

Torah Education at the Crossroads

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In addressing this topic, I make certain assumptions which it is best to declare at the outset.

I speak of "Torah Education" as it is known and practiced in Centrist or Modern Orthodoxy. This means, Jewish education in that community which subscribes to *Torah Umadna* as a desideratum and not a concession, to tolerance and moderation, to the State of Israel, and to the unity of the Jewish people. But these admirable qualities and values are ancillary to the primary principle of Torah as the very source of our lives, both individual and communal, and the study of Torah as the pre-eminent *mitzvah* of Judaism. My remarks might be viewed as self-critical, negatively constructive. Although I dwell upon our faults and failures and flaws, and forgo self-gratulation, do not conclude therefrom that we are hopelessly inadequate and doomed. Quite to the contrary: If I am critical of our educational efforts, perhaps harshly so, I ask you to attribute the public airing of my displeasures as a sign of collective self-confidence and strength.

Were I less confident of our past achievements and future triumphs, I would not risk exposing our weaknesses.

I shall cluster my remarks about two poles or centers of concern: *Torah* and *Mitzvot*.

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TORAH

The Torah component in the theme of "Torah Education at the Crossroads" may be divided into a discussion of: motivation, continuity, and axiology (or: the role of Torah in the hierarchy of values).

Motivation

One of the most fundamental, difficult, and persistent questions which Jewish educators have to confront is that of the motivation to learn. This is universally the case, but it is especially nettlesome for children or adolescents of our community who are exposed to the whole gamut of contemporary experience in which Torah learning is not a prestige item.

The perennial problem is getting more difficult of late. Why, after all, should a young person study Torah when it is so easy to be accepted, successful, and recognized without a whisper of Jewish literacy? It is even possible to attain eminence in national and international Jewish leadership while remaining profoundly ignorant of Jewish classics, practice, or values; or worse, one can be married out and aggressively assert that the dogma of "pluralism" qualifies the ignorant, the Jewishly illiterate, and the intermarried to be "Jewish" leaders equal with all others. Why study Torah when it hardly articulates with anything familiar in secular life, when it has

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barely any resonance in the general studies which a child undertakes for all of his/her youth in our society?

For most of the 70's there seemed to be certain segments of Jewish society for whom this question seemed less acute. This was the era of the Counter-Culture, when many young Jews rebelled against the Jewish "establishment" and its insensitivity to cultural and spiritual values, by seeking out Jewish study in one form or another. This was the period of ethnic self-assertion, of the proliferation of Jewish studies courses in universities throughout North America, and a conscious rejection of many of the symbols and institutions of our technopolitan society.

That period, however, quickly passed away — and I rue its untimely demise. The 80's generation on our campuses has been as humorless, as intensive, and as grimly serious as the 70's generation — but about altogether different things. They are over-concerned with their vocations, their professions, their security, their social acceptance. With the shift from marijuana to booze has come the change from Marcuse to money, from society to self and status, from the New Leftist to the All Rightnik...

Our tasks, therefore, promise to be more difficult, not less so. With the obsession with vocation and money-making seeping down to high schools and even lower, culture as such is in eclipse, and Jewish learning especially threatens to become the private preserve of a priestly class — once rabbis, now mostly *roshei yeshiva* and, in other circles, university professors of Judaic studies: the new monastic order, the Essenes of the Academy. But that, of

course, jeopardizes the existence of Torah which must be *moreshet kehilat Yaakov*, a possession of *all* our people.

Continuity

The criterion of success in Torah education is not how much or how well our pupils learn in their schools, but how much and how often they learn *after* they leave school, when they are at work and building families and running businesses and raising children.

Of Torah we say daily *Ki hem hayenu v'orekh yamenu*, "They [the Torah and its commandments] are our life and the length of our days." The test of whether we are truly committed, of whether Torah is really "our life," is whether or not it is indeed "the length of our days." If you want to know if Torah is central to your life — *ki hem hayenu* — check to what extent you turn to it in *v'orekh yamenu*, after your formal schooling is over. How often do you open a *Gemara* or *Humash* or attend a regular *sheur*? The test results for most of us — most of us Orthodox Jews, let alone the others — is probably quite dismal. And that means that we must take an honest look at the educational system which produced us, as well as our society in general.

I submit that to improve this situation, to make sure that, to the maximum extent possible for us, Torah becomes a part of our adult lives, we must make a serious attempt to induce and inspire the best and brightest of our high school students to continue their full dual-curriculum of Torah and general studies into their college years.

In elementary Jewish schools, we teach skills and love. In high schools we teach ideas and ideals. But it is primarily Torah study on the level of higher

education that can succeed in encouraging the study of Torah as a life-long occupation, as an act of the love of God expressed in the idiom of the intellect.

Regular Torah study on the college level is critical to developing the habit of Torah study for the rest of one's life. Only if Torah education is continued on a higher level for an ever larger number of Centrist Orthodox Jews, can we hope to achieve credibility — in our *own* eyes — as an authentically Orthodox voice, and thus validate our approach to secular studies and the Gentile worlds and the non-Orthodox communities and the State of Israel.

Axiology

The question of axiology is that of the scale of values, and what role we assign to the study of Torah, what emphasis we place on it vis-a-vis other activities.

The Mishnaic teaching *v'talmud Torah kneged kulam* means that Torah study outweighs not only all the other *mitzvot* but, remarkably, even non-*mitzvot*, such as vacations, entertainment, proficiency in every conceivable sport, and so on....

To the largest extent, this emphasis on Torah as the chief value of life and of Judaism is transmitted, or not transmitted, to our charges in indirect as well as direct ways: not only by construction of curriculum, but also by our own conduct as parents and teachers, our tone of voice, our body language, and the clues and hints they pick up from us and from their fellow students.

We must beware of reducing Torah to a "course" or subject or discipline or field of knowledge alone. Torah is and must always be presented as a deeply religious and spiritual enterprise. The Sages taught that Torah study by man is an act of *imitatio Dei*: we imitate the Creator who spends most of His time studying Torah. And God learns Torah: He doesn't just "take a course" in Torah in His heavenly Yeshiva Day School....

I am not advocating that we teach only Torah. I am philosophically committed to *Torah Umadda*. I do not expect or want all boys to become rabbis or *roshei yeshiva* and all girls teachers (although we could use many more recruits to both callings). I want our children to be proficient in all their secular studies too. But I want all of them, no matter what careers they will pursue, to keep Torah as their prime spiritual commitment and *talmud*

Torah as a regular and ongoing part of their lives.

That, I maintain, must be the end-product of our form of Torah education: greatness as human beings, but always as great Jews. And that cannot happen without the proper emphasis on the primacy of Torah as a life-long enterprise of the first importance. No form of Orthodoxy can flourish without that emphasis.

MITZVOT

The Facts on the Ground

We turn now from the question of the study of Torah to that of *shemirat ha-mitzvot*, the problem of the observance of the commandments, and thus the whole "life style," as it is now called, of our school population both during and after their years of formal education.

When I do so, I refer not only to the matter of "observance" in a way that can be quantified and projected in a sociologists' survey: how often do you lay *tefillin*; how often do you light candles?

I am concerned by the *quality* of the observance, the emotional dimension of our *shemirat ha-mitzvot*, the investment of our deepest feelings, the enthusiasm we bring to our religious acts, the faith in the transcendent One which must always underlie our expressions of Jewish living.

There was a time that our elementary yeshiva schools and even high schools were models of disorganization, pedagogical disasters. Today almost all of our educational institutions are efficient, systematic, and professional. Our teachers are pedagogically competent, psychologically sensitive, well trained. Lesson plans are submitted, conferences are held, and the classes hum.

Everything that is needed for the success of the educational venture is there.

Everything except *neshama*, soul.

Our children are taught to recite *berakhot* before eating, and their knowledge of which blessings to recite and when is often quite sophisticated. But I do not find these children actually reciting them, as a normal and accepted part of their lives, at home. Moreover, even when a *berakha* is recited, I rarely detect a note of genuine feeling. The schools seem to be fighting a losing battle against the nemes, purveyors of emotional thinness.

I sometimes attend services at one yeshiva high school or another and, with a considerable number of very happy exceptions, find them depressingly similar to the "davening" of their parents. The *tefillah* is by rote, without *kavanah*, without heart. The prayers roll off their lips fluently — and fall to the floor, shattered and splattered. If our children are no better than we are, what hope is there for the future? (It was Elijah who said, "Enough! Now, O Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers" — I Kings 19:4.) And if our schools cannot correct the situation, who will?

The Problem in Perspective

We must remember that our educational concerns embrace not only the transmission of knowledge — of the cognitive and abstract elements of culture *per se* — but the whole gamut of Torah, which is as broad as life itself. For the Jewish educator, character and religious conduct and morality are not merely ancillary consequences of learning, but the very substance and stuff of education. Moral behavior and the spiritual life are the *telos* or goal of the education: "*Takhlit hokhmah teshuvah u-massim tovim*" (Ber. 17b): The purpose of wisdom is repentance (the spiritual transformation of personality) and good deeds (practical moral conduct).

It is this disjunctiveness between, on the one hand, the moral life and the spiritual aspirations that are the purpose of Torah education and, on the

other, the deprecation of such values in contemporary Western culture, that makes the enterprise of Jewish education so problematical today.

The kind of conduct expected of a young Orthodox Jew and Jewess — regular *tefillah*, set times for study of Torah, modesty in dress and speech, respect for elders and Torah scholars — is often alien to what is expected of them as "typical Americans" in their socio-economic class, where the norms are more often set by television rather than the *sheur* and by the agenda of the political liberals rather than by the *Shulhan Arukh*.

The question of "lifestyle" or *shemirat ha-mitzvot* ultimately relates to what Victor Frankl has called the "noogenic vacuum" in the life of contemporary man; it boils down to a metaphysical pain: the lack of transcendent anchorage or roots for all values and all of life. Our students and the homes they come from are afflicted by a creeping emptiness that our society insinuates into our very selves, by an axiological void which demands to be filled. It is a very depressing question that modern man usually attempts to suppress: without God, without something beyond me and beyond my physical existence, what is life all about? What meaning is there to all this? Why struggle? Why live? Why not suicide?

Such questions have disturbed Western society at least for the past forty years. We probably can pinpoint the most recent outbreak of such concern as 1949, when Karl Mannheim

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published his essays on "Diagnosis of our Time" and "The Crisis in Valuation." He recognized that the twin sources of the deep crisis and malaise in Western civilization were the erosion of legitimation and the loss of meaning. As legitimation became attenuated, the usual sources of authority began to lose their significance — from Presidents and Prime Ministers to Popes and Professors. The sense of purpose is gone. Our lives and our acts are hollowed rather than hallowed. We look about in vain for something worthy of our commitment and our love. We have relativized good and evil and trivialized reward and punishment. God has been dethroned by man, and as our other idols have been found to have clay feet, apotheosized man has been discovered to be flat-footed.

Hedonism is the unspoken and unchallenged assumption of the times. Indeed, it is the metaphysical cataclysm which we have sustained from the loss of legitimation and authority which gives rise to hedonism. As Amitai Etzioni wrote a few years ago, "Hedonism further develops when norms which define meanings disintegrate without being replaced by new norms. Hedonism thrives amidst a spread of normlessness."* In other words, for the Jew the loss of *halakhah*, of a life of *mitzvot*, leads to a life of gross and empty pleasure-seeking.

Often, this hedonism — sometimes in quite vulgar form — coexists ironically with the trappings of Orthodox observance. Examples: shameless public expression of sexual affection — while wearing a *kippah*; Orthodox men and women filling their minds with the most dreadful pornographic trash, far more polluting to the imagination than the smokestack exhaust that fouls our air and against which some of these same people rail with all the passion of trendy indignation; parents taking their Day School children to Club Med for their "winter vacation."

Allied with hedonism is an individualism run rampant: self-centeredness, egocentricity. Hence, all those "self" movements: self-realization, self-expression, self-fulfillment, and the variety of weird "therapies" which grow wild in the fertile soil of California. It is an orientation that stems from Swine-

*"The Search for Political Meaning", in *The Center Magazine*, March/April 1972.

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burn's "Man is the measure of all things." This ultimately becomes, "I am the measure of all things." In *Teahouse in the August Moon* — a Broadway play popular many years ago — a little Okinawan recites an insightful soliloquy in which he says "There is East, there is West, there is North, there is South; I am in the middle, so I am the center of the world."

But such narcissistic self-indulgence is misleading. It is a living lie. And it leads right to the contempt for Torah.

Judaism, while focused on man, holds that man is important only because he stands before God, and it is this which gives him his significance despite the fact that he is finite, fallible, imperfect.

Jewish education thus has a massive task of resisting this regnant, unspoken philosophy of the world about us, and — without overstating the case and without detracting in the least from the need for self-esteem for the child — teaching, in ways they understand, that self-fulfillment comes from self-transcendence, that finding the self is achieved by losing the self in a great cause: the study of Torah; the life of *mitzvot*; Israel; concern with oppressed Jewries and the homeless and the sick and the underprivileged.

The central mission of Jewish education is to fill the metaphysical void creatively and truthfully. I am certain that it will not be possible to do so with nationalism, e.g., Zionism or Israel alone; not by language alone, whether Hebrew or Yiddish; not by a warmed-over liberalism and meliorism presented as the totality of Judaism; not by the

academic study of Judaism, for if man does not live by bread alone, neither does he thrive by disembodied text alone.

Our response will have to be a spiritual one, a religious one, a metaphysical one. We must provide the raw material of Torah from which students can construct their personal Jewish answers for themselves to such ultimate questions. And that means taking *mitzvot* seriously as the practical expressions of truth, of trust, of a deepening sensitivity to the One, the commanding Presence. If we are to answer that need and in that manner, then we must impart not just knowledge but life; teach not just *how* to do *mitzvot* but *to* do them; present Torah not as just a way of being Jewish, but as its very essence.

The mission of Orthodox Jewish educators, therefore, is to influence the home rather than be influenced by it, and to present Torah expressed in a life of *mitzvot* as the source of legitimacy, authority, value, and validity. Unless we strive to do so, all our other educational efforts will be in vain. We must never submit to the benevolent trivialization of Jewish life and learning as something secondary and merely ethnic — a kind of intellectual equivalent of gefilte fish.

The Need for Renewal

What I am calling for in our educational institutions is a sense of renewal, a turn from technique to *takhlis*, a reinvigoration of both our external and internal lives from the sources of *emunah*, of Jewish faith of all the ages.

It is simply not enough to be identified proudly as Jews. There has got to be study, study of Torah. And there has got to be *shemirat ha-mitzvot*, observance — on a level higher and more intensive than is present in our homes.

And observance in and by itself is not enough. We have got to raise a generation of religious Jews. And Jews, as a sympathetic and wise Gentile observer once said, do not merely *have* a religion; they *are* religious. Or should be.

We have got to aim to educate a generation of Jews who care — who really and truly care about their Judaism, who worry about it, who identify their destiny with its destiny, their fate with its fate.

Another way of saying the same thing is that we must so raise our children — and ourselves — that we are capable of being indignant when Torah is ridiculed, mocked, scorned.

The Capacity for Outrage

Permit me to go to the enemy camp to find a striking example of what I mean when I plead for a sense of indignation as the criterion for faith and commitment and seriousness of purpose.

An Indian novelist, a disaffected Muslim living in London, wrote a book that shook the world. Salman Rushdie incurred the wrath of the Islamic world because of what it considered blasphemy of all it holds sacred. Ayatollah Khomeini promptly condemned him to death and ordered his execution.

Now, there is no doubt that Khomeini was a religious butcher who lacked the most elementary qualities of humanness, compassion, or sensitivity. The Ayatollah was a disgrace to all religious folk of all faiths. Indeed, he even gave fanaticism a bad name.

But that is not my concern now. What I am intrigued by and what I admire is the capacity of Moslems world-wide to be indignant. Moslems really *care*: they were angry, irate, furious. Their capacity for outrage is a clue to how deeply they feel about their religion.

Not too long ago, fundamentalist Christians were also deeply disturbed and upset by a movie which they thought showed terrible disrespect to their central religious figure. Some of the protesters went overboard in demanding censorship of the movie, and others went even further in transforming their protest into ugly manifesta-

tions of anti-Semitism. But their protest showed that they care about their beliefs, that they take them seriously.

I admire those Moslems and Christians who possess this capacity for outrage, and I am jealous — even as I am fearful of the excesses of some of them.

I also admire, *le'havdil*, the *Haredim* in Jerusalem who refused to suffer the insensitive commercialism of those who put up advertising posters, which they considered immodest and salacious, in their neighborhood bus stations. The lunatic fringe that decided to torch these stations was and is fanatical and over-reactive and deserves condemnation. But the peaceful protesters were right on target. They showed that they cared, and that is why they were angry and indignant enough to demonstrate their fury by marching and shouting. Can you imagine our prim, proper, well behaved youngsters of our day schools, elementary and high and college, doing the same because their moral sensibilities as *benei Torah* were outraged?

Now, most Jews care deeply about things too. We organize against signs of anti-Semitism, we demonstrate against Soviet treatment of its Jews, we march in defense of Israel. And so do our day school youngsters — with even more verve and zeal than their parents. But all this concerns *Jews* — not *Judaism*. It refers to the physical and political security of Jews, but has nothing to do with faith, with religion, with morality, with Torah, with soul.

We get terribly nervous about the threat of censorship of any group, but that is either because we fear the consequences for ourselves or, even if for objective reasons, it is a cherished political belief, not a holy Jewish tenet. American Jews can summon the emotions of anger at a threat to free speech, which is as it should be, but not about scorn heaped upon Torah. We are ready to man the ramparts for the First Amendment but not for the First Commandment; most Jews do not even know what it is.

We have so much fiction by American Jewish writers that scoffs at Judaism and Jewish tradition in the most devastating and heart-breaking ways, that we have become inured to it. Israeli writers are even more blasphemous than their American Jewish counterparts. Some of the diatribes we read here or that Israelis write there make Rushdie's anti-Islamic stuff seem so tame that we

might call them "Angelic Verses." Yet, who is outraged by all this? Who is ready to mount a protest against Woody Allen's anti-Judaic writings equal to our angry reactions to his Op-Ed piece in the New York Times against Israel, or to the Nazi march in Skokie a number of years ago? Whose blood boils when an Israeli playwright holds all that is sacred to us as believing Jews up to contempt and ridicule, belittling all that is dear and precious and holy in our tradition? I am not speaking of philosophical or theological arguments — which must be met civilly and respectfully — but of cheap ridicule, of literary "shmutz".

Hardly anyone, really. We greet it with a shrug. We are so used to it that it no longer bothers us. And maybe that loss of the sense of outrage really speaks a loss of faith, a condition of being uncaring, cold, callous. Or at least of not being sufficiently committed.

In a word, our loss of the capacity for outrage is an indictment of our whole community which has absorbed uncritically the hedonistic and narcissistic ethos of the larger society, and of the educational system which has failed, despite heroic efforts, to change it. With all the marvelous, wonderful, even incredible accomplishments of which we can be truly proud, there is a dangerous worm gnawing away unseen in our vitals, and this problem must be addressed and solved soberly and deliberately, and not overlooked and ignored.

The most critical problem facing Orthodoxy which preaches *Torah Umadat*, moderation, tolerance, and openness is: Can we be all these things without sacrificing that "*bren*," that enthusiasm, that zeal and commitment and powerful love without which we are condemned to spiritual superficiality and religious mediocrity? Can our youngsters, some of whom aspire so mightily to be "cool," learn the ambition to be warm and even ablaze with the dream of achieving spiritual authenticity?

What is needed for all this to occur is a new assertiveness of Orthodoxy, grounded in both commitment and openness, tough-mindedness and tolerance; a new injection of single-minded dedication; a refusal to be passive about our future; a willingness to face criticism and react to it constructively; and a resolve that we will make Torah education grow in both quality and quantity. ■