



Notes from ATID

Sharpening the Message

Recommendations for Improving

the Effectiveness of Religious

Education in Yeshiva High Schools

Rabbi Alan Haber





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Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions

עתי-עמותה לתורה יוזמה ודרכים בחינוך יהודי (ע"ר)

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Foreword

There may be no endeavor more rewarding, and simultaneously more frustrating, than Jewish education.

As with most things, the rewards and the frustration come from a single source, in this case the sheer magnitude and significance of our task. We *mechanchim* and *mechanchot* are charged with the mission of passing on the eternal truths of our Torah to the next generation, inspiring them to carry forward that which we received from our own teachers, and thus becoming a crucial link in the chain of *mesorah*. We take that responsibility very seriously, and thus rejoice at every success and fret over every setback.

This paper, written during a mid-career pause in my own work as an educator, asks questions that I know plague other *mechanchim* as they have plagued me for the past few decades: how well are we accomplishing our tasks, and what can we do to improve?

Seeking answers, I spent a year and a half reading and researching. I conducted formal interviews with a number of principals and teachers from Modern Orthodox high schools across the United States, and with recent graduates currently studying in Israel. Informally, I conferred with friends, colleagues and students. Slowly, I honed in on the ideas presented below.

The answers I arrived at to my two questions form a paradox: the enterprise of Modern Orthodox Jewish education over the past few decades has been phenomenally successful – and at the same time there is so much that cries out for improvement. Both halves of that sentence are true and neither one negates the other. That is also because of the supreme importance of our task. When it comes to transmitting the Torah to the next generation and inspiring them to follow it, we must perform as perfectionists.

In the chapters that follow, I shall present a set of recommendations for subtle but significant

improvements in our methodology. Adoption of the suggestions will not necessitate dramatic changes. If implemented well, however, substantial benefits will accrue over time.

The title of this pamphlet, *Sharpening the Message*, encapsulates the principle behind my proposals. I would like to take the successful work that we are doing, and fine-tune it so that the message can be heard more clearly by our students. The Introduction and first three chapters present the analysis that led to my conclusions. In Chapter Four I discuss sharpening the message on an institutional level, and in Chapter Five I provide ideas for helping teachers carry it through in each of their classes. Chapter Six offers a brief evaluation of curricular goals and some recommendations for modifications. Finally, Chapter Seven reviews the different components in our educational programs, and ways to leverage the excellent work we are already doing to produce even better results.

This paper does not contain statistical analysis or scientific research, and its recommendations have not been tested systematically. What it does contain are the musings of a *mechanech* who cares deeply about *chinuch* and about the future of the Jewish People, and strongly believes that the two are intimately connected. I offer these thoughts to my colleagues in the field, and ask that you read them in that spirit.

The discussion below highlights Modern Orthodox high schools in the United States. I interviewed individuals who were associated with schools of that type, and the recommendations relate specifically to that group of schools. However, the core principles outlined in this paper are fairly universal. By modifying specific details, the recommendations could easily be adapted and thus adopted by high schools in other countries, and by institutions serving other age groups and/or communities with other ideological affiliations.

I am fully aware that the shortcomings I shall be noting do not apply across the board, and that where they do apply it is with varying degrees of magnitude. Additionally, I am aware of a number of schools that have already implemented at least some of what I shall be suggesting. In fact, some of the suggestions arose in part from conversations I had with principals and students who described successful aspects of their schools that I believe are worth replicating.¹

Nevertheless, I deemed this paper worth writing because I am convinced that as a community, we would do well for ourselves and our children to be much more engaged in these issues. It is my firm belief that if many more schools will adopt these subtle and simple but significant recommendations and do so more completely, our institutions and our communities themselves will be significantly improved.

I would like thank a number of individuals and institutions who enabled me to research and write this paper. First and foremost, to ATID for providing me with the funding for this project and to its director, my good friend Rabbi Jeffrey Saks, for his encouragement, direction and guidance.

I also owe a special debt of gratitude to my friend and colleague Rabbi Dr. Yoel Finkelman, who generously shared hours of his time and much of his insights and wisdom with me at various stages of this project. I would also like to thank Rabbi Yitzchak Blau and Mrs. Ora Lee Kanner for reviewing the manuscript in its final stages and sharing several important insights with me.

As noted above, many of the insights in this paper came from formal interviews and informal discussions with leading educators, as well as with a number of young recent graduates, who all took time to share their thoughts, experiences and opinions with me. This paper and its recommendations are the product of those discussions. I thank each of them for enabling me to share their insights with the broader community.

Finally, I thank my wife Monica and my children Sara, Batsheva, Moshe, Tzvi and Elchanan. In general, to paraphrase Rabbi Akiva, anything I accomplish in the world of *chinuch* is due to their support and partnership. In the case of this project specifically, it also includes a number of their perspectives and ideas.

Introduction

The current state of Modern Orthodox education—indeed of Modern Orthodoxy itself – can be described as a paradox.

On the one hand, our communities have demonstrated extremely impressive growth, both quantitatively and qualitatively, over the past few decades. As a single example, let us take a quick look at the community of Teaneck, often considered the flagship of American Modern Orthodoxy. When I was growing up in New Jersey in the 1970s and early 1980s, there was one Orthodox synagogue in Teaneck, and one kosher pizza store. There was no *eruv*. Today, a generation later, there are close to 20 synagogues and an equivalent number of kosher eating establishments of every type in Teaneck and in adjacent Bergenfield and New Milford (the community has expanded beyond the township's borders). There is an *eruv* over the entire area, a full supermarket selling exclusively kosher food, several Orthodox day schools within the community itself and even more in neighboring towns. One can find a *minyan* as early as 5:30 am or as late as 10:30 pm. The community offers numerous Torah learning opportunities for children, teenagers and adults, social welfare and other charitable institutions and social programming for all ages, including *Shomer Shabbat* boy scout/girl scout troops and Little League teams. All of this growth has taken place over the span of just a few decades, and it seems obvious that this impressive accomplishment should be seen as a vote of confidence in the day schools that educated this generation.

At the same time, however, Modern Orthodoxy is beset by many challenges. To some, spiritual life in our communities often seems like an empty shell, and the community itself sometimes looks more like a sociological entity than a faith group. Rabbis bemoan the widespread violation of various Jewish laws and loud socializing during Shabbat morning services, and often acknowledge that they feel powerless to change the situation.

There is also a significant problem involving children raised in the community abandoning Orthodox observance, either during their teenage years or after graduating high school. Unfortunately, we have little statistical data on religious retention rates, and the relationship between the nature of Jewish education and religious observance. It may in fact even be impossible to compile such data.² Nevertheless, over the past decade or two, many voices of concern have been raised in the Orthodox community about this issue.

Faranak Margolese's *Off the Derech*³ addresses this topic. Margolese also notes the lack of empirical data but attempts to bring indirect statistical support and anecdotal evidence to back up her assertion that the Orthodox community is experiencing an "epidemic" of people going "off the *derech*".⁴ Margolese substantiates her views with extensive quotations from other publications⁵ and from leading educators and public figures across a broad spectrum of American Orthodoxy.

More recently in 2012, Professor Yitzchok Levine posted a comment on the "Lookjed" email discussion group in which he quoted a student who graduated from "a Modern Orthodox high school" in 1997 as part of a class of 43 students. The young woman claimed that although "most [of her classmates] went to Israel for one year after graduation and a number stayed for a second year", all but seven or eight of them (including some who had studied in Israel for two years) were no longer observant fifteen years after leaving high school.

Professor Levine surmised that this was not at all atypical (one can certainly challenge that assertion⁶) and asked the following questions: (1) What are the day schools doing with 12 years of *chinuch*?; and (2) What are the schools in *Eretz Yisrael* doing with the year or two spent studying there?⁷ This post began a lively discussion thread that extended for about a month, with various opinions expressed about the extent and the

causes of the problem and his criticism of the existing educational system. Near-universal agreement was voiced on two points: that we are losing many students, and that the situation is worsening.

Although the problem neither begins nor ends there, students who study and live on non-Jewish university campuses are recognized as being particularly at risk. There is a well-known phenomenon involving young people who spent 12 years in Yeshiva day schools, and often a year or more in Yeshiva in Israel as well, arriving on campus and completely abandoning Orthodox observance by the time they graduate. Often, this change takes place within the first year or two on campus. The precise extent of the problem is subject to some dispute, but it is serious enough that the Orthodox Union funds an organization known as the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC)⁸ which staffs rabbinic couples on 16 different campuses throughout North America. Both spouses in each of these couples are employed full-time to provide religious and social programming geared exclusively towards students who grew up in Modern Orthodox homes. The organization does excellent work, and yet its leaders are among the most outspoken voices decrying the abysmal situation on campus and their own inability to stem the tide significantly.

Avi⁹ arrived on the campus of a non-Jewish university with a large Orthodox population after 12 years of Yeshiva day school education in a large metropolitan area. Avi had had a very positive religious experience in his high school – indeed although he was known as a “cool kid” in his school, he was also known as one of the more religious ones, and in addition Avi had had a wonderful relationship with his high school rebbe. He was determined to maintain his religious priorities in spite of the challenges of campus life, and was looking for a religious mentor to continue the type of relationship he had had with his rebbe in high school. Shortly after arriving on campus, he contacted his local JLIC rabbi to set up a chavruta. The rabbi was very excited, and they set up a time and began to meet.

In the beginning, Avi was also excited, and showed up enthusiastically for the chavruta. But after a number of weeks, Avi started to miss learning sessions with the rabbi. There were all sorts of other demands pulling at his time, and all sorts of other influences in his life. Other religious kids on campus were beginning to compromise on their observance levels – young women who entered campus wearing only skirts were beginning to appear in pants, young men were being seen without kippot, and attendance at the kosher dining hall was becoming less than 100%. Avi heard many excuses from his peers on campus: “It’s too hard”, “There are too many demands on our time”, “It doesn’t make sense”, and “at home we eat out at dairy restaurants anyway”. At first Avi was resistant, but after a short while he also began to slip, and the chavrutot were the first thing to go. It reached the point that he was missing the sessions more often than he came to them.

The JLIC rabbi kept pushing Avi to come and learn with him, but finally Avi broke it off entirely. “It’s just so much harder here,” he explained, “especially because almost nobody else is doing this. In high school it was fine because I was in the right environment, everything was pushing me to do certain things and it was enjoyable to me. But here I don’t have that structure anymore and nobody is pushing me. I thought I was ‘into it’ in high school, but I guess I overestimated how much. I spent a lot of time learning in high school and I kept all the laws – but I guess I never really thought about what it means to me in my life.”

As this vignette reveals, many factors influence students’ religious lives on campus. The pressures are enormous and our ability to provide a supportive environment is minimal. Additionally, there are all sorts of messages coming from the broader society and, often, even the students’ own families, that skew priorities and push them away from Torah observance. Still, after the extraordinary efforts invested in educating these young people, it seems that we should be able to achieve better results in confronting those challenges.

Why are Avi and his peers leaving Jewish observance? How can so many students who have received such an intensive Jewish education for their entire childhoods (at a cost often reaching several hundred thousand dollars each for their

parents) abandon their religious observance so quickly? And how can religious communities that are unquestionably successful and vibrant at the same time appear so shallow and empty?

Chapter One

Evaluating Modern Orthodox Education

Let us take a closer look at our educational system. As Torah educators, we generally concentrate our efforts on two objectives.

Firstly, as teachers we naturally want to teach. It is our mission to transmit the holy texts of the Torah, and the ideas they contain, to the next generation. We want our students to be Jewishly knowledgeable and to be conversant – both literally and figuratively – in the texts of our tradition.

We also have a deeper goal. As religious educators we are not satisfied if our students are simply well-informed and *skilled*. Our mission is for the Torah they learn to penetrate their souls, to transform their very beings. Yes, we want our students to learn the Torah. But even more importantly, we want them to live the Torah.

In the Introduction, we noted that although we are achieving some success with the second goal, we are still not accomplishing as much as we would like to, and frankly as much as the Jewish People needs us to. Let us take a moment to evaluate our other major goal - academic achievement. How are we doing on that one?

On this issue as well, the reality seems paradoxical.

On the one hand, we have accomplished much over the past few decades. During these years, as a professional community we have discussed and debated curricular goals and pedagogic techniques, and as a result, our schools have become increasingly sophisticated. Different schools have adapted the various models to their specific populations, and outside of schools as well, Torah education has flourished in our communities. The Jewish publishing industry has contributed by making a constantly-growing library of traditional and modern texts available both in Hebrew and in the vernacular, and of late,

we have also begun to harness the power of the internet and related technologies to advance the cause.

The growing popularity of *daf yomi* and proliferation of other learning opportunities for children, youth and adults in our communities attest to the success of our endeavors. We have managed to give increasing numbers of people both the skills and the motivation to continue their formal Jewish education on a lifelong basis. Thousands of Jews of all ages and backgrounds, both male and female, currently participate in regular formal programs of Torah study, something that was once confined to the ivory towers of the *batei midrash*. And educators in Israel who have taught graduates of American Modern Orthodox high schools for many years note that the level of knowledge with which these students come to Israel is often significantly higher than it was in the past.

Still, many teachers express increasing concern. Educators at the leading one-year programs in Israel report that a very high percentage of students entering their programs cannot read or understand a sentence in Biblical or Rabbinic Hebrew, and many even lack the skills to pronounce the words properly. These teachers are not speaking about weak students or those with various forms of learning difficulties, but of mainstream and even honors students.

These anecdotal reports were confirmed in a study conducted in 2009 at Yeshiva University. Fifty-four male students entering YU, “nearly all of [whom] had gone through elementary and high school in Jewish day schools and had spent a year [studying] in Israel” participated in the study. The students were tested on their abilities to read and comprehend a simple passage from the book of *Bereishit* with *Rashi’s* commentary, and their knowledge of Biblical Hebrew’s grammar and

vocabulary. Only 53% were able to do so; the remainder were deemed in need of remediation.¹⁰

Furthermore, although students are often able to repeat back information they have learned in school, teachers have registered an increasing lack of ability to analyze information or discuss it with any degree of sophistication.

Much recent energy has been expended on understanding and addressing this enigmatic dichotomy. Many educators place the blame on certain features of contemporary culture – the growing prominence of narcissism, materialism and an associated lack of willingness to sacrifice for the sake of others or even our own long-term goals, and an increasingly shallow popular culture that emphasizes superficiality and the pursuit of instant gratification. Additionally, fingers are often pointed at the ostensibly pernicious influences of the internet, cellphones, text messaging and other new technologies. Indeed, many recent studies

have shown that our brains actually are being “rewired” by the exposure to and use of these technologies. But the significance of this discovery, and what responses are called for remain unclear.¹¹

At this stage, then, we can summarize our analysis by saying that on both issues (religious and academic), decades of hard work by dedicated educators have produced impressive results in which we may all take pride – and yet, at the same time, our current realities cry out for improvement.

In the next chapter, I shall present four subtle observations about our current system of *chinuch*, which combine to create what I view as a very significant weakness. In the following chapters I shall present some recommendations for changes – also subtle and for the most part easily implemented – that have the potential to mitigate that weakness and strengthen our schools and institutions.

Chapter Two

Diagnosis, or Four Observations about the American Modern Orthodox Yeshiva High School System

In this chapter, I present four subtle observations about the American Modern Orthodox Yeshiva High School system, which crystalized in my mind over the course of this project. These are generalizations, and are certainly not all true of all of our institutions, but they do describe the major trends in our schools, and to some extent in other Orthodox educational circles as well.

I refer to these insights as “observations” rather than “criticisms,” even though I see them as problems to be corrected. I use this term in recognition of the fact that there are good reasons why the problems developed, and any attempt to correct them must take those reasons into account.

Like the 4-point approach I shall propose in Chapter Three, the four observations are inter-related. In fact, as I shall explain, I believe that the phenomenon described in the fourth observation came about at least in part as an attempt to compensate for the other three. Together, these four observations point to a significant deficiency in the current approach, a deficiency that results in our efforts (both academic and religious) falling short of our goals.

Observation #1 – Not Talking About God

As strange as this may sound, rabbis and teachers in Orthodox schools and synagogues talk very little about God. And, when they do talk about God, they often fail to help their students build a relationship with Him. We study texts from the Bible and the Talmud, we talk about important aspects of halachic life such as Shabbat, the holidays, and prayer. Of course, those things all have much to do with God, and He features prominently in the discussions, but we do not talk much about Him directly, or about how to interact with Him in any meaningful way.

In an August 2013 blog post, Rabbi Gidon Rothstein made the provocative statement that many Orthodox Jews today “are, in actuality, Reconstructionists.” He explained, “By that I mean that they are dedicated to the practices they know, but more as a matter of retaining membership in the community in which they were raised-or which they joined-than of trying to serve Hashem.” Rabbi Rothstein went on to describe what he sees as a community dedicated to many religious practices, but not for genuinely religious reasons: “Hashem doesn’t sit at the center of their religion. Their religion is to do what everyone around them says they need to do; show them, in black and white, that Hashem actually says otherwise, and it’s not that they disagree, it’s that it’s irrelevant.”¹²

According to Rabbi Rothstein, the cause of this sorry state of affairs is a tendency in our communities to avoid talking about God and about faith and worship. He argues that rabbis prefer to speak about the practical aspects of following halacha rather than encouraging people to engage religiously and spiritually, because “[rabbis have] learned that people are more comfortable speaking of ‘Torah and *mitzvos*,’ a defined system of practices. Speaking of the best way to serve or approach Hashem is much trickier, so rabbis learn to avoid it.” The rest of the post was devoted to exploring the reasons why theological discussions should, in his mind, be among the most important items on the Jewish community’s agenda.

One can certainly argue with Rabbi Rothstein’s extreme formulations or his insistence on the central place theology should hold in our communal discussions. In addition, he was referring to pulpit rabbis. It may well be that we teachers speak about these things more in our schools than rabbis do in their Shabbat morning sermons.

Nonetheless, I think it is undeniable that we do not devote enough press time in our classrooms to these discussions. And in my view, Rabbi Rothstein is on to something when he analyzes the reasons.

Talking about God is uncomfortable because if one takes those discussions seriously, significant implications emerge. A person who lives life with a constant awareness of God's presence (i.e., someone who genuinely fulfills the mandate "I place God before me always"¹³) experiences a sense of responsibility that can be quite burdensome.

As educators, it is easier to remain on safer ground by keeping the subject matter more abstract and psychologically distant. Yet we do our students a tremendous disservice when we avoid the topic of God. A more acute awareness of God's presence in our lives indeed imposes feelings of obligation, and the stronger those feelings are, the better equipped we are to resist challenges such as those encountered on campus. Even more critically, an awareness of God's presence brings meaning and purpose to people's lives, and can infuse in them a passionate sense of purpose that so often seems lacking in our communities.

Observation #2 – Teaching Torah as an Academic Subject

The problem, however, is deeper. Not only do we not talk very much about God, but even our "Torah and *mitzvos*" talk has an academic feel, with little attention paid to drawing personal, spiritual or religious significance from the texts.

That statement may sound strange, and may provoke some indignant responses. To clarify: I am not accusing Torah teachers of considering their subjects morally or spiritually equivalent to English, history or math. I am certain that everyone who teaches Torah in our schools believes in the intrinsic holiness of Torah and would never, *chas ve-shalom*, put it in the same category as secular knowledge. Secondly, I am not decrying rigorous and demanding studies or

suggesting that we compromise in any way on the academic standards for which we strive – again, *chas ve-shalom*! And third, I am *not* claiming that we completely fail to discuss moral or religious values in our classes. Indeed, it is impossible to study our texts at any level of depth without doing so. But that is also true of English literature and history.

What I *am* saying is that although *limudei kodesh* teachers undoubtedly view their texts and subjects as unique, authoritative and holy, and the students understand this as well, teachers generally do not address this point explicitly. And in the infrequent instances when they do speak about it, the conversations may be brief and dry. Perhaps we simply assume that our students understand why they study the holy texts, and that the words of Torah speak loudly enough to be heard on their own.

We need to rethink those assumptions, though, because our students are not necessarily internalizing those messages. In theory, they understand that Torah is singular and meant to be different than anything else they study. In practice, however, their classroom realities do not play out that way. Their *limudei kodesh* classes are generally treated as subjects that they must study for the sake of getting good grades and being accepted to a good college. Any other aspect of this learning and anything else they are meant to take from it often remains undeveloped.

This holds true about all students, whether or not they are religiously motivated. I shall illustrate this with a brief personal story:

One afternoon over ten years ago, I taught a class at MMY on a topic in Machshevet Yisrael connected to the history of the Jewish People - a topic about which I feel strongly. We spent the class analyzing chapters 26-27 of Vayikra and 28-30 of Devarim (the sections known as "tochacha").

We were looking at these chapters on a macro-level (not examining individual verses) and our analysis was based on concepts we had spent the

previous classes discussing. That particular evening, we simply read through these chapters from the Torah. I read the verses aloud myself, pausing briefly here and there to clarify a particular word, make a point or listen to a question or comment from a student. As we went through I also demonstrated how these sections of the Torah illustrate some of the concepts we had talked about in previous lessons. But essentially what I did that evening was to read the words of the Chumash with the students. These chapters are powerful ones, and I read them with a moderately high level of emotion. Some of the students were also visibly moved.

When the class was over, a young woman approached me and said, “I don’t know how to thank you, Rabbi Haber. This class was one of the most powerful learning moments I’ve ever experienced. I’m not exaggerating when I say that this past hour was a life-altering experience.”

I thanked her for the compliment, and told her that while I must protest the level of hyperbole, I was also extremely moved by what we just read. Indeed, I said, these ideas have changed my life as well. “But I just want to point something out,” I added. “All we did this class was to read pesukim from the Torah!”

It is now over a decade later, and that story stays with me. Indeed, that particular class was extraordinarily inspiring – and yet “all” we did was read from the Torah. These students had sat in classrooms every single day since they were small children, studying these same texts. What was different this time? Something extremely unusual happened that evening: the students listened to the words of Torah not only as a text to be studied, but as the Word of God speaking to them.

I cannot shake the feeling that this ought not be a rare occurrence.

There is an important lesson to be learned from this story. Earlier, I mentioned that we do not talk about God very much. Instead, we concentrate on the study of texts like the *Tanach* and *Talmud*, and

the information contained in those texts. Of course, one could argue that those texts themselves really speak about God, because they reflect His will, and of course (as noted above) when we study them we automatically discuss all sorts of religious, spiritual, philosophical and moral ideas. That is indeed true – but nonetheless we are only “talking about God” if we discuss that point with our students.

What made that class meaningful so many years ago was the context of the lesson, and the dynamic that had evolved over the course of the preceding weeks. As a teacher, I had raised a number of fundamental questions, in this case relating to the nature of the Jewish People and the meaning of our history, and had repeatedly suggested that the key to understanding these realities would be found by carefully reading the Torah.

The passages we read that afternoon contain very strong images. And my students, several months into an intense year of seminary in Israel entirely dedicated to introspection and personal growth, were at that point ripe for this type of thinking. By this stage in the course, both the teacher and the students had developed a shared sense of reverence for the text that allowed us to read it in a new way.

I realize that these were optimal conditions that are not easily replicable, but nevertheless, herein lie some crucial universal lessons about how Torah subjects should be presented and discussed.

Observation #3 – No Processing and Personalizing

Even when we do engage in discussions about God and theology, or about related topics like faith and prayer, we do not necessarily provide students with sufficient opportunity to process and personalize these topics on the emotional and spiritual¹⁴ levels.

This may be related, at least in part, to constantly increasing academic challenges. Teachers may

feel that they simply do not have the luxury of taking class time to devote to this sort of pursuit.

Or perhaps there is another cause, a problem we may even share with secular educators. In his book *The Courage to Teach*, philosopher of education Parker Palmer discusses the “mode of knowing” that dominates contemporary education, a method he terms “objectivism”:

Objectivism portrays truth as something we can achieve only by disconnecting ourselves, physically and emotionally, from the thing we want to know.

Why? Because if we get too close to it, the impure contents of our subjective lives will contaminate that thing and our knowledge of it. No matter what “it” is – an episode in history, a creature from the wild, a passage in great literature, or a phenomenon of human behavior – objectivism claims that we can know the things of the world truly and well only from afar.

For objectivism, the subjective self is the enemy most to be feared – a Pandora’s box of opinion, bias, and ignorance that will distort our knowledge once the lid flies open. We keep the lid shut by relying exclusively on reason and facts, logic and data that cannot be swayed by subjective desire (or so the theory goes). The role of the mind and the senses in this scheme is not to connect us to the world but to hold the world at bay, lest our knowledge of it be tainted.

In objectivism, subjectivity is feared not only because it contaminates things but because it creates relationships between those things and us – and relationships are contaminating as well. When a thing ceases to be an object and becomes a vital, interactive part of our lives – whether it is a work of art, an indigenous people or an ecosystem – it might get a grip on us, biasing us toward it, thus threatening the purity of our knowledge once again.¹⁵

Palmer goes on to acknowledge that this philosophy came about as a reaction to what he

calls “the evils of reckless subjectivity”, the culture that defined “truth” on the basis of whatever religious or superstitious beliefs happened to be in vogue at a particular time. Nevertheless, he argues, “history is full of ironies, and one of them is the way objectivism has bred new versions of the same evils it tried to correct.”¹⁶

Is it possible that we have absorbed this way of thinking as well? We want our students to take their Jewish studies classes seriously. In science or history class we would never devote time to reflective discussions, asking students “what does this mean to your life?” (though perhaps Palmer would have us do so) and maybe for that reason we are averse to doing so in our Torah classes.

Whatever the reason for the lack of processing time, it is a short-sighted policy. Firstly, as damaging as objectivism may be to secular learning, it is absolutely incompatible with religious education. If we want our students to be affected by the Torah they learn, we must give them structured opportunities to make that happen. And secondly, as I shall argue in the next chapter, engaging our students emotionally and spiritually (i.e., subjectively) with their learning will help them academically as well.

Aryeh Ben David, Founder and Director of Ayeka (an organization I shall discuss more in Chapter Five), makes this point in his recent book *Soulful Education*:

Traditionally, sources are learned in chevruta or small groups, followed by a class discussion. Rarely in the learning environment is there a venue through which a student can be alone with the learning....

When I teach teachers, one of my primary rules is, “Any teaching, without processing, never happened.” The processing is what imprints the learning onto the soul of the student and leaves a long-lasting impression. Otherwise, the knowledge learned tends to slip away without leaving a trace....

Numerous Jewish thinkers assert that the heart is the primary shaper of our character traits and director of our lives. The Talmud (Avodah Zarah 19a) itself states that “A person can only study from the place of his heart.” So it became clear to me that the emotional, heartfelt connection to Jewish wisdom would have to be the culminating element in *Soulful Education*.¹⁷

Taken together, the subtle issues noted in these first three observations (not talking about God, not talking about the spiritual significance of Torah subjects, and not giving students the opportunity to process what they learn and to think about its relevance to their lives) add up to a significant weakness in our educational system. We have managed to teach a great deal of Torah and many students have understood what they have learned and remembered much of it - but more often than not, this learning has failed to change their lives. I maintain that to a very large extent, this is because of the way we have been teaching it.

Educators have noticed these weaknesses, and have taken steps to correct them, using a method that has proven largely successful. This method, and the associated problem it has inadvertently produced or exacerbated, is the subject of my final observation.

Observation #4 – Bifurcation

Perhaps in part to compensate for the above-mentioned shortcomings, our schools and communities¹⁸ invest considerable time and resources on informal and affective education aimed at motivating youth toward religious observance and affiliation with the Orthodox community. These programs frequently achieve a high level of success. There are powerful advantages to relaxed and enjoyable programs that students attend voluntarily, and which do not involve the pressure of tests and grades.

One high school administrator put it this way: “In general, the classroom is not the best venue for religious motivation. Because it is mandatory, it is not inspiring. So we do a lot of informal education

– *tisches*, *shabbatons*, speakers, *chessed* projects, inspiring programs, etc.” Explaining the recent growth of this aspect of the educational program, another seasoned principal told me, “Years ago, people were inspired by learning and you could be successful by simply giving a great class or a challenging lecture. But today people no longer think deeply; it’s all emotion. The only way to reach people in this generation is through fun, and through one-on-one interactions with the teacher.””

These extra-curricular and informal education programs generally operate through methods of emotional inspiration like song, dance and inspiring speakers, and also work to create and reinforce social connections among the students and relationships with faculty. These programs thus build and strengthen two very powerful forces that can motivate people to commit themselves to religious observance: the power of emotion, and the power of interpersonal relationships and community.

Essentially, then, we have divided our educational program into two distinct compartments: the academic program based in the classrooms is designed to impart knowledge and skills through intellectual and cognitive activities, and the informal educational program is designed to inspire religious feelings and commitments using primarily emotional, interpersonal and social tools. Our hope is that these two components will complement one another to create a complete religious experience.¹⁹

The problem, however, is that the way it stands, the two elements do not sufficiently interact with one another, and in most cases we are actually running a bifurcated program. This is a mistake. The split is responsible for some of the shortcomings of our current system.

When researching this paper I asked a young man who had recently graduated from a Modern Orthodox co-educational high school, “what do you think your teachers were trying to accomplish, and how did they try to do it?” He answered,

“They were interested in teaching us how to read *rishonim* the best we can and how to understand the back and forth of the *Gemara*, and stuff like that. They also wanted to be religious role models, like if you want to talk to them and stuff. But mostly it was about learning skills.” In other words, serving as religious role models was an important goal of the teachers, but they did not use their academic teaching to accomplish this goal. The classroom was only for the technical aspects of learning.

I asked this young man what methods they used to perform the religious role modeling (other than being willing to speak to students “if you want to talk to them”), and he told me that in his school (located in a community where most of the staff and students live within walking distance of one another) teachers often invite students to their homes for Shabbat meals or Friday night “Onegs”. According to his estimation, the average teacher in his school hosts an entire class of students between five and ten times per year, in addition to more frequent interactions with smaller groups or individual students.

Impressed by the scope and intensity of this effort, I asked him if it was successful. His response was, “No, in terms of inspiring people, I don’t think they were particularly successful. I mean, it’s always nice to go and hang out and have some good food, especially if 15 of your friends are there also. That’s nice, but it was like if it hadn’t happened I don’t think it would have made a huge difference. And in fact, although over 90% of the kids in my class came from religious families, less than half are observant today, a few months after graduating high school.”

A girl who had recently graduated from a much larger co-educational school in a larger community elsewhere in North America told me that in her school as well, there was a significant drop-off in religious observance. The percentages she estimated were similar – while the great majority of students came from observant families, only about half remained observant by the end of high school. I asked her if she thought

her teachers were concerned with their students’ personal lives and were interested in influencing them. She responded, “Not in the classes. But the teachers themselves, they were definitely interested in that, and made themselves available.” I thought about that sentence – in her school also, the teachers were interested in their students’ religious and personal growth, and therefore they “made themselves available” – but did not devote time or energy to this goal “in the classes”.

I asked her to elaborate on how this worked and whether or not it was successful. “Personally,” she said, “I was very close with some teachers in high school, and I was constantly in their offices talking to them. They were very open and always made themselves available. This made a big impact on me and helped me become who I am today.”

“So it worked for me because I had relationships with teachers in and out of class. But for those students who didn’t have relationships, they just went to class and that was it. They didn’t talk to the teachers outside about any issues or anything, even if they were questioning. For those kids, the teachers didn’t have much of an impact.”

Realizing that both of these students (and others who had reported similar experiences) had come from communities where many of the families were only marginally observant, I wondered if the situation was different in religiously stronger communities. So I interviewed two young men who had attended two large all-boys high schools in the New York area. According to their reckoning, a significantly higher percentage of the students from their high schools remained observant upon graduation than did the students from the coed institutions discussed above, but at the same time, there had been a drop-off there as well (they both said that nearly all of their classmates had entered high school fully observant, and estimated that about 85% were still religious afterwards). Although it was certainly comforting to hear these more encouraging reports, I had expected students from religiously stronger families to be more likely to remain

religious. Therefore, although a 15% drop-off rate is much lower than the reported rate in the other schools, it is nonetheless quite an alarming statistic for this population.

Significantly, the young men both stated that their teachers tried very hard to inspire their students to live religious lives. When asked about the methods the teachers employed to achieve that result, they reported very similar things, which also closely matched what students from the less-observant communities had told me. They spoke almost exclusively about methods of informal education: school *Shabbatons*, visits to teachers' homes, *mishmar* programs and the like. They did not, however, tell me anything the teachers said or did to try to draw these messages out of the Torah texts they spent so many hours studying.

When I asked them about this directly, they confirmed my suspicions: the purpose of the learning was to cover the material, and perhaps to give them skills. If the teachers desired to inspire them religiously, they did so outside of the curriculum.

Sometimes these informal moments even happened in the classroom – students mentioned teachers “going off on tangents” to allow “spontaneous” discussions (which, from a teacher’s perspective, I realize may have been planned), or simply being inspired by a teacher’s personality and passion. I discovered that some schools even have a scheduled period of “*machshava*” or “*mussar*” discussions programmed into the class time – but these are still generally not text-based and the students are not tested on this material, so it remains distinct from the majority of the formal academic curriculum.

As one young man put it, “The academic side and information was usually text-based. You learn a *masechta*, and you’re tested on it, and the assumption is that if you are tested on it you will remember a certain amount of information. For skills they will give you things like vocabulary lists, and also have you prepare and use your own trial and error, and then show you how to do it the right way.”

“Then for the discussions of life goals, sometimes they would use texts – like for example one year we did *Mesillat Yesharim* and another *Pirkei Avot*, and based on that text they would discuss other things. We did that for about a half an hour each morning, but we didn’t learn those things in depth the same way we learned Gemara. In general, it was just *schmoozing*.”

This is bifurcated education. We are trying to teach texts and skills, and we are also trying to inspire the students religiously. We are devoting time, energy and resources to both of these goals – but we are doing so separately and independently. The pattern is clear, consistent among many schools in many different types of communities, and recognized by the students.

I would like to suggest that the key to taking our accomplishments to the next level lies in examining these assumptions and the decisions we have made as a result. On the one hand, our recognition of the importance of non-academic education has made a decisively positive impact. But we sometimes go too far, and in the process of successfully addressing one problem, we can create a different one.

To put it bluntly: I suspect that we unintentionally teach our students that the Torah texts belong in school, and are to be studied primarily for the purpose of grades. We communicate that message by teaching texts and skills in a rigorous way, but without talking much about God, religion or the spiritual significance of these texts. We compound the problem by running the classrooms as primarily academic environments without allotting enough time for processing whatever spiritual or religious issues do come up.

We do speak to the students about being religious. But because we generally speak about these matters during the informal education that we designed for this purpose, we inadvertently communicate the message that religiosity should be primarily based on emotional and social motivations.

We do not mean to send a bifurcated message, but we are doing so nonetheless. Again, when I make this claim I am not speaking only about the students whom we have failed to motivate academically or religiously. I am speaking even about those who are in fact motivated. Some students enjoy learning and studying, some students are inspired religiously, and some students fall into both categories. But even for those students, the two elements remain largely distinct from one another. Their religious commitments are usually based primarily on the affective elements cultivated in the informal programs, and the intellectual knowledge they have gained in classes typically plays a minor role in their religious identities.

Essentially, we have created a behaviorist model for religious observance, by encouraging behaviors that reinforce commitment and belonging to the community. This method is likely responsible for much of the retention and growth mentioned in the Introduction.

But a religious identity based heavily on this method is quite limited. For instance, when students find themselves without a religiously supportive environment, and especially when there are behavioral incentives *against* religious observance (e.g., on university campuses), they

have very few resources from which to draw strength to resist pressure. And even in communities where behavioral incentives do exist and are being used effectively, an over-reliance on these incentives carries a very real risk of producing the type of shallow “Orthodox Reconstructionists” about whom Rabbi Rothstein spoke (see Chapter Two). Although we inspire many of our students with our religious programming, that inspiration may lack a certain depth due to its weak association with their intellectual classroom work.

Further, my hunch is that this lack of connection between the two spheres is the key to understanding the shortcomings we have identified in the academic aspect of our education. It might well be that we are seeing less motivation to do hard academic work because students are not convinced of its value.

If we reduce the bifurcation and create a stronger bond between the two spheres, we could aim for symbiosis. The inspiration generated in the informal program would motivate students to put more effort into their studies, and the academic knowledge they acquire in class would provide an intellectual foundation for the lifestyle we have inspired them to lead. In the next chapters, I shall propose an approach for doing exactly that.

Chapter Three Proposal

My proposed approach, informed by the insights of educators such as those quoted above, emphasizes integrating the two spheres of our program into a single holistic unit by applying some of the methods and content of each one to the other, and by guiding students to draw connections between the different parts. We will also provide them with tools to think deeply and personally about these issues.

This integrated approach will express a unified religious world-view rooted in the eternal truths of the Torah. By infusing the academic classes with explicit religious and spiritual content as well as building in “spiritual processing time”, we will encourage our students to create an intellectual basis for their religious beliefs and lifestyle. And by referencing these lessons in the affective parts of our programs, we will help the students infuse this framework with emotional energy and spiritual vitality, and to build religious commitments that are based on faith and understanding alongside the emotional and social elements.

I wish to clarify that I am not suggesting that schools devote either more or fewer resources to formal or informal (or academic and affective) education than they currently do; we have seen that all of these modes of education are valuable, and that each makes a unique contribution. Further, I am not advocating a major restructuring of schools or their programs. Overall, our schools are successful institutions; our goal is enhancement, not revolution.

My suggestion boils down to a subtle change in emphasis and approach. For the most part, these suggestions can be implemented with minimal or no changes to the school’s administrative structure, faculty, academic schedule and calendar, and with only a moderate financial investment.²⁰ Nevertheless, I believe the improvement in results can be substantial.

My proposal would have us continuing to teach texts and concepts rigorously in our academic classes. We should not lower our standards – the classroom is for learning, and that requires hard work, homework and tests. Conversely, the extra-curricular activities are still to be fun and relaxing; that is the secret of their success. In the proposed model, the two parts of our programs will still exist as distinct components in our schools. The difference is that we will consciously help our students to “connect the dots” and recognize the reciprocal relationship between the two aspects of what they are learning.

This means that in the classroom, we must communicate to the students that these texts are holy and personally relevant to each of them, as they teach us how to structure our lives around the eternal truths of the Torah. We will need to dedicate a small percentage of our class time to working with the students to consider the individual implications of what they have learned. This may involve covering slightly less material - but the investment will be well worth it.

Then, as we devote time and energy to our students’ personal, spiritual and religious growth in our informal educational programs, we will make sure to build upon and strengthen what they have learned in the classroom. Inspiring speakers, emotional motivation and social reinforcement are vital elements in a successful religious education, and their vitality will increase when we connect them back to the cognitive concepts we teach in the classes.

It is not enough for our students to be “inspired” – they have to be inspired *about* something that they also *understand*. As discussed above, while the social power of a community should not be underestimated, there is a danger in putting too great an emphasis on this element. Religious observance that hinges mainly on access to a

community and “good feelings” is not particularly resilient. When, like “Avi,” the university student we met in the Introduction, students find themselves in a place where there are other sources of “inspiration” and where being part of the “community” calls for different behaviors, their previous commitments will appear paper-thin.

The integrated school I am proposing will teach a rigorous academic curriculum. It will also allot time and effort to not only teaching the students *what* we wish them to know (i.e., Torah texts) and *how* we want them to know it (i.e., skills) but also to explaining *why* we believe it is critical for them to learn these texts (because the Torah represents the Word and the Will of Hashem and teaches us how to serve Him, and because this can guide us throughout our lives to fulfill our Divinely ordained mission as individuals, as communities and as a nation). Such a school will also work with the students to internalize and personalize these messages.

Here is a snapshot of how our schools would look post-implementation. While our traditional struggles will not disappear, we will have gained one pivotal asset: student motivation.

Religiously inspired students will invest more effort, and will almost certainly achieve better results. They may even think about and discuss their learning outside of class. They might even occasionally approach a teacher with a question in situations where they never would have in the past. Experience confirms that this will improve their academic achievement, at least moderately and perhaps radically.

The emotional energy generated in the informal educational programming will be rooted in the cognitive ideas we have helped students to develop in their classes. The motivation produced by those programs will then be channeled into encouraging students to think more about what they learn and its meaning in their lives, creating a cycle of mutual reinforcement between the formal and informal aspects of the school’s curriculum.

The community at large will also be strengthened. The powerful social bonds that connect people to each other will be more closely integrated with the intellectual framework of the community’s beliefs. In lieu of simple social conformity, *halachic* behavior will more often be a reflection of deeply-held shared convictions.

This will in turn produce two benefits: (1) the community itself will become more deeply substantive and better equipped to combat a tendency toward shallowness; and (2) individual members of the community, if and when they find themselves without its close social support, will be more likely to be able to withstand pressure, since they will also have a more clearly articulated and consciously chosen belief system.

The following four chapters detail a 4-point program for revamping our schools along these lines. Again, I am well aware that many schools are already doing at least some of what I am suggesting here, but I think that taken as a package and implemented across many of our schools, the net result will represent a different communal approach with powerful potential for significantly improved results.

Chapter Four

Clarifying the Message

The first point is deceptively simple: every school should clarify the principles upon which it stands, and what its goals are for its students. This means that the school should have a clearly-defined religious education mission statement that contains at least three components: what the school hopes its students will know when they graduate, what it hopes they will believe and how it hopes they will act. The students should be very familiar with this mission statement.

Inspiration of any sort requires this approach. In his book *Start with Why*²¹, Simon Sinek lays out a simple but profound idea: The difference between inspiring leaders and the rest of us, he says, is that true leaders “Start with Why.”

In Sinek’s view, people, organizations and businesses generally focus on *what* they do. Some, in fact, do it very well and can even tell you *how* they do that. But very few people focus on *why* they do things. Drawing on examples from history and data from the fields of psychology and biology, Sinek develops a concept he calls “the Golden Circle”, teaching how to communicate an idea and inspire people to follow it by placing the “Why” at the center.

Sinek argues that those who operate this way inspire others to follow them at whatever they are doing, be it effecting social change (Martin Luther King said, “I have a dream” – not “I have a plan”) or selling a product (Apple Computer revolutionized the electronics market and popularized the personal computer and other new devices, he claims, primarily because they were motivated by an idea and their entire corporate structure and marketing strategy reflected that vision). In Sinek’s words, “people don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it.”

The “Why” is the bedrock of a Torah education. If we want our students to be inspired by the texts

they learn, we need to “Start with Why” – to communicate clearly why they are in an institution of Torah learning, and why we believe they should know and follow the Torah.

This point may seem obvious – but in reality we frequently fail to share the message. While most schools do have mission statements that at least briefly address religious goals alongside other goals of the school (such as secular academics), and these statements appear on the schools’ websites and in recruiting pamphlets, students are typically able to articulate only a very vague version of what the school represents.

If we want our students to be transformed by their Torah studies, the first step is to tell them that. Why do they spend so much of their day studying Torah? What do we hope they will take from this study? What are our expectations of the students? If we do not tell them, they may well never find out.

The particular details of this statement will, perforce, vary from school to school and from community to community – for example, while some schools may enforce *halachic* behavior even outside of school, other schools may not be able to even state this as an expectation. However, the fundamental point is universal: the mission and message must be articulated to the students.

As an illustration, let us imagine a hypothetical Modern Orthodox high school, on the first day of ninth grade. There is an assembly for the freshmen, and the principal and other school leaders are greeting the incoming students and conducting some sort of orientation. The following short speech is an example of what a principal or Head of School might say in order to begin the process of bringing the students into a discussion of the school’s goals from the very first minute:

Welcome to high school! I'm sure you are all a bit overwhelmed right now, but don't worry about that. With a little bit of time, everything will feel less confusing.

The purpose of this short orientation is to explain some things you'll need to know in order to be successful here in high school, and in a few moments we'll speak about various administrative procedures, your secular classes and extra-curricular programs. But first, right now at the beginning, I want to say a few words about the most important aspect of your school.

This is a place of Torah study – a place where Jews come to study the holy Torah that Hashem gave us.

You will also study secular subjects here, like mathematics, science and English. Those are also very important and we take them very seriously. But your Judaic classes are in a completely different category. Even if the grades in these classes might be less important for getting into the best universities, in the big picture of life these classes are the most important things you will be doing here, and in fact the most important things you can ever do – more important than anything else.

Why is that so? Why do we study Torah?

Each evening at maariv we recite a bracha that contains the words “ki hem chayyenu v'orech yamenu, uvahem nehegeh yomam valayla” – The words of Torah are what our lives are about; they are the very meaning of our existence. That's why we study them all the time. As Jews we believe that the Torah is the most precious gift that Hashem could possibly have given us, and that's why you are going to spend several hours of each day for the next few years learning these subjects.

For the next four years, you will be learning Chumash and Tanach, Mishna and Gemara, halacha and Jewish philosophy. You'll be struggling to understand many of these texts in the original Hebrew and Aramaic, and from time to

time you'll have to pass tests and write papers to make sure that you understand the material and are developing the skills to continue to study these texts in the future. At times, you may question the worth of all this effort. We'll be talking about that a lot over the next four years, but here I will explain briefly.

We believe with all our heart that the Torah is the greatest gift that Hashem gave us, and that it tells each and every Jew how to live their lives. The Torah is infinite, and its messages are not identical for each person, but it speaks to each of us.

So, we have three goals for each and every one of you, our beloved students: First, we want you to know what the Torah says. Second, we want you to believe in Hashem and in His Torah. And third, we want you to live your life according to the Torah.

How are we going to accomplish those goals? Well, the first one is fairly straightforward. We want you to know the Torah, so that's why you we're giving Judaic classes where you will learn it! Obviously we cannot teach you the entire Torah in four years of high school – that takes a lifetime, and one never actually completes it because the Torah is infinite. But what we can do is to teach you a lot more than you already know and give you the skills that we hope you will continue to use to study Torah for the rest of your life. So you're going to go to classes, and you're going to do your homework and come back to class and continue to learn, and every so often you'll have a test so that both you and we can be sure that you're learning. When you graduate from this school in four years, you will know a lot more Torah than you do now.

The third goal, while more difficult, is also somewhat straightforward. We said we want you to live your life according to the Torah. That means something different for each person, and we'll be talking about that a lot as well, but there are certain objective requirements. For that reason, one of the things you're going to be learning here is halacha, the laws that teach us how to act in various situations.

Of course, in the end each one of you is going to choose how you will live your life – nobody else can make that decision for you. But it is our deepest hope that throughout your life you will base your decisions on the Torah, and will follow the halacha to the best of your ability. At the very least while you are here in school, it is our expectation that you will act according to halacha, and we'll discuss some of the school rules a bit later on this morning. Ultimately, though, we really hope that you will keep these laws not only now because they are the school's rules, but for your entire life because they are what Hashem wants from us.

So goal #1, to know the Torah, is fairly straightforward, and goal #3, to live by the Torah is a bit more difficult but also somewhat straightforward. But the piece that connects these two is the hardest one of all – we also want you to believe in Hashem and in the Torah. Belief is that crucial step that gives a person the strength and conviction to make the decision to live by the Torah that he or she knows.

But belief is also the hardest thing to teach. In your Jewish philosophy classes you'll be learning what the greatest Jewish minds have said about belief in

Hashem and in the Torah, and you'll have a chance to talk about these things with your teachers. In the end, though, belief is something very personal. We can test you on your knowledge and to some extent we can make demands about your behavior – but we cannot control what you believe. What we can do, and what we will be doing, is to give you many opportunities to explore why a Jew should believe in the Torah, and to decide for yourself just how each of the Jewish concepts that you'll be learning should impact on your own life.

Your teachers and I are looking forward to learning and growing together with you!

Incoming students who start high school with a speech like this will not miraculously proclaim “naaseh v'nishma” and immediately believe what they are taught. Moreover, students have short memories for this information – it must be repeated frequently in different contexts throughout their high school career.

*But this speech, or some version of it, is the first step: if we send students into the classroom but fail to tell them *why*, we are setting up ourselves, and the students, for failure.*

Chapter Five

Teacher Training

What is true for a school overall is equally true for each classroom. It is not enough to simply teach the Torah texts and concepts; our students need to understand *why* they are learning particular material. Further, they must be given structured opportunities to begin to integrate this material into their lives.

The late Professor Seymour Fox of the Mandel Leadership Institute in Jerusalem devoted much of his writing to articulating the need for what he called “vision” in Jewish education. Fox spoke and wrote about this concept many times during the course of his career²², but perhaps the most systematic presentation can be found in the book *Visions of Jewish Education*, based on a project that was conducted during the 1990s at the Mandell Institute. In this project, a group of six senior scholars debated basic issues in Jewish education over a period of several years.

In describing the motivation for this project, Fox wrote:

Why do we emphasize vision? Without a guiding purpose, an educational system is bound to be scattered and incoherent, incapable of consecutive effort, unable either to grasp the possibilities of effective action or to avoid the obstacles in its path. Lacking a directive guide to the future, the system becomes repetitive and uninspired, prey to past habit, incapable of justifying itself to new generations of our youth in the worlds they will inhabit....

*Vision, as we understand it, is not simply ideological preference. It implies both comprehensive understanding and guiding purpose. It places the work of education in the setting of a present that is an outgrowth of the past but that also contains within it the seeds of a future to be grasped creatively through imagination and effort.*²³

Our classrooms do not always reflect this type of thinking. Typically, teachers concentrate on helping students understand and apply material or skills. As we discussed in Chapter Two, almost no class time is allotted to exploring the spiritual significance of the material, and even less time is granted to processing these lessons.

We are beginning to sense the problem here. While at first blush these latter activities appear to take time away from the “actual learning”, in reality, they are *part and parcel* of the actual learning! And, as discussed in Chapter Three, a greater emotional and spiritual connection with the Torah can generate improved results academically, as well as religiously.

In a later chapter of his book²⁴, Fox notes that although “vision makes a difference”, any vision is doomed to failure if attention isn’t paid to the “art of translating” this into real-life settings. In his words, “vision cannot be separated from implementation”, because “the history of education is replete with examples of promising ideas that failed because their proponents assumed that the power of the idea was sufficient in itself to reform educational practice”.

Fox describes the translating of vision into reality in an educational setting as a monumental effort that must be conducted on the institutional level. In a lengthy discussion he describes the role of the principal as a “visionary leader” and writes of the important role played by “The Team” (which in his view includes the lay leadership and every professional involved in the school, down to the administrative and custodial staff, and of course, most importantly, the teachers themselves). Fox reminds us that “when the classroom doors close, it is the teachers who are in charge”, and therefore “a vision of Jewish education can succeed only when teachers understand it, are capable of teaching it in their classrooms, and are committed

enough to want to do so.”²⁵

In practice, this means that, after ensuring that our staff understands and identifies with the mission statement we repeatedly share with our students, we must ascertain that they consider how to apply that vision in their own classrooms. This will probably require teachers to make some moderate adjustments in their teaching methods.

Different subjects will of course still be taught in different ways (*Chumash* should not be taught the same way as *Gemara* and neither should be taught the same way as *Machshevet Yisrael*). Pedagogical styles will of course still vary. However, in every Judaic studies classroom the teacher should: (1) Address explicitly and regularly the belief that the study of Torah is a holy and spiritual act and that the material we learn is meant to profoundly impact on our lives; (2) apply those principles to the *specific* material studied in that class; and (3) guide students to *spiritually process* their learning in a way that is personally meaningful to them.

What is the best way to accomplish this? Here as well, Parker Palmer’s insights into general education may be helpful. Palmer informs us that his entire educational philosophy derives from a simple premise: “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.”²⁶ According to Palmer, the teacher is charged with organizing and leading a “community of truth” in his classroom. Pedagogic methods and techniques are important tools that can enhance the teacher’s ability to carry out his or her task successfully, but they must never be confused with the essence of teaching.

True teaching, Palmer avers, depends on something he calls “the Grace of Great Things.”²⁷ The great things are the subjects we study in our classrooms. For Palmer, these great things can be as diverse as “the genes and ecosystems of biology, the symbols and referents of philosophy and theology, the archetypes of betrayal and forgiveness and loving and loss that are the stuff of

literature...the artifacts and lineages of anthropology, the materials of engineering...the novelties and patterns of history, the elusive idea of justice under law.” Essentially, anything we consider significant enough to study and teach is a “great thing” deserving of respect.

Following Palmer, we can say that as teachers of the infinite and eternal truths of Torah, we view the subjects in our classrooms as the Greatest of all Great Things. We cannot assume, however, that our students also do so when they enter our classrooms, or that they will independently arrive at this conclusion simply because we have taught them sections of Torah texts. We must help them to see the greatness of Torah.

Based on the idea that the great things must occupy center stage in our teaching, Palmer advocates for what he calls a “subject-centered classroom”. This model emerges as an alternative middle position in two dichotomies he perceives in contemporary education. One is the dichotomy between absolutism, “the claim that we can know precisely the nature of great things,” and relativism, “the claim that knowledge depends wholly on where one stands, so we cannot know anything with any certainty beyond our personal point of view.” Both of these extreme positions damage the community of truth, because one who adopts either of them believes he has nothing left to learn.

The second dichotomy is between the traditional “teacher-centered classroom” which revolves around an all-knowing teacher who is presumed to have all of the answers and whose sole role is to transmit this wisdom to the students, and the more modern “student-centered model” which arose to correct the perceived flaws in the traditional one. Palmer says that neither of these classrooms constitutes a true community of truth – because in each case one side (the teacher or the students) occupies a position that dominates the other. In a subject-oriented classroom, however, all the participants are subservient to the “great thing” being studied:

I can illustrate this essential idea with a humble, even humiliating example. I am thinking of an awkward moment that I – and perhaps you – have known, the moment when I make an assertion about the subject, and a student catches me contradicting something I said earlier or something from the text or something the student knows independently of the text or me.

In a teacher-centered classroom, getting caught in a contradiction feels like a failure.... But in a subject-centered classroom, gathered around a great thing, getting caught in a contradiction can signify success: now I know that the great thing has such a vivid presence among us that any student who pays attention to it can check and correct me. In this moment, the great thing is no longer confined to what I say about it: students have direct, unmediated access to the subject, and they can use their knowledge to challenge my claims. It is a moment not for embarrassment but for celebrating good teaching, teaching that gives the subject – and the students – lives of their own.²⁸

The extent to which we will succeed in inspiring our students with our Torah teaching depends directly on the extent to which we succeed in implementing this model in our classrooms.

Adoption of this model would require teacher training. Such training can take many forms: It could be a series of in-service days for the entire faculty, or it could be more extensive, such as entire courses of study or individual mentoring for teachers. Naturally, training new teachers in the approach would call for different resources than training a seasoned faculty.

In all cases, teachers would be trained to go through a three-step process in preparing and managing their “subject-oriented” Torah classes:

Step #1: Teachers will be asked to articulate why the study of Torah in general, and of their subject matter in particular, is important. This is something that all teachers of Torah know on a

deep level, but they are not always able to explain it to someone else. Further, there are many different ways to answer this question. Thus, every teacher must ask him/herself: Why does he/she study Torah? Why did he/she devote his/her career to teaching Torah? Why does he/she think that students should be learning what they are?

Step #2: Teachers will be challenged to define both academic and spiritual goals for each one of their classes. While it is axiomatic in an Orthodox school that the study of Torah texts is meant to have some spiritual impact on the students, this needs to be defined first and foremost in the teacher’s own mind. This should be done not only in classes that “lend themselves to this” like in *Chumash* or *Navi*, but also in more theoretical subjects like *Gemara* and certainly *halacha*, which on the one hand is very technical but on the other is perhaps the subject most directly and objectively relevant to how we live our lives.

One way to do this (as an exercise in a training seminar, and/or at the beginning of each year or semester as an ongoing part of the administrative management of a school) is to request that every teacher prepare a one-page statement of goals for each course he or she teaches. This statement should have two components: a statement of academic goals (i.e., what material the students should know and/or what skills they should acquire by the end of the year), and spiritual goals (i.e., beliefs the students should grapple with and internalize, emotions they should experience, decisions they should make).

There are many different ways to write these goals. On the one hand, the goals should be directly related to the texts being studied (so that a teacher who is teaching different courses should not be able to write an identical page for each class) and the particular teacher’s emphasis and methods. On the other hand, the goals should leave room for student personalization.

Here are some examples of brief statements of spiritual goals that a teacher could write:

- In this course we will be studying the second half of the book of Bamidbar. A central goal of the study of Chumash in general is for the students to view the words of Torah as directives on how to live their lives. Thus, we will focus on drawing moral lessons from the narratives in the texts: The narrative of the meraglim will give us a chance to think about our own relationships with Hashem and the role of bitachon in our lives, when we learn the story of Korach we will grapple with the balance between religious authority and personal autonomy in Avodat Hashem, and when we study the prophetic statements of Bilaam we will contemplate the meaning of Jewish nationhood and additionally try to connect emotionally with the beautiful poetry.

- A central goal of the Hilchot Kashrut class is to enable the students to take more responsibility for their observance of these halachot. By becoming “educated consumers” the students will be more discerning in determining that all food they consume has reliable supervision, and they will also be more aware of issues they need to be concerned with in their own kitchens such as separating meat and milk and checking for bugs. The goal is for them to become more scrupulous in the observance of these laws.

- This year we will be studying the third chapter of Bava Kama. A main goal of my Gemara classes is for the students to become excited and engaged with the learning of Gemara, to enjoy their study and to be motivated to continue in the future. Additionally, I would like them to develop respect for the depth of Talmudic thought and for the Tannaim and Amoraim as religious authorities. In this chapter specifically, we will have the opportunity to see the way the Torah deals with accidental damage to people or their property. A central goal is that the students should internalize the need for respecting other people’s property as a religious value, and should become more careful as a result.

This exercise, done at the start of a year teaching a particular course, would then be further refined at the beginning of each unit or even in plans for

specific lessons.

Step #3: Teachers will be trained to plan exercises that communicate these messages and that enable students to process them. This would entail the teacher devoting class time at regular intervals to articulating and discussing the issues laid out in the goals. Active student involvement will be necessary.

Exercises might include a rotating *dvar Torah*, given every few classes by a different student each time. The student’s assignment might be to derive a spiritual or practical lesson *from something he or she learned in the class* and apply it to a real-life situation. A short discussion on the student’s idea could follow. Alternatively, students could be asked to write a short essay on such a topic for homework.

Aryeh Ben-David’s “Ayeka” methodology provides useful insights and tools for facilitating students’ interactive engagement with the material. Ben-David notes that according to the Midrash and Kabbalah, the human soul has three primary “voices”: *Nefesh*, *Ruach* and *Neshama*, corresponding to our physical, emotional and intellectual natures. His view is that all three aspects must be harnessed in order to create a holistic, transformative learning experience. Our current methods already connect with the intellectual aspect; Ayeka methodology is designed to relate to the other two.

Ben-David advocates the creation of what he calls “safe space” in the classroom. This means that, at least at certain delimited times designated for these discussions, all students (and the teacher) must commit to an absolute respect for the thoughts and feelings of others – “neither invaded nor disregarded.” In this “safe space,” different methodologies can be used to help students process what they have learned. These can include creative exercises such as writing or drawing, ongoing or single-session discussions in pairs or small groups, or more conventional methods of group discussion.²⁹

Chapter Six

Re-examining the Curriculum

The previous chapter argued vigorously that *every* Torah subject can and should religiously inspire. Nonetheless, it behooves us to review our curricula and determine if the subjects we teach are the ones most critical to our students' Jewish well-being.

“Basic Jewish Concepts”

When making curricular decisions, schools must engage in what might be called a type of triage in order to make sure we use the finite number of hours available for Jewish studies in the most effective manner possible. As such, most schools teach some combination of *Torah shebichtav* (*Chumash* and/or *Nach*) and *Torah sheb'al peh* (either organized topically or by studying *Mishna* and/or *Gemara*)³⁰. Some schools also teach important ancillary subjects like Hebrew language and Jewish history. However, not every school has what might be called a “Basic Jewish Concepts” curriculum. Such a curriculum addresses the fundamentals of our belief and the core concepts that form the framework of our lifestyles.

The absence of a “Basic Jewish Concepts” curriculum might be related to a belief that these topics were covered in elementary school, or perhaps it is based on the notion that if they spend time immersed in advanced Torah study, students will pick up these basics “along the way”. However, something is not working. As we discussed in the Introduction and in Chapter Two, many students master specific texts or concepts but remain unable to explain how these are meant to form a unified world-view rooted in Torah and the basis of a *halachic* lifestyle.

If we want our students to form such a world-view and commit themselves to living such a lifestyle, we must help them “connect the dots” and place the subjects they learn into a unified framework. It may be, as one principal contended, that a decade

or two ago this was not necessary. Today, though, assistance and encouragement in forming such a world-view can mean the difference between retaining or abandoning religious commitment.

Thus, I recommend that every high school create a four-year “Basic Concepts Curriculum” to be presented in a systematic and integrated way. As with the mission statement, the details of what should be covered in such a curriculum and the texts and methods to be used will vary from school to school. Among other things, these differences may derive from the population the school serves and the school's ideology and goals. Nevertheless, the following are examples of the type of topics that are imperative to address:

- Issues of *Emunah*: Why should we believe in God and in the Torah? In our classrooms, these beliefs are often treated as givens, sort of like the axioms of geometry – assumptions which are never explained and for which no reasons are offered, but which form the basis for class discussions.

This may be because the school assumes that the students already have sufficient faith, and perhaps may even be concerned that discussing these matters will raise doubts and create more problems than it solves. Or perhaps there is simply a need to cover a certain amount of material, and there does not seem to be time for discussing “religious” matters during class. The informal education program may seem a more suitable setting for such talks.

Regardless, we ignore this fundamental issue at our peril. Even students who live *halachically* committed lives can have nagging doubts. Further, students must be prepared to face challenges to belief that can arise as a result of their inevitable exposure to the larger world and its culture. This can include intellectual challenges

raised by the studies of various sciences and biblical scholarship, the question of theodicy in the face of tragedy, and clashes between contemporary ethics and values and those of the Torah.

A second reason that schools may be reluctant to bring up matters of belief is that the teachers themselves may not have been trained to discuss these matters in a sophisticated and effective way. If that is the case, this problem will need to be addressed by teacher training and curricular materials, and/or by augmenting staff with individuals qualified in these areas. Ignoring the issue will not make the need go away.

Although as mentioned, while these subjects can and perhaps should be treated in the informal educational program, it is a mistake to relegate them exclusively to that setting. These topics are the foundation for everything else we teach, and as such they are among the most significant matters we can discuss with our students. They merit the seriousness of attention and rigor of analysis that is offered in a formal class, complete with texts, homework, tests and grades.

- Understanding the *halachic* process: A cursory glance at the *Chumash* will yield the knowledge that almost none of our *halachic* practice flows from the simple meaning of the Biblical text. To give one of literally dozens of ready examples, the written Torah's discussion of the prohibition against mixing meat with milk is limited to the simple sentence "*Lo tevashel gdi bachalev imo,*" which appears three different times in the Torah. On the basis of these few words, we tell our students that they must wait six hours before consuming ice cream after eating chicken. That is not, though, what the written Torah said.

Of course, there are good reasons for this, and we may even teach them to our students. But *halachic* reasoning as presented in the Talmud and later literature can seem arbitrary and forced to the untrained eye. This is especially the case when it comes to *halachot* that are difficult to observe

and/or contradict contemporary norms and mores.

Even if we opt not to teach those texts to our students, they are likely to come across them in translation or, even worse, in inaccurate or distorted quotations bandied about in internet discussions. Students must be given at least a basic sense of the *halachic* process and be told why we believe they should follow it. This information will increase the likelihood that they will make a commitment to a *halachic* life.

- Prayer and *brachot*: We teach our students that they are meant to speak directly with God multiple times each day, in the context of *tefillah* and *brachot*. Depending on the set-up of our school, they may be attending organized *minyanim* in school on a daily basis, and we hope they are doing so in their communities on *Shabbat*. These regular spiritual encounters have the potential to serve as the solid building-blocks of a religious personality. They also have the potential to be (and, tragically, often are) excruciatingly lifeless and boring activities, causing students to simply avoid them whenever they can and resent them whenever they cannot.

This core *mitzvah* is very difficult to teach, and though this is not the place to discuss methods of doing so³¹, I shall simply point out that a great deal of thought should go into it. And while, like *emunah*, this is a topic that can and should be dealt with through informal education, there are also aspects that must be studied academically – so it needs to be part of the curriculum.

In addition to the above examples, the four-year "Basic Concepts Curriculum" should also cover other *mitzvot* and values such as holiness, kindness, *tzniyut*, generosity, honesty, and the Land of Israel. While writing this section, I restrained my impulse to enumerate specific examples beyond those listed above, because my choices may not be appropriate, or may not be the most critical choices, for every school. While the specifics will vary, each school should be able to fairly readily create a list of essential basic Jewish

concepts.

Thus, while the details of the topics and the determination of time allotment will vary across schools, the main point is universal. We cannot assume that our students will build the intellectual framework for themselves. We must teach it to them, and help them integrate all the concepts that they learn in their other classes.

Halacha

Another area that requires curricular attention is *halacha*. Many Orthodox high schools do not teach any *halacha* at all. When it is taught, it is often a minor subject to which only a small amount of time is devoted. From the “big picture” perspective of this paper, this is astounding. One of our core goals is to inspire our students to live as observant Jews, and yet often, little or no time may be given to conveying what that entails on a practical level!

All schools must offer a comprehensive *halacha* curriculum that teaches students at least the basic requirements of Jewish law in all of the major areas they need to know in order to live observant Jewish lives. This involves at least a fundamental awareness of the laws of Shabbat, *kashrut*, *tefillah* and *brachot*, laws of the various holidays, and *mitzvot bein adam l'chavero*.

Approaches to *halacha* also vary across schools and communities. Whatever the position of the school and the individual teacher, however, *halacha* should be taught in a sophisticated manner that recognizes the validity of multiple views, demonstrates the integrity of the *halachic* process, arrives at practical *halacha l'maseh* and encourages students to think about how to live by these laws and to consult with *halachic* authorities when necessary.

Some Orthodox educators are reluctant to spend much time on *halacha* for fear that the lessons would be dry, and would thus prove difficult to teach and/or be a negative experience for the students. This need not be the case. *Halacha* can

be very exciting, and it is certainly relevant to any person who lives an Orthodox lifestyle. Classes that draw upon the sources, engage students in debate, and apply abstract principles to real-life situations can be highly stimulating, even for students who are not completely committed to following the *halacha*.³² Such a portrayal of *halacha* represents a pedagogical challenge,³³ but the importance of meeting that challenge cannot be overestimated.

The Role of Talmud Study

In the past few decades, Jewish educators have engaged in heated debate regarding how much time – if any at all – to devote to Gemara study.³⁴ In this paper, I shall not take a stand on this matter. However, in the context of suggestions for revamping curricula and evaluating how to make the best use of limited resources, I wish to make one observation.

In schools where boys and girls are educated separately (either in single-sex schools or in co-ed schools that have separate classes for *limudei kodesh*) the respective curricula are generally different. Typically, the boys' curriculum places a strong emphasis on Gemara, whereas the girls may be taught no Gemara at all, or it may be a much more minor part of their program. Girls typically receive a more balanced curriculum with a greater emphasis on *Tanach* and Jewish Thought, and sometimes on *Halacha*.

When this discrepancy is discussed in our circles, the debate is often driven by those advocating for a heavier component of Gemara for the girls. While anyone familiar with my personal resume knows that I am sympathetic to that position,³⁵ conversations with both young men and young women have led me to a somewhat surprising insight. Many of the students with whom I spoke, both boys and girls, thought that the girls' curriculum was superior to that of the boys.

Many boys complained that they found Gemara to be both difficult to master and irrelevant to their lives (so at the very least we need to rethink how

we teach it, and some of the methods mentioned in Chapter Five might help.³⁶ We also might want to consider spending more time on *aggadic* passages, at least when we encounter them.³⁷) Significantly, even boys who reported that they do enjoy learning Gemara and were happy to have had the opportunity to develop skills in this area during high school lamented the resultant abbreviation of other topics. One young man, a recent graduate of a co-ed school with separate *limudei kodesh* classes who was studying in a top Israeli yeshiva with a very Gemara-intensive curriculum, said that he envied his female classmates. If he and his friends had been taught what the girls were taught, he said, he thinks they would have been much better off both academically and religiously.

In comparison to the boys, the girls tended to express a greater feeling of connectedness to their teachers, their schools and the Torah they studied during high school. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that a higher percentage of girls than boys remain committed to *halachic* practice during and

after high school. To the extent that these impressions reflect reality, they may be related to natural differences between the sexes, especially during adolescence. However, I suspect that the manner in which the respective sexes have been educated also plays a part. The current girls' curriculum simply seems more effective than the boys' curriculum.

As noted above, I do not wish to take a firm position on the question of how much Gemara should be taught to boys, and whether or not it should be taught to girls is also beyond the scope of this paper. In my view, however, the policy of devoting the bulk of boys' *limudei kodesh* time to Gemara deserves to be reconsidered.

In any case, the other aspects of the curriculum discussed in this chapter (basic concepts and *halacha*) are *crucial* for both sexes. If a decision to introduce them into the curriculum or expand the amount of time allotted to them necessitates reducing the Gemara component somewhat in order to do so, it will be well worth the price.

Chapter Seven

Putting the Pieces Together: Integrating Formal and Informal Education

The recommendations set forth in this paper will not change a school's core values. However, the implementation of these suggestions will increase the degree to which those values will be effectively transmitted to its students. As discussed in Chapter Four, the message of the school will be articulated clearly and repeatedly to students, and will be distinctly reflected in the school's policies. As discussed in Chapter Six, the curriculum will include texts and concepts deemed essential for our students. And as discussed in Chapter Five, teachers will devote time and pedagogic energy to examine in each class the spiritual meanings of the subject and guide the students to process what they have learned and to apply it in their lives.

A final component of the package remains to be discussed: the integration of the informal, affective part of the school's educational program with the formal section. As noted in Chapter Two, over the years schools have invested increasing amounts of resources to informal programming because they have recognized the necessity of engaging students in ways other than the purely academic. And as we discussed there, the primary emphasis of these programs is emotional inspiration and social bonding.

As vital as those elements are, they do not fully exploit the potential of informal education. To use what we have to best advantage, these programs must be interwoven with the formal and academic side of our schools. There are several different ways in which this can be done.

Firstly, the excitement generated at these programs can be channeled back into the classroom, by explicitly addressing the imperative to not only care, feel and do, but also to learn. The religious and spiritual value of learning Torah, as well as the values of a religious lifestyle, can be the subjects of inspirational speeches and interactive programming. At some point during these

programs, someone should speak about the daily classes the students attend, and how those classes serve as spiritual and religious opportunities.

Additionally, the topics of informal education can be coordinated with the academic curriculum, in order to address the same subjects from different angles. One classic example of this, of course, are field trips in Israel. Some schools bring their students on organized trips to Israel at some point during their high school careers. These trips are exceptional opportunities to engage the students directly outside of the classroom with what they have learned in *Tanach*, *halacha*, Jewish history and other disciplines. Educational preparations for these trips should begin long in advance, and careful thought should go into designing the itinerary to build on these connections. Both the planning and the trip itself should be a collaborative effort between the educational staff of the school and a tour guide in Israel who is knowledgeable about Torah education.

Although it is more difficult, field trips outside of Israel can be used in a similar way. A visit to a factory, bakery or catering facility can teach the students about kosher supervision and the particular *halachic* problems that come up in such situations. Aspects of *hilchot Shabbat* can be brought to life on a farm or in a factory. A nature walk (perhaps on a Friday morning before a school *Shabbaton*) can be a perfect opportunity to study a *perek* of *Tehillim* or other Biblical poetry that draws on nature images. Another excellent example are trips, like those currently organized by a number of high schools, to meet and interact with representatives of nearby Orthodox communities of different ideological orientations and lifestyles.

As mentioned in Chapter Six, certain topics, such as faith and prayer, are particularly suited to informal settings such as school *Shabbatons*.

Critically, these programs should not replace engaging with these topics in the classroom. Doing so would deprive us of the opportunity to study a text on this topic in an in-depth way or engage in a systematic analysis spanning several class periods. It might also send the unintended message that these subjects are of limited importance. Thus, they must be part of the formal academic curriculum as well.

But there are other aspects of these types of matters that should be the subject of informal programming. Ayeka methods, noted above, are an example of an informal methodology that

encourages students to think, integrate, process and internalize, and to develop powerful relationships with spiritual concepts. Timing these events in coordination with the academic curriculum serves to enhance the impact of both. None of this is to suggest that we provide students with less fun and recreation, or reduce other important elements such as chess and community service. Here, we are working toward a consciously thought-out balance among the topics, methods and timing of the educational components such that the energy created by each will be best leveraged toward spiritual growth.

Final Thoughts

I wrote this pamphlet because I care deeply about Jewish education and the future of the Jewish People. In my view, there exists a direct relationship between those two issues. I have devoted the past several decades to teaching Torah, and with Hashem's help, I hope to do so for another few decades as well. The opportunity to step back and reflect on these matters was highly instructive for me, and this paper represents the results of that contemplation.

With those sentiments, I present these recommendations to my colleagues in the field of Jewish education. My belief is that if we adopt them, we will significantly enhance the already

impressive results of our efforts, and the Jewish People will be enriched. Of course, there are those who may disagree, and may have other ideas and opinions.

I hope that at least I have succeeded in beginning a conversation. To the extent that you, my colleagues in the field, agree with my proposals, let us begin to discuss how to implement them. To the extent that you disagree, let us debate the issue and discuss alternatives.³⁸ Either way, I hope we can take this opportunity to take further steps to advance the holy work in which we are privileged to engage.

NOTES

¹I promised total confidentiality to everyone I interviewed. In fulfillment of that promise and in order to keep the conversation focused on the issue and not on ancillary matters, I will not be naming any of these people, or attributing particular insights to any individual or institution. ←

²Such a study would need to be longitudinal. It would require highly specific and validated criteria for evaluating levels of observance, and would need to measure each individual's level of commitments relative to his or her familial and community background. Further, changing societal and communal norms over the course of the study would need to be considered in the research design. Such a study, massively ambitious though it would be, would only touch the tip of the iceberg in terms of determining cause and effect in these areas. ←

³Faranak Margolese, *Off the Derech: Why Observant Jews Leave Judaism and How to Respond to the Challenge* (Jerusalem: Devorah Publishing, 2005). ←

⁴p. 20. ←

⁵Such as *The Jewish Observer*, which published an issue in 1999 devoted to the problem of "at-risk" youth in the American *haredi* community. This issue generated unprecedented sales and responses, so much so that the magazine devoted an entire issue the following spring exclusively to readers' reactions. ←

⁶If indeed these are the percentages, then Orthodoxy would be on the verge of extinction; thankfully, as noted above, the opposite appears to be the case. But even if the problem is nowhere near as severe as he thinks, it does exist. ←

⁷Lookjed XIV:35, 2/21/2012. The original post and all the subsequent responses can be seen at lookstein.org (tinyurl.com/LookjedLevine). ←

⁸<http://jliconline.org/> ←

⁹Although the name is fictionalized, this account is based on actual events. ←

¹⁰Dr. Shawn Zelig Aster, "Adventures in Literacy-Land", published at lookstein.org (tinyurl.com/LooksteinLiteracy), p. 2. ←

¹¹For one of literally dozens (and possibly hundreds) of published discussions of these studies and their significance, see the June 5, 2010 Wall Street Journal article by Nicholas Carr entitled "Does the Internet Make You Dumber?" (available online at tinyurl.com/wsj-carr), and the opposing companion article published the previous day by Clay Shirky, "Does the Internet Make You Smarter?" (tinyurl.com/wsj-shirky). While I suspect that both perspectives have merit (the way people think is changing rapidly; this brings with it new difficulties and also new strengths and proficiencies), my own opinion is closer to Shirky's: the digital age presents both huge challenges and enormous opportunities, and we must therefore learn how to adjust our teaching in order to leverage the new skills and abilities as well as to address and compensate for the new handicaps. A recent book, reviewed in November, 2013 by the New York Times (tinyurl.com/nyt-thompson), makes a similar point in a fascinating way. That discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. ←

¹²Published as a response to an essay on a different topic on the “Hirhurim” blog (now torahmusings.com): tinyurl.com/pjpb46a ←

¹³*Tehillim* 16:8. See also the comment of the *Rema* on the very first paragraph of the *Shulchan Aruch* ←

¹⁴The terms “spiritual” and “spirituality” are loaded, ambiguous terms. Some people reserve them for *kabbalistic* or *Chassidic* ideas, whereas to others they connote emotional and other non-cognitive feelings of connectedness. Still others use the terms to express the intellectual experience of studying Torah or the awareness that one is fulfilling a *halachic* requirement. The reader is invited to understand these terms in any way that makes sense to him or her. ←

¹⁵Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2nd ed., 2007), p. 52. ←

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 53. ←

¹⁷Aryeh Ben David, *Soulful Education*, (Jerusalem: Ayeka Ltd., 2013), pp. 26-27. ←

¹⁸Informal education was once almost exclusively carried out in venues outside of school, such as youth groups and summer camps. While those entities still play a significant role, today most schools incorporate such elements into the curriculum itself as well, and many do so extensively. Many of the larger high schools currently have on staff at least one full-time administrator whose primary role is to coordinate extra-curricular activities of a religious nature. A veteran high school principal told me that whereas a decade ago his school would run a single *Shabbaton* per year, they now run six - two for the entire school, and an additional one for each grade separately. ←

¹⁹Homiletically, perhaps we can frame this model on the well-known Mishnah (*Avot* 1:2): “The world stands on three things: on Torah, on Divine service (*Avoda*) and on acts of kindness (*Gemilut Chasadim*).” In our high schools, we attempt to educate using all three modalities. In our academic program, we teach Torah, and in the informal and affective programs we encourage and develop religious commitment on the basis of “*Avoda*” expressed through inspiration and emotion, and on “*Gemilut Chasadim*” in the sense of strengthening bonds with others and building community. ←

²⁰The curricular suggestions in Chapter Six may for some schools be an exception to this statement. ←

²¹Simon Sinek, *Start With Why* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009). The introductory chapter of this book is available for free download at his website startwithwhy.com (tinyurl.com/ps06yzu), and a 15-minute video summary of the theory can also be viewed in Sinek’s “TED talk”: (tinyurl.com/k3vnzra). ←

²²See <http://tinyurl.com/FoxBibliography> ←

²³Seymour Fox, ed., *Visions of Jewish Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 8. ←

²⁴“The Art of Translation”, *ibid.*, pp. 253-295. ←

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 274-275. ←

²⁶Palmer, *ibid.*, p. 10. ←

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 109. He adopted the phrase from an essay by the Bohemian-Austrian poet and novelist Rainer Maria Rilke. ←

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 110, 118-120. ←

²⁹Ben-David, *ibid.*, pp. 23-40. A brief summary of Ayeka's method's can be seen on their website, particularly this page: www.ayeka.org.il/about/our-approach/. ←

³⁰Of course there are some girls' schools where, as a matter of principle, no Torah *sheb'al peh* is taught. While I believe that policy is ill-conceived on both *halachic* and ideological grounds, that discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. The recommendations in this section concern other aspects of the curriculum, and can be evaluated independently of that question. ←

³¹See Yoel Finkelman, ed., *Educating Towards Meaningful Tefillah* (Jerusalem: ATID Publications, 2001). ←

³²On a personal note, I have been teaching *halacha* for over twenty years, and I can no longer count the times students have contacted me to tell me – with great pride and excitement – about an incident that occurred during which they remembered something they learned in my class and were able to correctly assess the situation from the *halachic* point of view. These comments are not always made by the most advanced students, and sometimes they come from students who are not 100% in their *halachic* observance. And on some occasions, these communications have come years after I taught the student the material. ←

³³Those in need of curricular aids might want to look at the materials available from Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon's Halacha Education Center. A list of materials is available on their website at halachaed.org/en/. ←

³⁴This issue has also been discussed on "Lookjed" a number of times. For one example, see tinyurl.com/mybew5f. See also the essays by Rabbis Aharon Lichtenstein and Yehuda Brandes in *Talmud Study in Yeshiva High Schools* (Jerusalem: ATID Publications, 2007). ←

³⁵I have been teaching Talmud to young women for over twenty years. ←

³⁶A number of new methods have been developed over the past few decades, designed to increase the effectiveness of Talmud education and to help students relate the subject to their lives. Some of these methods are controversial, with passionate advocates both for and against their use. Each school and teacher will arrive at independent decisions about the best approach to teaching Gemara, but the question should be considered. ←

³⁷I thank my friend Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, author of *Fresh Fruit & Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggada* (New York: Ktav Publishing, 2009), for this point. ←

³⁸Anyone who would like to discuss any aspect of this with me is invited to contact me at ah@rabbihaber.net. ←



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