

EDUCATING OUR CHILDREN: IMAGINING THE JEWISH DAY SCHOOL OF THE FUTURE

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In considering what the Jewish day school of the 21st century should look like, it may be worthwhile to examine some of the curricular challenges of Jewish day school education today, so that we can develop a consciousness of where improvements most need to be made.

Perhaps the most fundamental curriculum issue concerns the place of general studies in relation to Jewish studies. This is a real issue for the Jewish community, and it cannot be resolved in one dimension. All Jewish communities have to define who they are through the curriculum that works for them, and hence I am not convinced that community day schools, or day schools that try to encompass a whole range of families with all kinds of different levels of commitment, can really work. In the rush to build community, we often water down the curriculum to create something that is interesting but '*pareve*'. As we move into the future, we need to look at this, and clarify the specific roles each individual day school should play within the community.

Part of this debate centres around the questions of what should be learnt in school, and what can be left until after school. At the very least, schooling ought to aim for children to reach the point where they are obligated to *mitzvot*.

How does one teach a child to be obligated to *mitzvot*? This is not

something that we can simply expect to come from the family and the home. A big part of the answer may be related to teaching spirituality. There is a tremendous quest for spirituality among teenagers today in Israel and around the whole world, and we educators do not know much about how to deal with it. We see children having some kind of spiritual *nitzotzot* – sparks – in their informal educational experiences – a *Shabbat yachad*, or at a wonderful seminar. But we haven't yet learned how to put this into the curriculum.

We also do not know how to talk to the children about God. We are afraid, and often prefer to talk about text instead. But children want to talk about God, because they are surrounded by a general crisis of faith. Perhaps we feel this more in Israel than teachers do in the Diaspora – my girls have been to more funerals in the past two years than I have been to in my whole life. But even without the current situation, the crisis of faith is going to stay with us. Teachers in the future need to learn to talk to children about God, and to allow them to express their faith, or their concerns and doubts, in an open and honest way.

We will also need to learn how to run schools that can develop a sense of commitment to social action. In the contemporary world, this notion is in decline: the younger generation is very 'me-orientated'. Their dominant questions are the same: what can I do for myself? How am I going to make a living? How am I going to grow up to have the right career? The day schools of the future need to be better equipped to respond to this challenge, and to find suitable mechanisms to engage young people in social causes.

Part of the way to tackle this is to create a wider school culture that exudes social justice. In many countries, Jewish schools must charge very high tuition. Certainly in the USA, there are a lot of issues over who gets scholarships, which federations support the schools, and which do not. We like to think that anybody who wants a Jewish education gets one. But it is highly likely that there are people who want it, but can't afford it.

In Israel we have a graduated system. We have what is called 'grey' education. Everybody is officially getting education for free,

but the so-called 'better' schools are charging a lot of money. One small example: in Israeli schools, lockers are for rent. If you want a locker you pay an annual fee; if you don't – or can't afford one – you don't pay. For this reason, I refused to put lockers into my school, until a group of parents complained. I argued that I needed sufficient funds to be able to give everybody a locker, or else nobody should get one. The parents raised the money. Creating injustices in school only enhances the legitimacy of the injustices outside of it. Similarly, the values of freedom, democracy, respect, *tzedek*, honesty and tolerance need to be taught, in ways that fully integrate them into both Jewish and general education.

In recent years, there have been significant strides forward in co-curricular education – bringing arts, music, theatre, sports, newspapers, and so on, into the Jewish school. Not all of this need necessarily be Jewishly-integrated, but some links ought to be drawn. Children should gain a general education, but they also need to find a space where they can feel their Jewish identity together with their cultural identity.

A group of tenth grade girls in my school wanted to study art. For them to be able to do so was going to be very expensive – the costs of the equipment required to enable children to learn photography, sculpture, and so on are extremely prohibitive. As a result, I established a relationship with the Israel Museum which has a *bagrut* programme in art one evening a week, and the girls now study there. Complaints from the Ministry supervisor from the *mamlachti dati* about me beginning the process of the girls' secularisation did not dissuade me. I don't see opening them up to the secular world of art as the beginning of their downfall. But it takes a while for everybody to understand that this is a good thing. And if we are going to open our children up to the world around them, we must also openly discuss the challenges that world presents. Indeed, our job is to keep them conversing about all the challenges they meet when they go out into the world.

In Israel, there are particular issues about heterogeneity, but similar issues exist everywhere. One of the biggest challenges con-

cerns the *aidot* – the different ethnic groups – and specifically cultural and religious differences between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. In Jerusalem, especially in the *dati* world, there is a tremendous amount of racism that has not yet been cracked. Many of the *dati* schools are de facto separated by *aidah*. But, if we want to build a macro-society that values difference, we must celebrate our differences in micro-structures like schools. We must talk about them, and encourage children to share the *minhagim* from their homes, and to value one another's customs and practices.

The issue of *tefillah* in all of the movements is very complicated. I don't think anybody has yet found the right formula for how to teach kids to *daven*, and how to find meaning in it. There are all kinds of radical solutions, but we have to give it a lot more thought. One of the main reasons that we have problems teaching it is probably because we have problems with it ourselves as adults.

Women's education is likely to continue to be a major issue. Having worked in a co-ed school, an all-girls' school and an all-boys' school, I am increasingly seeing the value of separate gender education, except in instances where it gives girls a lower-level curriculum and less good teachers. The principle for girls' education in schools of the future ought, I believe, to be 'separate but equal'. To date, I haven't seen that really work anywhere.

Part of the means of achieving this will be the appointment of female principals of modern Orthodox schools. In the last four years of the 1990s there were close to fifteen searches for principals of modern Orthodox co-ed high schools, all of which are proud to give girls an equal education. Not one of the search committees interviewed a woman. Part of girls' education demands that women teachers need to be given real opportunities to serve as role models, and full and equal access to top positions in schools.

Finally, Hebrew is absolutely essential for Jewish education, and for keeping the world Jewish community together. Reading Chumash or Rashi in English is not the same as reading them in Hebrew. The concept of a language that keeps us all together and helps to build a vision of a common future based on a common past is something very

important. Since I think that little children learn Hebrew best, they should be given an opportunity to learn it when they are young. These are our challenges.