



Teaching Toward Tomorrow

Setting an Agenda

for Modern

Orthodox Education

A Symposium Edited by  
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*Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions*  
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# RESPONSES

## MOVING ALONG OR MOVING AHEAD?

Esther Krauss

It has been noted that education is a messy business. The thoughtful contributions to this symposium lead in so many different and important directions that they challenge a coherent response. To name just a few themes: the financial crisis in Jewish education; the unprecedented affluence of the Jewish community that causes "rampant materialism;" the alleged intellectual and religious superficiality of the Orthodox community; the lack of intellectual coherence in our educational system; and the parental role that schools and educators are expected to assume. All have some validity, but reflect only partial truths. Goldmintz observes that the picture he presents is rather depressing. True enough, but he also notes the many accomplishments of our educational system and how much there is to celebrate.

Rather than attempt the impossible task of adequately responding to the diverse issues raised in this forum, I will focus on themes that resonated with me, pertaining directly to educational improvement, and then raise an issue of my own.

Collaboration is a refreshing concept that is beginning to take root on the Jewish educational scene. I believe it has far-reaching potential for bringing us closer to our goal of providing excellent education in our schools. Whether called "crossing borders," breaking down barriers, or overcoming isolation within and between communities and schools, a variety of cooperative efforts on behalf of Jewish education were proposed in this symposium. It has been noted (Bieler, Kardos, Schick) that the financial crisis that heads the list of the practical challenges we face cannot be solved without broad communal help. A recent issue of

*Jewish Educational Leadership*, which is dedicated to the topic of "Building Professional Learning Communities," suggests the many potential educational benefits of collaboration.<sup>1</sup> I might add that the

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example we set for our students of adults working together for the common good has major educational significance. Students are very sensitive to their surroundings and to the adult behavior they witness and experience.<sup>2</sup>

Commensurate with the potential benefits of this concept are the attendant challenges. Collaboration across denominations requires overcoming the isolation and suspicion that unfortunately prevails between them; cooperation within the Orthodox educational community requires overcoming prevalent attitudes of competition, territorialism, and philosophical differences. I don't know which is more challenging, but I would like to see us explore creative ways to overcome the challenges and work together towards shared communal and educational goals. The Boston experiments (Kardos) are promising attempts and should serve as models.

In setting down its six standards to evaluate school leaders, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium included the requirement that each of the qualities of effective leadership be directed towards the goal of "promot[ing] the success of all students."<sup>3</sup> We, too, are called upon to educate a diverse population of students even within the narrower confines of Orthodox schools, and our first educational responsibility is to help *all* students learn well. I use that phrase advisedly, because to educate, in the best sense of the word, is to facilitate learning.

To learn is exciting. Children are born curious, and they spend the early years of their lives exploring their wonderful world and learning enthusiastically how to navigate it. Anyone who has watched a child learn how to walk cannot but be impressed by how hard she works. She doesn't look for the "easy way out." She keeps at it, in spite of the cuts and

bruises. All parents have to do is understand, encourage, guide, and protect her from harm. To a large extent that is our major task as educators. We need to know how best to facilitate learning, and that requires us to be knowledgeable in subject matter, developmental psychology, and pedagogy – a tall order indeed.

To achieve it, we should examine teachers' credentials (Bieler), attract capable and dedicated teachers, provide them with pre-service training, mentor new educators (teachers and school leaders), and work on continuous professional development that focuses on in-school collaboration. Schools should create a culture and environment of growth for everyone – students, faculty, leadership (educational, administrative, and lay), parents, and community. There is a wealth of educational material out there that can be tapped to generate context-specific knowledge and educational strategies for religious schools (Kardos).

Teachers have the most direct and ongoing contact with students. Their professional expertise, enthusiasm, interests, and dedication should be harnessed to improve education. They need encouragement and guidance to work collaboratively, and they need to be empowered to take initiative and accept positions of teacher leadership in their own schools. If, indeed, teachers don't "know enough" literally (Blau) or pedagogically, they need to learn more and learn it better. A month of summer study is a good place to start but not nearly enough. Academic summers are very long and should be used for more than recharging of batteries, as important as that is. This precious time is available to improve education. School staff should be paid to spend that time working together to develop contextualized curriculum, pedagogic approaches, and educational initiatives to enhance the religious and emotional growth of all their students.

The field needs to be professionalized by the creation of an academic setting for Jewish education where theory and practice converge (Bieler). The existing culture of professional isolation needs to be broken. Traditional schools are lonely places for educators from the top down. "Crossing borders" (Kardos) means opening the school doors—the doors

of classrooms, offices, and school entrances. Teachers should routinely visit each other's classes. Lay leaders, parents, and educators from other schools should be invited into a school's "sacred space" so that all can learn from and support each other. Schools need to become true "learning communities."

To focus specifically on religious education, a Modern Orthodox school faces a diverse group of students from different religious backgrounds with different spiritual and intellectual tendencies, capabilities, and needs. Unfortunately, we tend to follow a one-size-fits-all approach in an area where differentiated instruction is called for. It would be helpful for us to learn more about the religious and educational experiences of our students (Finkelman) to guide us in more effectively addressing their needs and differences. As Modern Orthodox educators we are challenged by the very complexity that defines us. We all want to transmit our sacred tradition, but we also legitimately seek "intellectual honesty and coherence." We want to accept the challenge of teaching students "to think critically about their history, while continuing to foster a love and passion for *Yiddishkeit*" (Perl). We need, in other words, to find ways to balance the intellectual, spiritual, and affective approaches to Jewish education.

It strikes me, however, that much of the discussion pertains to secondary education and beyond. In fact, I note that most of the respondents to this symposium are associated with high school education and beyond. I suggest we look at the full range of a student's Jewish education pre-college as a continuum, beginning with a more focused concentration on the early years of primary and elementary schooling, through secondary school, and then followed by the Israel experience.

In the natural sequence of intellectual, emotional and psychological development, the early years are most suitable to laying foundations for love and commitment to Torah and Jewish values. At this concrete stage of their development children are most receptive to emotional and spiritual approaches to Torah study. Their natural innocence and naiveté

lead them to more readily appreciate and internalize *middot* such as love and concern for others. Education during this period should focus on children's religious and emotional growth.

Adolescence is a time of identity formation, which requires the development of more sophisticated and complex analytical and critical-thinking skills. It is during these years that students most need to have their questions and issues addressed sensitively and honestly. The proposal to create a *mahshevet Yisrael* curriculum (Weiss) for that purpose is laudable but may be too narrow. Familiarity with Jewish philosophical and theological sources is required for Jewish literacy, but the total environment and culture of a Jewish school should invite and welcome questions in all subject areas and all facets of school life. Students need knowledgeable mentors whom they respect and to whom they also feel comfortable turning with their religious questions, mentors who have themselves experienced similar struggles.

A recent study on the growth of independent religious communities suggests that perhaps we have not done enough in this area.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of doomsday predictions about intermarriage and assimilation, it is refreshing to note that young Jews are seeking opportunities, albeit in unorthodox, independent, and creative ways, for increased Jewish study and religious expression.<sup>5</sup> Although these movements are comprised primarily of non-Orthodox Jews, the fact that fifteen percent of participants, according to the study, identify as Orthodox is significant.<sup>6</sup> We should ask ourselves why and how we might be failing intelligent young Jews who don't find a comfortable place in the established Orthodox community.<sup>7</sup>

The third, or transitional, stage in the Jewish educational continuum is what has become the traditional post-high school year in Israel. This should continue to promote religious and intellectual growth, but also prepare students for entry into the "real" world. It is "risky" to raise questions about this *de rigueur* educational experience, but I am in good company in suggesting a reexamination of the goals and objectives of the Israel experience.

I am concerned that just as American schools abdicate some responsibility for adequately developing students' Torah commitment and values, leaving it all to Israel, Israel programs abdicate their responsibility to help prepare students for life after they go home. Likewise, just as American schools do not adequately meet the needs of their diverse student populations, Israel programs offer too few alternative program styles.

There are certainly students, both male and female, for whom "ivory towers" of Talmud Torah and spiritual development are appropriate, although I advocate that even those programs should pay more attention to preparing students for the future. And the fact is that there are students who have different intellectual interests or need broader programs, and there must be legitimate and accepted alternative programs for them (Waxman). Goals for such programs should be carefully designed to maximize the value of the Israel experience in preparing students to live meaningful Jewish lives.

The Israel program is an expensive luxury that most students take for granted, and about which they even feel self-righteous and entitled. We have a responsibility to disabuse students of their notion of Israel as Disneyland (Berger). Study in Israel should not only be rigorous, but it should be conducted in Hebrew. College credits should be awarded only for college-level work, and the year should not be a short cut to earning a college diploma the quick and easy way.

Perhaps most importantly, the decline in Diaspora Jews' identification with Israel has come at the very same time that Israel's image in the world has suffered, and anti-Semitism is on the rise. The proposal that we strengthen the connection of our students to Israel by sending college students on missions there (Berger) has merit but may be too little and too late. The immediacy of Israel—the threats to our security as well as the special, miraculous nature of this country—is difficult to experience from afar; it can best be felt only by living here for an extended period of time. That is where the post-high-school programs miss a golden opportunity. Students who return from living and learning in Israel should be armed with the information, skills, motivation, and self-

confidence to project a more nuanced approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict and provide informed and honest responses to both Jewish skeptics and non-Jewish opponents.

Finally, students experience Jewish education very differently in these Israel programs than they did in their schools in the Diaspora. Although that may be appropriate for their more advanced level of maturity, the difference should not convey mixed and even contradictory messages. There needs to be a strong partnership between Israeli and Diaspora educators as they share the responsibility for helping students attain a Jewish "worldview"(Gottlieb) that is based on a profound connection to Torah texts, the Jewish people, and the land of Israel. Together they should strive to provide young people with the tools to deal with the complex world in which Modern Orthodox Jews choose to live.

Finally, I would like to raise an issue that demonstrates the complexity and challenge of that worldview. I was surprised to find that such a wide-ranging discussion of anticipated challenges to American Orthodoxy did not make mention of the changing role of women. Perhaps we believe that the topic is already passé because the expansion of Torah study for women is an adequate response to feminism. We are naturally reluctant to acknowledge that intensified Torah study has already, and will continue in the future, to present challenges that demand intellectually honest and sensitive responses.

Ironically, the Haredi community, which provided the original impetus for formal Jewish education for women and where it gained widely accepted legitimacy from the Hafetz Haim as a critical religious need, has responded to the challenge to further its own ends.<sup>8</sup> In the words of Sara Schneirer, the founder of Bais Yaakov, "Beth Jacob does not try to impart a great wealth of knowledge... but a wealth of spirit, a large measure of enthusiasm for the performance of commandments, and a large measure of good personality traits."<sup>9</sup> Today that means socializing girls into their role as enablers of Talmud Torah. Thus, in the Haredi community, the advances in women's education are largely responsible for universal and extended Torah study for men.<sup>10</sup>

Modern Orthodoxy views Torah study for women much more broadly, seeing in it intrinsic and independent intellectual and spiritual value for each individual woman. However, it has not come to terms with the religious implications of the changed status of women. We hold on to vestiges of the original justification for women's learning as a *bedi'avad*, a compromise with new secular realities, and do not adequately recognize and appreciate the religious significance of learned women and the potential benefits of empowering them religiously.

For example, Modern Orthodox schools need knowledgeable and committed educators to transmit their message effectively. The field of Jewish education is inviting to women who love to learn and are searching for meaningful ways to contribute their expanded knowledge. They should be outstanding role models for the girls and boys who are growing up in these new realities, but we limit their educational roles and influence.<sup>11</sup> We bemoan the lack of interest in Talmud study among male students, but ignore the increased interest in it among female students. We hesitate to allow women to teach Talmud and halakhah even in schools exclusively for girls, and reject, almost universally, the presence of a female Talmud teacher or principal in a coed environment.

Similarly, we shy away from confronting halakhic issues like *zimmun*, *keriat haMegilla*, or *keriat haTorah* in our schools. We either adopt the conservative, indeed reactionary position that these are halakhically or politically questionable, or we take the position that schools are not the forum for activism. One can argue either of those positions<sup>12</sup> but demonization, marginalization, or avoidance of issues does not make them go away; it pushes them underground by alienating students and that is, to my mind, much more dangerous than confrontation.

As a community that believes in the eternal relevance of Torah, we need to confront the religious, social, and family adjustments that the inclusion of women in the full gamut of religious life requires so that we can educate and prepare our students of both genders to deal with them in their own personal lives. I would urge that the collection of data about the educational and religious experiences of students (Finkelman) explicitly address issues of gender.

Advanced Torah study for women has already influenced halakhah and will continue to do so. We should welcome the fresh approach of women to textual interpretation in halakhah as well as in Tanakh, and open new halakhically-grounded opportunities to incorporate women into the religious arena, both public and private. Learned women have adequately proven their allegiance to Torah and Jewish values. The *to'anut* and *yo'atzot* programs in Israel presage the vast contributions that women can and will make to Judaism.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jewish Educational Leadership*, 6:1 (Fall, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Theodore R.Sizer and Nancy Faust Sizer, *The Students Are Watching* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> *Standards for School Leaders*, (Washington, DC: The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, 1996), p. 8, available at <http://www.ccsso.org/content/pdfs/isllcstd.pdf>, emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> Steven M. Cohen, et al., *Emergent Jewish Communities and their Participants* (n.p.: Synagogue 3000 and Mechon Hadar, 2007), available at [www.jewishemergent.org/survey](http://www.jewishemergent.org/survey).

<sup>5</sup> Limmud conferences are springing up all over the world and attracting a large number of young people who want to learn more about Judaism.

<sup>6</sup> Cohen, et al., *Emergent Jewish Communities*, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> In a talk given by the Rav at Kehillat Jeshurun in 1972, where he discussed why the *Beit HaKenesset* is not popular even among Orthodox Jews, he commented on the anti-establishment attitude that characterizes the modern American Jewish community. See R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Beit HaKenesset – Mossad VeRa'ayon," in *Divrei Hagut VeHa'arakhah* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1982), pp. 99-116.

<sup>8</sup> The Belzer Rebbe was the first to give his approval to the founding of Bais Ya'akov. Agudat Yisrael quickly took Bais Ya'akov under its umbrella educational organization, Keren HaTorah. The Hafetz Haim justified it on the basis of changing social conditions. See R' Yisrael Meir Yitzchak HaCohen, *Likutei Halakhot, Sotah*, v.2, p.2, quoted in Deborah Weissman, "Bais Yaakov: A Historical Model for Jewish Feminists," *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken, 1976), p. 142.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from a letter to the director of Bais Ya'akov in Jerusalem, as cited in Abraham Atkin, "The Beth Jacob Movement in Poland," PhD dissertation, Yeshiva University, 1959.

<sup>10</sup> Menachem Friedman, "Haredim Confront the Modern City," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, 2 (1986), pp. 74-96.

<sup>11</sup> On religious role models for girls see Rachel Furst, "En-gendered Identities: Accounting for Gender in Religious Educational Role Modeling," Jerusalem, ATID, 2002, available at <http://www.atid.org/journal/journal02/furst.doc>.

<sup>12</sup> See Ralph W. Tyler, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), where he asks whether schools should develop young people to fit into the present society as it is, or schools have a revolutionary mission to develop young people who will seek to improve society.