



Teaching Toward Tomorrow

Setting an Agenda

for Modern

Orthodox Education

A Symposium Edited by
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BACK TO BASICS

Jay Goldmintz

There is no doubt that one of the most pressing and depressing concerns for parents, lay people, and professionals alike remains the issue of rising costs and an educational infrastructure that may be too large for our own good. For my part, however, I prefer to address some of the educational challenges before us in the classroom.

We are now seeing students who live in a world of material comfort that is unprecedented and, at the same time, who live in a world that feels more vulnerable than ever before. We have more students with diagnosed learning disabilities or students whose learning styles have been defined in very specific ways, more students who are wrestling with emotional trials and tribulations, and more students who are getting outside support for mental health diagnoses we barely knew existed twenty years ago. Even if it may be argued that kids have not changed all that much, what makes these phenomena noteworthy is the fact that (many) schools now see it as their mission to address the emotional needs of our students in unprecedented ways. All of this points to the fact

that more than ever before we need to reach out to each individual child in ways that we never have. This is no less true for the spiritual realm than for the academic or emotional. Every child needs to be touched, every child needs to be heard in ways that a decade ago would have been unheard of. Many of our

schools have finally seen the importance of having mental health professionals on staff, but it is not at all clear that they can handle the load or, for that matter, that the teachers on the front lines are getting the training and professional development necessary to handle these issues. In short, our attention needs to turn increasingly not to the child at-risk but to the whole child.

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In some cases, for example in the realm of religious development, this may call for fashioning a totally new area of professional expertise. What are the differences between a ninth grader's religious understanding, faith, and commitment and those of a twelfth grader? What are the warning signs of and appropriate reactions to real religious conflict versus normal adolescent development? How do we guide such students? How do we include parents? What exactly is religious guidance? What are the differences between guidance and *kiruv*, and how are they applicable in an educational setting? In these areas we could use much help from both the university and the *beit midrash*, as well as from our Israeli counterparts; the incorporation of spiritual-Hassidic elements into the educational domain has yet to make inroads here, and I believe there is much to be learned and gained.

In a related vein, we have little research to rely upon, but the word that seems to cross too many educators' lips when speaking privately about students these days is that they are "entitled." The symptoms may be as numerous as the definitions of the malady, but it is clear that many educators are troubled by a generation of students who see things coming to them and whose parents are determined not to have them be "unhappy" for even the smallest amount of time necessary to complete a difficult assignment. This is not a phenomenon that is unique to our population (a recent columnist in the *Wall Street Journal* suggested that it was the fault of Mr. Rogers who told all kids that they are special), but that is little consolation to those classroom teachers who are trying to get students to stretch themselves. The efforts on the mental and emotional health fronts mentioned above will require that we work with both students and parents in new ways. How do we do a better job of parent education? How do we empower parents to support one another? How can we collaborate with congregational rabbis to help parents? How can differentiated instruction be used in a high school classroom to provide greater student self-confidence? What are the specific individual skills that are required to gain independence in reading a *pasuk* or *sugya*, and are there spiraled curricular models upon which we can draw? How can teachers be trained to use *havruta* time more effectively?

This is no less true in the affective domain where there is a vague sense that one needs to work harder to "impress" students than ever before. One needs to find ever more creative ways to draw them in lest they feel like they've been there and done that, for all too often they truly have, and they therefore no longer see it as special. They have traveled more extensively than any other generation that wasn't being pursued by persecution and, as such, school trips, summer programs, and learning opportunities seem to get ever more exotic (and expensive) in an attempt to give some meaning to life. Educators need to resist the temptation to give in to this culture blindly, and if travel students must, then much more educational thought and professional standards need to be brought to bear on these programs. Schools should be teaching parents how to insist upon them. In the meantime, we can be trying to teach students that there is much that can be gained from exploring our own creativity. There is joy in sharing one another's company, or even in a quiet walk in the park.

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Hebrew language is under siege. If the battle a number of years ago was to maintain *Ivrit beIvrit* (with some rare exceptions, that battle has not been going well), today one hears more and more about teachers and students who describe the Hebrew text itself as a barrier to "meaningful" learning. Too many teachers (and parents) seem to take it as a given that their students will go home and do it all in Artscroll rather than struggling with basic Tanakh in the original. Worse, some teachers will use translations in class because the Hebrew can "get in the way" of reaching students' hearts and minds. Teachers need help learning how to teach Hebrew texts regardless of the language of instruction; the stakes in our failure to do so are too high to ignore.

Religious Zionism is under siege. We never really met the crisis in Zionist education in the wake of the first war in Lebanon, but Israel has not remained stagnant since then, waiting for us to catch up. Events in Gaza and again in Lebanon have had a profound impact on Israeli society and

culture in ways that most of our students are probably not in touch with. If there was a time when we were brothers and sisters with our *dati le'umi* counterparts in Israel, there is a sense that our relationship has changed to first or distant cousins. The nuances and fractures of that community are lost on many of our students and I have yet to hear of any educational efforts on our part that take into account these new realities. How much more can we allow the gap to grow? I do not wish to take away from all of the programming and rallying and *hesed* work we do with Israel as our focus. But there still seems to be something missing. Perhaps the time has come (at the risk of making the entitlement issue worse) for us to organize our own trips to Israel or to once and for all agree to give up some class time for a curriculum in Religious Zionism that someone can actually write. Perhaps we need to meet more as educators with our Israeli counterparts and hear about their own struggles. Indeed, there is little place for us to meet collaboratively or even to hear about one another's work. For all of the differences that there certainly are, there are many areas in which we could learn from one another's experience.

The same could be said of our relationship with many of the post-high school programs in Israel as well. Here, too, the gap in understanding one another seems to grow exponentially with the growth of the number of programs trying to attract Diaspora students. For all of the truly incredible revolutionary and positive impact that such programs have had on the American Orthodox scene, we have often allowed too many well-meaning but misdirected programs to co-opt our educational and communal mission. This is as much our fault as theirs, but we need to address it together before it is too late.

Similarly, Chaim Waxman recently noted that our definitions of Orthodoxy in America may be in need of revision.¹ If once it was the Modern Orthodox community that advocated involvement in American political affairs and outreach to our fellow Jews, these areas may now be increasingly dominated by those once deemed to be more to the right. There is a growing insularity within the Modern Orthodox community. We give a lot of money to *tzedakah*, but are far stingier with our time and

interests. Teaching students *mesirat nefesh* for the sake of the *kellal* is a bigger challenge than ever before. The obligatory *hesed* requirement that many schools have may be in need of tweaking to include more specific kinds of activities. The role models we present, the time we refuse to take out of learning for the sake of activism, the kinds of causes we don't expose our students to, all have enormous impact on their sensitivities and commitments.

The dangers of a symposium such as this one is that the questions are all based upon challenges and problems, and as I read my own words I am struck by the potentially negative impression that might be left about the state of Jewish education. Quite the opposite is true – one cannot help but be amazed by the accomplishments of our students, or humbled by the dedication and commitment of our faculty, including a new breed of extraordinary teachers, or gratified by the fresh kind of involvement of a new generation of lay people. Perhaps a future symposium could focus on the things that are well with our profession and perhaps by then it will be able to include some of the things that right now are in need of our urgent attention and care.

Rabbi Jay Goldmintz is Headmaster of Ramaz Upper School. He has most recently published on issues relating to religious development in adolescence.

¹Shalom Berger, Dan Jacobson, and Chaim I. Waxman, *Flipping Out? Myth or Fact: The Impact of the Year in Israel* (New York: Yashar, 2007), pp. 174-176.