

VALUES AND IDENTITY IN JEWISH EDUCATION

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This article identifies a set of values to guide the development of an ideal Jewish school; it then specifies a series of recommended organizational, curricular, and instructional practices to address these values. The preface establishes the rationale for rethinking the substance and form of Jewish education in the United States.

Who are the Jews? How many are they and is the Jewish community growing or evaporating before our very eyes? And who cares? Of course the ultra-Orthodox Jews, with their large families, strong values, and high-energy spiritualism and fundamentalism, are “growing”; but they are only 200,000 strong and prefer to remain radically and obviously separated. They shun acceptance and thus assimilation by their dress, hair, languages, and particularly the separate schooling of their children—in fact, they shun contact with other Jews (Peshkin, 1986). They have been private schoolers since the creation of these sects in the US and Europe.

Research on the ultra-Orthodox Jews is extremely important, because this community is perhaps one of the few obviously viable communities which is strong, growing, well-educated, internally cohesive (no intermarriage), and productive. These groups show what real private education, when integrated into the life of the community, can do in perpetuating religious life.

The counterexamples are descendants of the great immigration of Central and Eastern European Jewry occurring between 1880 and 1915. These Jews were startled and pleased to find that public education was open to them and that in fact they were among the success stories of the rags-to-

riches American dream: immigrant Jews dominating the elite public institutions, such as the Bronx High School of Science, Stuyvesant, and the City College of New York. In just a generation, public education turned a poverty-stricken, oppressed European Jewry into a secure, assimilated, highly American middle-class community. If public education worked anywhere, it certainly worked for the Jews.

This partaking of public education created a situation in which the Jewish community has become so totally integrated into American life—as was the purpose—that it may be on the verge of assimilating itself out of existence. Gone from the collective American consciousness will be the Jewish narrative and memory that have significantly contributed to the richness of our culture. Thus, for Jews and other groups, the question is, do you remain separate demographically, or do you join the club and become just another contributor to the American melting pot—but no longer a discrete population? Are the unique value and identity systems worth maintaining and nurturing? If these distinct communities are worth saving, and if they are making significant contributions to American life, then the only means for preserving this culture is private and separate education.

JEWISH MEANING

The argument concerning the contribution of Jews to American life rests on the assumption that Jewish values are unique, profound, and meaningful not only for Jews, but for everyone. Is this true? The Jewish population in America is fragmented, confused, and diffused like any other subculture. It differs in political perspective, religious observance, philanthropic behavior, and intellectual outlook. Is there anything left that gives it a definition and identity that can be transmitted to the next generation and perpetuates and energizes the behavior of individual and groups of Jews? In short, is Judaism truly relevant in the everyday lives of most American Jews?

Thus, we must ask, What is it that would best restore continuity to the Jewish community? Is it a better liturgy? more charismatic, caring rabbis? a more “modern” belief system? more attractive synagogues? Or is the answer a completely revised (rethought) educational infrastructure, based on a private education paradigm?

Whereas early in its history the U.S. Catholic community built a system of parish schools for every Catholic child, the organized Jewish philanthropic community expended its mounting resources on the rescuing and resettling of worldwide Jewry, the establishment of the State of Israel, and above all, a separate social welfare system which became the model for United Way, and even for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The field of social work was virtually invented by Jews. The emphasis under a survival mentality was that no Jewish person would go to bed unhoused or unfed—

but formal, private, and separate education was nowhere to be seen. Biological needs took precedence over the transmission of values and beliefs, and the Jewish community is suffering from this privation to this day.

The action agenda that focused on social welfare and the protection of persecuted Jews in foreign lands was coupled with a strong response to anti-Semitism and any form of prejudice. Support for such groups as the ACLU and the NAACP reflected this commitment. These efforts raise the question, is a common fear of external prejudice sufficient to keep us together? Or do Jews need a carefully crafted, dedicated, comprehensive religious education system, much as the Catholics have?

JEWISH LEARNING

We now arrive at education issues such as what Jews should learn, where they should learn it, and to what end. The key questions are, What kind of Jews do we want to produce? What constitutes an educated Jew today? And does Jewish education make us smarter in other areas of learning and life?

One of the great stereotypes or canards is that Jews are smarter: While they cannot farm or fight, they win Nobel prizes and take top places academically, mainly because of the tradition of learning and argumentation built around the study of *Torah* and *Talmud*. Some would simply contend: It's "good Jewish genes."

While I disagree with this stereotype, intellectuality traditionally has been the most highly prized quality in the Jewish community, and it was nurtured through the Beit Midrash which will be described later in this article. The student who achieved stature for intellectual competence in the Beit Midrash commanded more respect than did his more athletic or financially secure counterparts. Now the question is, What constitutes "Jewish learning?" This question is a major focal point for the values segment of this article.

JEWISH ASSIMILATION

The integration of the U.S. Jewish community into general social, political, and economic life has occurred with spellbinding speed. The central research question deriving from this integration rests on the assumption that the traditions of Judaism and the history of the Jewish people can provide a framework for a secular and nonsectarian curriculum. Can the legacy of excellence in Jewish learning be translated into an approach that will improve schools in general? In other words, can the approach to learning which includes an intense relationship to spirituality and religion provide the key to education reform at all levels? Is it then the responsibility of private schools to engage in a program of daring experimentation which would be impossible in the public sector, so that the private religious approach might provide for the general good? The analogy to Roman Catholic and Quaker schools is obvi-

ous. These private schools are open to all and so in their own specific ways are producing leaders who inform general society and lead it in specific ways. Now, the fundamental question is, Can and should the U.S. Jewish community establish religious schools with a Jewish- and Hebrew-based curriculum, that are open to all, so that the leaders of the next generation will also include graduates with Jewish memory, knowledge, and learning styles as part of their repertoire?

JEWISH SECONDARY SCHOOLS

In the way of background it is important to emphasize two points: First, America has only five non-Orthodox Jewish high schools; and in New York City, with a Jewish population of 1.8 million, there are only two with less than 200 students between them. Second, these Jewish schools do not integrate Jewish and secular studies; in fact, there are two different schools operating over the course of each day, usually with the Jewish subjects offered in the morning and the secular or “English” subjects in the afternoon. These schools have two different staffs, including a pair of principals and two different half-time faculties.

Is this practice not antithetical to real Jewish learning and life which is comprehensive and integrated? In other words, Jewish theology explores all facets of human experience based on the theological concern that if God is one, radically one, then knowledge should also be unified and coherent. For the last year we have been grappling with this concern and several others while working to design a Jewish high school and academy that will educate secular, unaffiliated, and interested Jews and provide them with Jewish textual skills and an ethos of Jewish learning.

We’ve tried to address such questions as: What will such an academy look like? How will it preserve what the Jewish community has to offer while contributing to a more spiritual and multifaceted America? And how might we make these schools interesting and educationally successful? By placing the finest institutions of traditional Jewish learning at the heart of these schools, leaders will strive to modify and enrich them while focusing on the concerns of the broader Jewish community. The next section describes in detail the values which would guide this ideal school and the kinds of practices which follow from those values.

VALUES WHICH GUIDE THIS APPROACH

1. TALMUD AND TORAH:

SCHOOL IS A PLACE FOR THE BUSINESS OF LEARNING

Student learning is the primary focus of the school’s efforts. The quality of learning should be challenging and exhilarating, and this cannot happen

unless students and faculty invest in rigorous study. Students who enter the academy must commit themselves to discipline, self-motivation, and responsibility.

We purposely use the term "learning" instead of "study." The academy will not be a passive place in which teachers lecture and students absorb, but a place where all members of the community are expected to contribute. Support staff are not there simply for the students' benefit. Nor should any student or teacher prize his or her own wisdom over all others. It says in the *Mishna*, Peah 1:1, that there are many activities for which one receives credit, but that the learning of *Torah* outweighs them all. The ultimate goal of communal behavior is that special kind of learning which awakens the human spirit and leads into the realm of imagination and curiosity.

2. V'AHAVTA L'RE'ACHA KAMOCHA: LOVE AND RESPECT FOR THE RIGHTS AND FEELINGS OF OTHERS

This academy should be based on friendships, rooted not only in enjoyment or even utility, but on the struggle to see the world through the eyes of the other. A critical perspective informing the culture of a school is that people believe deeply that they can learn from each other, and that mutual understanding can reshape the world. This is a school of individual differences, wherein members of the community not only respect the feelings of others but strive to understand them. They must be present for each other and be prepared to learn the specific languages in which people frame their ideas.

This is a difficult task because each person has a particular style of communication, often determined by gender, religious or communal perspective, and economic status. Often students fail to express themselves both in and outside the classroom because they do not feel valued. In a society that generally values certain styles of expression over others, this academy will commit itself to an awareness of these inequalities and try to address them. This philosophy must inform the way teachers treat students, students treat staff, and members of different peer groups treat each other.

A commitment to equality is easier said than done. How will this Academy determine whether a student feels valued and respected? Faculty, staff, and tutors will play a significant role in this regard, not only as intellectual and emotional role models, but as people with whom students feel comfortable expressing themselves.

3. AL TIFROSH MIN HATZIBUR: DON'T SEPARATE YOURSELF FROM THE COMMUNITY

The student body of this academy will be recruited in such a way that subgroups will become inevitable. It will be natural for the student population to divide by religion, gender, political view, and other characteristics. This

school will have a higher goal which is embodied in the formulation, "Al Tifrosh Min Hatzibur," or "Don't separate yourself from the community." This school will attempt to move beyond a system of cliques to a wider circle of friends. To do that will demand that members of each subgroup become aware of how they treat and understand people who are different from themselves.

The school will bring shared values that can serve as a bridge between different communities, a system of ethics within the Prophetic and Talmudic traditions in Judaism, and the corresponding traditions of all sacred human societies. All members of the school must be sensitive to questions of democracy, minority rights, individual and human rights, and communal responsibility.

Is it possible to create a school community in which individuals feel responsible for the actions of the whole? In the past 100 years we have seen time and again how societies overwhelm the individual's sense of morality and responsibility. The utterance "I was only following orders" has marked our century. The story of the pursuer in Sanhedrin 73b presents a complicated text which urges the individual to take action on behalf of the communal good, to protect the society from involvement with sin. In the school the definitions of ethical standards and sin will be debated. School staff will strive to educate students to care for their commitments, to be self-critical, and to be aware of the impact that their commitments have on others and on the community as a whole.

4. *HARACHAK MESHACHANE RAH:* KEEP FAR FROM A BAD NEIGHBOR

All responsible communities must look outward as well as inward. This institution must look out to and for the society at large. It must be a special community and be understood to be an exemplary neighbor. It must try to establish an atmosphere that will allow the surrounding community to look at the academy with pride. This can be accomplished in a number of ways ranging from students tutoring neighborhood children and engaging in social action projects to an attempt to hire staff who live in the immediate neighborhood.

In Exodus 19 the Jewish community is called a kingdom of priests. A priest is a conduit for a larger society, a wider realm. No priest ever felt that he was the end in himself. This is the reasoning behind the use of the principle *Harachak Meshachane Rah*: Keep far from a bad neighbor. Bad neighbors only look out for themselves. This academy cannot exist isolated from the world. Political currents, wars, social disturbances, trends, and fads will affect the school. This school will be planned with state-of-the-art facilities and curriculum. It will stand in contrast to many of its immediate neighbors. Therefore, the school will be sensitive to the state of affairs of its neighborhood and be committed to bringing value to all people in the immediate loca-

tion. In times of difficulty and crisis, the school will have deep credibility within the neighborhood so that it can serve as a common ground.

This school will also strive to make its statement to the community at large in such a way that it will shape the surrounding environment and not simply be shaped by it. Through public programs, artistic celebrations, and social service projects, this school will become a good neighbor. This is not simply an emotional statement. The school will face issues that will occasion changes in zoning, community board approval, and neighborhood commitment. Members of the school community will try to serve on community boards and be vigilant about fulfilling their civic responsibilities. Many schools, particularly those sponsored by a distinctive community, see themselves as constantly in struggle with their surrounding neighborhoods. This school, in a consistent and planned pattern, will be organized by a standing committee of parents, faculty, students, and neighbors to make sure that the school community cares about the surrounding parks, centers, recreational facilities, and issues of human concern.

5. *BAL TASH-CHIT*: RESPECT AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND PROPERTY

Students must be challenged to consider the impact of their actions on the world around them. The Jewish concept of Bal Tash-chit speaks against the waste of resources. This school will implement programs which focus on issues of recycling, ecological concern, and environmental awareness. This school will strive through study, responsible environmental behavior, and access to nature to develop an ethic of ecological sensitivity. Its building and laboratories will manifest environmental awareness, and the school itself will be a laboratory for ecological values.

6. *IM EIN ANI LI MI LI*: IF I AM NOT FOR MYSELF, WHO AM I?

This academy will oblige its students to maintain the highest degree of integrity and honor. As in any academic community, plagiarism, theft of intellectual property, and property damage will be treated as major infractions. Each student will participate in seminars on sex education, substance abuse, and harassment. The school will be a smoke- and substance-free environment, so students or faculty members can bring their best intellectual ability to bear. Students will be expected to attend classes, behave respectfully, participate in school activities with safety, and maintain a high individual moral standard. Counseling services, college placement, and employment assistance will offer individualized support to students; and every attempt will be made to keep buildings, libraries, and recreational facilities open for extended hours.

7. *DERECH ERETZ*: CONSIDERATION AND RESPECTFUL BEHAVIOR TOWARD OTHERS

Intellectual acumen, philosophical insight, and legislated religious behavior are no guarantees of a good person. It is not enough to follow rules; one also has to want to be good. A sense of goodness must be among the school's high ideals.

Goodness is vague and hard to describe, but easy to notice. It is subjective, but it cannot mean everything. There is the rabbinical principle of *Ha-Malbin et chaveiro b'rabim*—that you avoid any situation where a person might be embarrassed in front of others. The admissions process will try to identify students who will not only make a significant contribution to society, but also be good companions in learning and in life. This school will be a meritocracy and students who can produce measurable results will be rewarded. But the sense of *Derech Eretz*, of being open and kind to others, will be prized even more highly. If *Derech Eretz* will temper the intellect, then people will enter the building and say, "This place has *menschlichkeit* (humanity)."

8. *ASEH LECHA RAV*: MAKE YOURSELF A TEACHER

This academy will attempt to create teachers out of peers. In the Beit Midrash and in many classes students will be asked to teach each other. This is one interpretation of the phrase from *Ethics of the Fathers*, 1:6, but there is another; that the faculty must be a precious resource for the school and be respected. Rules and regulations will apply to the entire academy, not simply its student body. The corollary of respect for the faculty is respect from the faculty for the students.

9. *KNEH LECHA HAVER*: ACQUIRE FOR YOURSELF A FRIEND

The medieval commentator Rashi understood "acquire for yourself a friend" to mean the acquisition of books. In the Avot d'Rabbi Nathan it was thought to mean the obligation to have a friend, at least one to whom you could reveal your secrets. As a principle of community, our defined meaning will encompass a little of both these interpretations. This is a school that will demand commitment to both people and books.

First a comment on books. A people is only as good as its library, as rich as its cultural memory. Therefore the school must be directed toward creating a culture based on learning and the reading of books. It sees reading as sacred activity, a process through which a person can communicate with another through the medium of the written word.

A Jewish library must have two kinds of books. The first is a book which is novel, original, and fresh; a book that excites the imagination and thrills

the reader, a book that is meant to impart information and to be read once. Its hallmarks are originality and creativity. The second kind of book is in Hebrew and is called a *sefer*. This type of book is not a container of anything new, but a vehicle to the past. A *sefer* has no real beginning or end, and it can be read over and over again. It is best read in conversation and it gathers opinions and perspectives from a long lineage of readers. As we grow it grows with us and can be a mirror of our life.

Both of these kinds of books will be important at the academy. They will provide the language for not only the acquisition of ideas, but also the acquisition of friends. They will be the vehicles through which members of the community are able to find the way to reveal their secrets.

10. *DAN ET KOL HA-ADAM L'KAF Z'CHUT*: GIVE PEOPLE THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

The *Torah* obliges one to reprove another, but in the *Talmud* the ability to carry out this obligation is understood to be a rare skill. The school community must consist of critics; but they must tune that criticism gently, always giving the benefit of the doubt. In the new school, rules and regulations will be intended to be life enhancing, not a series of locked doors and forbidden opportunities.

PRACTICES IN AN IDEAL JEWISH SCHOOL

In an ideal Jewish school, distinctive practices and characteristics emanate from the foundational values. These practices are worthy of consideration for implementation in other private as well as public schools.

BEIT MIDRASH AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The Beit Midrash unifies learning and places it at the center of the academy. This house of study goes back centuries in Jewish life and culture and represents an instructive model for exploring and constructing new paradigms.

This Beit Midrash is a coeducational environment which places learning at the center of Jewish existence and uses the passionate philosophy and innovations of the Frankfurt Lehrhaus. This school will differ from the Lehrhaus, however, in that it will teach adolescents and be directed at issues outside of Judaism and its literature.

Students in the Beit Midrash will largely study classical Jewish texts. Even the non-Jewish texts that will be studied will relate to significant human concerns. The curriculum of this Beit Midrash will over a period of four years provide each student with an accumulation of texts, midrashim, legal material, philosophical problems, and other elements that are necessary to construct Jewish literacy. Joseph Telushkin's (1991) *Jewish Literacy* gives a

solid description of a minimum standard for what a person should know to be considered a Jewishly literate person. Students who emerge from this school will not only be able to achieve that minimum, they will know much more and have initiated a lifelong spiritual and intellectual hunger.

Collaborative learning style will set the educational framework for the Beit Midrash and underpin each subject area. Although the term "collaborative learning" has become an overused piece of jargon, its concrete benefits are confirmed by recent studies. The collaborative learning style is adaptable to most subjects or disciplines. When two students study and attempt to understand a mathematical equation, an English passage, or a science question as a team, each can acquire a stronger individual command of materials and ideas. Scholars such as Kenneth Bruffee (1993) have shown how important collaboration can be for individual learning. Working together, whether in music or in science, gives the individual the necessary sense of being part of a peer group dedicated to learning and discovery. To students of traditional Jewish learning, this is contemporary confirmation of the *hevruta* system that has been practiced for centuries in the Beit Midrash.

The essence of the Beit Midrash is that students speak their way into the understanding of a text. The goal is to create a dynamic and engaged learning which sets the tone for all classroom work; students who learn every morning in learning pairs will feel continued energy and passion in their day. Most students like to talk, and this style maximizes the opportunity for them to do so. It also decreases the number of hours that teachers need to control students and the tension and opposition between them; it makes the teacher an ally.

Students in active face-to-face discovery with one another make up the Beit Midrash. Such a learning environment fosters interest and passion and encourages students to go deeper into the text. Passion in turn leads students to use the text as a vehicle to another goal, to know one's self in context with another. By engaging one another actively, student pairs are better able to find their voices within the text and to link their own personal stories to the wider human story. And as the pairs vary, each student learns how to deal with a variety of personalities.

The structure of the Beit Midrash supports learning for its sheer joy, learning as recreation, and learning as a way of bringing dimension to everyday life. This kind of learning will attract ambitious and motivated students. Such a structure will also help to fashion a community out of students with widely divergent views. Face-to-face learning encourages and demands that each student take responsibility for self and each other. The Beit Midrash enables students to study, discuss, and debate one another, and in the process to acquire lifelong friendships. It thus forms a basis for the school's community as well as its curriculum.

Ideally the Beit Midrash is situated at the center of the school, at its

entrance. It is a room of great height, lined with books. The tables are long, made of solid, dark wood narrow enough for students to speak to one another with ease. The windows are tall, so that natural light can illuminate all corners of the room. The floors are wooden, so they might creak with movement, like organic elements of learning. The aisles between the tables are wide enough for informal conversations. The other rooms of the school might have internal balconies so that the activities of the Beit Midrash could at times softly pervade the space. This kind of concentration thrives in the midst of sound and activity; concentration not of solitary study, but the concentration that is a contribution to a widely shared enterprise. This place of learning should be central enough and in plain enough view, so that when students have free time or emerge from class, they are drawn to learning out of friendship, interest, or commitment.

HEVRUTA STUDY, ESSAYS, LECTURES, AND SYMPOSIA

Study in the Beit Midrash will be the Academy's first activity of each school day. From 8 a.m. to 9 a.m. students, faculty, and staff will be divided into hevrutot or pairs of learning partners. Hevrutot from all grade levels will simultaneously study the same selected text in the same study hall as all other hevrutot. The pairs will study the text orally: The sound of all the hevruta partners studying in the same room creates an uplifting, unique hum, the sound of voices learning together. This oral, active learning style is an ideal way to begin the day.

Each student will be expected to arrive at the Beit Midrash on Monday with an essay of roughly a page in length that responds to the chapter's study guide questions. For example, students might study a chapter based on friendship. This chapter could include a selection from the Mishna on the acquisition of a friend, together with Aristotle's understanding of friendship from Book 9 of the *Ethics*. These sources might be backed up with a text by Maimonides on this subject, as well as the short essay by Eudora Welty from her anthology on friendship. These texts would be chosen not only for their distinct views on the subject, but because they play off each other and because, in the case of Maimonides, he quotes Aristotle. In this way, students would be exposed to both classical European and Jewish texts which form different sides of a conversation. The students' essays about this chapter should answer such questions as: Are there various categories of friendship? What is the basis of friendship? If asked to choose between a friend's loyalty or the truth, which one would a student choose?

As the week progresses, students will be expected to revise their essays. On Wednesday, a faculty lecture will be followed by a symposium in which the week's concept is placed into the broader context of non-Jewish and Jewish thought. The faculty lecture and symposium are major school events.

At these events, the entire student body, parents, guest speakers, and the public are invited to participate. Unlike the faculty lecture, the symposium will draw speakers from outside the school such as noted musicians, dancers, academics, writers, visual and performance artists, and political and intellectual figures. (Periodically, the symposium will be held during the evening to enable a guest speaker to address a wider audience about a given subject.)

Students need regularly to see that what they are asked to do in school is being done by adults unaffiliated with the academy, and that students are valued participants. These events will bring to the discussion the real-life, interdisciplinary aspects and motifs of these subjects and enable students to participate in the real-world process of debate and learning.

The symposium will deal with questions formulated by the students themselves in the preceding days and written on a board in the Beit Midrash. This board will be shown to the panel speakers and moderator at the opening of the symposium, not before. (Collaborative learning requires spontaneous, live thinking, not just advance preparation.)

The conversation that takes place as a result of the faculty lecture and symposium will change many ideas, and students will need to revise their essays as a result. They will turn in final drafts that reflect such changes on Friday. All final essays will be bound into a book at the end of the year and placed on permanent display.

Knowing their work will be read and commented on by others should be a motivating factor for all students. The use of computer linkages will enhance this aspect of the Beit Midrash. Making the essays a part of the school's archives is also a strong indication of the academy's philosophy of learning for personal transformation and communal involvement. It is learning as a link to the language, conventions, commonplaces, and culture put forth by the school, and as a link to the community, the people and the wider human story. It is learning for those dedicated to hypothesis, reconsideration, and change.

TUTORS AND MENTORS

A student from a secular background, Jewish or non-Jewish, will be schooled in the currents of modern thought but exposed to skepticism about modern conceits regarding reason and knowledge that have traditionally been fueled by systematic religious thinking. The school will use arguments and ideas to bind together a learning community, but it will encourage the individual with a dissenting voice to speak clearly and be heard. This will happen in the Beit Midrash, the classroom, the science laboratory, the debate club, and the playing fields.

How will this be accomplished? The academy will seek out graduate students who have the ability and interest to live in an intense community and

employ them as tutors in the academy and the Beit Midrash. These graduate students will be at the dissertation-writing stage or research level of their graduate work.

These graduate students who can transmit their enthusiasm for learning and imagination to students will serve as intellectual guides and role models. It is vital for high school students to feel they have someone who understands their questions, a kind of big brother or big sister who can bring them to higher levels of confidence and ambition. These graduate students will also help advise clubs, work on plays, and be there simply to engage in conversation with developing adolescents. They will not inspire fear, since they do not give grades. A residential facility might be made available for graduate students and visiting faculty.

When young students arrive at yeshivas, they are assigned older students as tutors. Furthermore, members of the adult community will sit with them periodically, serving as mentors, to make sure they are not only comfortable and content, but are expanding their minds to a level of excellence. If the tutors and mentors are selected carefully and matched well to students, a significant learning process can lead to lifelong friendships.

Tutors are integral to the school, for their consistent yet gentle confrontations will support the work of faculty and allow students to advance intellectually and morally. An ideal tutor is one who engages and encourages a student in rigorous intellectual debate, yet also relates to the student on more lighthearted levels, such as going to the movies, cycling, or skating through Central Park.

TOWN MEETINGS

Town meetings will occur as a highlight on the Friday afternoon of each week. They are a time of presentation and celebration of individual and communal accomplishments and are closed to everyone except members of the school community. The meetings have a ritual format and are introduced by a short but distinctive piece of learning. They also include a performance by the Parsha Players that presents the weekly *Torah* reading in a dramatic context.

The town meeting agenda is partially controlled by student government. The meeting itself is a time for committee reports, announcements, airing of student concerns, and the formation of new groups and clubs. The town meeting is not a forum for changing policy or developing new legislation.

INTEGRATED CURRICULUM

Many Jewish schools use an integrated curriculum, and the more integrated the better. Jewish literature, philosophy, history, practice, religion, law, and politics can easily find a place in a standard curriculum. In classes on mod-

ern literature, modern Jewish literature will be included. In classes on medieval history, medieval Jewish history will be included. The richness of the Jewish content will come from the way in which these Jewish particulars are integrated into the general curriculum.

History is a fine example of a discipline wherein integration can happen early. In the teaching of history it is not only significant to know what history to teach, but also how to teach history. Integration of this curriculum comes when a teacher of European history, using a text such as *Zakhor* by Yosef Yerushalmi (1996), begins to help students view history from a Jewish perspective. This integration will allow them to see the Jewish content as part and parcel of their studies. There will be no disadvantaging of the Jewish curriculum by the general curriculum. Such integration is not only possible but essential in all the major disciplines.

MISHNA AS METAPHOR

How does one design a secular Jewish school? There are two approaches. The first approach celebrates Jewish culture through songs and theater. One could have Jewish studies classes that would emphasize history, Hebrew, and modern Hebrew literature. For students in the higher grades, issues such as the Holocaust, the Bible as literature, and Jewish communal needs could be examined. Study of these issues would function as a supplement to the curriculum. This approach is certainly workable. However, we believe it would be beneficial to proceed in a different way.

The second approach is newer and more experimental. It claims a Jewish vision of reality which is pervasive. Our attempt is not to separate Jewish learning from the core curriculum but instead to reassemble the entire vision of learning so that students will slowly build images, language, competencies, conceptions, and finally, excellence to give them a specific intellectual approach to the world. This is what *Mishna* as metaphor is all about. Professor Isadore Twersky claims that when Maimonides wrote his *Mishna Torah*, he did not separate the world into Jewish and non-Jewish issues. Instead, he used the Jewish categories to gather and organize the human attempts at knowing. He reused old notions to fashion what he thought was an authentic Jewish paradigm. We stand on the shoulders of giants.

The use of the *Mishna* as a metaphor for the curriculum is only an innovation in modern times. Goldenberg (as cited in Holtz, 1984) argues that the *Mishna* was a curriculum. It was the way the sages passed on their learning to subsequent generations. There is, however, no precedent for trying to reformulate a modern Western curriculum through the *Mishna*. This is the heart of the academy.

CONCLUSION

The Jewish high school herein proposed will be a Jewish school grounded in the ideas of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook. Rav Kook understood the Jewish world to comprise a variety of communities that had become alienated from one another and are in search of a language of rediscovery and return. He understood that each of the communities from the most secular to the religious was necessary if there were to be a rebirth of the people of Israel. When his Hasidism demanded that he censure the secular labor Zionists, he declined. He said the people needed all types of communities to create a spiritual and enduring Jewish world. This is the kind of atmosphere we will strive to create at this school.

The Jewish people are held together by the basic stories of Judaism from the *Torah*. In this light, the school will be committed to providing students with stories from their heritage that will bind them to Jews throughout the world. How else can we explain why American Jews spend their hard-earned dollars on rescuing Jews from Ethiopia and Russia? What binds these people who speak different languages and share few similar customs and overall philosophies of life? It is their shared heritage and commitment to the basic Jewish story. This school will be dedicated to providing its students with this story that will bind them to all other Jews.

This is the heart of this school: a commitment to the inculcation of students with knowledge of the Jewish story. This Jewish commitment which defines the essence of our school will serve to justify and lay the intellectual groundwork for pluralism. We believe that students who are informed of the Jewish story should be free to express their commitment to Judaism in whatever form they wish.

At the most fundamental level this new school will be an American private school in which anything may be discussed. It will be a pluralistic Jewish academy where a distinction is made between coercive religious activity and intellectual and experiential exploration. It will stress communal activity that involves an exploration of the Jewish tradition rather than participation in ritual life. The school will also focus on the development of spirituality; and on providing students with tools to make serious decisions.

It is important to reemphasize that throughout the century, American Jewry has pursued a number of urgent objectives: e.g., the creation of infrastructure and institutions, assistance and rescue for Jewish communities abroad, support for the establishment of the State of Israel, and the creation of an American Jewish culture. The enterprise discussed in this paper, the creation of a distinctive educational strategy, follows naturally. Implementation of this strategy must be followed with a strong effort to assess program effectiveness and to address a set of basic research questions.

Critical to the growth and improvement of Jewish education, as of all education, is a high-quality research and development effort. A recent book

edited by Kelman (1996), *What We Know About Jewish Education: A Handbook of Today's Research for Tomorrow's Jewish Education*, captures the need for improved study of Jewish schools and Jewish education. Kelman writes about his book of essays:

Almost every essay leaves the reader feeling that not enough research is being done in Jewish education. Indeed, most of "what we know about" comes from the pens (or computers) of authors engaged in doctoral studies. And while it is certainly commendable that students choose to work specifically in the arena of Jewish interest, it is lamentable that the research efforts for which they were trained cease upon the granting of their Ph.D. or Ed.D. Few are the institutions, agencies, or synagogues which pursue research as a general part of their philosophy and encourage professionals to continue to use that which they have learned in graduate school. (p. 10)

In closing, it is important to emphasize that the goals of developing Jewish schools, assessing their effectiveness, and addressing the research questions that will derive from their development constitute an important, complex, and demanding challenge. Their achievement will require the commitment of leadership throughout the American Jewish community.

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