limiting the discussion to the clash between science and religion, theory and faith, but broadening the scope to include nutrition and kashruth, environmentalism and the concept of *ba'al tashhit*. The combinations are endless and each needs to be explored and incorporated into a seemless curriculum.

I would be most pleased to work with any educator interested in fleshing out this sphere of education.

Leibtag:

At the core of Modern Orthodoxy is the confrontation, rather than the avoidance, of society. This confrontation includes dealing with contemporary culture, which can be antithetical to Torah values. This constant tension between societal values and Torah values actually makes teaching children in a Modern Orthodox school a very complex process. This hard work demands that we confront issues openly with our students. There is little in contemporary culture that our children are not aware of, due to their exposure to the media, attachment to technology, and use of instant communication. As such, it is essential that these issues should be discussed with their Judaic Studies teachers and principals. Due to the sensitivity of the discussions and their implications within Jewish law, it is recommended that the staff meet prior to any meeting to review the salient points of discourse. Parents, as the primary teachers of values, should also be informed and included in these discussions. Our children live in a

highly transparent world; therefore, their educational environment needs to reflect the same sense of transparency.

On a broader level, the Modern Orthodox school should have General Studies teachers who are themselves Modern Orthodox Jews. Their teaching would integrate a Torah perspective in the areas of history, literature, mathematics, and the sciences. However, that reality will also require a national effort of recruitment and training.

It should be noted that curricular integration is also an issue that faces general educators. Current educational thinking has been concerned with the compartmentalization of its core curriculum subjects. This approach prevents students from appreciating the interrelation between the various disciplines. This realization has served as a catalyst in the general education market for the development of strategies and curricula that facilitate integration. As a preliminary step toward integration, Jewish educators need to first demonstrate to their students the relationships between Humash, Navi, Talmud, Halakha, Hebrew Language, and History.

Integration of Judaic and General Studies begins with the faculty of both departments meeting to review areas of curriculum that lend themselves to integration. These can be both areas of conflict and points of convergence. Students need to be exposed to the application of higher-order thinking skills. They also need to realize the primacy of Torah and reverence for "*emunat hakhamim*" before engaging in any integration. A scope and sequence can be developed beginning in middle school through high school to provide our students with both the underlying knowledge and critical thinking skills necessary to confront contemporary issues as they approach adulthood.

Grassroots Resource Merging: Reflections on a Collaborative Day School Model in a New Economic Order

Aaron Frank

(Rabbi Frank is the current Lower School Principal and incoming High School Principal of the Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School in Baltimore, MD.)

We are blessed in American Jewry with incredible Day School options. From Orthodox to Reform to Community Day Schools, excellence in the area of academics, in the area of religious education, and in the area of character education have made the Day School movement one of the lynchpins of the strengths of modern American Jewish identity. With the dawn of a new, grayer economic era, how can we keep these schools excellent? How can they remain viable when many of our givers are suffering economically and when our tuition-paying families are being stretched like never before?

The only way to respond to such a crisis without massive cuts is to think robustly about new initiatives that can preserve the excellence of the Day Schools without sacrificing their unique character. In this essay, we would like to explore new avenues in what we will call "Day School resource merging." It is a simple model, one that uses almost a "Sam's Club" approach, the basic principle that working together or even buying in bulk saves money and enables everyone to flourish. It is a model that acknowledges that structurally and programmatically, the many Day

Schools in communities are duplicating expenses in ways that are costing the Federations, the schools themselves, and, finally, and most importantly, the Jewish children and families that they are serving.

Finding Areas of Commonality

For many years, as the Day School movement has soared, we have gotten used to defining particular schools by their unique visions and *hashkafot*. Yet, we must begin to look at the things that unite us, more than those that divide us. What this model seeks to do is to find areas of commonality—costs that every Day School has—in order to pool resources and save.

The first area of commonality that we suggest is the area of our shared commitment to a rigorous General Studies curriculum. While we may not all agree on the amount of hours spent poring over a Talmud or in Hebrew Language class, the majority of Day Schools agree on the primacy of excellent math, reading, and science curricula and the importance of staff development. We must, as school administrators and department chairs, create a common lexicon and standards for math, for biology, and for history. These times demand that we roll up our sleeves and create a community of unified interest in which we identify the curricular areas toward which we are all committed. This could take shape in many forms. It could be in the form of a group decision on professional development. It could be a common decision on lab supplies or textbooks. It could even take the form of a local, or even regional, Day School scope and sequence for science, math, or literature. From the outcomes of such endeavors, we would be able to resource merge like never before.

Another area where resource merging could certainly take place is with the much more mundane expenses that all schools incur. Every school spends on paper goods both in the copy room and the lunch room. Every school spends on buses for transporting students to school, for field trips, and for athletic events. Every school spends on payroll systems and insurance for its employees. Every school spends on athletic uniforms and referees. Every school spends on advertising and public relations. Imagine if we could pool resources and spend together, in bulk, instead of needlessly doubling our costs.

Approximately 35 to 40 percent of budget line items are goods and services that all Day Schools value, purchase, and provide. So, if Day

Schools were able to truly act as cooperatives and pool their resources to purchase these, and many other such services in bulk, imagine the savings.

With this model, we must undo our natural tendency in every Day School. We can no longer afford to only look at what makes us unique. We can no longer try to be the only show in town that is doing X or Y. We must embrace a model that equally emphasizes what we can do together.

Coordination of the Model

In many ways, this is not a new idea. Many have read that recently PEJE, Avi Chai, and some Boards of Jewish Education have been working on comparable initiatives, both on the local and national level. These models operate from the top down with experts identifying areas of commonality.

Our model is different. We would like to present a model that works from the bottom up. Instead of those outside the school dictating the areas of collaboration, we are of the strong and deep belief that the most effective way for such efforts to take shape is through a grassroots effort—- from and by the people in schools. It must be a peer-driven initiative with the outside organizations serving as a central vehicle for funding, periodic consultation, mediation, and guidance.

It is critical that each school be a true stakeholder. Each must invest in a qualified staff member who already works in the school, knows its culture, and who has, as part of his or her professional responsibilities, the charge to work intensely within the school and with the other schools to make the model a reality. This work must be done along with a deep internal review of the school mission in order to truly decide what can be done together and what must be done alone.

Whether in business or in our personal lives, everyone knows that the best partnerships work when each side knows who they are. In the same way, only through a model, with people who know the schools, with people who live and breathe them, can we embrace our commonality while preserving the integrity of our differences.

Challenges

If we are honest, collaboration can sometimes feel uncomfortable and threatening. Everyone is going to have to give. For schools that have

greater challenges, this idea may seem dramatic. For schools that are more solvent, yet still challenged, it may seem like an unnecessary diminution of power. These are all natural feelings—but these times demand that we do our best to make these feelings secondary and work together for the betterment of all. We must understand that our school missions will only continue to have stakeholders and only continue to thrive if we all step out of our comfort zones and embrace something new.

Due to the need for each school to have true reflection and self-examination, a project like this will take time and resources. But it would be time and money well spent. Schools will have to invest in the short term; however, the long-term benefits can see the emergence of a model of cooperation that can truly be an example to all.

This is a call for exploration by schools. As many have pointed out, a *mashber*, in Hebrew, is both a crisis and a birthing stool—an opportunity for new life. These times of crisis demand new models. We would be irresponsible if we did not recognize the crisis nature of the times in which we live. We owe it to our constituents a collective soul-searching of the mission of our schools and a rethinking of our true needs. When we reflect this drive, more people will give, as they will acknowledge that their funds are getting a better bang for the buck. Truth be told, this model could eventually trim our expenses and our tuitions from 20 to 40 percent. It is a win-win situation. With these types of savings, our classrooms will be filled with more families who can pay and our financial assistance funds will be able to provide for more people than ever.

Certainly different Day Schools have different missions. We must celebrate those differences. Yet, we all want one central reality—a Jewish world where people find Torah and Judaism accessible and relevant. We all want to give the greatest number of Jewish children a strong secular and strong Jewish education. In a world where fewer Jews are finding Judaism relevant and fewer Jews who want to make that commitment can afford a Day School, it is our responsibility to open our arms and open our books. The future of our American Jewish Day Schools and the future of American Jewry depend on it.

The Complexity and Feasibility of Fostering *Midot* and *Derekh Erets* in Our Children

Aharon H. Fried, Ph.D

(Rabbi Fried is Associate Professor of Psychology and Education at Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University. He also maintains a private practice in Psychology evaluating children who have learning or behavioral problems in school, and guiding their parents and teachers in ways of working with them. For the past 30 years, Rabbi Fried has held various positions at all levels of Jewish Education and is best known for his early pioneering work in Jewish Special Education.)

n more than one occasion, I heard Rav Mordechai Gifter *zt"l* tell the following story.

Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Grodnanski, the son-in-law of Rav Yisroel Salanter, engaged his daughter to a young man, Chaim Ozer Grodzensky. Since the bride's grandfather, Reb Yisroel, had not traveled to attend the *vort* [a learned speech made by the bridegroom], Rav Eliyahu Eliezer wrote his father-in-law, informing him of his granddaughter's engagement, and enclosed the *divrei Torah* that the *Hattan* [groom] had delivered at the *vort*. Reb Yisroel wrote back, "Mazal Tov. I received your letter, and from the *divrei Torah* that you enclosed I can see that the *Hattan* is indeed a *talmid hakham* [wise scholar]. However, the biblical verse says, "*Et biti natati L'**Ish** hazeh . . . ve'al ha**Ish** lo katavta li meuma!*" ("I gave my daughter to this **man**, but you wrote me nothing about the **man**, i.e., the mentch.)[1]

When we speak of the *midot* and *derekh erets* of a person, that is, the character traits of the person as expressed in his or her actual behavior, we speak of the man/*mentch* himself. Thus, when we speak of imbuing children with good *midot* and *derekh erets*, we are speaking of the creation of the total *mentch* that he or she can become. This quest cannot be accomplished by measures that address only a part of that whole. We must address the whole person.

Over the years, I have heard, read, and participated in many debates on the most important variables are that affect *midot* and *derekh erets*, as well as in attempts to implement programs to this instill these qualities in our children. In these conversations, some have argued for our schools to teach *midot* more, that is, to *tell* children what proper moral behavior is. Others have argued that the teaching of *midot* can only come from the home, by example. Some have advocated the intense study of mussar (ethics), while others have created *midot* programs in which children are not merely told what moral behavior is; they are taught about *midot* in organized lessons, complete with worksheets and homework assignments. Still others have instituted school-based *hessed* programs, with academic credit awarded for the participation in set number of hours of *hessed,* or volunteer community service.

All of these programs base themselves on underlying theories (generally not explicitly articulated) about what it is that will produce good *midot* in our children. Those who believe that good moral and ethical character stems from proper moral *thinking* teach *midot* via the subject matter of halakha and mussar, i.e., learning to think about right and wrong. Those who believe that good moral and ethical character and behavior stems from learning how to *behave* properly focus on providing children with good models for behavior, and/or with institutionally based rules for behavior with the implementation of consequences and discipline for infractions of the *midot* and *derekh erets* rules. Then there are those who believe that children will learn to do good only by actually doing good; not by learning *about* doing good. They advocate enticing or demanding that children actively engage in *hessed* programs. These approaches address the cognitions and behaviors of our children, and to a lesser extent, and only indirectly, their affect.[2] Most educators feel that these programs are ineffective or not effective enough. In a previous article I described some of the failings in our system when it comes to *midot*.[3]

Educators and parent advocates of *midot* programs, judging a program to be ineffective or not as effective as they would like it to be, have a tendency to do what seems prudent—abandon what doesn't work and begin something new that may. And so, we hop from one program to another, one effort to another, teaching mussar one year, focusing on disciplining children for infractions of *midot* in another, using a "thinking about *midot* program" the next, and then, finally, calling parents in and laying the responsibility at their feet. Not enough nuanced thought is given to figuring out what about these programs does work, what should be salvaged, and how the programs should be combined with other approaches.

The field of Psychology suffered from a the similar malaise back in the 1960s and 1970s. For every study that showed some variable to have an effect, there was another study showing it to have no effect, or even an opposite effect, until, with a paradigm-changing insight, Urie Bronfenbrenner helped redirect research in the field. Bronfenbrenner compared the growth of the individual and the study of that growth and development to the growth of a plant and the study of that plant's growth and development. We all understand intuitively that it makes little sense to argue about whether it is mainly the quality of the seed, the amount of water, the sunlight available, the air temperature, or the proximity and kind of other plants and animals, that affects a plant's growth. Nor can we say simply that it is the combination of these that determines development, for in reality, the absence of any individual factor or variable can often be compensated by the increase of another. It is the combined interaction of all of these factors that actually determines, or more correctly, influences, the plant's growth and development. Thus, in studying plant life we look at the entire ecological system, and study it as such, as an interconnected and interrelated system of factors and variables that affect each other, and the organisms within it, which in turn affect the system itself. So too, it is futile in children's development to seek *the* cause or determiner of a particular behavior or set of behaviors, and to then construct a program around that factor. Instead, it is an ecological approach that is necessary, a study of the combined effects of many interrelated factors, each contributing to, or distracting from, the healthy development of a particular trait.

Researchers in Psychology who study the development of behavioral characteristics in children are no longer likely to try to isolate any one fac-

tor and search for its sole effects on the characteristic of interest. Rather, in the case of negative outcomes such as "juvenile delinquency," they attempt to identify those factors that, when present, are hypothesized to protect a child from becoming a juvenile delinquent, as well as those factors that tend to place a child at risk for developing delinquent behaviors. Then, all of these factors are studied systematically to discover how they interact and affect each other—and most importantly, how they affect the outcome, i.e. the development of juvenile delinquency. Similarly, in studying the development of a positive constellation of behaviors, researchers attempt to identify those factors that serve to enhance or facilitate the development of the positive trait, as well as those factors that serve to inhibit or hinder the development of that positive trait, and how all of these factors they interact and affect each other.

If we wish to understand the development of *midot* and *derekh erets* we must adopt this approach. We must understand that there is no one method, factor, or place (such as school, home, synagogue, or neighborhood, mussar learning, role models, active *hessed* programs, and so forth) that, can by itself, assure the development of *midot* and *derekh erets* in our children. Nor should we blame and burden any one factor for a child's failure to develop proper *midot* and *derekh erets*. The job is bigger than that. We must become aware of all relevant factors and how they interact—and keep them in mind when we educate our children.

In studying the development of *midot,* I would first identify and list the relevant *enhancing* factors, factors that make it more likely that good *midot* will develop in our children). I would then identify the *detracting* factors, (that is, factors whose presence makes it less likely that good *midot* will develop.) I would then try to become aware of how all of these factors, enhancing and detracting, interact with each other.

Some of the pertinent factors come to us by way of our biology or genetic endowment, and though we cannot change them, awareness can help guide us in our approach to the individual child, enhancing the effect of their positive natural traits and mitigating the effect of their difficult natural traits. Other factors come to us by way of our social environment, our experiences, our role models, our values, and our beliefs.

All of these domains and factors interact with each other constantly and in a dynamic fashion. Thus a positive factor, such as having a good role model, may offset the effect of a negative factor, such as not having

been given rules. Or, it may even enhance and multiply the effects of another positive factor. For example, having a sense of values will multiply the effect of having developed good habits of behavior that are in synchrony with one's values and allow for their broader generalization to an increasingly broad range of situations.

In the following pages I will try to elaborate on some of these relevant factors. I will try to make some suggestions about ways parents, teachers, and members of the community at large can enhance the development of *midot* and *derekh erets* in our children. I fully realize that my musings will be seen by some as unrealistic "dreams." However, dream we must. Hazal (*Berakhot* 14a) tell us, "One who goes seven days without a dream, is called bad." The Vilna Gaon understands this "dreaming" to refer to having higher thoughts or aspirations. We must aspire to do better.

Laying the Groundwork: The Social Environment

Three main factors help lay the groundwork for the development of *midot*:

RESPECTING AND VALUING OTHERS. One must feel the value of and gain a sense of respect for *all* human beings, including one's self, and all others regardless of race, gender, or religious affiliation.

HAVING ROLE MODELS. One must have positive role models who embody *midot* and *derekh erets*.

BEING AFFILIATED. One must feeling a sense of belonging, first to a family constellation, and later to a school, synagogue, and community, and people—and eventually to the greater community of *humankind.*

Imbuing children with *midot* and *derekh erets* begins at home. The home must set down a foundation and create a framework in which this will happen. The first step in such an endeavor requires creating a home environment that teaches children to value and respect everyone created *beTselem Elokim*—including one's self. This feeling comes to an infant or child who feels valued by and cared for by his or her parents. Such a child gains a sense of self-respect and later on will not want to sully it. Reb Tsadok haKohen of Lublin writes (*Sefer Tsidkat haTsadik* No. 154): "Just like a person needs to believe in Hashem, so too he needs to believe in himself," that is to say, a person should believe in the *kohot haNefesh* (strengths and abilities) granted to him or her by God. A person needs to believe that God created him or her with a purpose in mind; that he or she

is capable of fulfilling that purpose and should not squander those *kohot haNefesh*. As the Meiri writes in *Pirkei Avot* (Perek 5, Mishna 1), "A person's humility should not reach so low a level that his humility brings him not to be concerned with himself when he behaves in a lowly manner and with disgusting character."

From this sense of self-respect follows a respect for all human beings, all of whom were created by God with a purpose and were endowed by God with the requisite *kohot haNefesh* to fulfill their particular task and purpose on this world. Hazal (*Mishna Sanhedrin* 37a, and *Baraita*, ibid. 38a) tell us that Adam was created alone in order that later generations not be able to tell each other, "*My father was of a more elevated status than yours*." It is only when *we*, the parents, truly believe, in the deepest recesses of our hearts, in the inherent value of all human beings and in their right to basic respect, that we can hope to instill true *midot* in our children. This attitude and belief comes to children, with their proverbial "mother's milk," through their experiences at home in their most formative years. To use the language of developmental psychologists, early experiences equip children with "Internal Models of Experience," sets of lenses that will color how they will look at human beings—and how they interpret their actions, strengths, and shortcomings. It is these early experiences that will determine whether they live up to the value expressed in the *tefilah* of the Rebbe Elimelech of Lizensk *zt"l*, "*May it be your will that we see that which is elevated in our friends rather than their shortcomings*." The first step in imbuing our children with *midot*, then, is the creation of an atmosphere of respect, a respect for all human beings, for proper, polite, and caring behavior—and a disrespect and even disgust with coarse and uncouth behavior.

The above happens only through parents who serve as role models and instructors for the aforementioned attitudes, and the behaviors to other human beings that naturally result from them. Values and attitudes are fed to children in their earliest years not by preaching, but rather, by the words and deeds of their parents, by how the parents treat each other, by how they treat the *meshulah* at the door, and by how they treat the cleaning help in their homes. As Hazal tell us (*Succah* 56b), "The speech of a child heard in the street is either his mother's or his father's."

Parents also instruct by their responses to the suffering of others, by the stories they tell their children, and by the books they encourage their children to read. When I was about fifteen years old, my mother, a

Holocaust survivor, handed me Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, a novel about apartheid in South Africa saying, "Read this, you'll learn. Not only Jews suffered."

Along with the sense of respect for human beings, one of the most basic and important things that children get from their parents is the sense of belonging, the feeling of being affiliated with a group, such as the family unit, and valued by it. This is an extremely important component of moral behavior. Belonging is a basic human need,[4] and it underlies our feelings for others, our motivation to maintain those ties, and our sense of guilt when we fail to live up to the moral norms and expectations of the group.[5] The family is the first unit or group to which an individual belongs. From a child's experience in the family unit and from his or her attachment to it, the child develops his or her internal model of belonging to other broader groups, those of the school, the synagogue, the community, K'lal Yisrael, and eventually, to the community of humankind.[6]

Children will learn good *midot* from their parents, but these attitudes need strengthening. This needs to happen in school. Rabbeim and teachers, in action and in deed, serve as role models for respecting others or for denigrating them. When educators teach pride in Torah values by pointing to the beauty of Torah, they raise their children to loftier heights. However, when they try to instill pride in our heritage primarily by denigrating all others, they lower their student's sights. When they treat all children with care and with respect for their persons, regardless of family background, of physical appearance, and of ability level, they instill in their students a sense of respect for others. When they create favorites, inadvertently or by design, or encourage the creation of cliques that define themselves to a great degree by the exclusion of others, they destroy their students' respect for others. Teachers always need to be careful in how they speak to and about others, even about those whose actions need to be criticized and denigrated. The Hazon Ish (*Sefer Emunah U'bitahon, Perek* 4, No. 16) writes that when a rebbe admonishes a student using harsh and coarse language—whatever benefit this may seem to have on the student's hesitance to repeat his transgression in the future—the immediate negative result is that the student learns to use coarse language, as he will mimic his rebbe. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rebbe Yosef Yitzhak Schneerson *zt"l (Kuntrus haHinukh ve-ha-Hadrakha)* writes similarly, that a "rebbe or *madrikh* (counselor) who speaks about one of the greater

human defects and refers to them with contemptuous labels—which are actually truly fitting for them"—will nevertheless find that the benefits of his intended message are outweighed by the loss of a student seeing his teacher using coarse language.

It is not sufficient to tell children a story about how Reb Yaakov Kaminetzky *zt"l* stopped a conversation to stand and watch with silent respect until a non-Jewish funeral passed, because, as he explained to his companion, "He, too, was created *beTselem Elokim*." It is not enough to tell stories. We must *emulate* the actions of the heroes of those stories. At the very least, we should be careful not to destroy the message of a story by the way we actually speak to or about others, or by how we treat them. When children observe that the *kavod* due to the *tselem Elokim* that God endowed people with can be abrogated by mere mortals when they so choose, they will conclude that they too can choose when to grant someone the *kavod* that comes with *tselem Elokim* and when to refuse a person that *kavod*. Much depends on what they see us do.

Engaging Affect and Emotions

The following are three vital points in engaging the emotions of children:

Empathy and sympathy. One must develop an understanding for the life condition and pain of other human beings.

Intuition. One needs to develop intuitive reactions, positive and negative, to proper and improper *midot*, up to and including a sense of disgust for insensitive, rude, crude, and cruel behaviors.

Sensitivity. One should develop the ability to anticipate how a person may feel in a given situation, and how one's actions may be interpreted (or misinterpreted) by another person. One needs to learn how to adjust one's actions to head off any discomfort to others.

For *midot* and *derekh erets* to endure over a lifetime, across a wide and varied array of situations, they must be understood intellectually, and therefore taught and discussed. However, at a more basic level, our children need to *feel* them; they must engage them emotionally. A very basic ingredient in the development of *midot* and *derekh erets* is developing one's feelings—especially one's feelings for others. It requires learning to empathize with others, and to feel their need, their pain. At the most primitive level, this is limited to feeling immediate pain, as in feeling the pain

of someone we have just seen bang his finger with a hammer. Later, we develop our ability to understand and feel another person's less visible hurts, such as hunger or embarrassment. Eventually we graduate to understanding another's total life condition. We come to empathize with the way a poor person feels when he cannot feed his family, or how one feels when she is different from the majority in her group, be it by dint of ethnic background, of socio-economic level, of being a newcomer or stranger, or by dint of one's appearance, if it is perceived somehow as "different." Parents can elicit these feelings from their children as natural opportunities arise. A parent can talk to a child about how he or she thinks a playmate felt when she hurt herself on the playground, or when she was not invited to a birthday party. Or, a parent can read stories to his or her child about people and their difficulties and invite the child to imagine and discuss the feelings of the people in the stories. These feelings need to be awakened in children to the extent possible at home, and then strengthened through the wider educational opportunities available through the school curriculum.[7] Our learning should address emotion. In literature, in history, and in many other areas, children would gain from discussions of the feelings of the people involved. We teach Humash, which is replete with feelings and complex and difficult interpersonal relationships. But, I'm afraid that in many of our schools we focus on the facts and avoid discussion of the emotions involved. Perhaps daunted and awed by the task of explaining the emotions of the Patriarchs, Matriarchs, and other biblical figures to the young children learning Humash, we avoid it completely—a loss to our children and to their understanding of emotions and of *midot*. Taking children to visit the elderly who live alone or in nursing homes, having children involved in bringing them gifts or, more importantly their company, goes a long way in bringing a smile to the face of the lonely, and a sense of joy to children as they learn how much they can do for others. Such experiences begun at home and expanded on in school create indelible "memories" in children. In the future, situations even vaguely reminiscent of the feelings aroused by these early experiences will serve as markers to awaken their feelings as well as the appropriate called-for responses. These early experiences equip our children with a moral intuition, a set of internalized feelings and gut reactions to situations and behaviors,[8] something I call the "yuck factor" or the "yummy factor," as the case may be.

Research suggests that many—perhaps most—of our moral judgments are based not on logic, but rather on intuitive reactions. We recoil emotionally from that which our early experiences have taught us to be "yucky" and we are attracted emotionally to that which our early experiences have taught us to be "yummy." Thus, for example, a person who is the product of an Orthodox Jewish upbringing will recoil at the thought of eating a cold piece of meat on a plate that had pork on it ten years ago (even though it would be halakhically permissible). Similarly, he will pull back in fright from just touching something *muktsa* on Shabbat (even though the prohibition is in moving the object rather than touching it). These intuitive reactions were embedded in the child through early experiences with the concepts of pork and of *muktsa*. He learned that they were "yucky" and recoiled from them. Unfortunately, the upbringing most children receive makes it less likely that they will recoil in the same way from instances of hurting another person, from *lashon haRa*, from *hutspa*, and the like. And herein lies one of the failures of our ability to transmit *midot* and *derekh erets* to our young. This needs to be changed. It will change only through the conscious planning of experiences for young children that will implant negative feelings for behaviors that exemplify bad *midot* and positive feelings for behaviors that exemplify good *midot*. Our children need to have experiences in which they come to feel and empathize with the pain of others, to have experiences in which they see their parents reacting with as much horror to their hurting another child's feelings as they would to their turning on a light on Shabbat.[9]

Children who learn to empathize with others and gain a moral intuition also develop sensitivity to how others feel or may come to feel in given situations. This sensitivity eventually enables them to monitor their own behavior and its effect on others, to anticipate how others may interpret their behavior, and to adjust their behavior to preclude any misinterpretation and/or resultant hurt. This is a sign of an accomplished *ba'al midot*, one who contemplates one's behavior with care always taken to avoid offending others, even inadvertently.

Teaching and Learning

The following are issues that are central to teaching and learning *midot* and *derekh erets*:

Beliefs. One must have a belief system that proscribes negative behaviors, and remain consistent with that belief system.

Values. One should strive to gain knowledge and understanding of ethical and moral values (through mussar and other sources).

Rules. One must have a knowledge and understanding of ethical and moral rules (such as halakha) and of societal or institutional rules governing proper behavior.

Connections. One should connect one's behavior back to one's learning and one's values.

Although early experiences and the actions of role models are important in instilling in children a feeling for morality, they cannot suffice. We cannot allow children to grow up relying only on feelings and on intuitive instincts acquired at an early age by which to judge moral situations. Many situations require reasoned and nuanced judgments of right and wrong. Intuitive reactions to such nuanced situations will just not do.[11] Thus, our children must learn to reason intellectually about morality. They must be equipped with an understanding of the beliefs and values upon which our moral principles rest and the mitzvoth of the Torah that follow from these beliefs and values and ultimately govern our behaviors.

In *Parashat Ki Tavo*, every Jewish farmer is commanded to bring his first fruits to the *Bet haMikdash* and to make a confessional declaration (*viduy*). Among other statements, the farmer is commanded to declare:

> I have eliminated the holy things from the house, and I have also given it to the Levite, to the convert, to the orphan, and to the widow, according to the entire commandment that you commanded me; I have not transgressed any of Your commandments, *and I have not forgotten.* (Deut. 26:13)

On the last words, "and I have not forgotten," Hazal remark, (cited by Rashi), "I did not forget to bless you . . . when separating the tithes." To explain the deeper meaning of this addition of Hazal, the Sefat Emet (*Parashat Devarim*) remarks:

> And I have not forgotten: This means that I did not forget while doing the mitzvah by turning it into a perfunctory habitual act. *For there are those who do a mitzvah and forget and do not know what they are doing.*

Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, it is quite possible to perform the most noble tasks in a perfunctory manner and to forget why

we do them. It seems to me to be no coincidence that the Torah teaches us this lesson of not forgetting about the hallowed and holy nature of the mitzvoth we do, specifically as it speaks of giving "to the Levite, to the convert, to the orphan, and to the widow." It is precisely in performing these acts that we may be most prone to forget the *kedusha*, or holiness, involved in them, and come to view them as mundane and even discretionary. Therefore, it is here that Torah tells us not to forget the holiness of these acts.

A vital aspect of any *midot* program is to teach our children that *mitzvot bein adam leHaveiro*—commandments governing our dealings with other human beings—are God's commandments no less than *mitzvot bein adam laMakom*—commandments governing our relationship with God. Children need to hear this from their parents at home, from the teachers and rabbeim in school, and from their synagogue rabbis. They need not only to hear this, they need to see the rules governing "mitzvoth between human beings" taught, modeled, adhered to, and in the case of transgressions in these areas, reacted to as intensely as to their transgressions in "mitzvoth between humans and God." To do this properly, it is important to teach the underlying values of these mitzvoth and how these values emanate from God's word.[10] With further growth, the child in yeshiva will learn the intricacies of these mizvoth. In learning Gemara, *Shulhan Arukh*, and works of mussar, our children will learn how far-reaching and how complex these mitzvoth and their ramifications are, and how seriously they are meant. This, in context with everything else I am outlining here, will give our youth a deeply sophisticated appreciation and loyalty to the *mitzvot bein adam leHaveiro.*

But our students need to learn the *mitzvot bein adam leHaveiro* for more down-to-earth, practical reasons as well. As in other areas of Torah, children need to know what Torah requires of them in these areas. There are many halakhot to learn. To pick just one off-the-beaten-path area, there are halakhot governing how one should behave when eating with others. For example, "One may not look into the face of one who is eating or at his portion, so as not to embarrass him" (*Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 70, 4). Or, "One should not bite into a piece of bread and place it on the table [for it may disgust others at the table]" (Ibid., No. 10, and *Be'er Heitev* there). If we are to fulfill the halakhot we must learn them.

Focus on Behavior

To guide behavior, we must consider at the following:

HABITS. We need to develop habits for proper, civilized behavior, for good *midot* and *derekh erets*.

CONTROLS. We should institute a high level of controls at home and in school against behavior lacking in *midot* and *derekh erets*.

SELF-CONTROL. We aim to develop of the capacity for self-control.

To train and guide our children in the ways of *mitzvot bein adam leHaveiro*, of *derekh erets* and *midot,* it is important to create and institute some rules in the home and in our schools to safeguard and to promote these ways. Thus, in the home, basic (even if seemingly old-fashioned) rules of respectful behavior toward one's elders should be stated and adhered to. This might entail having even the youngest child get used to waiting his or her turn in getting *kiddush* wine or *hallah* at the Shabbat table. The youngster will at first naturally protest, but if calmed by his mother and told "soon, soon, everybody in turn," he or she will get used to it, accept it, and eventually even understand it. The child will thus learn a lesson in *derekh erets* for those older than him or herself. More importantly, the child will learn a lesson in self-control and delayed gratification, probably one of the most important prerequisites for moral behavior.[11] Rules in the house about avoiding fights, about sharing, about helping out with the housekeeping are more than important, they are essential. Parents should demonstrate polite behavior, explain the rationale for such behavior, and tell their children that they expect them to emulate such behavior. Thus, they should learn to hold doors open for others, not to push or cut in front of others in a line, to give their seats up to those older than them or to people with disabilities, and to rise in respect of their teachers, rabbis, other dignitaries, or the aged. Children need to learn through doing, to show respect to others, that they may not abuse others, that they are not entitled to everything they receive. Instead, they should feel thankful for what they receive. They need to appreciate that others (including their mothers) are not there to serve them, and that they should not expect others to clean up after them.[12] These lessons need to be taught gradually and at age-appropriate levels, but they should not be delayed or forgotten.

Additionally, families must deal with this subset of behaviors and with infractions in these areas as they would with any behavior: with expressed

approval and positive reinforcement for adherence to these rules. And, for infractions, families must react with understanding, with explanations for why what the child did was wrong, with guidance as to how the child might correct that wrong, and with negative consequences, if necessary.

Schools also need to foster polite and kind behavior in their students toward their elders and their peers. Schools should be watchful for the negative effects of bullying and cliques. A school that is oblivious to such phenomena creates much immediate damage to the victims of such exclusion and discrimination—but also much long-term damage to the perpetrators of bullying and excluding others. These students will grow up with a lack of *midot* and *derekh erets*, sorry human beings with only a shell of their Jewishness connected to the Torah they are learning. Schools have even broader reasons for smothering negative behavior. Schools are communities. They develop cultures. When a culture of aggression, of cliquishness and of exclusion is permitted to develop in one generation of a school's students, it tends to be transmitted to the next generation of incoming students and becomes harder to eradicate with each incoming freshman class that is welcomed by a negative culture. It is the responsibility of the school administration and its faculty to create a welcoming *midot*-friendly culture. This they can do by their example, but also by how they react or fail to react to infractions of *midot* and *derekh erets*. If they react with greater strength to an infraction of a school rule than they do to a child being taunted by another they are sending a clear and potent negative message. If a school is to foster a culture of *midot* and *derekh erets* it must institute and implement clear guidelines for positive behavior and clear controls against negative behavior. These will set the tone. The controls instituted by the school for proper behavior, if properly taught, and fairly and consistently implemented, will eventually be adopted by their students and become the bedrock of their self-control in these areas.

Naturally Endowed Traits: Temperament and Intelligence

Parents and teachers need to be aware of individual differences among children and take these differences into account. Children with difficult temperaments may have greater difficulties with self-control and with delayed gratification. However, they can learn with greater consistency, with more patience, and with greater degrees of understanding. We dare

not declare them to be incorrigible just because they require more from us. Children with difficult temperaments or different learning abilities may need more patience and more explanation, but in the end, they can understand.

Hazal in the Mekhilta (*Shemot* 19:3) tell us that Moshe Rabbeinu was told to convey the commandments to the Israelite women with an *amira raka,* a "soft tone." (in contrast to the harsher tone that was to be used with the men). This "soft tone" did not, however, turn the commandments into suggestions or requests. The fact that women are obligated in mitzvoth and are subject to the same strictures and punishments for transgressing them as men are, demonstrates that they are still commandments. What then does a "soft tone" mean? The Malbim (*Vayikra* 1:3) explains that a "soft tone" means speaking with more elaboration and explanation. Some of our children require this. All are entitled to it. But again, with all of them, our rules for proper behavior must remain just that, firm rules.

Summary and Conclusion

Children need to be brought up at home in a cradle of respect and value for the *tselem Elokim* in all human beings. They need to be surrounded by positive role models and provided with experiences in which to learn empathy and develop sensitivity to other people's feelings. Subsequently, in school, and continually at home, they need to be taught to understand, love, respect, and follow God's law, both where it governs mitzvoth between humans and God and where it governs interactions between human beings. Such children will develop *midot* and *derekh erets*. A lesser program might seem easier, but it will hardly do the job.

NOTES

1. This anecdote appeared in a *Jewish Observer* article by Lipa Goldwerth in a slightly different version. I write it as I heard it from Rav Gifter *zt"l*.
2. Not many programs that I am aware of engage the children and expose them to reading about, hearing about, or experiencing, the suffering and deplorable life conditions of those they should help, or of those they may be hurting, except for a few stories in which children hurt by schoolyard taunts attempt suicide or leave the fold. These stories, told mostly to teachers, and only sometimes to children, are so embellished with miraculous coincidences and hallowed as examples of Divine intervention, that they end up being taken as apocryphal, with their immediate message being lost.
3. Fried, Aharon H. "Is There a Disconnect between Torah Learning and Torah Living: A Focus on *Midot*." *Hakirah* Vol. 6, 2008.
4. Baumeister, R.F., and Leary. "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation." *Psychological Bulletin*, 117, 1995, pp. 497–529.
5. Baumeister, R.F. "Guilt: An Interpersonal Approach." *Psychological Bulletin* 115:2, March 1994, Vol. 115, No. 2, pp. 243–267.
6. All too often, the Orthodox Jewish child receives messages from the rest of the world to the contrary.
7. There are some excellent programs for emotional education that could benefit our children. One that I have successfully used in schools and would recommend to our schools is *Thinking, Feeling, Behaving: An Emotional Education Curriculum for Children* (Vol. 1) & *Adolescents* (Volume 2) by Ann Vernon (Champaign, IL: Research Press).
8. Haidt, Jonathan. "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment." *Psychological Review* 108:4, 2001 Volume 108 No. 4 , pp. 814–834.
9. The Rambam in *Shemona Perakim* writes that although having a visceral distaste for pork is unnecessary and perhaps even wrong-minded, having a visceral distaste for hurting others, stealing, and the like, is an imperative. Unfortunately, we have inverted this value. Another area in which our reactions as educators have gone topsy-turvy is how we react to children's misbehaviors. Thus although there is a halakhic position that holds that children who are not yet of the age in which they are obligated in mitzvoth need not be stopped from eating non-kosher food by anyone other than their parents (who have an obligation of Hinukh), we would all rush to stop the child. We would not necessarily do so, when we see a child hurting another. "Boys will be boys," we say. The Rambam followed by the *Shulhan Arukh* rules that when it comes to mitzvoth between people, a Bet Din, as an agent of the community, is obligated to stop a minor from engaging in acts that are harmful to others. However, a Bet Din is not responsible for a minor's behavior regarding mitzvoth between humans and God (*Kesef Mishna* Perek 1, Halakha 10, Hilkhot Geneva).

10. There is a tendency in some circles, in search of "purity of motive," to teach students that mitzvoth such as tsedaka should be done, not out of mercy for the poor. That, they suggest, would be serving one's own emotional needs and soothing one's conscience. Rather, they argue that tsedaka should be performed only because it is God's will. I would suggest that the intended message of the rabbis who write in this vein is not that we do mitzvoth without emotion, but rather that we remember to connect the emotions involved to God. As Hazal tell us, "Just as God is merciful, so should you be merciful."
11. Lest we give the older children an unhealthy sense of domination, in our family we instituted a rule that in certain things the "pecking order" reversed. Thus when it came to giving out ice cream, the youngest got first, then the older ones, with the adults served last. Thus, each end of the family got practice at waiting their turn.
12. Based on the halakha that one may not disgust others at the table (mentioned above), Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach insisted always on taking his own plate off the table and cleaning its remains into the garbage can, lest it disgust others. (Noeh, Eliyahu, *Sefer Hiku Mamtakim* Vol. I, pg. 239, Jerusalem, 2008, p. 239). This is a practice and attitude that parents would be well advised to instill in their children at an early age.

Expanding Our Religious Vocabulary

David Bigman

(Rav Bigman is Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Maale Gilboa.)

The work of educators in Day Schools is not to be underestimated. The dedicated men and women who work with adolescents are especially worthy of our appreciation. The volatile years of adolescence, times full of excitement and turmoil, present our youth with many challenges—but also harbor tremendous potential for personal growth.

Several factors tend to inhibit the realization of the potential of these formative years. With almost exclusive emphasis on measurable academic achievements, the formal setting of the classroom provides a rather poor setting for fostering inquisitive minds and searching souls. Even the most committed, diligent, and talented educator will find it hard to overcome the disadvantages inherent in the system. He or she is often forced by circumstances to neglect fostering the personal growth of the student as a human being and as a learning and practicing Jew. We should consider seriously revamping our academic goals and significantly changing the structure of our schools. The purpose of this article is to suggest one substantial change in our curriculum that can enrich our students and better equip them for the future.

In my experience, one of the most prominent features of the graduates of Orthodox schools is a lack of sophistication in their religious language. Even the most intelligent student, who has already mastered the rudiments of a liberal arts education, who reads diligently and enthusiastically, is often deprived of any depth or breadth in his or her thoughts relating to God and God's relationship with humanity. Although students' concepts about these issues remain undeveloped, these same students are

expected to deal with a wealth of secular knowledge while being bombarded by criticism of religion. By the time they finish high school, these students quite often have reached the conclusion that religious thought is a sham, and religious experience is, at best, a pleasant illusion. This problem can be alleviated quite easily—although some our educators need some aid in making the transition.

Maimonides expressed criticism of biblical imagery eloquently and at great length in the *Guide of the Perplexed* and concisely in his *Mishne Torah*. He was so successful in "cleansing Judaism of vestiges of idolatry" that his approach is viewed by many as the final word on this topic. Maimonides' interpretation of all anthropomorphic expressions as metaphoric is so obvious to some, that the portion of the *Guide* that deals with this issue seems to be superfluous, even boring. Yet even one with the most rudimentary knowledge of Jewish Thought after Maimonides will understand that although Maimonides' work was extremely influential, it must be viewed as an opening remark in a multi-generational debate. One important focal point is haRav Shneur Zalman of Ladi's criticism of the concept of "negative appellations." He states that even this approach smacks of "reverse anthropomorphism" since God is viewed as the negative of our selves. The discussion has become especially vibrant in the last hundred years. From haRav Kook to Emanuel Levinas, thinkers have dealt with the issue of theological language in very compelling ways. The criticism of such language by Wittgenstein created a great wake of reactions even in the Torah world. Professor Yeshayahu Leibovitz and haRav Professor Eliezar Goldman became exponents of extreme interpretations of Maimonides' approach.

For high-school students, the issue of religious language is essential. At the turn of the last century, haRav Kook already noticed that the pioneers of the "Second Aliyah" were heretical vis-à-vis the image of God that remained in their mind from the formative years of the *heder*. Beyond the question of belief lurks the question of religious experience. Religious language affects our ability to interpret universal human experiences in a significant and meaningful fashion—and may add important dimensions to our existence. It is likely that the development of rich and diversified religious vocabulary is a necessary condition for the advent of more intensive explicit experiences. Beyond this, it could be posited that sophisticated religious language actually may be instrumental in the formation of spiritual experience.

Programmatically, the following introduction may be useful to both educators and students to understand where we stand—and to suggest what path we may take to enrich our lives and energize our commitment. At this point in the progression of Jewish Thought, it is inappropriate to be judgmental or apologetic about any particular imagery. For those who have "Maimonidian" sensitivities, I would suggest using the format used by the mentors of the Mussar Movement. When using biblical imagery, they would simply add the words, "so to speak." In my mind, even the rationalist approach is a form of human imagery for "silence is your praise." The simple analysis suggested uses three distinct models to delineate the basic imagery employed in Jewish Thought and liturgy up to, but not including, the novel thoughts of Professor Emanuel Levinas. As in all analysis using models as their format, none of these models represents any particular opinion that was expressed historically. They are extreme constructs and lack sophistication, yet I have found that they function as a very useful map as students find their way through our sources and their own experiences.

Biblical Imagery

- God is an omniscient and eternal persona who created the world by decree and intervenes in history when so desired.
- God watches over creation, administering justice.
- God is capable of great wrath, "foaming at the nostrils," and even greater compassion, "hearing their cries."
- God is susceptible to argument and prayer.
- The imagery of God is vivid, extremely anthropomorphic—and even includes descriptions of God's thoughts and changes of heart.

Rationalist Imagery

- God is the prime mover—an entity beyond our comprehension.
- God is an incorporeal "being," complete and never moved.
- The dichotomy between Creator and creation of Tanakh is reaffirmed and enhanced.

- Theism approaches Deism.
- Divine providence, God's administration of justice and retribution, the significance of prayer, the appearance of angels, and even revelation are topics that deserve and receive special attention in this approach as they seem to contradict its premises.

Mystical Imagery

- God is both transcendent and imminent. Although God is beyond human conception, God's essence permeates the comos.
- The dichotomy between Creator and creation of Tanakh is broken; Creation is not only a moment in time, but is in some sense an ongoing process.
- Beyond the historical influences on this imagery mystical experiences nourish these thoughts.
- In peak experiences mystics lose their sense of self and become absorbed in the unity of all being. This experience is interpreted as a reflection of the Divine within the material world.

Although these models of talking about God seem mutually exclusive, the approaches in our literature often use them simultaneously. The way these thoughts are combined often creates intriguing results. The models suggested can help us analyze sophisticated religious language used by great thinkers in our tradition.

In our schools and synagogues, biblical and rationalist language are often used simultaneously in very simplistic ways, yet intertwined beyond recognition. Ideas used together seem to contradict one another. Intelligent students are confused. Some blame their confusion on the Torah. Sloppy thought seems to prove that religion is only "opium for the masses." Questions on a particular mode are often confused with questions on the essence of Torah and the halakhic lifestyle.

Very often, systematic justice administered by a "transcendent being" of the rationalist model by some created mechanism is somehow tied to very personal biblical imagery. This is prominent in students' minds and can create an impasse. Although they have many experiences that would

be interpreted directly as meaningful meetings of humans with their Creator, these experiences are not recognized as such. The religious language of the student is too narrow to encompass spiritual experience. Since each set of imagery—biblical, rationalist, and mystical—expresses and nourishes distinctly different religious experiences, some students are left empty handed. They have yet to feel the presence of God in the biblical sense—but they have no words or ways to conceive of God in any other sense. Some feel the presence of God in their lives, but are convinced that their feelings are silly, since their conception of God does not fit the lofty being of the rationalist mode. The rationalist mode and the mystical mode tend to contradict biblical imagery in the mind—and even more so in the heart. Some students manage to live in a dichotomous world. As a brilliant student once told me: "Although I find Maimonides' approach in the *Guide* very convincing, I live my life with the distinct feeling that God is holding my hand." Another student commented: "Fortunately, I forget the *Guide* when I pray!"

It is my conviction that more students may remain devout if we enrich their religious language. It is important to note that mystical imagery is very potent for open-minded yeshiva students. Visiting a museum, listening to a concert, reading about the discoveries of contemporary physics, or seeing the smile of a child can be interpreted religiously in all three models. If students acquire a language of transcendence their lives, they may experience these activities as pivotal to the meaning of their lives.

Steal This Book: Jewish Literature in the Yeshiva World

Ezra Cappell

(Dr. Ezra Cappell is Associate Professor of English and Director of the Inter-American Jewish Studies Program at the University of Texas at El Paso. He has published numerous articles on American and Jewish American writing, and he is the author of the critically-acclaimed book, American Talmud: The Cultural Work of Jewish American Fiction.*)*

> "I tell you, all the madness of the human race is in the sanctification of that book. Everything going wrong with this country is in the first five books of the Old Testament. Smite the enemy, sacrifice your son, the desert is yours and nobody else's all the way to the Euphrates. A body count of dead Philistines on every other page—that's the wisdom of their wonderful Torah." (Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, p. 75)

As a yeshiva boy in Forest Hills, New York in the 1980s (this was at Ohr Torah Institute—otherwise known as "the Institution," as in *house of detention*), the closest thing to a Jewish American novel we were ever required to read were the aggadic sections of rabbinic fantasy we occasionally studied in Talmud class. It should be mentioned, however, that the rabbis almost always skipped over these "story" passages as unimportant. We routinely turned the Talmud page when we came upon what my ninth-grade rebbe called "these worthless passages," and jumped headlong into the text's *pilpul* and halakhic discussion of a gored ox or a disputed *tallit*.

Growing up in Cedarhurst, Long Island, in the 1970s and 1980s as an "*aynekel* of the Modzitzer" was a strange and heady experience. Every winter we would get in my father's beat-up car and drive all the way to Brooklyn, to a *shteibel* in Flatbush where, as the only non-black-hatted Hassid in the room, I would be rewarded by being seated between my grandfather and the current Modzitzer Rebbe. I would listen with rapt attention as my grandfather's cousin, Ben Zion Shenker, sang the beautiful and haunting *niggunim* of my great, great grandfather, Rabbi Yisrael Taub of Modzitz. Each *niggun* came with a story that my grandfather would whisper into my ear as the hundreds of loyal Hassidim swayed to the mournful strains of Ben Zion's voice; I heard history, both his and mine, unfold in each note. One *niggun*, called a "song of the homeless," was written in response to the thousands of refugees streaming through the Modzitzer's *shtetl* in the aftermath of World War I. Another terrifyingly beautiful *niggun* was penned while the Rebbe (my grandfather's grandfather) had his right leg amputated. The song, which is sung only twice a year, once at the *yahrzeit* of the Rebbe and again during the *Ne'ilah* service on Yom Kippur, is a gentle reminder to God pleading with him not to forsake his people during their times of sorrow.

Needless to say, our family never *davened* at a Young Israel; my father managed to find the one shabby *shteibel* in all of Long Island—and he made fast work to move the family directly across the street from *Congregation Beis Medrash*—an insider's joke of an appropriate name for a Long Island synagogue—a *shul* without a pool (but, with plenty of Vilna *shases* for consolation). My father must have believed that proximity to a real honest-to-goodness bearded Rebbe, one who strolled down Central Avenue wearing a *shtreimel* and *kapotah* no less, would somehow keep me from losing my Modzitzer bearings. As it turns out—he couldn't have been more right.

Shabbos in our home not only meant traditional Jewish foods: challah for *motzi*, thick Malaga wine for *kiddush*, gefilte fish and chrain, but, as importantly, it also meant a new hands-breadth of Jewish American fiction—my reading for the coming week. Once the last strains of *benching* were sung, my father would wordlessly rise from the table and quietly descend the steep basement steps and disappear, sometimes for a half an hour or more. When he came back up to us all, his arms would be filled with dusty old paperbacks of Jewish American novels—his old yellowing

musty texts from his youth growing up in Kingsbridge in the Bronx, the second son of Holocaust survivors. Other texts he had culled as an English major up in the Harlem hills of City College, that "poor man's Harvard" of the mid-1960s.

From my father's overflowing arms, I first discovered my life as a Jew in Long Island—these books spoke far more powerfully and poignantly to me than the *pilpul* sections of *Gemara* we labored over each morning in yeshiva. From Bernard Malamud's poor shopkeepers and decrepit grocery stores, I learned deep in my soul what *rachmones* meant and the difference mercy could make in poor people's lives; Saul Bellow's thwarted intellectuals warned me of the perils of only living in one's own head, Herzog-like, as so many of my genius relatives had done and were still doing in the new world; from Philip Roth's angry bar-mitzvah boys or quisling army privates and jaded upper-class Jewish WASP wannabes, I saw transcribed in print the vain material strivings that I witnessed from a back-row seat each week at Rabbi Speigel's Long Island *shteibel*—where the yearly celebration of the glory of the ancient Torah included the selling of *atah hareta* to the highest bidder; or where each *Shabbos aliyah* in the *layning* was an opportunity to get someone to donate twice *hai*—every prayer it seemed was an opportunity not to draw closer to God, but an occasion to pander to the wealthy patrons seated comfortably at the *shteibel's* front table. Through these many Jewish American writers whom my father bequeathed to me, I discovered the meaning of commitment to a Jewish world of ideas and ideals: *tsedakah*—charity, *gemilut hassadim*—acts of lovingkindness; with each new novel devoured by the fading light of my mother's *Shabbos* candles, I learned deeply Rabbi Akiva's message: *veAhavta leRaiakha kamokha*, love your neighbor as yourself.

Shalom Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, Mendele Mokher Seforim, Franz Kafka, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Israel Joshua Singer, Chaim Grade, Edward Lewis Wallant, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Cynthia Ozick—each Friday night I would turn to these brilliant writers and learn again what it meant to be a Jew: torn, conflicted, angry, compassionate, loving, argumentative, generous. My weekly reading expanded my understanding not just of what my grandparents had gone through in Europe, but what I might at some time be required to do, think and believe as a Jewish man in the not too distant future—a future that, as I got older, seemed rapidly to be approaching the present.

Needless to say, during all my time being schooled in yeshiva—thirteen years to be exact, I was never once asked to read or reflect on a single work of Jewish American fiction. I suppose we once read Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*—sneaked into our tenth-grade world drama curriculum by Mr. Joseph Cohen, a lovely man who walked with a distinct limp, his left knee having been shattered when, as a young boy, a horse from a Lower East Side ice truck kicked him as he tried to pilfer something cold to suck on during a particularly sweltering August day on Avenue C.

So what gives? Why is Jewish American fiction not taught in the yeshiva world? Is it fear of ridicule? Fear of allowing young, impressionable minds to be influenced by secular (read: *treyf*) thinkers? More importantly should this literature be taught in the yeshiva world or in the hundreds of Jewish Day Schools across America?

Many of the rabbis I studied under in yeshiva would dismiss such books as *shtuss*—nonsense that would lead to *bitul z'man*, a frivolous waste of time. Worse, many would label this glorious literary heritage as *apikorsus*—heretical teachings, forbidden to read let alone to savor and enjoy. Which begs the question: Why *should* Jewish American fiction be taught in the yeshiva world?

II

In her recent biography of the greatest of all Jewish philosophers, *Betraying Spinoza: The Renegade Jew Who Gave Us Modernity*, Rebecca Goldstein tells of the ways that she was discouraged in her *Bais Yaakov* yeshiva to even say Spinoza's name—let alone be permitted to study his philosophical treatise, *The Ethics*. This would not only be *bitul Torah*, but it would be heretical as well, giving the girls illicit ideas not conducive to marrying a good yeshiva *bochur*.

Much like Goldstein's grim *Bais Yaakov* experience a generation earlier, from the many rebbes I came across in my years of yeshiva in New York, I was told time and again that it would be better to sit in a room and do nothing than to waste my time filling my head with illicit ideas from that self-hating Jew, Philip Roth. One rabbi at OTI, a man who was also the English Studies Principal (I kid you not) at the major Satmar yeshiva in Brooklyn, became so enraged upon seeing me reading Philip Roth's lat-

est offering, *The Counterlife*, he knocked the book out of my hand grabbed me by my shirt and, shaking me violently, screamed: "Cappell—you should at least read Shakespeare or the Greek myths—there is true poetry, not this filthy garbage from a self-hating Jew! If you keep reading Roth, what will your children know about Judaism?"

Not that there wasn't a library in our modified office building on 108th Street that served us hundred and twenty Jewish boys as The Cohen Educational Center. There was, in fact, perched high on the top floor in a dark corner of the building a large steel door with the word "LIBRARY" scratched into the industrial paint. During my four years at the school, I cannot recall ever seeing that door open. When we literary-minded *talmidim* complained to the administration, we were told that in theory they supported the idea of a library hour once or twice a week, but the problem was they had no funding for a librarian—hence the room remained dark and sealed.

One morning while we were studying a particularly difficult talmudic passage dealing with the numerous issues of *shehitah* (ritual slaughter), our tenth-grade rebbe, being a top-flight educator, the type of teacher who was up on the very latest pedagogical techniques, filed us into the library, which unbeknownst to most of the boys, contained a TV *and* a VCR. The idea was for us to watch a rather gory video of a *schoichet* wrestling with a large animal. I vividly recall a recalcitrant goat being the star of this particular after-school special; I will also never forget my classmate David getting ill and vomiting all over the library floor when the *schoichet*, after explaining to his video audience the sharpness of his knife, quickly pulled his prized implement across the goat's throat. Just as a stream of hot, steaming blood shot forth so did David's lunch fly across the library floor. During all of the excitement with the vomit, my good friend Ari swiped the Rabbi's keys and quickly ran down the street to Queens Boulevard and bribing the bemused Israeli locksmith who at first (before Ari handed him a folded $20 bill) pretended to be outraged at the request, refusing to copy the official school keys which were clearly marked "DO NOT COPY." Of course, with the $20 in his pocket he did make copies of all of the yeshiva keys. Now after the *shehitah* video was over most of the boys were interested in the office keys (grade changing and other assorted mischief). But Cal, Jonathan, Shlomo, and I had other plans: we had our eyes on that shiny brand-new brass library door key.

And so began our "Rescue a Book" program from the shuttered OTI library. My friends and I would at opportune moments, while one of us acted as the lookout down the hall, sneak into the dank dark corner of the library and with just a dim natural light filtering in from the street, quickly scan the dusty shelves for books worth reading. At first we made random selections: Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. As we got more bold in the dark library (an old 6 Volt flashlight helped with our courage), more thought went into the process: we systematically went through the Russian masters (a shelf not too far from the door should a quick exit be required): Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and my favorite from this lot—Nikolai Gogol. We soon worked out a system: the actual book thief (borrower) would get first dibs before passing the book(s) around our small literary club. When we were all done reading the person going in for the next book would return the previous book. We even voted Shlomo as our first underground librarian, tasked with keeping track of who had which rescued book.

Back from the Riverdale days of "The Institute"—when it had a top-flight educational program founded by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin (before he abandoned the education of New York's finest young minds in deference to the settler movement in Efrat, Israel), the library had a focus on great works of European literature. There was even a large section with French titles. Of course we, the young men of the 1980s Queens version of OTI were, amazingly, not offered any foreign language instruction: not French, not Spanish, nothing. When it became apparent to the upper administration of OTI that we needed a foreign language exam to obtain a New York State High School Diploma with the Regent's Seal of Approval, our rather enterprising principal came up with the solution that the entire yeshiva should study Hebrew language one hour a week during the rebbes' lunch hour. This way we could pass the Regents and help our Talmud and Mishnah study at the same time—thereby avoiding yet one more hour of "wasted time."

One afternoon as I was looking through the French section of the library, picking up a copy of Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, I noticed a misshelved book among the French classics. There staring up at me from behind the pale glow of my flashlight was the impish grin of a man. I flipped the book over to discover a beat-up first edition of *The Adventures of Augie March* (as the dust-jacket proclaimed—by the author of *Dangling*

Man and *The Victim*). I grabbed the two volumes: Bellow and Stendhal, and quickly made my way back down the hall. It sounded more like a kid's book (certainly in comparison to *Crime and Punishment*), but I opened the first page and began to read aloud quietly to myself in the near darkness:

> I am an American, Chicago born—Chicago, that somber city—and go at things as I have taught myself, free-style, and will make the record in my own way: first to knock, first admitted; sometimes an innocent knock, sometimes a not so innocent. But a man's character is his fate, says Heraclitus, and in the end there isn't any way to disguise the nature of the knocks by acoustical work on the door or gloving the knuckles. (Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*, p. 3)

And I was hooked.

III

I began this essay with a quotation from *The Counterlife*, one of Philip Roth's most important novels. Taken at face value, it seems like a rather angry and one-sided attack on ancient and holy Jewish texts. Why would any yeshiva or Jewish Day School principal want his or her students to study a text that contains such seemingly hateful words and ideas? Well, of course, one could find just as hateful ideas (taken out of context) in that (recently) much-maligned Hebrew Bible itself. After all, "an eye for an eye," sounds pretty scary and hateful as well—that is *without* interpretation. Once we understand that the Torah is speaking of the value of labor lost through blindness we can begin to see the wisdom and morality of this ancient biblical passage. No yeshiva principal or rebbe worthy of the title would suggest that his or her students should go study the Torah without commentators such as Rashi or the Rambam. So too one must delve more deeply into Philip Roth's novel before we may interpret his work. This isolated quotation, while extremely provocative, does no justice to the larger aims and deep moral underpinnings of each of Roth's novels. Without interpretation of the Torah we could easily end up like Karaites sitting in the dark all *Shabbos* long, afraid to turn right or left. Similarly, without any critical understanding of Philip Roth, many religious leaders over the years labeled Roth as a self-hating Jew.

The truth about Roth, as well as about the many dozens of brilliant contemporary Jewish American writers, could not be further from this

idea of self-hatred. Writers like Roth, those who have been satirizing the exploits of their Jewish American characters for decades, are actually the self-appointed guardians of the morals and values of the very culture they may be skewering in their fictional portrayal. Philip Roth never denigrates Judaism in *The Counterlife* or in any of the other thirty or so novels he has written in the past fifty years. Instead, he is attempting to push American Judaism (and America for that matter) toward a more perfect union of study and pragmatism, idea and ideal.

In this quotation from *The Counterlife,* the speaker is one of Roth's most amusing characters, an Israeli journalist named Shuki Elchanan, who in this scene is goading his old friend, Philip Roth's alter-ego Nathan Zuckerman. They are out at dinner, discussing the current difficulties of Israeli politics, when his anger and frustration comes to a boil:

> "I tell you, all the madness of the human race is in the sanctification of that book. Everything going wrong with this country is in the first five books of the Old Testament. Smite the enemy, sacrifice your son, the desert is yours and nobody else's all the way to the Euphrates. A body count of dead Philistines on every other page—that's the wisdom of their wonderful Torah." (Philip Roth, *The Counterlife*, p. 75)

In this scene, Zuckerman and Shuki are discussing the dangerous right-wing leader of the Israeli settler movement, Mordecai Lippman—a man who perverts the Torah to bolster his message of hate and fury. More than likely, Roth modeled Lippman on Rabbi Meir Kahane, whose real-life party "Kach," was first listed as a terrorist organization back in 1994 (as well as their splinter group, "Kahane Chai," which is still labeled to this day as a terrorist organization by Israel). A short while after this conversation with Zuckerman, Shuki corrects these distorted ideas in a heartfelt letter to Zuckerman in which he explains that he doesn't want to be misunderstood—nor does he want Zuckerman to mistake the zealots of the settler movement for the majority of peace-loving Israelis. (Lippman espouses a platform of fear and hatred: "There is nothing the American goy would like better than a *Judenrein* United States. . . ."[p. 124].) Shuki explains in his letter to Zuckerman that he is on edge because his son, a musical prodigy who has been given an opportunity to study under the tutelage of Daniel Barenboim in New York City, would rather do his military service than continue his studies in New York. The reader of Roth's novel soon learns that Shuki is really quite a dedicated father who loves

the Jewish State and loves being a Jew. We also hear from his father, a Holocaust survivor, now a welder in Israel, who pleads with Zukerman to make *aliyah*. That drunken rant against Israel and the Hebrew Bible is in fact a manifestation of Shuki's frustration with the horrors of war and the many hatreds unleashed by the Middle East conflict. Shuki, we discover, is a veteran of the Yom Kippur War, where

> he'd lost his hearing in one ear and most of the sight in one eye when an exploding Egyptian shell threw him fifteen feet from his position. His brother, a reserve paratroop officer, who in civilian life had been [an] architect, was taken prisoner when the Golan Heights were overrun. After the Syrian retreat, they found him and the rest of his captured platoon with their hands tied behind them to stakes in the ground; they had been castrated, decapitated, and their penises stuffed in their mouths. Strewn around the abandoned battlefield were necklaces made of their ears. (p. 63)

After all this fighting and horror, Shuki is tired of warfare and tired of people who, like Lippman, believe that they have God on their side and therefore *all* of the answers. In fact, having witnessed numerous atrocities committed on both sides of the conflict, as these disturbing passages demonstrate, Shuki remains somewhat shell-shocked by his experiences.

What Roth gives his readers in *The Counterlife* (and in each and every one of his novels) is a complex view of a multi-faceted religion and culture. There are no easy answers in *The Counterlife;* like the best literature, it offers us difficult questions we must contemplate alone and communally. Do not Jewish schools and yeshivas owe it to their students to present complex thinking on the many complications of Jewish life in America and Israel? Do yeshiva principals think that by barring these discussions from the *Beis Medrash* and the yeshiva classrooms that their *talmidim* do not know of the existence of alternate perspectives, varied identities, shifting levels of religious observance to Judaism and a "Torah-true" life? Do these same rebbes and principals not know of the high attrition rate of students who have been denied opportunities to discuss the complexities of individual faith and understanding of our tradition? How many of these students had Roth novels (or, like Rebecca Goldstein in her yeshiva experience being denied Spinoza's *Ethics* . . .) knocked out of their hands? How many of these students who were frustrated in their attempts to gain a deeper more meaningful individualistic understanding of Judaism are no longer affiliated with the faith or no longer consider themselves "practic-

ing" Jews? How many of these thoughtful students are now "off the *derekh*"?

IV

At the end of one of Saul Bellow's most important stories titled "Something to Remember Me By," the narrator—now an old man preparing for his own death, but barely sixteen years old in the frame of the story—is trying to prepare himself for the imminent death of his mother, a woman who has suffered for many months from cancer and who is in the midst of the very last throes of her disease. After several misadventures in the frigid cold of a Midwestern storm, the narrator has been robbed of his sheepskin overcoat; he knows he must return home, where his furious and often violent father awaits him. These are the boy's thoughts as he rides on the Chicago streetcar home:

> If my father should catch me I could expect hard blows on my shoulders, on the top of my head, on my face. But if my mother had, tonight, just died, he wouldn't hit me.
>
> This was when the measured, reassuring, sleep-inducing turntable of days became a whirlpool, a vortex darkening toward the bottom. I had had only the anonymous pages in the pocket of my lost sheepskin to interpret it to me. They told me that the truth of the universe was inscribed into our very bones. That the human skeleton was itself a hieroglyph. That everything we had ever known on earth was shown to us in the first days after death. That our experience of the world was desired by the cosmos, and needed by it for its own renewal. (Bellow, *Collected Stories*, p. 436)

The boy gets off at the North Avenue stop and that is when Saul Bellow's pithy *drash* on Jewish mourning rituals begins:

> I got down on the North Avenue stop, avoiding my reflection in the shop-windows. After a death, mirrors were immediately covered. I can't say what this pious superstition means. Will the soul of your dead be reflected in a looking glass, or is this custom a check to the vanity of the living? (p. 437)

A cynical reader might say, "Why should yeshiva students have to put up with this angry dismissal of an important *shiva* ritual?" After all, Bellow's narrator dismisses this *minhag*, or custom, as "pious superstition." Yet the narrator's next two questions suggest a far more nuanced

appraisal of this custom. In fact, Bellow himself is not at all dismissive of these Jewish rituals. "A check on vanity of the living"—this is in fact a brilliant interpretation of this mysterious ritual of uncertain origin. More importantly, Bellow's entire story is focused on key ideas of Judaism and our relationship with this tradition: how to honor one's dead parents and what is bequeathed from one generation to the next.

V

Why study Jewish American literature in the yeshiva classroom? Because without it we have a very limited idea of the varieties of Jewish life in America. We cannot hide from the difficult questions Jewish writers in America ask of our community no more than we can fend off the many barbed critiques that much twentieth-century and contemporary Jewish American literature presents to an early twenty-first-century practicing "Torah Jew." Nor should we. Any serious appraisal of Jewish life in America (the aim of a yeshiva education?) would be incomplete without these varied Jewish American voices weighing in. We as a community need to contend with these key ideas. So whether stolen by its students or willingly given, this body of imaginative work created by Jews in America during the past century of experimentation on these shores desperately needs to be contemplated. I have often thought that it is a yeshiva audience, those readers classically trained in the traditional Jewish texts and culture, who truly have the knowledge to "unpack" all of the hidden meanings contained in Jewish American writing and who constitute the ideal readers for Jewish American fiction writers. How sad that this perfect audience has, with an angry flick of the hand (*Shtuss!*), so often rejected this body of post-rabbinic literature, work that might be thought of as a complex commentary on traditional Jewish sources: the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud.

VI

Many of the new Jewish American writers are former yeshiva students formally schooled in Torah and mitzvoth: Allegra Goodman, Tova Mirvis, Gary Shteyngart, Shalom Auslander. Yet many of these former yeshiva students seem to use their hard-earned knowledge of Judaism as fodder for

satire and ridicule. Early on in Gary Shteyngart's funny and culturally vital 2006 novel *Absurdistan*, his protagonist Misha Vainberg, a recent immigrant from Russia, is maimed in a botched adult circumcision by a group of Hassidim in Brooklyn. Late in the novel, Misha is traveling on an airplane when he spots a large Hassid sitting in first-class getting into an argument and acting rudely to a flight attendant. He enters into the first-class cabin and begins shouting at the Hassid: "Beware of their *mitzvah* mobiles, fellow Jews among you. Beware of circumcision late in life. Beware of easy faith…" (p. 109). Similarly, Shalom Auslander puts his knowledge of yeshiva to work in almost each of his stories collected in his 2005 book *Beware of God*. In "The War of the Bernsteins," the eponymous character becomes so obsessed with the mathematics and mechanisms of Jewish reward and punishment that he spends most of his waking hours calculating the number of negative commandments versus the positive mitzvoth—missing the spirit of the Torah in the process and completely ignoring and alienating his young wife, who eventually divorces him:

> The spiritual mathematics consumed him.
>
> Was obeying a negative prohibition worth the same amount of reward in the World to Come as fulfilling a positive commandment? Would the inaction of negative prohibitions really be as rewarded as the deliberate action of positive commandments? (p. 3)

Of course, all of Bernstein's anti-social behaviors are actively encouraged by his rabbis who think of his increasing concern with mitzvoth as a positive sign of his becoming a much better Jew—a true "master of repentance." Perhaps no contemporary Jewish American writer better exemplifies the need to study this literature in the yeshiva than Shalom Auslander. While his writing is uproariously funny—it is also a wry commentary on the importance of not losing track of the true meaning of the Torah as a way of living a life filled with meaning and concern for our fellow human beings. The Torah is not a ledger sheet of virtues and demerits. Auslander's stories point out the shortcomings of a yeshiva education that does not focus on how all this Torah observance should strive to make better human beings.

Reading Auslander's stories brings me back to some of the more unsavory aspects of my own yeshiva background. At Ohr Torah Institute the rabbis would greet us in the morning with a big bear hug combined with a back

rub. What was the purpose of this morning ritual? Had the rabbis missed us so much since the previous afternoon? Was this a true emotional exchange between *rebbe* and *talmid*—an emotional overflowing of powerful feelings? It was not long before we each realized that this outburst of physical warmth was really a slick rabbinical maneuver to do a quick once over for each boy: I refer to what became known in our yeshiva as the "*tsitsith*-check." During this morning ritual hug, if you were discovered to not be wearing your four-cornered, fringed garment under your button-down dress shirt, you would be required to purchase just such a ritual object proffered by the more enterprising rabbis of our school right out of their attaché cases.

As in Auslander's story "The War of the Bernsteins," these rabbinical machinations did more to alienate the recipients of all this religious attention than they served to draw people closer to God and an increased level of ritual observance. One way to read Auslander's stories would be as a cynical perspective on the yeshiva world—stories best left out of Jewish Day School and yeshiva high-school curricula. Yet I would argue that the most important audience that Shalom Auslander is writing for is precisely the world of *tsitsith*-checking rabbis—complete with frozen smiles and false embraces. Perhaps a Jewish educator reading this story, or as importantly, one of the poor unfortunate *tsitsith*-checkees like myself—just might be brought back to an awareness, a deeper sympathy with the true spirit and beauty of Judaism. At the same time Auslander's fiction forces his readers to recognize how that beauty has been perverted by numerous unthinking and uncaring religiously-motivated actions. After all, *tsitsith* are supposed to bring the wearer to an understanding and an appreciation of God's omnipresence. As it says in Numbers 15:40, you wear *tsitsith* so "that ye may remember, and do all My commandments, and be holy unto your God." Ironically, the Torah goes on to explain that *tsitsith* are supposed to serve as a reminder of God's granting the Israelites their freedom: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Numbers 15:41)—probably not the first thought on each manhandled boy's mind during a morning *tsitsith* check. I can say with certainty that God's commandments were the furthest thing from my mind during (and long after) those demeaning (and often expensive) exchanges.

In contrast, my reading of contemporary Jewish American fiction has afforded me a deeper understanding of Jewish ritual, and it has inspired in me an appreciation for the true beauty of Judaism—an aesthetic that was

often marred in my yeshiva experience. After all, satirists have always been the self-appointed moral guardians of their culture. Whether it is Philip Roth, who way back in the 1950s had his young character Ozzie Freedman scream down at his rabbi: “Promise me, promise me you’ll never hit anybody about God” (p. 158), or Shalom Auslander’s twenty-first-century vision of a sterile Jewish Orthodoxy, these brilliant works of fiction engage young minds both in and out of the yeshiva. What great literature does is force its readers to think and reflect on their lives, their roles in shaping their culture and universe. This is especially true of literature that engages readers on their own native grounds—in this case in an Orthodox or Torah setting. It is most important to allow students within the yeshiva world to be engaged by Jewish American literature to allow their imaginations to run over the possibilities that engagement with the modern world from a traditional perspective and lifestyle entails. We owe it to ourselves and to our students not to stifle the important discussions that would ensue from these readings.

VII

One of those dusty books I rescued years ago from my moldering yeshiva library was a seminal work of literary realism: Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black*. Late in that book, Stendhal famously defines the novel as: “a mirror that strolls along a highway. Now it reflects the blue of the skies, now the mud puddles underfoot” (p. 479). Morris Dickstein, one of the most important critics of contemporary Jewish culture, in his recent survey of American literature, *The Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World*, claims that in this passage

> Stendhal only appears to be invoking the mirror as an impersonal mechanism, a carbon copy that displays the world as it actually is. The image itself, as he positions it, belies this simplistic claim. This is not a stationary mirror fixed upon the passing show, observing the parade as from the viewing stand, but a dynamic reflector shifting position as it moves down the road. (p. 8)

Dickstein goes on to suggest that the mirror “must be held or carried by someone, and the images it provides will be framed, constantly changing, a series of partial views contributing to a larger picture” (p. 8).

Surely the world of the yeshiva and the young minds it seeks to shape deserves just such a "dynamic reflector" to gauge its progress and its shortcomings. Thankfully this reflector already exists in the body of work Jewish American fiction writers have produced during the last one hundred years of experimentation on American shores.

In this essay, I am proposing that the yeshiva world institute a curriculum of study that not only reflects the beautiful blue sky but also the mud puddles of the contemporary Jewish American community. Our vast literary inheritance does just that—all we need to do is open the books ourselves and make them available to the youth studying in our yeshivas and Jewish Day Schools across the country. We deny our young questioning scholars of the yeshiva a glimpse into this mirror at the peril of the community. The yeshiva world is fearful of allowing young impressionable minds to delve into the dangers of contemporary fiction. But in fearing the "reflected mud and muck" of the Jewish community, the beautiful image of the blue sky is obscured as well.

VIII

Throughout her 1998 novel, *Kaaterskill Falls*, Allegra Goodman engages numerous Jewish philosophical questions. How restrictive must an Orthodox life be? Does kosher always mean kosher? What are the true ethics of kosher food? (In the midst of the horrors of Postville, Iowa, can the Orthodox Jewish community really afford not to fully engage their students in a meaningful debate about the letter of the law and the true meaning of the spirit of kashruth and holy eating habits?) How can an individual adhere to a stringent code of Orthodox behavior yet concurrently remain a committed individualist? How do twentieth-century feminist ideals jive or conflict with a Torah-true life? Goodman forces her readers to ponder and meditate on these difficult questions. Precisely because of Goodman's engagement with these tough, thorny issues, she is able, at the novel's conclusion, to powerfully evoke the *Shabbos* ritual of *havdalah*. Many of the main characters of the novel gather around the lit candle to mark the conclusion of the *Shabbos* and debate the meaning of ancient Hebrew prayer. I could not ask for a better talmudic or midrashic interpretation that would form the basis of a better understanding of this important ritual.

Goodman's novel also perfectly "reflects" Stendhal's metaphor of fiction being a "movable mirror." Throughout *Kaaterskill Falls*, Goodman's characters question their adherence to the strict laws and traditions dictated by their leader Rav Elijah Kirshner and, after his death, by the Rav's puritanical son Isaiah (who reveals more than a few mud puddles); however, by the conclusion of the novel, Goodman's protagonist, Elizabeth Shulman, finds her own place within that beautiful "blue sky"—the culture and life of Orthodox Judaism.

Kaaterskill Falls concludes with numerous characters ending their *Shabbos* with the traditional *havdalah* service:

> They get up and go inside the house to make havdalah. The Landauers get out the spice box and kiddish cup. Brocha holds the braided candle, and Isaac says the prayer marking the end of the Shabbat. After he says the last words, *Hamavdil ben kodesh lihol*, Nina asks, "What do you think is the best translation for that?"
>
> "Blessed be he who separates the holy from the profane," Isaac says.
>
> "The sacred from the secular," puts in Elizabeth.
>
> "The transcendent moment from the workaday world," suggests old Rabbi Sobel in his quavering voice.
>
> "Mm." They pause around the smoking candle. (p. 324)

Just imagine the debate that would ensue in a yeshiva classroom after reading this scene. What do we make about this separation between the secular and the sacred? Just imagine the conversation a group of students highly educated in traditional Jewish texts, talmudic and midrashic, might have after reading this powerful novel. Let's debate it—is Jewish literature outside the realm of holy and in the realm of the profane? Through engagement with traditional Jewish sources, I would argue that the literary production of Jews in America should be seen as one more stage of rabbinic commentary on the scriptural inheritance of the Jewish people.

Goodman draws her readers' attention to the distractions of American popular culture and the importance of continuing to make those distinctions, those vital demarcations between holy and mundane, Holocaust memory and the noise (and comfort) of American popular culture. For pre-*Haskalah* Jews, this was not a personal concern—Judaism itself made these distinctions. However, much of contemporary postmodern Jewish American fiction seems to ask the all important question of how do we make these distinctions in a post-Holocaust world?

I, for one, after reading Goodman's novel back in 1998, would never think of *havdalah* quite the same way again. These days, when I perform this ritual, it is no longer as mere rote repetition of an ancient text. Goodman's novel began a personal questioning of just what this separation we celebrate entails. How can we truly sanctify the Sabbath as separate yet a part of our weekly lives? How do we truly sanctify the Sabbath so that the *havdalah* service can be truly felt as a demarcation of difference? As I argue in my recently published book: *American Talmud: The Cultural Work of Jewish American Fiction*, I believe that this is precisely the type of work that Jewish American literature performs for its readers. What Jewish American fiction does is open the many ancient Jewish texts and rituals to a contemporary audience so that we become a part of a living breathing tradition—one that may in fact augment our contemporary American lives and not stand in opposition to it.

Instead of requiring its pupils to steal the promethean fire of contemporary Jewish literature, the yeshiva world ought to be celebrating this body of work, willingly incorporating it into its curriculum as a means of conveying ancient tradition to their contemporary Jewish students. In doing so, they will secure the relevance and primacy of ancient Orthodox Judaism for many more generations, ensuring the *mesorah* or great chain of tradition continues in a contemporary American setting.

In *American Talmud* I quote an aggadic section from tractate *Menahot*:

> Rabbi Judah said in the name of Rab: When Moses ascended on high (to receive the Torah) he found the Holy One, blessed be He, engaged in affixing *taggin* (crown-like flourishes) to the letters. Moses said: "Lord of the Universe, who stays Thy hand?" He replied: "There will arise a man at the end of many generations, Akiba ben Joseph by name, who will expound upon each little letter, heaps and heaps of the laws." "Lord of the Universe," said Moses, "permit me to see him." He replied: "Turn thee around." Moses went (into the academy of Rabbi Akiba) and sat down behind eight rows of Akiba's disciples. Not being able to follow their arguments he was ill at ease, but when they came to a certain subject and the disciples said to the master "Whence do you know it?" and the latter replied, "It is a law given to Moses at Sinai," he was comforted. (*Menahot* 29b)

This aggadic short story might seem peculiar to those not regularly engaged in the study of the Talmud. Although the Talmud is often perceived as being a rigid book comprised of legal maneuverings designed to

codify the intricate Mosaic laws, it might more accurately be thought of as a blueprint for modern and postmodern fictional play.

Far from being a dry legal document, the Babylonian Talmud, particularly its aggadic sections, revels in the fantastical and the ambiguous. Not merely capable of tolerating dissent, the Talmud honors and celebrates a difference of opinion; time and again the Talmud honors radical rethinking, even about its foundational concepts. In the previous passage, for example, the Talmud tells a seemingly heretical story in which Moses, the greatest leader of the Jewish people, cannot follow the basic logic of even a simple talmudic argument.

This foregoing aggadic passage reveals the storytelling aspects, the cultural work performed by the Babylonian Talmud. Through its literary passages the Talmud reinterprets the Torah anew for its own generation. This open-endedness, this celebration of multiple perspectives, is not only a characteristic of the Babylonian Talmud; it is also a hallmark of twentieth-century and contemporary Jewish American fiction. There are so many analogues between the two that Jewish American fiction writers embracing modern and postmodern life are often mistakenly perceived as radically breaking with their traditional past. Yet they are one more link in the great chain of rabbinic thought conveyed to us through the centuries as a means of interpretation designed to ensure that scripture will remain vital and new for each generation.

IX

At the end of one of his greatest novels, *The Adventures of Augie March*, Saul Bellow's hero reflects on his many-faceted identity, wondering to himself how a poor orphan from the wrong side of Chicago ended up tramping across the frozen postwar fields of Normandy. He begins to laugh, and Bellow writes: "that's the *animal ridens* in me, the laughing creature, forever rising up" (p. 536). Bellow refers to Aristotle's designation that to be human is to be able to laugh. Augie's associative mind then goes on to reflect on Christopher Columbus, who, five centuries before Augie came on the scene, set all of his personal discoveries in motion: "Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America" (p. 536).

Shutting out contemporary Jewish American voices from the yeshiva syllabus does not prove that these students will grow up without doubts—forgetting that there is an America swirling in all its contemporary glory and horror right outside the *beis medrash* doors. For me, 108th Street led directly to Queens Boulevard and *Jacey's Billiards* when, at the age of 16, I preferred shooting pool to being denigrated by my rebbes for reading a body of work that even back then I thought of as post-rabbinic literature. Yet, *hineni*: here I am twenty years later engaging in traditional Jewish texts through the very literature that was branded as *shtuss* by my supposed spiritual leaders—the well-intentioned but wrong-headed rabbis in my yeshiva.

Much of contemporary Jewish American writing eloquently voices the perils of unfettered assimilation, the withering of roots and the loss of memory that is often attendant with pursuing the dream of America. Jewish American fiction writers' morally serious work warns of the political misuse American popular culture has often made of Holocaust commemoration and tradition. Their work continues to dramatize the complex lives of their Jewish American characters, while powerfully rendering the conflicts that inevitably arise between tradition and modernity, memory and history.

That "dynamic reflector" of contemporary Jewish American literature is extremely important. It might reflect some of the less-savory aspects of our culture; writers like Philip Roth have been doing that since their first published works. But they also reflect the sky—the great promise of a life lived by an ancient code of understanding, belief, faith, and compassion. Shutting off discussion does not lead to blind adherence—and it does in fact lead to its opposite. When we stifle that discussion we threaten our viability in a contemporary world of myriad identity choices and, in the process, we destroy our own textual tradition. It didn't work in the *shtetl* as the *Haskalah* blew winds of enlightenment through the dusty *shtetl* streets with its intoxicating air of freedom—it certainly will not work in the freest society the world has ever known. We ignore Philip Roth's blue sky and puddles of mud at our own peril.

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An Educational Manifesto

Francis Nataf

(Rabbi Francis Nataf is the Educational Director of the David Cardozo Academy in Jerusalem and the author of Redeeming Relevance in the Book of Genesis *(Urim: 2006). He has also written numerous articles concerning Jewish education and Jewish thought. Rabbi Nataf was ordained at Yeshiva University and holds degrees in Jewish History and International Affairs.)*

For a long time, traditional Judaism was based on authoritarian structures that paralleled structures of the general pre-Modern world. Most significantly, faith in a Creator had long been a nearly universal norm. Thus, while Judaism, per se, was not consonant with society around it, God was at the center of how people understood their world.

Although this is not the place to properly review changes brought about by the Modern era, it may be helpful to remind the reader about some of the great upheavals that directly impact on religious continuity. Modern thinking opened up all realms to free inquiry, leaving nothing to dogma. One of my first teachers, perhaps inadvertently, summarized the impact on Judaism when he said that contemporary acceptance of the Torah is no longer characterized by *na'aseh venishma* (we will do and we will understand), but rather by *nishma vena'aseh* (we will understand and we will do). Whether we are conscious of it or not, our zeitgeist impels us to understand what we believe and why we believe it.

Modernity also challenged the authority of the elites by pronouncing all humans to be equal. As such, rabbinic authority was severely compromised, opening the way for the various movements that arose independently of the traditional rabbinate's hegemony on ideology.

In our own times, as Modernity continues to unfold and develop, the last authoritarian stronghold to fall is the family. In accordance with the

Democratic idea, older children are choosing whether or not to listen to their parents. Of all structures, this is arguably the most critical to Judaism. And yet, we see it falling nonetheless.

Moreover, today we see faith in a virtual state of siege. Even those who proclaim to believe in a Creator rarely explain the world around them in more than mechanistic terms. This is undeniably having an impact on our own ranks, as reflected in the following quotation from a talk by Rav Shlomo Wolbe *zt'l:*

> It seems to me that education in faith is really weak today. You have to start talking about faith already in *heder*, telling the students that they were created from God, explaining how it is God who gives them life. God gave the Torah that they are learning. Then later in yeshiva . . . you have to talk more about faith.

Such an educational need has arisen because these things are no longer assumed in the surrounding society. Schools do not teach that we need to eat food or that the sun keeps us warm, because these ideas are universally accepted. Once faith has lost its universal acceptance, attentive teachers like Rav Wolbe will see a need to "teach" it.

In spite of Orthodoxy's extremely mixed record, the dominant approach in this sector toward Modernity has been to isolate ourselves from general society, its paradigms, and questions. This has not only been the approach to education, but to thought as well, as the philosophical investigations of the *Rishonim* (medieval scholars) were shunned for more narrow textual study, focusing mostly on understanding the *how* and *when* as opposed to the *what* and *why*.

The ability to isolate ourselves from the assumptions of society around us, however, has of late become severely compromised. Two trends have made Orthodox society permeable, to the point where Modernity is confronting the previously most isolationist segments of our society. The first trend is the increasing dependence on media, and particularly the Internet, necessitated by participation in the marketplace. The second trend is the greater exposure to the non-Orthodox brought about by the influx of *ba'alei teshuvah* in the last few decades (as well as our contact with a greater number of defections from the Orthodox community). Thus, the continued usefulness of the isolationist strategy is becoming more and more questionable.

Almost all Jews today live part of their lives in contact with modern Western culture. In many subtle ways, this culture competes with Judaism for our loyalty. Unconsciously, many of its values become incorporated into our worldview without our even realizing it. An obvious and dangerous example is the growth of consumerism among all but the most careful circles. Consumerism is defined here as spending inordinate amounts of time and effort on consumer choices and believing that these choices help define our identity.

The above analysis leads to the conclusion that Jewish faith and values can no longer be assumed as cultural norms—even within the most conservative segments of Orthodoxy. As such, we must consciously and explicitly teach our beliefs to ourselves and our children, with the realization that the assumptions and freedom of modern society ultimately give our children a much greater prerogative to reject these values. Although these assumptions may not be ones with which we agree, under the present circumstances we have no choice but to work within them, believing that we have good reason to expect success in the free market of ideas and lifestyles. Thus, we must learn how to compete for the hearts and minds of our own children as well as for the hearts and minds of others. In our time, there are few, if any, voices presenting a clear strategy on how to do this. Rather, we muddle along, focusing on performance of mitzvoth and Torah study in a cultural vacuum.

Instead of designing a plan to deal with the causes of the current malaise that exists in Orthodoxy, people are merely dealing with the symptoms. Although we may salute the courage of the *Jewish Observer* in acknowledging and addressing the issue of dropouts, like the vast majority of efforts, it isolates the problem to the individuals and not to problems with the system as a whole. The same can be said of the myriad forums that are trying to deal with the variety of marriage/family/parenting issues that are more and more apparent within our ranks. Focusing on individuals is much more palatable to the dominant conservative forces within Orthodoxy, but in the long run it is doing us a disservice.

One obvious arena that must be addressed in dealing with the problem outlined above is our educational system. Essentially based on the Eastern European yeshiva model, its focus is on giving students the ability to study texts. The European yeshiva curriculum was aimed at providing two goals for its elite student body: 1) proper mastery of the Talmud

and accompanying literature to provide the necessary expertise from which to reach halakhic decisions, and 2) enhancing the spirituality of the students in a mystical fashion, grounded in the questionable idea that more involvement in Torah study will bring about a stronger connection to God. In the contemporary context these two goals are clearly insufficient. Although traditional study itself, if done well, can be invigorating, it is not enough to give today's culturally ambivalent students an understanding and internalization of classical Jewish beliefs and values, and thus motivate them to devote their lives to God.

What is needed, therefore, is a complete reevaluation of what we study and how we study it, in accordance with what most of our children will need in order to flourish within our religious tradition.

II.

Many of us owe a great deal to the yeshiva system. Even more important than knowledge and skills, our religious inspiration was largely formed by the years spent within the yeshiva walls. Clearly, there is much to be gained by carrying over certain aspects of the yeshiva model.

It is our thesis that the yeshiva curriculum is totally unsuited to the needs of the Jewish masses. Still, there are at least three components of the yeshiva experience that are invaluable: 1) the atmosphere of intensity, 2) the rigor of approach to text and, hopefully, truth, and 3) success in bringing about strict adherence to halakha.

Intensity

Former High Court Judge Menachem Elon once recalled the unmatched intensity of his days at Yeshivat Hevron. The single-minded pursuit of understanding that exists in the classical yeshiva is clearly invigorating. Elon described it as a pursuit unlimited by time or schedule. In spite of its overwhelmingly intellectual nature, the complete dedication of self to religious pursuits experienced in the yeshiva is something that leaves an indelible mark upon a person.

Similar dedication to a more holistic curriculum and setting may be harder to bring about. The key may be in the schedule, logistics, and perhaps most important, in the leadership of the new schools. When the rosh yeshiva exhibits sincere and complete dedication, it sets the tone for the

entire yeshiva. This will presumably also be true of the new schools that we envision.

The Search for Truth

One of the appealing facets of the yeshiva is its democratic approach to truth. A rebbe's shiur does not stand if he cannot appropriately address a logical flaw pointed out by even the weakest student. In fact, stumping the rebbe is the aspiration of every yeshiva student worth his salt. In a proper yeshiva, all are equal before the truth. The soundness of this approach speaks for itself, allowing the natural ambition of the students to motivate them toward achievement.

As we propose to move away from the uniquely cerebral approach of the yeshiva, we must ensure that rigorous pursuit of truth not be sacrificed. Even as we put more emphasis on personal expression, we must hold teachers and students accountable for their ideas. If their ideas are not properly rooted, we will be following in the ways of all antinomian sects, a risk that must be taken very seriously.

Adherence to Halakha

One of the major goals of the yeshiva is to create punctilious loyalty to halakha. While yeshiva dropouts may often reject halakha completely, successful graduates are usually highly dedicated to the halakha, which they see as directly emanating from the texts that they have studied.

One of my students observed that it often appears as if yeshiva graduates worship halakha instead of God. Even as I believe this to be a very insightful observation, historical experience shows that halakhic rigor serves as the backbone of Jewish spirituality. In our efforts to correct the situation by putting God back in the center of Judaism, we must make sure that we formulate a convincing motivational scheme to engender strict adherence to halakha among our students.

The uninterrupted tradition of learning has given us a justified self-confidence in giving over a quality experience in the traditional yeshiva. The creativity, rigor, and depth involved in traditional study of the Talmud and its commentaries are appealing to the best of minds. There is no equally developed body of literature in other Jewish realms, such as *aggada*, Jewish Thought, and prayer. Thus, it is only natural that we are happy to stay with something in which we are proficient. Such reticence to

expand our horizons is understandable, yet it is ultimately untenable. In today's field of "mass" Jewish education, the traditional yeshiva curriculum is as archaic as the typewriter. One can create a typewriter that is literally a work of art. Even one who can create such a typewriter and is not yet sure how to build a computer, has no choice but to learn how to do the latter, if he expects any appreciation and use outside of a museum.

In sum, we have no choice but to move past the yeshiva model in setting up schools for the masses. This will require much experimentation in order to create a quality experience. That being the case, we have everything to gain by making use of every successful facet of our learning tradition. Rigor, intensity and stress on normative behavior must be central to new institutions of learning if they are to form the next link in the transmission of Judaism from one generation to the next.

III.

The dichotomy between the Jewish educational system and its cultural context is perhaps greater today than ever before. The Jewish people, including all segments of Orthodoxy, has never been so fully integrated within a culture that often espouses a competing set of values and assumptions. This integration creates a serious challenge to the cultural integrity of the Jewish people.

In spite of this challenge, we find ourselves relying upon an educational model that unrealistically expects an automatic internalization of Jewish values and modes of behavior. Thus, religious schools expend most of their energy teaching text for its own sake. These schools assume that this quality experience will magically inspire our children to accept any values, ideas, or behaviors that are associated with Judaism. The equation the current system depends upon is: "If I love (see the quality in) learning and learning is exclusive to Judaism, than I must also love (see the quality in), and will adhere to, all of Judaism."

Lack of true analysis of how and whether the schools meet our religious goals is a sure harbinger of catastrophe. As a result, the only way to prevent the impending crisis is to give sober and unsentimental thought to our goals as a people, and the role of Jewish education in accomplishing these goals. Once we do that, we will feel compelled to embark on a fundamental reformulation of the contents and methods of Jewish education.

Obviously, serious reformulation of Jewish education will take years, probably even decades. Nonetheless, initiating this discussion is long overdue. Below are a few modest suggestions to get the ball rolling:

It must be understood that the main job of Jewish schools is to create balanced and secure, truly religious Jews. If our students end up becoming *talmidei hakhamim* so much the better, but that must remain a secondary goal. In a world where individuals choose their beliefs and lifestyles, the societal norm is to understand one's choices. In this cultural context, we clearly cannot expect great success without giving our children some background knowledge as to why Jews are supposed to act in a certain way. Our schools need to transmit an understanding of the Jewish belief system and code of conduct. This will then give our children a sense that they know the raison d'être of the Jewish enterprise. In short, our children must be shown that Judaism as an organic system is the most effective way to a meaningful and holy life.

Curricula must be selected that will explicitly communicate Torah values—their sources and implications. Mitzvoth should be studied in their broader ideological context—from a philosophical, as well as legal, perspective. Teaching the beauty of individual mitzvoth without plugging them into something more systemic is a big mistake that may well have been a prime cause of the "*hithaberut*" phenomenon in Israel, where young people pick and choose which mitzvoth to observe based on how relevant to their own lives they perceive them to be. It is for this reason that Rav Kook was in favor of teaching Kabbalah on a mass level in Modern times.

We must teach our belief system and faith. This means that students need to know how Jews historically have understood the nature of God, prophecy, and other such matters. As a simple example, someone who has not studied Rambam's discussion on prophecy in *Hilkhot Yesodei haTorah* will probably be unclear about how we can categorically deny the claims of other religions. Since today's individual will be exposed to other faiths, such information is indispensable.

More important than anything else is the creation and internalization of students' relationship with God. Prayer is central to this. It should be taken for granted that students have to understand what they are saying, the meaning of the words as well as the ideas behind them. We must teach *kavana*. Children must be taught meditation skills as well as the ability to

be comfortable with silence and being alone. It is true that such concepts are not easily imparted. Their central value, however, should force us to spend a great amount of time and effort on developing and perfecting the strategies needed to internalize these skills. If this means working in small groups or one-on-one, it is well worth the extra cost in personnel.

Finally, texts must be chosen based on their content and in line with educational goals. As such, we must spend more time on Tanakh and Jewish Thought and less time on Talmud. It is worth noting that as far as halakha is concerned, Tanakh is the only subject that a father has to make sure his son learns (Y.D. 245:6, see Taz and Gra).

Concerning method, we must prioritize religious socialization over the acquisition of information. Thus, the educational relationship that must be created between teacher and student should be in the form of apprenticeship. Apprenticeship is teaching by theory followed by practical example. The apprentice is then tested on his or her own ability to use the theory as best as he or she can under the scrutiny of the master. A good master will allow the apprentice to develop his own unique style with the tools that the master has taught.

Indeed, we will need to spend more time with our students and invite them into our lives. Students need to see how truly religious Jews interact with their children, what they do with their free time, how they eat and make *berakhot*, and so forth. Students need to see how Jews celebrate and why they celebrate; they must see how and why Jews mourn. Correspondingly, teachers need to be role models worthy of emulation.

Even within the classroom, we have to take the phrase *na'aseh venishma* (we will do and we will understand) more seriously. As most educators know, a hands-on experiential lesson is almost always a successful lesson. Beyond learning about mitzvoth, their performance must be fully experienced. A full mitzvah experience should obviously have more than a physical component. When a teacher shakes a lulav, he or she should find strategies how to prepare for the mitzvah with his or her students, through meditation, song, inspiring stories, and the like. There is often no greater source of motivation than seeing and being involved in a properly performed mitzvah.

Students also need to be exposed to the outstanding role models of our generation. It is important for them to hear about *tsaddikim*—and see them firsthand. People need living heroes. If we do not provide them, chil-

dren will look elsewhere. One should not underestimate the role of heroes in personal values development. In this, one must be careful to distinguish between *tsaddikim* and *gedolim*. While all *gedolim* worthy of the name have many outstanding traits, sadly they may also have painfully visible flaws and consequently exposure to such people can be disconcerting for students. While their teachers' flaws, within reason, help to make them more human and thus more accessible as role models, we have to be careful about whom we acclaim to be heroes.

The first step in overhauling the current educational system is to give teachers (current and future) the ability and knowledge to do so. Teachers are in an ideal place to be the foot soldiers of the revolution that we would like to implement.

New teachers must be trained to view themselves as religious facilitators. They have to understand that they hold the keys to the next generation's spiritual development, or lack thereof. As a result, a great responsibility will be given to them and, by the same token, the unparalleled merit will be theirs if they can meet this challenge successfully. They would be making a major contribution to epic history.

We live in a time that demands bold thinking. Indeed, we live in a time that also demands bold action. More than ever, it is an "*et la'asot lashem*"—a time when we require the courage to act for the sake of the Divine.

The Limits of the Orthodox Classroom

Yael Unterman

(Yael Unterman is a creative educator and author living in Jerusalem. She has lectured and taught worldwide and has authored a new book, Nehama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar.*)*

Few would deny that what differentiates Orthodoxy as a standpoint is largely the boundaries it places. These boundaries are notably stricter and more delineated than those of the non-Orthodox movements. This is not to deny the role of beliefs, ideals, and other emphases in structuring Orthodox life; however, even these rely to some extent on a set of strong borders to preserve them.

Borders are critical in defining identity. Orthodox Judaism's relatively clear parameters can appear to good advantage, especially when placed against a background of Western culture, which arguably often fails its adherents, leaving them adrift in a sea of contradictory recommendations from scientific and cultural mavens. When one's personal borders of behavior and creed are firmly established, one is freed from the need to constantly create and adjust them. One can then focus on creating the content rather than the vessel in which to hold it.

In an ideal world, Orthodox parameters would serve to minimize confused wandering and searching. Furthermore, while some measure of dynamic dialogue is unavoidable as individuals change and grow, the overall picture would be one of a stable, rich lifestyle in which one's religious, intellectual, and behavioral impulses are in synch, both within oneself and also vis-à-vis the surrounding community. And indeed, many are drawn to Orthodoxy precisely for this kind of clarity. Yet limits, boundaries, and borders may also be extremely stifling, and may in fact—especially when

driven by fear rather than existing organically as part of a secure identity—overly curtail individual autonomy and choke off important spiritual and existential processes necessary to religious life.

The Orthodox classroom or other study forum reflects the above truths. I'd like to explore briefly some of the boundaries—both of content and form—placed within the Orthodox classroom. Some of the questions to be dealt with include:

• In terms of content, what is studied and embraced as positive, and what is deemed inappropriate or dangerous and is kept out of the classroom, either by omission or by active suppression?

• In terms of form, in what fashion do the students learn? How much control does the teacher appropriate or relinquish, and how much autonomy and self-expression is granted to the students within the learning process?

For the purposes of this discussion, I will borrow two categories applied by Dr. Marla Frankel (who in turn utilizes Professor Michael Rosenak's educational terminology and theory) in her analysis of the work of Nehama Leibowitz *z"l*. An examination of Leibowitz's work will demonstrate for us a model of a lesson that contains both openness and limits; and through it we can arrive at a general discussion of the limits of the Orthodox classroom.

Frankel suggests that Leibowitz wore at least two teaching "hats," and that this granted her a large measure of flexibility, a trait critical to good educating. The first "hat," or role, is that of the facilitator. This kind of teacher steps back from the students, enables discussion, challenges them intellectually, and trains them in problem-solving. It is the process, not the solutions, that is important. The facilitator's religious focus is on existential, emotional dimensions rather than on enforcing norms and laws. The second "hat" is that of the pedagogue. This type of teacher presents a discourse or lecture, using rhetorical and analytical skills to answer his or her own questions instead of letting the students answer them.

In the first model, the individual student is important; in the second, it is the community and the content that matter as vehicles for belief and practice. These two broad roles (though obviously other models are possible) will help us organize what otherwise appears a confusing patchwork

of contradictory elements in Leibowitz's pedagogy, and to see that ultimately she implemented what may be termed "pluralism within limits."

This was true of both the content of Leibowitz's classes and also their form. In terms of content, we see both the facilitator and the pedagogue in action. Leibowitz believed in offering a diversity of interpretation, and the method she invented of presenting different commentaries side-by-side was very much a facilitator's technique. It activated the students—and also taught them that many options existed, and that their questions were not heretical. As Leibowitz states: "It is important to include this opinion too so that the students will not assume that Rashi's explanation is the only one possible, and anyone who is bothered by it . . . is, so to speak, an utter heretic who has no part in the Torah of Moses."

Overall, Leibowitz's method was pluralistic relative to her contemporaries and to the traditional approaches that preceded her. The Tosafists, for example, aimed to reconcile discrepancies, while Leibowitz loudly broadcasted them. When educators expressed to her their concern that students, especially children, could not easily grasp that multiple opinions may co-exist, she retorted: "We are not Catholics! We have no Pope to decide who is right!"

Furthermore, Leibowitz opened up the limits of her classroom and writings to include non-Orthodox and non-Jewish sources in the study of Torah. These sources were not only used to bolster traditional sources (an agenda palatable to conservative elements, as it served to show "how correct our sources are") but also to unearth new layers of the Torah. This was far more radical, implying that thinkers outside Orthodoxy can reveal dimensions in the Torah overlooked by traditional commentators. Leibowitz believed she could eat the "fruit" of these thinkers, while throwing away the "peel."

However, Leibowitz took the facilitator role only so far before putting on the pedagogue's hat. The students were allowed to choose, but only from a certain range of sources selected by her. She placed constraints on the use of universal sources—worldly wisdom was not to be equated with Torah, and the non-Orthodox sources referred to always remained a precisely selected minority, approached with caution and never given the pride of place that the traditional commentators claimed.

In terms of form, Leibowitz encouraged open discussion in her classroom. She paid personal attention to each student as far as she was able,

and she was seen as an accessible teacher. She hated the idea of lecturing, believing that when the teacher talks too much it limits the interaction essential to learning. Instead, her lesson consisted largely of group discussion of a topic, with the teacher interspersing her comments and never talking for more than a couple of minutes at a time. Students forgot that they were being educated, as the discussion flowed as naturally as a conversation. Though not lacking in personal charisma, Leibowitz did not rely on it as the driving-force of the lesson. Rather, she chose questions that would open up discussions, and she deferred her own opinion until after the students had had a chance to reflect. In permitting such interactivity, she relinquished control to the students, functioning as a facilitator and anticipating contemporary trends to a certain extent.

Today's students are encouraged to express their opinions and to create personal connections to the subject matter, whereas the teacher's role is to validate the students, not to critique them or guide them too strongly. Leibowitz's lesson partly conformed to this model, in its encouraging of maximum participation and lively discussion. Ultimately, however, Leibowitz kept a tight rein on what was considered the correct answer, using a formula of positive and negative reinforcements and not hesitating to announce "*Bikhlal lo*!" ("Totally incorrect!") when she disagreed, an experience that could be mortifying for the student. Few educators in tune with today's trends would read a student's answers out in front of everyone and then declare, "That's completely wrong!" She ran a strict classroom, not permitting the lesson to stray off on random tangents and insisting on punctuality and proper preparation. She expelled students who did not have a basic understanding of the material, or who arrived empty-handed, *sans* Tanakh. When two young yeshiva students admitted they had brought neither Tanakhs nor notebooks, Leibowitz announced to the roomful of students, "It's the TV generation! They come to sit and watch!" Many found her harangues somewhat intimidating; some even left, never to return. In all this, she acted as the pedagogue; and some might even label Nehama's style authoritarian, though she herself would be repulsed by such a term.

In her approach to the text, Leibowitz also demonstrated such mixed tendencies. While on the one hand she encouraged her students to read the text closely and directly, ultimately the commentators' lead was to be followed when studying text critically, with the student's own ideas in second place.

Students' responses to Leibowitz's classroom varied, in line with the diverse elements mentioned above and with the students' own personalities. For many, her teaching techniques were their first experience of the teacher as facilitator. The fact that her class was founded upon dialogue between commentators of different periods and spirited discussions between participants constituted a breath of fresh air. Unlike old-school lecturers, Leibowitz was open to diverse viewpoints in her lessons, and students were even allowed to contradict her, though not the text. She was interested in the individual student and in nurturing original thought; her aim was active learning.

Yet she also firmly steered her class, rigorously training her students to approach the text correctly as she saw it. There were limits to her tolerance of critique of faith-based principles in her lesson. Those who studied with her remember occasions when students disagreed with her—and it was obvious to all present that such "insolence" was out of place. Leibowitz was controlling the class, and for a student to introduce some new agenda was completely inappropriate. Students were there to learn from the teacher, not to advance their own theories. She countered opposition with responses such as: "You didn't understand," "You need to learn more about this issue," or "This is off the topic." One student challenged: "But Nehama, aren't there seventy facets to the Torah?" She replied, "Yes, but what you said is not one of them!"

Many students liked the balance Leibowitz struck between her two roles. They enjoyed the discussion, while also appreciating her firm control of the class, which, by preventing too much digression, allowed mastery of a specific topic. She allowed arguments to continue for just so long, knowing exactly when to interrupt and return to the original point that she had made. For these students, what Leibowitz lost in openness of discussion, she gained in sharpening the student's mind. With a firm hand, she invited them into a new way of looking at a text, beyond their existing opinions, and she restrained overimaginative students with unsupported interpretations. In her class, even highly opinionated and voluble people learned to defer to her in order to gain what she could give. One charismatic educational figure, today the director of several institutions, recalls, "She would tell me what she thought, and I learned to keep quiet."

But this policy frustrated those who wished to broaden the field of inquiry, or who thought along different lines than hers. A free-spirited per-

son might feel uncomfortable in her class; individualistic or critical students might experience the classes as rigid, with her constant demand to justify oneself using strict and rational tools serving to cramp a looser, more associative relationship with the text. Leibowitz was also not (barring a couple of isolated statements, not backed up in practice) interested in personal and emotional reactions to the text. On the contrary, she believed that they interfered with correct interpretation: "When analyzing or interpreting a literary work . . . [there is a risk] that the interpreter will speak about himself . . . about his own elevation of spirit, about what is going on inside himself . . . instead of about the text." She cared greatly about general relevance, but not about the personal relevance for each individual. Class time was reserved for the correct answers, of which Leibowitz had a very clear idea. Personal issues and questions, even those of existential urgency for the student, must be saved for outside the classroom walls.

One last significant point to be made is the fact that Frankel, along with Erella Yedgar, discovered through careful analysis that the limits of Leibowitz's classroom changed depending on the students. The more knowledgeable and committed students generally were allowed more leeway.

The picture that emerges from all of the above is that of a complex approach, enabling Leibowitz to reach many different kinds of people simultaneously. It appears that Leibowitz achieved a good balance of elements in the classroom, creating openness and space and yet firmly setting limits so that various lines would not be crossed. She gave the impression of teaching from within a secure, non-defensive, open Orthodoxy (except perhaps when it came to biblical criticism and the historicizing of the Bible, around which she had extremely strong feelings that might lead to defensiveness); and that the limits she set were simply those of a teacher invested in guiding students to think in a certain way, rather than creating the free-for-all that sometimes passes for pluralism today.

We must, however, be careful before applying the Leibowitz model as an ideal for contemporary Modern Orthodox education, so many decades after it was developed. In the hands of the wrong (read: insecure, unimaginative, or authoritarian) teachers, or as part of a rigid system—for example, as widely applied through the Israeli matriculation exam—there is a risk of it becoming dry and mechanical, with the more limiting and inflex-

ible aspects dominant. Moreover, today's educational mindset, in line with changes in general global sentiments, has shifted in the direction of the facilitator. Hence, the elements of the pedagogue in Leibowitz's style run even more risk today of alienating creative and independent-minded students, who expect and desire to be allowed to express their opinions and have them considered with respect. For this reason, some of her students who continued her method in their own teaching chose to modify it and extend its limits; for example, allowing more direct access to text without mediation by commentaries.

We can argue, on the other hand, that precisely *because* the world of education has shifted so far toward interactive discussion and away from making definitive statements, Leibowitz's model of pluralism within limits has much to offer. Those educators for whom pluralism means never disagreeing with someone's interpretation—however illogical or textually inconsistent—for fear of offending, would do well to take a leaf out of her book and learn to make firmer statements and guide toward a worldview. These, however, are often the problems of the non-Orthodox, while Orthodoxy by its nature risks the opposite, namely excessive ridigity and over-imposed limits.

This article has not set the ideal borders for the Orthodox classroom; such an aim would be too ambitious—and also arrogant. This is a multifaceted, ongoing discussion, and will vary from educator to educator, institution to institution, and sector to sector. My purpose has been to raise the issues and show some of the prices to be paid for moving too far in one direction or another; and to present at least one model that incorporates both poles, so that educators may work out for themselves what proportion of "facilitator" versus "pedagogue" role is worthwhile adopting in their own lessons. I would also challenge the educator to introspect and ascertain how many of the limits he or she imposes upon the classroom derive from personal fears (such as that of relinquishing control), and how many constitute a thought-out *a priori* model.

On a final, personal note, as a product of an Ultra-Orthodox high school and some elite Modern Orthodox institutions of higher learning, I personally suffered greatly from the cramped limits of Orthodox classrooms. There was little space available for my questions and self-expression. My opinions were at best tolerated, rather than engaged or valued, and at worst seen as threatening, though they stemmed from an entirely

genuine searching place. As for my creativity and imagination, it found no place at all. Many of the lessons strait-jacketed and silenced me rather than allowing me to emerge feeling more engaged, more connected, and more self-appreciating.

As an educator, I have since tried to rectify this by engaging in open debates where I value my student's opinions as a genuine source of wisdom for me. I try to engage with them with respect for their insights, while at the same time not abrogating the value due to my own knowledge. I have also adopted creative techniques that encourage self-expression and free the mind to go broader and deeper than is generally accepted in Orthodox circles. One example of the latter is Bibliodrama, a marvellous role-playing technique of "spontaneous midrash" that, when done correctly, with firm steering and with faithfulness to the text, can achieve superb results in terms of deepened identification with the Torah, without straying from what feels comfortable for an Orthodox population. Here, I aim to stretch the limits but not breach them—and I feel it is important to do so. I trust that this question of what the limits are, and when and how to expand them to their maximum, may spark discussion in the right quarters.

Toward an Orthodox Community that is More Responsive to People with Special Needs

Howard Blas

(Howard Blas is a social worker and special educator who primarily teaches students with special needs and circumstances in Jewish Studies and for bar and bat mitzvah. He is Director of the Tikvah Program at Camp Ramah in New England. Howard's work has appeared in publications such as The Jerusalem Report, The Jerusalem Post, *and* The New York Times.*)*

Ilana is a good natured, caring, religiously observant high-school student who enjoys reading, baking hallah with her mother, and spending time with her peers at school and in her synagogue. When it became clear in pre-kindergarten that Ilana had a learning disability, her parents made the difficult decision to transfer her from the local Jewish Day School to a private school that specializes in teaching children with learning issues. Although this was a difficult decision, they knew it was necessary for Ilana's academic growth and development. They reasoned that Ilana would have plenty of time to socialize with her Jewish friends on Shabbat and on playdates. They knew they could count on her continued involvement in their large Modern Orthodox synagogue.

Ilana's mother was shocked and disappointed when one mother at their synagogue stopped inviting Ilana to participate in weekly playdates with her child. Invitations to birthday parties and other social activities began to stop as well. Even a B'nei Akiva dinner, designed for children to socialize

with other synagogue members, felt "closed" to children who did not attend Day School. Ilana's mother feels that no attempt was made to facilitate interactions between the Day School students and those from other schools. She finds it ironic that the same synagogue that graciously and compassionately hosts adults with moderate to severe disabilities at its yearly Yachad Shabbaton is unable to successfully include children, such as her daughter, with milder disabilities. She wants genuine acceptance and inclusion—and not compassion or pity. She wonders why some people act as though Ilana is "contagious" and that others can "catch" a learning disability or other impairment by socializing with children with special needs. She laments, "The social isolation is worse than the academic isolation."

The Jewish tradition has always been aware of differences among God's creatures, who are all considered to be created in the "image of God." The Bible and rabbinic texts detail laws about treating people with special needs. We are taught, "Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind," (Vayikra 19:14), and there is much discussion in various codes regarding the status of the *heresh* (deaf person), and the *shoteh* (possibly a developmentally delayed person). Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilkhot Berakhot*, 10:12, based on *Berakhot* 58b) has a detailed discussion on which *berakha* to recite upon seeing people who are "different."And the Mishna in *Sanhedrin* 4:5 teaches, "Although a person stamps many coins from a single die, and they are all alike—the King of Kings has stamped every person with the die of Adam, yet not one of them is like his fellow man." These sensitively crafted sources suggest that each person is unique and worthy of respect and inclusion in the community—regardless of appearance or level of ability to walk, speak, hear, or learn. Additionally, these sources suggest that the Jewish community has a moral and even halakhic obligation to create programs to meet the needs of *all* people within our communities—regardless of special need or circumstance. How accepting and accommodating are our synagogues, schools, and community institutions? What can we do to better include and support those with special needs?

Synagogues

The synagogue is central to the daily life of most observant Jews—as a Bet Tefilla (a house of prayer), a Bet Midrash (a house of study), and perhaps most importantly, as a Bet Kenesset (a place of gathering). The synagogue

is potentially the most important religious institution in the lives of families of children with special needs. Sadly, many families like Ilana's feel that their synagogues lack a genuinely accepting attitude toward their children. Shabbat morning children's services and afternoon Shabbat groups are often unable to meet the needs of children with special needs. Many parents feel that their children would benefit greatly from weekly Shabbat services and social activities, even if they sometimes need redirection and gentle reminders from patient, experienced group leaders. Children and their parents often receive uncomfortable looks, "shushing," and requests to leave the sanctuary when a child is "making noise." While parents recognize that fellow congregants have a right to pray and listen to the rabbi's sermon in peace, they are often struck by the lack of understanding in their synagogue. This reception in their own synagogue stands in sharp contrast to the genuine acceptance they receive *outside* of their own synagogues.

There are Modern Orthodox synagogues and rabbis who have taken the lead in meeting the needs of congregants with special needs. In my work teaching children with special needs for bar and bat mitzvah, several rabbis have suggested sensitive, creative options for members with special needs. For example, families may choose to have a non-Shabbat bar mitzvah, where fewer members would be in attendance, the length of service is shorter, there is no haftarah, and there are no Shabbat-related issues when it comes to microphones, adaptive technology, or computers.

In one Boston area synagogue, a bat-mitzvah girl gave a *devar Torah* and "announced pages" using Power Point slides during a Sunday morning service. One Modern Orthodox rabbi suggested that a particular child with learning disabilities celebrate his bar mitzvah on the Sunday of Hanukkah because the Torah reading, from Parshat Naso, is repetitive and predictable and therefore less difficult for this child to learn. Another rabbi found a halakhically acceptable way for a non-verbal boy to celebrate his bar mitzvah on Shabbat morning. The boy had a very large brain tumor removed when he was two years old, and has unfortunately never been able to speak. He uses a Dynavox Dynamo augmented communication device seven days a week. He pulls down screens by topic and depresses buttons to communicate his needs. His very dedicated parents worked with the rabbi, so that their son could be called to the Torah on Shabbat morning. He essentially activated his father's voice to recite the Torah blessing, lead *Adon Olam,* and deliver a *devar Torah*.

Despite these success stories, there remain unmet needs for people with disabilities in Modern Orthodox synagogues. Parents express frustration that they do not feel comfortable taking their children with special needs to Shabbat groups or children's services. Orthodox parents who have made the painful decision to educate their children outside of the Jewish Day School system feel that such groups and prayer experiences are precisely what their children need to fully experience synagogue and Jewish communal life.

One Modern Orthodox rabbi, a parent of children with special needs, feels uncomfortable bringing his children to his own synagogue; yet, he and his children have been warmly welcomed and embraced "outside" of his community. He feels the neighborhood *Hassidishe shtiebel* understands and accepts his son—even if he is disruptive during the sermon or the repetition of the *amidah*. The Conservative Movement's Ramah camping movement, through its CampYofi Program at Ramah Darom, has been similarly accepting and inclusive. Yofi offers a week-long camp for children with autism and their families. Similarly, Ilana and her family have been warmly embraced by a smaller, more traditional Orthodox synagogue in their neighborhood; each Shabbat afternoon the rabbi and his wife invite Ilana to their home, where she socializes with and even babysits for their children. Modern Orthodox synagogues should similarly embrace differences and work toward accommodating children with special needs.

Al Pi Darko—*According to His or Her Way: Jewish Education for Children with Special Needs*

Most parents in the Orthodox community accept as a given that their children will receive a Jewish Day School education. When it comes to providing an appropriate Jewish education for children with special needs, families often find that choices are limited. There are many reasons for this. First, the term "special needs" encompasses diverse impairments, including learning issues, physical disabilities, mental retardation, autism, psychiatric disorders, and other genetic and acquired conditions. Approaches and philosophies toward education, even within the special needs communities, can vary widely—from those advocating full inclusion to those promoting separate classrooms.

A second reason that choices are limited is that schools lack the staffing and expertise to consider implementing special-needs programs. Teachers and therapists with training in special education, speech and lan-

guage therapy, psychology, physical therapy, and occupational therapy are required to support students with special needs.

Third, schools typically lack the financial resources for starting and running such specialized programs. The costs of providing a Day School education—even for "typical learners"—are never covered by tuition costs alone and can be prohibitive. Dr. Jed Luchow, Director of Special Education/Project SIR for the Board of Jewish Education of Greater New York, notes how complex and expensive providing such services can be. "When public schools need more money for services, they can raise taxes," remarks Luchow. Yeshivot and Day Schools cannot.

Families specifically seeking a Modern Orthodox approach to educating a child with special needs find that few programs exist. Some turn to Hareidi schools, where there is more general acceptance of all learners who are viewed as created in God's image. The recent movie, *Praying With Lior*, portrays the warm acceptance experienced by Lior Liebling, a young man with Down syndrome (and the son of two Reconstructionist rabbis) in a Philadelphia-area Hareidi yeshiva. Modern Orthodox parents of children with special needs have reported similar acceptance by the Hareidi world.

Some families feel that private special-needs schools (and in some cases, even Catholic schools) are better equipped to provide services to children with special needs. In the Northeast, for example, observant families sometimes opt for well-regarded schools such as Churchill and Gateway in Manhattan, Mary McDowell in Brooklyn, Windward in White Plains, New York, Eagle Hill in Greenwich, Connecticut, and the Cardinal Cushing School in Hanover, Massachussetts. This "trade off" means that families need to seek other avenues for providing Jewish education and Jewish socialization environments.

Fortunately, some Jewish community Day School programs do exist for educating children with special needs, and there are some successful initiatives supporting Jewish special education throughout the United States. Although specifically Orthodox-affiliated programs exist, families of children with special needs are more likely to cross denominational lines than they might for their other typically developing children.

Although it is impossible to highlight all such programs, I will mention some programs, mainly in the Northeast, in order to illustrate the various models and approaches currently offered. Many of the descriptions below are provided by the program; ability to live up to their claims are difficult to assess and are beyond the scope of this article.

In 1985, Rabbi Dr. Martin Schloss, currently the director of the Division of Day School Education for the Board of Jewish Education, and Dr. Sara Rubinow Simon founded the Consortium of Special Educators in Central Agencies for Jewish Education. The purpose of this group is to support special education programs in North American Jewish communities as well as to provide resources to Jewish special educators through professional networks. Members meet once a year to share ideas and materials to enhance and expand special education in Jewish educational settings.

Parents for Torah for All Children (PTACH) has supported children with learning differences from elementary school through high school for more than thirty years. PTACH programs exist at such schools as the Yeshiva University School for Girls and Chaim Berlin High School. Strides have also been made to sensitize and train teachers. PTACH's educational director, Dr. Judah Weller, has created the "Jewish Day Schools Attuned Program," based on the Schools Attuned Program, a nationally recognized professional development and service program, created by Dr. Mel Levine, Director of the Clinical Center for the Study of Development and Learning at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine at Chapel Hill. The Schools Attuned program covers eight neurodevelopmental constructs that affect learning—including attention, memory, language, motor skills, and social cognition. Several years ago, The Nash Family Foundation of New York City funded a grant to train 125 Jewish Day School educators in New York, Los Angeles, and other cities in the Schools Attuned program.

Kulanu Torah Academy in Long Island, New York, is a program dedicated for Jewish students with special needs, including students with Asperger syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, dyslexia, and Tourette's syndrome, as well as developmental disorders, attention disorders, learning disabilities, and physical challenges. Students receive educational services within the yeshiva environment from middle school through high school. In addition, Kulanu's Gesher Program is a three-year program initiative for 18- to 21-year-old students with special needs, which serves as a "bridge" from school to the world of work.

The Sinai Program in New Jersey offers schools for children with developmental disabilities and learning disabilities. According to their website, Sinai is sometimes referred to as a "school within a school." Although Sinai is independently operated and funded and each school has its own administration and staff, all of Sinai's schools are comprised of self-contained classes set within larger, typical community Jewish Day Schools, including

the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy and Yavneh Academy. This structure increases opportunities for mainstreaming within the host schools.

Yeshiva Education for Special Students (YESS!) is the only full-service, professional, special-education yeshiva elementary school in Queens, New York, serving children in grades K through 8 with learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, and language-processing disorders. According to their website, "It is the philosophy of YESS! that all Jewish children, regardless of their cognitive or physical challenges, have a place in the mainstream of the Jewish community." YESS! espouses individualized special education for general and Judaic studies. Mainstreaming and integration with the typically developing Yeshiva of Central Queens (YCQ) community are integral to the YESS! program.

Some Modern Orthodox schools have started programs to support students with a range of learning issues. Manhattan Day School in New York City has been offering support services for students in grades 1 through 8 with learning-based language disabilities since 1984. According to Sharon Miller, Director of Special Education, the program provides self-contained classes for between six and eleven students, who learn with one head teacher and one assistant teacher. Students learn basic skills in both secular and Jewish content areas, including reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, science, computers, organizational skills, Hebrew language, Bible, Talmud, and laws and customs. Students with Individual Education Programs (IEPs) often receive in-school services, such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, counseling, and physical therapy. The staff also includes special educators and school psychologists.

SAR Academy in Riverdale, New York, offers a program to support elementary and junior high school students with language-based learning disabilities. According to Rebecca Hirschfield, Director of Educational Support Services, the program was started, in part, to help keep students with learning issues in the Jewish Day School system. The SAR program is an inclusive educational initiative, designed to be able to meet the needs of children whose learning needs differ from their typically achieving peers. Children with special needs are placed in "inclusion" classrooms with typically developing children. The class is staffed by an additional teacher, who is a learning specialist. In the high school, students receive support through the Student Learning Center and may participate in a modified program, consisting of fewer periods per week of Talmud and Tanakh, and/or exemption from a foreign language requirement.

Ramaz School in Manhattan offers a Learning Center to support students. In the Lower School, students in need of remediation work individually or in small groups in the Learning Center. In the Middle School, students receive one-on-one remediation during the time they would otherwise be attending specialty classes such as music, art, or *parashat haShavua*. Students who have completed a formal external psychoeducational evaluation to document a learning disability are eligible for Learning Center services. Upper School students seeking the services of the Learning Center also must undergo psychoeducational evaluation; students may then be eligible for certain accommodations, including extended time for test-taking and laptops for use during exams. Based on the recommendations of the tester, students may also receive remediation from the Learning Center faculty.

A unique Boston-area program, Gateways: Access to Jewish Education, offers several programs for Jewish students with a wide range of special needs. Gateways provides a Jewish education to children with moderate to severe disabilities who are not able to receive one in a typical classroom setting (for example, children with autism spectrum disorder, hearing and visual impairment, developmental delay, cerebral palsy, and/or genetic disorders). Gateways also works with students in Jewish Day Schools across the denominational spectrum, including the Chabad Day School of Sharon, Maimonides School, JCDS, New England Hebrew Academy, Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston, South Area Solomon Schechter Day School, Striar Hebrew Academy (SHAS), The Rashi School, and Torah Academy. Within each Day School, Gateways staff (comprised of speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and reading and learning specialists) provide extra support and assistance. Gateways works with students to help improve their academic and social skills and generalizing strategies in the classroom. In addition, the therapists assist teachers with curriculum modifications and provide teachers with professional development, including weekly coaching. For students who need more intensive instruction to develop reading and writing skills, Gateways provides an intensive alternative language arts curriculum to the classroom. This class focuses on explicit teaching of skills, including reading comprehension and decoding, written language, and word study (phonics, spelling, and vocabulary). Rabbi Mendel Lewitin is pleased with what Gateways has accomplished in his Striar Hebrew Academy. “Gateways has sensitized us to the fact that children have unique needs—from enrichment to remediation—

and even helped remove the stigma associated with asking for special-educational services. Now, parents are comfortable seeking support, and all students are developing a deeper understanding of their peers."

Sulam, established in 1998, is the only non-profit Jewish educational organization in the Greater Washington area for children who require specialized services for learning needs. By collaborating with Jewish Day Schools, Sulam educates children with diverse needs alongside their peers in a Jewish Day School setting. Sulam also provides adjunct educational services to high-school students at the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy.

Another non-Day School alternative is MATAN: The Gift of Jewish Learning For Every Child, whose mission is "to give the gift of Jewish learning to every child, regardless of ability." MATAN provides support to children, teachers, and families through teacher workshops, school consultation, program development, consultation with families, curriculum development and modification, behavior management, community presentations, and neuropsychological assessments. MATAN works with synagogues and provides after-school Talmud Torah-equivalent programs for children with special needs. MATAN also offers teacher training and provides consultation to families and synagogues.

Youth Groups and Summer Camps

Parents recognize that their child's Jewish education is comprised of more than the school experience. Opportunities to participate in the richness of Jewish communal and synagogue life are extremely important to a child's Jewish and social development.

Yachad/National Jewish Council for Disabilities (NJCD) includes individuals with disabilities (ages 8 through senior adult) in Jewish programming across the United States and Canada. Yachad members participate in Shabbatons at various Orthodox synagogues. Yachad Shabbatons are generally staffed by high-school and college-age Orthodox youth, allowing for socialization between typical and disabled peers.

The Jewish Community Center of Manhattan and other Jewish Community Centers across the country offer programs that focus on providing Jewish cultural programming for children and young adults with varying needs. Initiatives include programs for school-age children such as after-school or Sunday programs, summer camps, sibling workshops, assistive technology, lectures and support programs for caregivers, and a

Special Needs school fair. The JCC in Manhattan also offers a program for young adults featuring Sunday outings, lounges, drama therapy, technology training, and career development.

The Friendship Circle, founded in 1994 by the Lubavitch Foundation of Michigan—and now existing in many communities nationwide—offers programs to provide assistance and support to the families of children with special needs as well as to individuals and families struggling with addiction, isolation, and other crises. Teen volunteers are an integral part of their program serving individuals with special needs.

According to The Foundation for Jewish Camp, "No experience is more powerful, thrilling, or transformative than Jewish overnight summer camp." Various Orthodox summer camp programs offer socialization and Jewish immersion experiences for children with special needs. Camp HASC, a summer program of the Hebrew Academy for Special Children, provides a seven-week overnight camping experience to over 300 children with mental and physical handicaps. HASC is specifically dedicated to children with special needs.

Yachad b'Nesher is a Yachad/NJCD program within Camp Nesher, a camp for typically developing children. Yachad b'Nesher specializes in mainstreaming boys and girls who are developmentally disabled. There are accessible bunks on each campus set up for these campers, their special needs, and their specially trained staff. Yachad campers participate daily in all activities with different bunks.

Yachad also offers Yad B'Yad travel programs, where typically developing high school students and members of Yachad together tour the East Coast, the West Coast, or Israel.

The Tikvah Program was founded nearly forty years ago at Camp Ramah in New England and now runs programs at several Ramah camps throughout the United States and Canada. Although Camp Ramah is the camping arm of the Conservative Movement, the Tikvah Program has historically attracted a significant population of its campers from Orthodox homes. In the Tikvah Program, campers are included in all aspects of the rich Jewish summer camping experience and benefit from the richness of "immersion" in Jewish communal life. Prayers are modified for the needs of the campers and generally involve singing, dancing, and repetition. Following spirited weekday morning prayers, campers begin and end breakfast with the appropriate blessings, return to bunks for *nikayon* (clean up), and participate in daily activities such as Jewish learning,

Hebrew instruction, swimming, sports, arts and crafts, and vocational training. Tikvah campers even take a turn leading the camp in Shabbat evening services, and they perform a Jewish-themed play, partially in Hebrew, for the entire camp.

A Modern Orthodox Action Plan

Clearly, the Modern Orthodox community can do more to help make people with special needs feel more fully included in synagogue and communal life. A move toward full inclusion will require working collaboratively with others in the Jewish community (often across the "denominational divide"), continued education of rabbis, leaders and community members, and ongoing congregational and communal self-assessment.

Working Collaboratively with Others in the Jewish Community

The Jewish disabilities world has been very successful in breaking down denominational barriers. I heard a story of two Philadelphia-area Jewish parents of children with autism speaking very comfortably and openly—one was a Lubavitch rabbi, and the other was a female Reconstructionist rabbi. The chances of these two interacting in another context are slim. This heartwarming anecdote illustrates the potential for Jews of various backgrounds to work together. Successful collaboration already takes place in many communities across the United States.

In Westchester, New York, Carol Corbin is the chairperson of the Westchester Special Needs Roundtable. She is also the coordinator of Synagogue Inclusion, which is part of the UJA of New York Caring Commission. In the first year of the Roundtable, nearly forty Westchester-area rabbis and parents from across the denominations, as well as directors of special-needs programs, JCCs, and various agencies, came together. They determined that the focus of the initial phase of their work should be on teacher training and congregational sensitivity. As their work has continued, the Roundtable has addressed ways to make congregations sensitive to populations with special needs. They have addressed such topics as building access and the social, emotional, and educational needs of those with special needs.

Shelly Christensen, Program Manager for the Jewish Community

Inclusion Program for People with Disabilities (a program of Jewish Family and Children's Service of Minneapolis, Minnesota), is a frequent presenter across the country on the topic of inclusion. Christenson, author of "Jewish Community Guide to Inclusion of People with Disabilities," has worked with synagogues and agencies to help create awareness and action. Synagogues across the denominations are collaborating in an effort to serve those with special needs, and are taking part in "February 2009 is Jewish Disability Awareness Month."

Following her presentation several years ago, each synagogue appointed a lay leader to a community liaison committee. Each committee meeting takes place at a different synagogue, and committee members tour different synagogues and discuss issues of accessibility. Christensen reports that members of the Orthodox community have been very involved with the committee, and that synagogues and schools have embraced inclusion. Synagogues of all denominations may wish to consider starting inclusion committees, which function much as social action, Israel action, and ritual committees.

The Modern Orthodox community also has numerous opportunities to join the larger Jewish community in workshops and conferences. For example, the Partnership for Jewish Life and Learning in the Washington, D.C., area has a Department of Special Needs and Disability committee, which organizes a yearly conference, "Opening the Gates of Torah: Including People with Disabilities in the Jewish Community." Their most recent conference featured twelve sessions on inclusion and attracted more than 350 people. In addition, this organization provides information, resources, consultation, and professional development to parents, teachers, and administrators in preschools, congregational schools, and Day Schools in community. Their extensive range of services strives to "help ensure that every member of the Jewish community, children and adults alike, has access to the range of social, educational, and religious opportunities that the Washington area has to offer."

Modern Orthodoxy, with its long, impressive history of collaborating with the larger Jewish community, has an unprecedented opportunity to take the lead in the area of inclusion and accommodation of special needs. This willingness to work collaboratively and diplomatically can be useful in helping the community address sensitive issues such as religious and dietary policy in Jewish group residences.

Education of Rabbis, Leaders, and Community Members

Pulpit rabbis are often sensitive to the diverse needs of their membership. Yet each rabbi can point to the moment he was "sensitized" to the needs of a congregant he hadn't previously "noticed." These needs frequently come up when a family is considering the bar or bat mitzvah of a child with learning disabilities or physical disabilities. One rabbi sheepishly recalls being asked if there were any people in his congregation with visual impairments. He reported that he didn't think so. When asked if his synagogue offered Braille siddurim or special seating for members with visual impairments, he reported that it did not. He was then asked if he felt there was any connection between the lack of accommodations and the lack of attendance by those with visual impairments. And, as noted earlier, parents of children with autism are often uncomfortable bringing their children into the sanctuary for fear they will be disruptive.

While parents are instrumental in educating rabbis, rabbinical seminaries can offer "disability awareness" as part of the rabbinical school curriculum. Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh Yeshiva and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School in Manhattan, recently brought the entire rabbinical school graduating class to a community-wide inclusion conference, held at the JCC of the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Linzer reports that the education of rabbinical students was encouraged by Shelly and Reuven Cohen, Manhattan residents, who had spent years seeking and developing educational and camp programs for Nathaniel, their son with special needs. When Nathaniel died, the Cohens approached Rabbi Linzer about possibly funding a program in their son's memory, with the goal of training rabbis about developmental and physical disabilities. This program is now part of every YCT student's rabbinical education. These rabbis will surely go out to their respective communities more knowledgeable and more sensitive to people with a wide range of special needs.

Ongoing Congregational and Communal Self-Assessment

Each synagogue has an opportunity and a responsibility to determine whether it is doing enough to meet the needs of people with special needs. This may involve surveying members as to their unique needs and assessing accessibility in their synagogues—from entrances, to the women's section, to the reader's desk.

Conclusion

Meeting the needs of those in our community with special needs involves a sincere belief that all Jews are created *beTselem Elokim*, and that each person has a right to respect and full inclusion in our communities. The Modern Orthodox community is in a unique position to champion efforts, within our synagogues and within our communities, to expand educational and socialization efforts. It is not our job to complete the task—but neither are we free to desist from it!

A Peculiar Point in Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch's Essays on Education

ELLIOT RESNICK

(Elliot Resnick is a staff reporter for The Jewish Press. *He studies Modern Jewish History at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University.)*

Despite the rhetoric emanating from certain camps of Orthodox Judaism, studying secular knowledge *lishmah*—knowledge for knowledge's sake—is a widely accepted notion among Jewish thinkers. In fact, virtually none of the great Jewish personalities who discuss the value of secular knowledge—from Rav Saadiah Gaon and Rambam to Rav Kook and Rav Soloveitchik—speak of its utilitarian value. Rambam does not praise Aristotle's philosophy for its salary-increasing powers, nor does Rav Kook laud university studies because of their utility in getting into a good law school.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch is a classic example of this knowledge-*lishmah* school of thought. Not only does he extol the spiritual value of secular studies, he explicitly derides those who see knowledge as a tool in advancing one's career. Two quotations (many more can be adduced) from his essays should suffice to establish this point. In "The Relevance of Secular Studies," Rav Hirsch writes:

> [A]ny supporter of education and culture should deplore the fact that when these secular studies are evaluated in terms of their usefulness to the young, too much stress is often placed on so-called practical utility and necessity. Under such circumstances, the young are in danger of losing the pure joy of acquiring knowledge for its own sake, so that they will no longer take pleasure in the moral and spiritual benefits to be obtained by study.

And in "The Joy of Learning," Rav Hirsch has this to say:

> [W]e forget that by hurrying to impose the yoke of the materialistic, or, as we like to put it euphemistically, the practical aims of life upon the dawn and springtime of childhood and early youth, we only deprive our children prematurely of the bloom of flowering youth and nip our children's spiritual yearnings in the bud. Instead of encouraging our children to get wisdom for its own sake, we raise them to become only clever and shrewd, judging everything in the light of self-interest and respecting only those intellectual and spiritual pursuits that are likely to yield the highest dividends in terms of material gain. A generation raised on such a philosophy of life will never be able to experience that true joy of learning, which regards knowledge itself as the supreme reward.

Rav Hirsch also stresses that educators must not give their students the impression that their secular studies are simply a necessary concession to modern times. Such an impression is both incorrect and harmful, for "[o]nly ideas rooted in genuine conviction will be received with enthusiasm. Products of compromise can expect no more than grudging acceptance forced by considerations of expediency."

Thus far, Rav Hirsch merely emerges as another proponent—albeit an enthusiastic and vocal one—in the long line of Jewish thinkers who see inherent value in studying secular knowledge.

What distinguishes Rav Hirsch, however, and what makes him a fascinating case study is that more than once in his essays on education, he cites statements of Hazal, our Sages, regarding learning *Torah lishmah* to bolster his position that one should study *secular knowledge lishmah*.

For instance, in an essay discussing general—not specifically Torah—education, "Ethical Training in the Classroom," Rav Hirsch cites *Pirkei Avot* 2:6, "*v'lo am ha'arets hassid*" and remarkably translates this aphorism as "[A]n uneducated man will not attain the moral grandeur of selfless devotion to duty." Traditionally, the term *am ha'arets* applies to someone ignorant vis-à-vis Torah, not general, knowledge. And yet, Rav Hirsch either ignores or pretends not to know this.

Even if Rav Hirsch understands *am ha'arets* in a nontraditional sense, he also applies other statements of Hazal to secular knowledge that almost certainly apply *exclusively* to the study of Torah. For example, he cites *Kiddushin* 40b, "*Limud gadol she-haLimud meivi lidei ma'aseh*," and translates this statement as "Knowledge has priority because only the right kind

of knowledge can give rise to the right practice." Two sentences later he paraphrases *Pirkei Avot* 4:7 as "[I]t was considered a desecration of knowledge and the striving after knowledge to use learning as a 'crown of self-glorification' or a 'tool for making a living.'" Rav Hirsch applies these quotations to secular studies without even hinting that in their original context they refer specifically to the study of Torah.

Nor does Rav Hirsch limit himself to select quotations. In the same essay he makes this general statement about Hazal:

> [O]ur Sages were enemies of ignorance. They regarded education, intellectual enlightenment, and the acquisition of knowledge as the first of all moral commandments. They viewed the dissemination of intellectual enlightenment among all classes of the population as the prime concern of the nation, and the training of a child's mind as the first and most sacred duty of fatherhood. They considered it a matter of conscience for every Jewish father to see that his child should not remain a boor and *am ha'arets*; no Jewish child must be allowed to grow up as an ignorant, uneducated person.

Frankly, this is staggering. Rav Hirsch talks of Hazal as enemies of ignorance, generally speaking, not as enemies of *Torah* ignorance—even though most of Hazal's statements concerning education surely apply to Torah education *only*. Nor does Rav Hirsch apparently feel the need to explain himself (and an explanation is desperately needed, especially keeping in mind the vast difference between Torah study and other fields of knowledge in the minds of many Orthodox Jews). Rav Hirsch never says something to the effect of, "Although our Sages speak of Torah education, we can apply the principle behind their statements to other fields of study as well."

While Rav Hirsch's employment of Hazal in speaking of secular knowledge is most pronounced in his essay, "Ethical Training in the Classroom," he blurs the lines between Torah and secular knowledge in other essays as well. For example, in "Education in the Rabbinic Era," which concerns the educational values of the mishnaic and talmudic sages, Rav Hirsch concludes by asking, "If the pure delight in knowledge for its own sake should, once again, become the common heritage of an entire nation, might it not contribute, in some fashion, to the uplifting, the healing, and the greater happiness of all mankind?" Again, Rav Hirsch speaks of "knowledge"—generically—even though the mishnaic and talmudic sages' educational values concern Torah knowledge.

In "Talmudic Judaism and Society," Rav Hirsch, citing *Shabbat* 31a, writes that the second question Heaven asks a person after he or she dies is, "[D]id you set aside a fixed time each day for continuing your studies?" The actual question, as found in the Talmud, is "*Kavata itim laTorah?*—Did you set aside fixed times for the study of Torah?" Rav Hirsch somehow morphs "Torah" into "studies." Further blurring the lines, Rav Hirsch cites this statement of Hazal among a series of other talmudic statements, all of which concern generic knowledge, *not* Torah knowledge.

Finally, in "The Joy of Learning," Rav Hirsch attempts to convince parents of the need to instill a love of learning in their children even though he describes his era as "so materialistic, and materialistic concerns are given such prominence…". He contrasts his age's attitude to knowledge with "the spirit of true scholarship, which, until very recently, was cherished by the members of the Jewish nation." Of course, this "true scholarship" cherished by Jews was Torah scholarship. Indeed, in subsequent sentences in this essay Rav Hirsch writes specifically of "Jewish scholarship." Nonetheless, Rav Hirsch is less than crystal clear in this essay when he employs, without qualification, the words "scholarship" and "knowledge."

With this fascinating discovery in hand, what now? How does one explain what appears to be an intriguing misuse of Hazal and Jewish history?

My short answer to this dilemma is "I don't know." One can write this apparent distortion off to Rav Hirsch's lifelong goal of winning hearts and minds to Orthodox Judaism. However, such an answer is less than satisfactory in that it assumes a certain dishonesty on Rav Hirsch's part. Therefore, I offer the following possible explanation.

Rav Hirsch obviously knew that he took a logical jump in applying statements of Hazal regarding Torah study to the study of general knowledge. Nonetheless, he considered the step more of a logical "skip" than a logical "leap." In other words, unlike the vast chasm many Orthodox Jews currently see between Torah and general knowledge, Rav Hirsch views the two fields of study as basically similar to one another. Both concern God's wisdom. The student of Torah studies the Divine word and the student of nature, history, and the people in it studies the Divine design. Both are divinity students.

Moreover, in his essays on education, Rav Hirsch repeatedly posits that discovering the laws governing nature should inspire people to search

for the laws given to govern *their* lives—the moral law. In Rav Hirsch's terminology, the laws of the Creator should lead people to the laws of the Lawgiver. And by "obeying this moral law of his own free choice, man joins the great chorus of creatures that serve God."

If, then, the proper study of Torah, nature, and history (where one sees God's guiding hand) are all closely intertwined with the study of God's moral law, and if "[i]n the view of Judaism, truth is one and indivisible," Rav Hirsch's out-of-context utilization of Hazal's educational statements becomes more understandable. In his mind, secular studies represent another path in one's Divine service. If so, truly how can one misuse such knowledge as a "crown for self-aggrandizement" or as "a tool for making a living"? May Hazal not have had these studies in mind when they argued, "*lo am ha'arets hassid*"? Jewish learning is, after all, in Rav Hirsch's opinion, "so broad and universal in character that it happily welcomes any other fields of study that aspire toward an understanding of the realities of nature and history." And if Hazal did not have such studies in mind, are the two not similar enough to, in good faith, apply a quotation said regarding Torah to general knowledge? Very likely, Rav Hirsch felt the answer to this question was an emphatic *yes*.

Rabbi Kook and the Modernization of Judaism

Pinchas Polonsky

(Dr. Pinchas Polonsky, a mathematician and sociologist, is one of the founders of Machanaim, *a Russian-Jewish educational network in Israel that promotes religious Zionism. He was actively involved in the Refusenik Movement and underground Jewish educational network in the former Soviet Union. A prolific writer, Dr. Polonsky has authored 15 books, numerous articles, and internet and audio courses on Judaism. This article is an excerpt from his book* Rav Kook: The Man and His Teaching, *published in 2006 by* Machanaim. *This article is translated from Russian by Lise Brody.)*

Abraham-Yitzhak ha-Cohen Kook is, without doubt, one of the most celebrated rabbis of the twentieth century. He is known to most people, however, only as the creator of the philosophy of religious Zionism, and we frequently overlook the fact that the foundations of his teachings reflect a deep modernization of Jewish faith itself and of its approach to an array of contemporary problems.

Rabbi Kook was a poet by nature, not a university professor. Thus, he believed that mysteries are explained only by other mysteries. This approach makes a systematic study of Rabbi Kook's philosophy difficult. In the following article, I will attempt to outline Kook's philosophy in more concrete terms.

A Step in the Development of Judaism

According to Rabbi Kook, one vital step in the evolution of Judaism is the revival of those sparks of Divine light that have hitherto been lost, or that were insufficiently realized in the process of historical development. It

must be noted that this article represents a simplification of Rabbi Kook's views. For more detail, see Rabbi Kook's article, "The War of Ideas and Faiths" (*Orot*, p. 129; see also *Shemona Kevatzim* 1:16).

The central problem Rabbi Kook faced was the wave of Jewish souls leaving Judaism for various ideological movements alien to it. This wave was particularly strong in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when many deserted yeshivas closed their doors and Jewish youth turned en masse to secular Zionism, socialism, or other "ism." According to the mainstream Orthodox view, these departing youth were "lost and mistaken;" the problem was thought to lie in them—they were not taught correctly, they did not fully understand their traditions, and so forth. Thus, the task of religious leadership was to influence these souls through explanation and teaching so that they would return to Judaism.

It was at this moment that Rabbi Kook proposed an entirely different approach to the problem. According to him, the reason Jews were rejecting the Torah lay not only in the error of their ways, but also in the flaws of the modern religious world—in Judaism as it existed at the time. In order to bring about the return to Judaism of those who had fled, it was necessary not to drag them back to the Judaism that they had rejected, but to correct the defects within Judaism itself. Then those Jewish souls would gradually return of their own accord to the renewed Judaism of tomorrow. In other words, Rabbi Kook regarded the exodus of Jews from Judaism as an indicator of the presence of flaws in Judaism; furthermore, he saw it as a sign that the time was ripe for correcting these defects and believed that social/historical circumstances required that we do so without delay.

Basing his approach on Kabbala, Rabbi Kook maintained that if a large number of Jews rushed to a particular ideology under the banner of morality and virtue, this meant that despite its apparent distance from Judaism, or even hostility to it, that ideology must contain a spark of Divine light. The anti-religious appearance of this alien ideology would merely be its shell, which fed off the energy of the spark inside. It is that spark, not the shell, that attracts the souls of those who turn away from Judaism, as Jewish souls, on the whole, are drawn to good and reach for it innately. Furthermore, the "breach"—the spontaneous, morally grounded mass movement of the Jewish people—is itself an indicator of the ripeness of the spark, a sign that it is time for its activation.

The Teaching of Rabbi Kook as Torat haKelal, *Teaching for the Entire Nation*

Of course, Rabbi Kook did not believe that every Jew is an entirely upright person who strives for good in every deed. We know perfectly well that among Jews there are plenty of fools and criminals. However, when a large group of Jews leave their tradition for another ideology, we see not the rejection of the Torah by an individual Jew, but a socially significant movement. Such a movement is always accompanied by a sense of moral righteousness declared and subjectively felt by its participants. Without this sense, a social movement cannot develop.

Rabbi Kook believed that a human sense of morality, which is the manifestation of God in the individual, is the world's driving force. Therefore, he viewed a spontaneous, morally grounded social movement by the Jewish people as a definitive manifestation of the role of the Jews as the chosen people—even though the form that this manifestation takes might directly contradict the directives of the Torah—and held that we must, in the end, view the situation as "*hitgalut Elokim,*" the revelation of the Divine.

Thus, Rabbi Kook's teaching is a *Torat haKelal*, a teaching of national unity, viewing the Jewish people as an integral whole, capable only as a single entity of bringing the Torah to the world, and seeing disparate groups within the Jewish people as essential parts of the whole.

Flaws in Judaism and the Process of their Correction

Continuing our analysis of the outline for Judaism's development, it is important to note that the ideas presented so far—that inside every shell are concealed sparks of holiness and Divine light, that the shell feeds off the energy of this spark, and that Jewish souls carry within themselves the role of the chosen and the attraction to good—do not constitute the unique and truly revolutionary teaching of Rabbi Kook, as all of these ideas have been stated and discussed many times in Kabbala and in Hassidism.

The true revolution in the thinking put forth by Rabbi Kook lies in the proposition that this situation arises due not only to the attraction of the sparks, but, above all, to a defect in Judaism as it exists, evidenced in the lack or insufficient activity of a given spark within it.

The process of activating the spark involves several stages. The first step is to extract the sparks from the shell (see *Shemona Kevatzim* 1:71, also *Orot*, p. 63, passage 9). Guided by our Divine moral intuition, we must explore and determine the precise nature of the Divine spark that is drawing masses of Jewish souls to a particular ideology. To do this, it is necessary not only to approach the views of those who have joined the new ideology or movement with extreme respect and deep attention, but also to demonstrate genuine sympathy for the "ism" itself.

In the language of Kabbala, we must feel the Divine spark locked within the foreign ideology. Clearly, in order to extract the spark from any specific "ism," it is necessary, while staying within the framework of Judaism, to show sympathy toward the "ism," as sympathy and empathy are the first steps toward understanding. But any individual religious person may not sympathize with every ideology. Some may simply be too deeply repulsive to him or her. This merely shows that this person is not equipped to extract the spark of Divine light from those particular "isms." Rather, that person must work with those ideologies that he or she values, as only in them will he or she be able to find the spark of Divine light. It is impossible for any one person to sense the sparks in all "isms," and it is wrong to attempt to spread oneself so thin. Every person must focus on what is genuinely close to his or her Divine soul.

At this stage, those who, in the course of their lives, have spent time near to or even within the foreign ideology being examined may play an especially important role. In particular, when Western values are integrated into Judaism—or, to put it more precisely and formally, when those sparks of Divine light that nourish the values of contemporary Western culture are revived within Judaism—an important role must be played both by Jews from Western countries and by Jews from Russia, who have been educated in the crucible of totalitarianism and communism.

The process of identifying the Divine sparks in secular ideologies is only the beginning of our work since, as stated above, we cannot integrate that spark into Judaism directly. Such a heavy-handed transplant would lead to a rejection of the tissue, which could even result in the death of the entire organism. Therefore, unlike Reform Judaism, which swallows the spark whole from the other teachings and so takes in with it elements of shell that radically contradict the Jewish approach and tradition, the Modern Orthodoxy of Rabbi Kook strives before all else to find this spark's

native, authentic manifestation in Judaism. Orthodoxy must seek out the spark and its true Jewish form in the fundamental tenets of Judaism—that is, in the complete and ideal Judaism, encompassing all the ideas contained in all of its texts and oral traditions. To do this work, one must not only be an expert in Torah, halakha, and aggada, but one must also have the particular wisdom to sense behind the traditionally expressed formulations the deep contemporary content that accurately reflects their Divine light while resonating in today's world.

Next, the given spark must be cultivated within a renewed Judaism. The process of the cultivation of sparks is carried out in our model through modern Judaism, as it does not alter the existing, historically formed Judaism, but supplements and corrects it. The concept presented here is not Reformism, which is associated with the abolition of ritual commandments, but Modern Orthodoxy, in which a process of development is continually taking place alongside the preservation of tradition. Judaism loses nothing, but only increases.

As a result of the activation of the spark, the defect in Judaism is corrected, and Judaism takes a new developmental step. In place of the existing Judaism of today comes the Judaism of tomorrow. Furthermore, because the spark whose light had been attracting the souls who left is now restored and active within Judaism, these souls begin to return to Judaism (see *Shemona Kevatzim* 8:51).

> Of course, we do not in any way mean to say that those who will return to Judaism are the very same people who left it earlier. The step in development described here occurs over the course of several decades, and those who have left have left. At the individual level, a return to Judaism is possible at any moment; but the return of a whole generation is impossible without the restoration of that spark that gives life to the new ideology and that triggered the exodus from Judaism in the first place—a process that must ripen over many decades. Finally, people with "kindred souls" to those who left earlier now return, as they are the souls attracted to this particular spark—but this takes place two to four generations. In other words, it is their spiritual grandchildren and great grandchildren who return to Judaism.

Example #1: The Integration of Sparks from Zionism

We will now use examples to illustrate how this model functions in practice.

For the first example, we will examine a fairly simple "ism," with regard to which the above model has been fully carried out from beginning to end: secular Zionism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, "Judaism" and "Zionism" were not only contradictory, but in many ways hostile to one another. At that time, the slogan of secular Zionism was, "We will become a nation like all others." This entailed, in particular, the abandonment of religious principles as a basis for Jewish self-identification in favor of a civil-national identity. Because of this, many rabbis condemned secular Zionism as an attempt to destroy the Torah and traditional Judaism.

Under these circumstances, Rabbi Kook took an entirely different position. He maintained that we should not berate secular Zionism for being outwardly wrong, that is, for straying from the Jewish heritage, the Torah, and God. Instead of focusing on the outward defects of Zionism, he argues, we should seek out its inner truth, find its Divine spark, and correct existing Judaism accordingly by integrating into it the spark that had attracted Jewish souls to secular Zionism. As Rabbi Kook writes,

> The *nefesh* [that is, the lower part of the soul in kabbalistic tradition] of sinners of Israel in the "footsteps of Messiah"—those who join lovingly the causes of the Jewish People, Land of Israel and the national revival—is more corrected than the *nefesh* of the perfect believers of Israel who lack the advantage of the essential feeling for the good of the people and the building of the nation and land. But the *ruah* [that is, the higher part of the soul] is much more corrected in the God-fearing and Torah observant. . . . The *tikkun* [correction] will come about through the "Light of Messiah" . . . Israel should bond together, and the *nefesh* of the observant will be corrected by the perfection of *nefesh* of the better transgressors, in regard to communal affairs, and material and spiritual ideals attained to human understanding and perception. Whereas the *ruah* of these transgressors will be corrected by the influence of the God-fearing, observant and great of faith. And thereby both groups will receive Great Light. . . . The higher *tsaddikim*, masters of *neshama* [the third and highest part of soul], will be the uniting conduits, through which the light of the *nefesh* will flow from left to right, and the light of the *ruah* from right to left. . . . This will be accomplished through the light of Messiah, who is David himself, who erected the yoke of *teshuvah*. For the sake of David, Your servant, do not rebuff Your Messiah." (*Arfilei Tohar*, § 21, published also in *Orot*)

The situation was somewhat simplified by the fact that this spark con-

sisted of the desire to resurrect a full and true Jewish national life in the land of Israel. Not only does this ideology *not* contradict Judaism, as many mistakenly believed at the beginning of the twentieth century, but also, on the contrary, is an essential condition for Judaism's further existence and development. Therefore, Rabbi Kook focused on the study of those sources in Judaism that address the religious significance of claiming the Land of Israel. In his articles and books, he conducted a thorough and deep analysis of these sources, and he made this analysis the central component of his educational program at the Zionist "world-wide Yeshiva" (*Merkaz haRav*) that he founded. After his death, Rabbi Kook's students, and especially his son, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook, brought up a new generation of rabbis and religious activists at that yeshiva, for whom Zionism—the claiming of the Land of Israel and active participation in its government—was an integral part of the living Judaism that they studied, taught, and abided by. Graduates of the yeshiva *Merkaz haRav* transmitted the same active contemporary Zionist spirit to their students and to the religious circles they influenced.

Since this teaching was in keeping with the times, it began to spread far and wide. All of this took place as an undercurrent over the course of nearly half a century, from the 1920s to the 1970s. And when, after the Six Day War (1967) and especially after the Yom Kippur War (1973), the question of creating Jewish settlements in the territories of Judea, Samaria, and Gaza came up, the tens of thousands of students of Rabbi Kook's school, united in the movement Gush Emunim, were the driving force behind the new wave of Zionism.

In other words, in the 1970s and 1980s, the religious Zionists—that is, the adherents of Modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Kook's school—became the leading Zionist group in the country. The perceptions of society were transformed: People's ideas of "Zionism" and "Judaism" ceased to contradict one another and drew closer. The struggle for the settlement of the Land of Israel by Jews took on a religious character far different from the anti-religious character it had had at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a result, those who had a Zionist soul, who cared about Jewish settlement in Israel, began to draw closer to Judaism, rather than to distance themselves from it. One could say that in the late twentieth century, Zionism "returned" to Judaism the souls that it had "borrowed" at the beginning of the century.

As a result of all of these processes, the right wing of Israeli society (that is, people who seek to settle and claim all of the territory of the Land of Israel) is today significantly closer to religious values than the left wing. This distinction is so strong that the expression "religious right" has become a stock phrase in the Israeli political lexicon. In the 1920s, it was the opposite—those concerned with the settlement of Israel were significantly farther from religion than those who were indifferent to the issue. In this way Judaism has completed a step in its development, having extracted a spark from secular Zionism. A side-effect of drawing "Zionist souls" to religion was, in particular, that hardly any such souls remained on the atheist side; this has led to the fact that today secularism is most often associated with a rejection of Zionism, or "post-Zionism."

Example #2: The Integration of Sparks from Atheism

We will now examine a different example, one that may appear shocking at first, but that nevertheless fits within Rabbi Kook's overall model for approaching secular ideologies. Specifically, we will apply the system described above to atheism. We will attempt to carry out the process of extracting a spark of Divine light and furthering the development of Judaism by means of atheism.

Rabbi Kook writes,

> Atheism displays the power of life. Therefore, the real spiritual heroes extract sparks of great kindness from their atheism and turn its bitterness into sweetness. (*Arfilei Tohar*, § 120)

> The destructive wind of disbelief will purify all the filth that gathered in the lower realm of the spirit of faith . . . all will grow in purity and strength, in supernal holiness, from the firm, pure exalted kernel, which no negativity can affect. Its light will shine as a new light upon Zion with a wondrous greatness. (*Shemona Kevatzim* 1:476, *Orot haTehiyah*, ch. 51, p. 199)

Atheism, according to our model, fully qualifies as an outside "ism." It stands in opposition to Judaism, displaying the banner of rejection of religion—yet Jews join its ranks in significant numbers, proclaiming its morality and worth.

Because in Rabbi Kook's time atheism was actively growing and attracting supporters, he devoted a significant amount of attention to its analysis

in his works. As always in his approach to a foreign ideology, Rabbi Kook did not focus on a critique of atheism's mistakes, its rejection of God and tradition, and so forth. This would have been trivial, and it was attended to at the time by much of the religious establishment. Rather, he attempted to understand where the deep attraction of atheism lay, what was in it that drew Jewish souls, and how Judaism needed to evolve so that, instead of leaving, souls of this type would find their rightful place in it.

What is the "spiritual core" of atheism, its Divine spark? In order to find this, we can ask the following question: From where do members of this group derive pride? For pride reveals the correlation between our achievements and our Divine spirit. We take pride in those achievements that gladden our Divine spirit, seeing them as truly worthy. In other words, the point of pride of any ideology signals what must be culled from it, as it is the root of the attraction of the Divine soul. This, therefore, is where we must seek out the concealed spark.

In what, then, do atheists take pride, specifically as atheists? Of course, I am not speaking here of those atheists who have never given either religion or atheism a serious thought, and who were simply taught to be atheists. Any movement has fools in plenty; we must not focus on these, but on those who think for themselves. We speak here of real atheists—intelligent, thinking, and active. In what do they take pride *as atheists*? Based on my own acquaintance with atheists and their books, I believe that the atheist prides himself on being a doubting, critically thinking person. The atheist says: "You, the religious, merely believe. But I doubt. I cannot unquestioningly accept all of this. I am a skeptic." It is not for nothing that a conversion to atheism in Israel is called *hazarah beShe'ela*, literally, a "return to the question" (as opposed to coming to religion, which is traditionally known as *hazarah beTeshuva*, or "return to the return," which can also be read as "return to the answer"). With this formulation, atheists establish themselves in opposition: "You, the religious, have the answer (*teshuva*)—but we have the question (*she'ela*). This is their source of pride, that they "have the question." We are not discussing simple questions, of course, such as what is or is not kosher, but the fundamental and eternal questions of existence. The atheist stresses: "You are attracted to answers, we to questions."

Thus, the true atheist has skepticism as his or her core conviction and declares him or herself to be a critical thinker who has unanswered ques-

tions to which no one can have ready answers. Is this core of atheism attractive? Picture two teachers, one who says, "Come to me. I have answers for everything," and one who says, "Come to me. I have questions and doubts for every problem." Which of them seems more spiritually advanced? Whose lectures would you wish to attend? The skeptic's, of course. We know that there are no ready answers to the truly complicated questions. We also know that answers are very often superficial and questions much deeper. Therefore, if one says that he has answers, and the other that he has questions, we will, of course, go to the one who has questions.

By means of this analysis, with the help of our own religious intuition, we have found the spark of Divine light in atheism. Our intuition clearly confirms that questions and doubts are a great thing, and that in them there lies the source of atheism's spiritual attraction.

Does this component—unanswerable questions—exist within Judaism? Clearly, in Judaism as it existed 100 to 200 years ago, the emphasis was primarily on the "answers." Today, unfortunately, within the popular, rather primitive Judaism with which certain demagogues try to "capture" the masses, the stress is also frequently placed on the answers. But if we are deeply convinced of the religious importance of unanswerable questions, then let us look to ideal Judaism and try to find out where within it the central questions and doubts lie.

The first thing that comes to mind is the book of Job. Job is a righteous and good man, yet he is showered with misfortunes: the destruction of his possessions, the death of his loved ones. And so, three of his friends come to him, and after the period of silent mourning, they begin to ask: Where is justice in the world? Why does the righteous man suffer? Job's friends offer highly reasonable explanations, but Job rejects them all, telling his friends that they are wrong, that they understand nothing. The discussion continues for the length of the book, about 40 chapters. At the end of the book a voice rings out from the heavens, saying to the three men, "Ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job hath."

In other words, the Book of Job concludes by telling us that there is in principle no answer to these essential questions. The question of justice remains open. It is necessary to seek an answer, but one must never assume one has found it.

Thus, we have an example from a book from Tanakh that clearly states that there can be no answer to this and, apparently, to many other funda-

mental questions. Another such book is Kohelet, Ecclesiastes. And although this book ends with the words "fear God . . . for this is the whole man," which can be seen as an "answer," the entire book in essence tells us that answers to real existential questions do not exist. This is one more typical instance in Judaism of the "unanswerable question." One must admit that if, instead of questions, the books of Job and Ecclesiastes consisted of a collection of answers about the meaning of life, Tanakh would be greatly impoverished.

However, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this aspect of doubt was not a developed area within existing Judaism. Its spiritual leaders considered doubt to be a flaw and discouraged their followers from discussing questions that sowed it. They were to stay inside and never venture out. The leaders feared that one from their flocks might leave—yet many did flee Judaism because those spiritual leaders were unable to reveal its inner potential to address adequately the problems of the times. The leaders discouraged the reading of certain books, but people read them and turned away from Judaism and its lack of tolerance for doubt.

We have found the Divine spark in atheism, and we determined that that spark was not realized in existing Judaism, which feared doubt to the point that the thirst for it became a force for the spread of atheism. Our next steps are to develop within Judaism the spark of doubt that we have discovered in its roots, so strongly that it will shine more brightly there than it does in atheism.

The following conception formulated by Rabbi Kook provides us with a roadmap for revealing the spark of doubt in Judaism. He tells us that any faith that lacks doubt is not an ideal faith. On the contrary, belief without doubt is primitive: Doubts are an integral part of true faith. As the Divine is by its very essence eternal, and all things human are, by their essence, temporal and finite, including all of our thoughts, ideas, and reasoning about God, our understanding of God cannot, in principle, be correct.

But what are we to do, if we are finite and temporal? How can we at least draw closer to the eternal Divine, come to understand it even partially? At the very least, we must doubt everything we think about the Divine, for when the finite being feels his limitations and doubts himself, he becomes "less finite," some potential of the infinite appears within him. If we are sure of ourselves and do not doubt, then our finite and temporal conceptions of the Divine become "even more finite," moving further

from the eternal Divine. If what is finite wishes to become less finite and to move closer to the infinite, it must be dynamic. That is, we cannot become actually infinite, but we must at least be potentially infinite, if only through doubting the certainty of our understanding and wishing to move forward. Therefore, doubts are an integral, necessary part of true faith, aiding, not impeding, its progress.

When students in a yeshiva or school are taught this concept of faith, an entirely new generation of religious people rises up, a generation whose views can be characterized as "religious post-atheism." These people use the religious achievements of atheism in the development of Judaism. Unless it activates within it the aspect of doubt, religion will be primitive. Doubt is necessary for its existence. Because the aspect of doubt was not adequately developed in religion over the last centuries, atheism came along, smashed everything, and advanced among people the concept of the value of doubt—and for this, religion owes it a debt of gratitude.

Atheism comes, says Rabbi Kook, to ridicule the primitive form of religion and destroy it, clearing the ground for the construction of a more exalted religious system. From the point of view of the development of religion, atheism was a historical necessity, as we ourselves—even the religious community and leaders who recognize the importance modernization—would never have decided to destroy that primitive aspect of religion. We simply would not have had the strength and nerve. Therefore, atheism enters and does all of that work for us.

The observant religious person who has grasped the ideas of post-atheism holds a different sort of religious consciousness. He combines Orthodox religiosity with a willingness to doubt his own religious tenets. Such a person emanates this new type of faith, changing the ideas of those around him, opening the way to religion for doubting people. These doubting souls begin to approach Judaism, seeing that post-atheist Judaism contains the spark of doubt, and that the spiritual necessity of doubt is even more developed here than it was in atheism.

The difference between the post-atheist religious consciousness and the classical one is easy to see. The Israeli essayist and philosopher Dr. Daniel Shalit says that one needs to converse with a religious person for no more than ten minutes to determine whether he or she is post-atheist or pre-atheist. Approached this way, atheism is not an enemy of religion. It is an enemy of primitive religion, but an ally in the creation of a more advanced one. If we can make the ideas of atheism the general property of

the religious world, we will move religion forward and make it possible for those whose souls instinctively and absolutely correctly thirst for skepticism and doubt to approach this religion.

What Is to Be Doubted?

Thus, according to Modern Orthodoxy and post-atheism, doubt is critical for the growth of faith; without it a person cannot believe truly. If people, limited by nature, do not doubt their own limited religious ideas, they will remain much further from God in their understanding than those who, though limited, at least doubt.

When we frame the problem this way, we frequently encounter the following question: "Should one doubt everything? There must be something, from the religious perspective, that is absolutely beyond question. God's existence is certain —how can that be doubted?!" The answer, from the point of view of religious post-atheism, is that everything can and must be doubted. To doubt is not to deny, but to subject to criticism and analysis. This applies even to the tenet that God exists. What is to be doubted is not the words themselves, but our interpretation and understanding of them. Since doubt is not denial but analysis and clarification, it is necessary for our religious understanding. It would be incorrect to see doubt in the existence of God as a choice between the statements "God exists" and "God does not exist." This is a different kind of doubt entirely. What we must doubt is the meaning that we give to the word "existence" as it relates to God.

Rabbi Kook proposes a completely radical approach to this problem. He explains that there is a faith that is not faith. And there is a lack of faith, or atheism, that is, in its essence, faith. What does he mean by faith that is not faith? He refers to the person who believes in God, but whose belief is so primitive that his image of God is closer to a caricature than to what God is. And what is lack of faith that is faith? This is the situation when a person says that he does not believe in God, but he says this because religious groups have pictured God in such a primitive form that he is unable to believe in such a God. This unbelief reflects not a lack of faith, but a high level of religious feeling.

The words "I believe in God" or "I do not believe in God" do not reflect true faith or lack of faith. We must hone the meaning of these words during our whole lives—not just our individual lives, but over the

course of all human life. We can and must doubt these meanings in every way, for doubt is not denial; doubt is dissatisfaction with simple answers and a thirst for more precise understanding.

Example 3: The Integration of Sparks from Reform Judaism

We will now turn to another example and analyze, according to our model, the Modern Orthodox perception of Reform Judaism.

It is clear that Reform Judaism contradicts traditional Orthodox Judaism, yet many Jews follow this ideology, which sees itself as worthy and moral. Appearing at the beginning of the nineteenth century, this movement rode the gathering wave of rationalism. The reformers were convinced that all that was needed for an understanding of the whole world, including religion, was sound reasoning. They believed that by means of rational analysis they could easily distinguish what was important in religion from what was secondary, and then do away with the secondary to create a new, true religion, based on the main ideas of Judaism. They considered the main ideas to be the philosophical tenets, such as monotheism and ethical values; they discarded what they saw as unimportant: observance of the Sabbath, kashruth, and other laws that they viewed as rituals. The Reform Movement steadily gained ground throughout the nineteenth century.

However, with the crisis in rationalism that occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, Reform Judaism, too, found itself at a crossroads. It began to change in a new direction, in many ways drawing closer to tradition. Reform Judaism today is entirely different from what it was at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but its external appearance remains essentially the same.

The "shell" in Reform Judaism is evident: It is based on the idea that we can make changes in religion at will, according to our needs of the moment. Clearly, this contradicts the fundamental ideas of traditional Orthodox Judaism. When Reform Judaism first appeared, the Orthodox, observing its external form, naturally judged it to be in opposition to Judaism. However, working with Rabbi Kook's ideas, we must not get caught up in a conflict with the superficial challenges of Reform Judaism. Rather, we must find the core, the positive idea that attracts Jewish souls to its teachings. If Jews are turning to it, it must contain a Divine spark.

What is this spark? As discussed earlier, one method of seeking it out is to ask what adherents of this movement take pride in. Reform Jews' main point of pride is that they are modern; they are in step with the times; they change and grow rather than remain stagnant. (This is why the term "progressive" is often preferred to "reform.")

Therefore, we must ask, from the perspective of our own Divine souls, is this principle—to grow and advance rather than to stay in one place—good or bad? It is good, of course, and each of us feels it so. Thus, we have extracted the Divine spark of Reform Judaism. We must now turn to Rabbi Kook's vision of Judaism and see how this spark— the value of change—manifests itself.

How are we to find the idea of change within Ideal Judaism? In its most apparent form, it is presented as the continuing Revelation, but that concept is not a simple one, and we will discuss it in more detail later. In order not to become mired in its complexities, we will take a clearer example. We will explore the difference between Rabbi Kook and Maimonides on the questions of change in the Divine and of the religious importance of progress.

Rabbi Kook tells us that, given its perfect nature, the Divine cannot lack the aspect of constant change, and therefore religion, to be worthy of God, must progress and develop. In other words, the need for progress and modernization, even in the area of religion, is not merely a human trait; it is a manifestation of our Divine nature. Religion, therefore, must develop—not in order to make it easier and more convenient for us humans, but because without development religion will not adequately reflect God. Rabbi Kook's analysis of this concept completes the process: we have found the corresponding spark in Judaism and developed it to a higher level than it reaches in the "ism"—Reform Judaism—we began with.

We are now faced with the process of cultivation of this spark in practical Judaism. According to our model, if our "ism" is Reform Judaism, the Judaism of tomorrow will be the Modern Orthodoxy of Rabbi Kook—that form of Orthodox Judaism that sees development as important and provides a roadmap for it. Furthermore, in some sense, Modern Orthodoxy is even more modern than Reform Judaism, as it not only strives to develop and evolve in areas that seem "out of date," but it also has a program for the further development of Judaism. This orientation to the future is entirely unique. In our experience with many religious ideas, we have

never come across anyone who proposed a program of religious development for the coming decades or centuries!

The Essential Difference between Reform Judaism and Modern Orthodoxy

Although there are parallels between certain aspects of Reform Judaism and Modern Orthodoxy, we must emphasize again the cardinal and essential difference between them. Both recognize that the historically formed, traditional Orthodox Judaism in many ways fails to address the needs of contemporary society, and that this prompts many Jews to leave it. However, the two approaches to this problem are critically different. The Reform Jews proclaim that it is difficult for people today to observe all of the commandments and restrictions of Judaism, and therefore we should ourselves lighten the demands to make life simpler for its followers. But the Modern Orthodox maintain the opposite: after all, from a technological standpoint, today it is much easier to observe all of the commandments than it was in past centuries, so the real question people are asking today is simply, "What do I need all of this for?" However, when we develop those sparks that have dropped out of sight within Judaism, we create a reason for many more people to move toward it. In other words, the Reform solve the problem by making Judaism smaller, while the Modern Orthodox solve it by making Judaism bigger, through the development of its ideals and the restoration of its sparks of Divine light.

Both movements see the presence, seriousness, and depth of the problem, and they do not avoid it, as do many of the Hareidim, but the solutions they propose are polar opposites.

Religious Anti-fundamentalism and the Concept of Continuing Revelation

The religious concept of the continuing Revelation of God asserts that the Divine Revelation did not stop at Mount Sinai, but continued throughout time and continues still, manifested not in miracles, but in the course of human history, above all of Jewish history. Therefore, this Revelation can and must be listened to, and to do this we must see history as a dialogue with God.

There is no doubt that the very idea of monotheism as a religion of

dialogue implies a continuing interaction between humans and God throughout all of human history. What is more, Jewish monotheism, as Rabbi Kook's concept emphasizes, is characterized by the idea that not only does every individual carry on a dialogue with God, but the nation as a whole, and all of humankind do the same. It would be natural to suppose that through this dialogue, God continues to speak. Of course, God does not say anything to contradict God's earlier words; God's word cannot be revoked. The earlier Revelation is never rescinded, but it must be continually developed and added to. Thus, the idea of a national dialogue with God leads to the principle of continuing Revelation, and that, in its turn, to Modern Orthodoxy.

The view of history as a dialogue between humans and God means that God is continually speaking to us, and all innovations that bring forth progress in culture, society, and religion are not simply human invention, but also Divine Revelation. Therefore, they must be integrated into our religious ideas and not discarded.

It stands to reason that not everything that has occurred in the course of history is Divine. Many developments can and should be criticized, changed, repaired. However, it would be categorically wrong to cast away historical development as a whole, as we would be discarding with it essential elements of the Revelation. According to this conception, we do not have the right to reject historical change—not because we must protect human creative activity from primordial religious dogma, but on the contrary, because we adhere to a religious viewpoint. Thus, the concept of the Continuing Revelation, and Modern Orthodoxy, which is based on it, are both aspects of Rabbi Kook's religious anti-fundamentalism.

The Embedded Implication that Judaism Must Lag Behind Culture in Its Development

Looking at this model for the development of Judaism by means of sparks from "isms," we are obliged to make note of one critical feature, which from a religious point of view might well be seen as an embedded "flaw." Namely, the model presupposes that Judaism lags behind culture in its development. The "ism" appears first, arising in relation to progress in the larger society. As a result of this, people become dissatisfied with flaws in Judaism that earlier generations accepted (see *Arfilei Tohar*, 2 and 68);

they leave and build a new ideology; and only two or three generations later does a segment of the religion adapt, develop, and realize the essence of these new ideas to create.

But if it is always thus, how will religion ever be able to lead? How will it accomplish what it is called upon to do?

The answer to this problem comes in two complementary parts.

The first is the fact that, indeed, within the structure of assimilating sparks from various ideologies and movements, Judaism will never be in a position to overtake those "isms." However, Rabbi Kook explains that Judaism has "in reserve" another most important concept, namely, that of God's dialogue not only with the individual, but also with the nation as a whole. Christianity or Western society never adopted this idea, inherent to Judaism from the start; humankind has only today begun to explore it. Therefore, Judaism will be able to lead civilization by means of this idea, rather than through its assimilation of sparks, which, as important as it is, merely serves to correct accumulated flaws that occur in the process of transition from Judaism of Diaspora to a Judaism of the Nation of Israel. Until we have adequately corrected these flaws, we will continue to fall behind and so will be unable to make ourselves heard by the world. We must continue to correct them, while at the same time developing that concept of national dialogue with God that is uniquely ours. We would later bequeath this concept to humankind, thereby making an essential contribution to the development of civilization.

This is the first part of the answer. However, the problem has another aspect. The second part of the explanation as to why Judaism lags behind culture in its development is that, as Kabbala explains, our entire world is "*tikkun olam*"—"a world of correction." God's light cannot appear in our world immediately in its true form. At the beginning of Creation and again in every new stage of development, there is *shevirat kelim*, the breaking of the vessels, and the sparks of Divine light become enveloped by shells. Judaism's "lag" is grounded in the very foundations of existence. Every idea first appears in a wrong form, in the context of the "ism." And only afterward, as a result of our efforts to improve the world, it appears in a purer and more correct form.

This arrangement of things is, of course, not accidental. It is related to God's desire to allow us to become God's "companions," God's co-creators in the universe.

A Parent's Perspective on Torah Education

Steve Golden

(Rabbi Steve Golden is Judaic Director at the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades in Tenafly, NJ. He was among the first graduates to receive semikhah from the Institute of Traditional Judaism. In addition to serving as a congregational rabbi, he has taught in Day School and adult education programs.)

In his *Yad haHazakah*, Rambam writes:

> If someone is bitten by a scorpion or a snake it is permitted to recite a charm over the wound, even on Shabbat, in order to calm the patient and give him encouragement. Although such a thing is of no [objective] benefit whatsoever, since a life is in danger they [the rabbis] permitted it lest the victim suffer mental anguish [should it appear that not every effort was being made]. (Abodah Zarah 11:11)

This ruling of Rambam was adopted by Rabbi Yosef Karo (*Shulhan Arukh, Y.D.* 179:13)—to the great annoyance of the Vilna Gaon, as evidenced by his following comment:

> This opinion is the Rambam's [as expressed in the latter's Laws of *Abodah Zarah* 11: 11–16]. He also wrote [similarly in] *Perush haMishnah*, A. Z. 4:7. But all subsequent authorities disagreed with him because of the numerous charms recorded in the Gemara. He, however, was drawn by the accursed philosophy, and that is why he wrote that witchcraft, names, charms, demons and amulets are all deception. But he has been thoroughly refuted on the strength of the innumerable stories found in the Talmud such as that of the matron who uttered words and immobilized a ship [*Shabbat* 81b,

> *Hullin* 105b] . . . or that of the rabbis who every Friday studied the halakhot of creation, and would create a "tertiary calf" [*Sanhedrin* 67b] and R. Joshua who pronounced a name and was suspended between heaven and earth [*Bekhoroth* 8b] . . . . But philosophy with her blandishments misled him to explain all such stories allegorically and to uproot them from their literal meaning. As for myself, Heaven forefend that I should accept any of those allegorical explanations. . . ." (*Biur haGra Yore De'ah*, 179:13).

The foregoing dispute reflects an age-old clash between two worldviews. Rambam reads the texts of the Talmud in a manner that does not violate reason or contradict the results of empirical knowledge. Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, on the other hand, prefers to uphold a literalist reading of the same texts. Indeed, his evident commitment to literalism propels him to accept superstition! As for the "accursed philosophy," Rabbi Elijah blames for Rambam's metaphorical interpretations of difficult *aggadot,* we cannot be sure what he had in mind. Certainly Rambam himself shows no awareness of being a victim of philosophical deception when he expounds his opposition to literalist readings of improbable *aggadot*. No, if Rambam is to be believed, his anti-literalism arose from deep convictions regarding the Sage's essential rationality:

> Know that the words of the Sages of blessed memory, are understood differently by three groups of people.
>
> Regarding the first, from observing them, reading their books and hearing about them, they are the largest [group]…. They understand the teaching of the Sages only in their literal sense, in spite of the fact that some of their teachings, when taken literally, seem so fantastic and irrational that if one were to repeat them literally, even to the uneducated... their amazement would prompt them to ask how anyone in the world could believe such things true, much less edifying.
>
> The members of this group are so poor in knowledge that it pains one [to think] of their folly. Their very effort to honor and to exalt the Sages in accordance with their own meager understanding actually humiliates them! As God lives, this group destroys the glory of the Torah and darkens its light, for they make the Torah of God say the opposite of what it intended. God said in the perfect Torah, "The nations who hear of these statutes shall say: 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deut. 4:6). But this group expounds the teachings of our Sages in such a way that when the other peoples hear them they say, "How foolish and worthless is this insignificant group of people!" The worst offenders are preachers who preach and expound to the masses what they themselves do not under-

> stand. Would that they keep silent about what they do not know, as it is written: "If only they would be utterly silent, it would be accounted to them as wisdom" (Job 13:5).
>
> The second group is also a numerous one. It too consists of persons who, having read or heard the words of the Sages, understand them according to their simple literal sense and believe that the Sages intended nothing else than what may be learned from their literal interpretation. Inevitably, they ultimately declare the Sages to be fools, and hold them up to contempt. . . .
>
> There is a third group. Its members are so few in number that it is hardly appropriate to call them a group—except in the sense in which one speaks of the sun as a group of which it is the only member. To this group the greatness of our Sages is clear. They recognize the superiority of their intelligence from their words, which point to exceedingly profound truths. . . . The members of this group understand that the Sages knew as clearly as we do the difference between the impossibility of the impossible and the existence of that which must exist. They know that the Sages did not speak nonsense. . . . Thus, whenever the Sages spoke of things that seem impossible, they were employing the style of riddle and parable, which is the method of truly great thinkers. (Rambam, *Hakdamah lePerek Helek*. Cf. Isadore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, West Orange, NJ: Berman House, 1972, 407–409)

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi shared Rambam's fear of the threat to Torah posed by excessive irrationality.

> See that we are not any different than our ancestors. If the details of ancient idolatrous practices were widely known today, we would also be lured astray—just like we are [at present] by other popular vanities such as astrology, incantation, talismans, and other actions [alchemy?] that mean to change physical nature—despite the fact that the Torah has commanded us to stay far away from these practices! (*Kuzari*, end of 4:23. Cf. *Sanhedrin* 102b; Rambam, *Guide*, III:37)

It is meet to come clean and state up front that I incline toward the Maimonidean position. That is to say, the Sages' acknowledgment of nature's basic predictability and their manifest scientific curiosity do not allow me to think of them as irrational. It is hardly necessary to add that such keen study of nature's laws in no way debars a person's openness to miracles and the power of God to change the world. That holds for the Sages, for Rambam, and for us humble latter-day folks. Yet, because they studied nature so closely, the Sages were in the best position to recognize

miracles for what they are—the exceptional intervention on the part of the Creator for God's own moral purposes.

You may be wondering what this literalist debate has to do with the topic I've been invited to write about, namely Torah education from the perspective of a parent. Answer: the debate *per se,* nothing; its ramifications, plenty. A major pedagogic disappointment I have encountered over and over again is the seemingly indiscriminate way teachers in many Day Schools introduce young children to material far above the average child's intellectual and emotional age. I know that some parents read Grimm's fairy tales to their kids in the hope that a child will understand it as mere fancy. Be that as it may, sacred texts are another story. It seems to me that because the child approaches these texts with a different level of receptiveness, the educator needs to exercise extra care about what material to teach. Particular perturbation is caused to children when hard *aggadot* are set before them in the raw.

Let's take the following text from *Megillah* 12b as an example:

> "And Queen Vashti refused" (Esther 1:12). Since she [too] was immodest, as the master said above, that both of them had an immoral purpose, why then would she not come? Rabbi Jose bar Hannina said: This teaches that leprosy broke out on her. **In a Baraitha it was taught that Gabriel came and made her a tail.**

What goes through a teacher's mind before deciding to share such an *aggada* with his or her class? Surely the teacher has considered at least the obvious questions it raises: Why did this great miracle of the tail occur—even if Vashti's vanity was off the charts?! Or was the tail's advent something less than a miracle? We recall that in the rabbinic corpus, a human changing into an ape is not precluded.

> Rabbi Yirmiyah bar Elazar said: They [*dor haPalagah*] split up into three parties. One said, 'Let us ascend and dwell there;' the second, 'Let us ascend and serve idols;' and the third said, 'Let us ascend and wage war [with God].' The party that proposed . . . 'Let us ascend and wage war' were turned to apes, spirits, devils, and night-demons. . . . (*Sanhedrin* 109a)

So maybe our Sages believed that humans were created with the potential to turn into (revert to?) apes—but back to the question about Vashti. What was the size of her tail? It would have to be imagined as too

long and voluminous to hide under the normal train of a queenly robe. What was it about Vashti's sin that merited so vile a metamorphosis? If, on the other hand, humans were not endowed with simian latency, then why would the Creator choose to revise creation?

Unless the teacher has thought all this through, surely he or she is ill-advised presenting it to impressionable children, even if he or she emphasizes its sociological aspect. (There are those who see this *aggada*'s point as an attempt to downplay non-Jewish Vashti's virtue in order to boost our collective Jewish ego.) Still, whether presented as entertainment, myth, or anthropology, this *aggada,* with its inescapable grotesqueness, is best saved for advanced students who are able to articulate any problems they might have with it.

Another *aggada*, though seemingly innocuous, can cause considerable bafflement. Noah is told to provide the Ark with a "*tsohar*" (Genesis 6:16). This rare word, *tsohar,* is generally understood as a porthole by writers ancient and modern. However, one *aggada* identifies *tsohar* as a light-giving gemstone. Now, although jewels can sparkle and reflect light, they cannot generate it. Therefore telling children that stones can generate light is plain wrong.

Besides choosing their material wisely, teachers would do well to prepare themselves both intellectually and emotionally for questions their students might throw at them. Years ago, my daughter was paying attention to a lesson about *kapparot* that her elementary school teacher gave in advance of Yom Kippur. When the teacher had finished explaining the mechanics and purpose of that practice, my daughter asked, "If all the sins of a person went into the chicken, was it not unfair to give the chicken to the poor? They would be inheriting all those very sins that had been purged from the first person!" The teacher gave the child a blank stare, and without any response, moved on to another topic.

Of course one is not advocating the sanitization of texts—or even an avoidance of charged ones. Most teachers are responsible, but often labor under the notion that anything found in our sacred literature must be edifying for all and sundry. The Mishnah thought otherwise: "[A child of] five years [is ready] for Scripture, ten years for Mishnah…fifteen years for Talmud. . . ." (*Aboth* 5:21). Entrusted with the stewardship of Torah for the next generation, it behooves every one of us educators to rethink many current pedagogic practices.

Homework: Helpful or Hurtful?

Elana Beth Nussbaum

As adults with jobs, children, and endless responsibilities, we often think back to our childhoods, the "good old days," when everything was easy and carefree. We played in the park, played with our friends, played sports, and played imaginative games with our siblings. We didn't have to worry about feeding our families, paying bills, staying up with our babies at night, and then trying to be functional the next day! We just had to be kids! Now, being a parent myself, I often wonder how carefree our children feel today.

Young children attending Day Schools have long days full of learning both General Studies and Judaic Studies. The day starts at approximately 8:00 A.M. and can go as long as 4:30 P.M. The children practice and learn new skills that enable them to become articulate, educated, and successful adults. There is no greater gift then seeing your child read for the first time, write a creative book about dinosaurs, and translate a biblical verse better than you can yourself. We owe this to the great schools our children attend, and to the wonderful teachers who are dedicated to giving our children these amazing skills. However, what exactly is the role of homework?

Educators agree that homework increases a child's learning—as long as it isn't busy work and is kept within certain time boundaries. However, if given too much, the results, I believe, could be detrimental to both child and parent. When school-aged children get home from a long day of learning, they need time to turn off their brains for a while. Just as we all need "down time" at the end of the day, to watch television or read the paper or a good novel, so do our children. Not only do they need down time, but they can use this time to develop other important hobbies and skills. Whether curling up with a book or a magazine, playing sports, taking a

musical instrument lesson, having a playdate with a friend, playing board games with their siblings, or even just having a chat with their parents unrelated to school or homework—down time like this is valuable for growing up, building self-esteem, and developing good conversational and social skills.

The amount of homework continues to grow year by year. As children get older, more is expected of them. Thirty minutes of homework becomes an hour, an hour becomes two… When does it stop? As I wrote before, the work not only affects the children, but the parents as well. As my oldest child began getting homework, afternoons became battles. It is clear to me now why it took my son a seemingly endless time to do his homework! He needed to shut his brain down for a while! But back then, we used to fight. A lot. I would tell him if he would finish quickly that he would have a chunk of free time. I would offer rewards. I would sit with him. I would stay in the other room, then come back to check in. My afternoons became so stressful; not only were my nerves shot, but it obviously affected my son and my other children. I strongly resented the idea that I was ignoring my other children, yet I wasn't spending quality time with my son and his homework!

As much as I understand the need to review the day's work, I did not understand the need for more than that. Our kids do as they are supposed to, just as we did as kids. There may be groaning and moaning about it, but it does become routine, and complaints aren't as strong as they were. But does that mean it's acceptable? Does that mean that our kids don't need periods of time to choose activities that interest them? Some parents I know have no problem with the amount of homework given, and wouldn't mind if there was even more! They feel that not only is it enhancing their children's learning, but provides educational structure for the evening. They think that learning, as all of us would agree, is more productive than playing video games or other mindless activities. However, with some monitoring of duration, playing such games is a good way to tune out for a bit. In excess, video game playing is probably not the best idea! But there are so many ways that kids could have down time other than video games. It is up to us as parents to give our children good choices and guidance.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are parents who struggle, as I do, with the evening juggling act of balancing our housework, tending

to younger children, helping more than one child with homework, cooking dinner, and so forth. I know many people who have to hire tutors or homework helpers just to physically have someone there to sit with their child, because they are either working parents, or just don't have the time or the patience! Some kids can sit down to do their own work, but there are many others who need help with the content of the work given, or help focusing into the work after a long day at school. If homework is such an important aid for our children, why does it create such havoc in our homes? Why should our children be sitting doing work at home after sitting for the majority of the school day? Our children need to move, to be silly, to choose their nightly activities after working all day. Our children just need time to be.

There has to be some type of happy medium, where children have some time to review what they have learned over the course of the day, but it shouldn't take over the whole evening! Homework is given over the weekend; homework is given over summer vacation! They never get a period of time without it! The problem is that, unfortunately, I do not think this will change much. I just hope for the sanity of children and parents everywhere, homework will be more review and less busywork. I wish there would be more creative assignments, something that might be less repetitive than what they have been working on in school. School is the place for going through the basic drills and building on them. After-school time should be time for opportunities for other, very important skills to be learned, practiced, and enjoyed. We want our children to know their ABC's and 123's, but at what expense? Will my child not get into college or find a job without doing two hours of long division every night? Are seven hours of school not enough? Maybe my tuition is so high because it accounts for the two hours of extra work at home! Kids need time to be kids, and parents need time to be parents. If children cannot do their homework in a reasonable time, then it should not done at home. There is still something called schoolwork, right?

Thou Shalt Not Oppress the *Ger*

ANONYMOUS

I am a convert. There can be no question that I am halakhically Jewish, at least if you trust the Lubavitchers to know halakha. I am writing to protest the downright shameful treatment of converts by the Orthodox community, which so conveniently forgets the explicit commandment to not oppress the *ger*.

First, let me state my background—though I will omit identifying details for reasons that will appear later. I was raised as a Christian in the Bible Belt to believe that the Bible was the word of God. Nobody explained to me why "God's Word" did not include the laws in the first five books, which today are observed only by Jews. Due to my parents' severe opposition, I could not do anything toward converting to Judaism until I went away to graduate school in a small college town.

This was more than 35 years ago. At that time, I took instruction from the only Orthodox rabbi in the state, who could be described as Modern Orthodox. In those days, I knew nothing of Modern/Hareidi distinctions among Orthodox Jews; in fact, there were no Hareidi Jews in my immediate vicinity. The Bet Din consisted of my rabbi; the only Conservative rabbi in that town (he was a Sabbath observer), and one other person. As I started meeting other Jews for the first time (I had had no significant social Jewish contact before my conversion), I started getting questions about this conversion. I had met a community of Lubavitchers by this time, and they decided that although they believed my conversion was valid, they would redo it just to remove all question. They even placed a call to New York and got a ruling that I should not say God's name in the blessing for this re-run. This second conversion took place about a year and a half after my first conversion.

I did not meet and marry my husband until nine years later. His entire family is Hareidi, and he is yeshiva-educated. We are Shomrei Shabbat but not "yeshivish," and live in a small college town with a bare minyan for our Orthodox community. We have one child, a son, who is also Shomer Shabbat.

The basic problem a convert faces in the Orthodox world stems from the following mind-set: If you observe one mitzvah more than I do you are a fanatic, and if you observe one mitzvah less you are an *apikores*, or heretic. This is hard a enough mind-set for a *ba'al teshuva* to navigate and to figure out what is essential halakha and what is less essential *minhag*, or custom—and even more so for the convert. If a convert is at all less stringent than the person he or she is speaking to, the logic seems to extend that the convert has not accepted all of the mitzvoth, and therefore the validity of the conversion is in question. I've even had an Orthodox rabbi say this to me in those very words!

I recall an occasion when I asked: Why, if there is one law for the convert and one who is born Jewish, that converts are automatically classed with prostitutes as people *kohanim* may not marry? That's when I learned that questioning is not permitted. Another "learning experience" I had was when I became friendly with a young man—and our friendship was disapproved of by people in the community, who forced him to end the friendship. I obviously hadn't accepted that the only permissible relationship between a man and a woman was marriage to that person, so therefore I wasn't "really Jewish." I even got into trouble when I expressed secular political views that differed from those of the person I was speaking with. I didn't elevate "what's good for the Jews" (including the State of Israel) over all other considerations. This showed that I had not really become part of the Jewish people, and therefore I wasn't considered to be Jewish.

My point is that the only way for a convert to be "accepted" is to become SuperJew: to be more stringent than anyone else, and to totally block out the former non-Jewish self. I have known of a few such people, though I have never become close enough to them to tell if this is real or an act they put on for self-preservation. Sorry, folks, I'm not SuperJew, nor are the vast majority of converts I have known—though they and I feel pressure to be so. If you can be "accepted" only by putting on an act, you're not really accepted.

In the culture in which I grew up, the cardinal sin is forgetting where

you came from. I've often had Jews tell me that they assume I wouldn't want my children to know my parents, and that since my parents are not halakhically my parents I owe them no obligation. I'm afraid that I've never bought that, and it has been the source of many problems. Does this mean I'm not really Jewish?

And I wish I had a dollar for every remark I've heard made by Jews about "the goyim." I can't stand such remarks about me (I'm still the same person I was before) and my family and my former co-religionists (whom I do NOT consider to be idolaters!), and it's no excuse that the speaker didn't know my background. The Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 94a) recognizes that this is painful for the convert and explicitly forbids such comments lest the convert regret the conversion. Believe me, I've heard much worse about non-Jews from Jews than I've ever heard about Jews from non-Jews. I'm afraid that this does not exactly solidify my identification with the Jewish people, whom I encountered only after my conversion to the faith.

The effect of all this on me (and I've only related a few examples) was very nearly to drive me away from Judaism. When people do things to you in the name of religion, it becomes hard to separate the people from the religion. In this case, it is also very hard to separate halakha from *minhag*. When a demand is made on you that you simply can't fulfill, and you are told that this is an essential part of the package, how do you not then reject the whole package? I very nearly did. If there had been a way to undo my conversion, I might well have done it. But when I give my word, I keep it. I believed I was now obligated to observance and couldn't get out of it. What really saved me Jewishly was that I was now living in my present small college town, where all Jews are accepted without question (because, for one thing, we can't afford to be very particular). This tolerance allowed me the space to recover after my experiences with larger and more rigid Orthodox communities.

Most of my problems of the sort I've described occurred before I got married. Since then, my husband's *yihus* (religious lineage and connections) has largely protected me, coupled with the decision we made to hide my ancestry where at all possible. This started with my mother-in-law, a Polish immigrant who probably subscribed to the "can the leopard change its spots" view of non-Jews that I have also heard (primarily from members of her generation). She was deeply embarrassed about her son having non-Jewish in-laws, but she wanted her son to be happy. She

solved the problem by pretending to everyone (and herself) that my parents were Jewish, and ordering us to say nothing to the contrary. She has been dead many years now, but my husband, with his greater knowledge of the Orthodox world, convinced me that it would be better for our son if my background still was not known. We have all become very good at giving the misleading impression that I was born Jewish, while at the same time not saying anything that isn't true. I do not have sufficient Hebrew language skills to pass as someone who was born into a Jewish, religious home, but we allow the impression to exist that I am a *ba'alat teshuva*. Although our son knew my parents (now long-deceased), to outsiders we emphasize my husband's family and de-emphasize mine. I am not comfortable having to deny who I am, and I hope that someday my son will decide that denying half his heritage is not good, but I've acquiesced because it's best for him. If my status becomes known, he will be forever under the same cloud that I am. I wouldn't wish my experience on anyone, especially my own son.

My latest problem, which has reawakened all of these memories, is that my son has started looking for a *shiddukh*, a wife, in the Orthodox world. We recently had a very bad experience. The girl signaled interest on a computer site, knowing of my background. Her mother took over and forbade her to meet my son until I was investigated. The result was very unpleasant for me: the matchmaker, in the course of her Inquisition, persisted in thinking that it was for the sake of marriage, that the re-conversion was at my husband's insistence (never mind that both conversions took place long before I met him), and even asked whether our son had conversion papers! Their rabbi then called us to explain that it was his synagogue's policy to have copies of conversion papers on file, and asked us to send them. (All of this was before my son could even talk with the girl to see if the match was worth pursuing.) I was going to refuse unless the same demand was made of the other parents; before it came to this point, my son refused the match. He agreed with me that proof of my Jewishness should not be halakhically necessary (especially at this stage), since it was not in question that I had long been observant, and further, it sounded like a bad in-law situation. It still left me very upset. I don't mind the asking itself as much as I do the unwillingness to accept my answers. I am hoping that in whatever *shiddukh* he makes, my background can remain hidden (except to the girl herself) until after the wedding, because

I can foresee a repeat of this unpleasant suspicion directed at me and only me. I don't know whether this will be possible.

This brings me to one of my long-standing grudges. Converts are asked to show papers at every instance, from day school enrollment (either their own or their children's) to weddings. The same is not asked of people who claim to be born Jewish. I resent being singled out for this suspicion. I don't care how politely it is phrased or what reasons are given. ("Standard synagogue policy" certainly doesn't cut it.) I find it offensive and discriminatory to constantly have to prove myself, to know that there will never be a time when I am simply accepted as a Jew without strings attached. Perhaps the larger community is simply unaware of the impact this practice has on a convert's feelings. But it's past time that this was realized and these policies reexamined.

These actions may actually violate an additional negative commandment, beyond oppressing the *ger*. Maimonides, when talking of "cheating with words," gives an example of someone who tells a convert to "remember your origins." He may have meant that someone who while in negotiations with a convert assumes a superior position because of his Jewish birth is cheating, by taking for himself something to which he isn't entitled (since Jewishness should be equal for all Jews). These demands for proof of conversion in return for *shiddukhim* and Jewish education may qualify.

I will now refuse to provide papers for any reason unless the same is required of non-converts as well. (I can tell you that my husband has no such paperwork to prove he is Jewish.) If one needs to be sure I am Jewish, one should apply the same criteria for people who claim to be born Jewish. To me (and my yeshiva-bred husband agrees), this discriminatory treatment is a clear violation of the commandment not to oppress the *ger*. One convert I know got so fed up with this practice that she tore up her papers. I haven't dared go that far, but I'm sorely tempted. Whatever happened to the halakhic presumption that if you are observant of mitzvoth, you are Jewish? I've been Shomeret Shabbat for 35 years. Shouldn't that suffice? (The yeshiva community actually may be better on this point than non-yeshiva people; my Hareidi sister-in-law and her husband immediately and totally accepted me with no questions asked.)

I have been told that I should not feel offended by these procedures because, especially these days, people need to make sure that both parties to a Jewish marriage are Jewish. First, I don't think anyone should tell me

how to feel. The commandment not to oppress the *ger* only makes sense in light of the *ger*'s own feelings. Second, why are the same requirements not made of the parties who claim to be born Jewish? *Ba'alei teshuva* aren't asked for papers; but even for them, isn't it forbidden to shame a *ba'al teshuva* by reminding him or her of past non-observance? Third, I don't think one should downgrade the explicit commandment not to oppress the *ger*.

So what if an occasional mistake is made? I'm afraid that with my background I can't consider this the worst thing that could happen. I can hardly take the position that any non-Jewish ancestry is a blot on the Jewish people. Actually, I believe there is an opinion that if it should transpire that a maternal ancestor wasn't Jewish, it would not negate the Jewish status of observant *mikva*-going descendants. But if that doesn't suffice, do a conversion to make sure—and I don't mean making an already observant person start from scratch. This problem is fixable. Elijah the Prophet is going to have quite a job sorting us all out anyway; what's a few more, especially when weighed against the commandment not to oppress the *ger*? Personally, I'd go with this Torah commandment as against concerns with the purity of the Jewish people. Unfortunately, however, the Orthodox community seems to have taken the other position. I think a number of so-called religious Jews will have a few things to answer for on the Day of Judgment.

The situation today is even worse than it was 35 years ago. With the Orthodoxy's move toward the right, standards for converts have been raised. It is forbidden to refuse a sincere convert. In the effort to weed out the insincere, has the bar been raised so high as to also exclude many sincere converts? In my day, the "Big Three" mitzvoth were Shabbat, kashruth, and *taharat haMishpahah* (family purity); anything more was desirable but not a deal-breaker. It was not required that the convert know all of halakha. And at least where I did it, anyone who did not have a Jewish fiancé(e) was automatically accepted. In addition, if a problem was later discovered with the procedure, redoing it was no big deal. Now, to judge by the experience of newer converts in our community, one must have to commit to a higher level of observance and must live in a large Orthodox community (which, as a resident of a small community, I disagree with—it is quite possible to live halakhically without a lot of large local Jewish institutions). Additionally, there is a reluctance to simply redo

questionable conversions. One Shomer Shabbat person in my community is in halakhic limbo with his questionable prior conversion, which nobody is willing to redo as long as he lives here. The point about questionable conversions that appears to be overlooked is that although the conversion may be invalid, it also may be valid. The current focus seems to be on the possible invalidity, with the result that these converts are treated as if the conversion never happened. What about the possibility that it may be valid? If it is, aren't we committing several serious sins, from oppressing the *ger* to discouraging further observance?

The religious leadership in the State of Israel adds to the problem by only accepting certain rabbis' conversions. Where would that leave me? I doubt such a list even existed 35 years ago; if it did, I don't know whether my rabbi would have been on it. Put it this way: My son knows it would be probably too complicated for him to consider making *aliyah*.

Even outside the State of Israel, there is a problem with local autonomy. A conversion that is accepted in one community may not be accepted in another. One person in our community converted 50 years ago. No problems arose until now, when her daughter was refused membership in one European synagogue, and her grandchildren were denied a Jewish education in that community. Since the (Orthodox) converting rabbi has long been dead, he could not be asked for information. The daughter is accepted as Jewish in some Orthodox communities but not in others. What is a convert to do, especially when it is long enough after the fact that all witnesses have died?

I have read the Rabbinical Council of America's new conversion policies, which are intended to address at least the uniformity problem. Aside from the fact that these policies are only prospective, I am afraid that in implementation they will be used to institutionalize a very high bar for converts and justify retroactive rejection of converts such as myself. I fear that the prescription that converts should tell their local rabbi of their status merely invites the sort of social problems I've described above, unless said rabbi is both trustworthy and sensitive (which, unfortunately, not all are). We do, after all, know the halakhic implications of our own conversions! I for one (and I suspect others as well) prefer not to emerge from the closet now.

It appears that no convert can ever be secure in his or her status as a Jew, no matter how much time has elapsed. Ignorance of the halakha

involved, coupled with prejudice against non-Jews, makes it all too easy for a Jew to consider a convert to be insufficiently observant, hence non-Jewish, and to feel no qualms about expressing this. It should be absolutely forbidden for a Jew to raise this issue about a conversion once validly performed, and it also should be forbidden to reexamine decades-old conversions that were done by Orthodox rabbis. Otherwise, there will be literally no end to the suspicion surrounding a convert.

It may not be too farfetched to draw an analogy with the "purity of blood" concerns of Spanish Christians at the time of the Inquisition. "Old Christians" constantly suspected "New Christians" of being secret Jews, even if generations of the New Christian family had been devout Christians. This entailed serious social and political repercussions against the New Christians, who became a permanent and inferior social class. Only if one could prove "purity of blood," that is, unadulterated Old Christian descent, could one rest easy. I am afraid that the present-day Orthodox Jewish social structure may be developing into a similar caste system, with converts at the bottom of the ladder and with decreasing possibilities of social integration. The tales I hear from outreach organizations about the problems *ba'alei teshuva* face in Orthodox communities indicate this—and, of course, converts have even lower status than *ba'alei teshuva*. Rambam would be appalled.

When people ask to convert, they are warned about persecution from non-Jews. Nobody ever warns them about persecution from Jews. Perhaps this is simply not on the radar screen of conversion rabbis, very few of whom have ever experienced it themselves. However, this has been the experience of nearly every convert I know. Frankly, if I had known 40 years ago everything I know now, I doubt I would have found becoming Jewish to be worth the struggle, despite my theological convictions. Is this the message we want to give converts—that they will never be fully accepted by the Jewish community? I can never fully belong, nor can my son if the truth about me were made public. At least my child is a male, so the problem should die with him. As for me, there is nothing more that I need from the Jewish community. I only want to protect my son, who did not choose his situation, from having to go through the same experience. It is past time for someone to remind Jews that the commandment not to oppress the *ger* is still part of the Torah.