

A SYMPOSIUM



Our Schools Our Children Our Future

VOICES IN JEWISH EDUCATION TODAY

Education is often valued for purely utilitarian reasons. It provides the skills to acquire better jobs, and the reasoning ability to address social dilemmas. In addition, knowledge can enrich the quality of our lives. But education takes a far more central role in Judaism. It is the essence of our peoplehood.

Unlike other nations, we did not unite due to chance geographical proximity. Our peoplehood began at a time when we had no land to call our own, as we wandered in a barren desert. Rather, our link was defined by a common book: the Torah. Thus, even dispersed among the nations, exiled from our homeland, our identity, rooted in the timelessness of knowledge, has never faded.

In light of this, Jewish education presents a special challenge. If we have failed at educating our children, we do more than compromise their quality of life; we compromise the very integrity of our people.

In this symposium, WELLSPRINGS invited a distinguished panel of educators—representing a broad spectrum of Jewish educational efforts—to comment on various related questions that cut to the heart of some of the most critical issues in Jewish education today.

MAYBE IT IS TOO SIMPLISTIC TO IMPLY THAT EXPECTATIONS ALONE CREATE RESULTS. BUT IF WE RECOGNIZE THAT THERE ARE MANY WAYS FOR CHILDREN TO EXCEL, THIS BECOMES A MORE REALISTIC GOAL. THE OBJECTIVE IS NOT NECESSARILY TO PRODUCE HUNDREDS OF EINSTEINS, BUT RATHER, INDIVIDUALS WHO WILL SUCCEED AT DOING WHAT THEY CAN DO BEST.

ally been canceled. Sooner or later the sinner will cry out, together with Cain, "My sin is greater than I can bear."

Yet I fear that this describes the condition of the majority of America's Jews, and even as I praise my students for visiting the sick and raising funds for the poor, so I chide them for not actively going after their friends who behave in ways that they never would. And I do not hesitate to claim that this is the toughest thing I have ever had to teach at the university.

TAKE A MOMENT TO DREAM. MONEY IS NO OBJECT. THE SKY IS THE LIMIT.

You have no other responsibilities...

Describe the educational institution

YOU WOULD MOST LIKE TO FOUND.

WHOM WOULD IT SERVE? WHAT WOULD BE ITS GOALS, ITS EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY?

HOW WOULD IT CONTRIBUTE TO THE FLOURISHING OF JEWISH LIFE?

JEFFREY SAKS Your question is based on a common line of reasoning regarding educational problems and their amelioration. In dreaming about the solutions to educational problems the discussion usually begins with money, then makes a quick segue to a discussion of the shortage of manpower. "If we had enough money we could hire better teachers," the oft-heard wish states. Without dismissing the very real need for greater monetary resources to be invested in Jewish education (both to attract talent, as well as address other serious needs), I am loath to subscribe to any "magic bullet" theory that will solve all problems—it's just not that simple.

If we were to awake tomorrow with more money than we knew what to do with, and discover that qualified, knowledgeable, enthusiastic teachers were lined up at our door looking for jobs, we would still be lacking a crucial element for any educational improvement:

ideas. Too often children are educated for method, not meaning. Even when our teaching strives to be more than method, but aspires for meaning as well, there is something hollow in the *chinukh* because it is not "vision-driven."

By vision-driven practice, I mean the act of "translating" (what others might call applying) from theoretical guiding principles to the act of teaching, in a way by which a theory of Jewish commitment and experience as a whole is translated into a systematic method of educating. Of course, our method of educating must strive towards being all-encompassing—schools and synagogues, informal and adult education, etc., including (but not limited to) the content and configurations of these educational settings—in a word: cradle-to-grave education.

Traditional sources must serve as the basis for our theory of education and vision for each educator and the community he or she leads. Professionalization requires that we develop the strategies necessary to actualize and implement this theory and vision. Jewish tradition serves as a crucial resource in molding a young educator's understanding of his or her profession. Unfortunately, these sources often merely serve as slogans, and have often not been fully processed to offer the guiding theory into *chinukh*.

We can dream of a cadre of educators who not only bring knowledge and skills to their holy task, but who are empowered by guiding ideas, and who have developed ways to connect the often severed realms of those educational ideas, goals, and visions with the all-important arena of pedagogical practice.

SHEINDEL TEICHEL The educational philosophy that I would like to see in an institution is a basic one, namely, one infused with the conviction that every child can learn.

We are all familiar with the anecdote about a teacher who was given a list of numbers next to each name on a class list on the first day of school. Assuming that these were the IQs—and some were very high—

personalizing the curriculum according to the particular values of the institution and needs of the student, while still constructing a vocabulary for shared discourse.

JEFFREY SAKS In the 1980s, Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* argued that the excesses of educational reforms instituted throughout the twentieth century by the progressive movement, and its emphasis on process over content, had robbed Americans of a "vocabulary of national discourse." In his book, Hirsch proposes that all Americans learn common points of reference so all may exchange ideas equitably.

In Israel today, the notion that citizens on either side of the religious divide might exchange ideas equitably is an increasingly difficult proposition. The religious-secular debate—which has been overshadowed in the past two years by the reinvigorated and protracted conflict with the Palestinians—reflects the breakdown of a common cultural language.

When I moved into my Jerusalem apartment a few years ago, there were two other families who had been living in the building since 1948. Both families had come from the concentration camps, one via detention in Cyprus, to the Holy Land—fought in her wars, struggled and scrimped, raised families, and grew old. Despite the fact that one household was quite secular and the other would have been considered ultra-Orthodox, the couples shared a bond of friendship and respect, forged from a half-century of remarkable common experiences. It is also true that the two gentlemen would discuss the weekly Torah portion while sitting together in the garden. There was enough of a common cultural vocabulary to sustain communication.

The dichotomy between knowledge and skill-based goals on one side, and the behavioral and affective ambitions of *chinukh* on the other, is not only intellectually deceptive, but is foreign to authentic Torah education. In the debate (Kiddushin 40b) between the relative merits of study and action (between Hirsch and Lickona?), our tradition answers with an inimitable Talmudic meta-answer: neither! We believe in *talmud ha-mevi li-yedei maaseh*—that the knowledge-based goals of Jewish education cannot be examined in isolation from the action-based goals (which clearly belong under the headline of *mentchlichkeit*).

In brief, the "essential core" toward which we

ought to be educating is that which will unlock the doors of knowledge, surely necessary for practical observance of *halakhah* and a meaningful Jewish life; but also that which will culminate in a student who embodies "respect and responsibility." Without delimiting "exit requirements," we might nevertheless strive for commitment to those extra R's both in the interpersonal arena that Judaism holds so sacrosanct (Lickona's bailiwick), as well as within one's relationship to G-d, and in one's own inner spiritual life.

CHAIM KOSOFSKY I would agree that teaching ethics is the basis of Jewish education. Perhaps we should loosely translate the term *Torat chayim* to mean not only a living Torah but also "lessons for living." The Torah, then, is a guidebook with instructions for how to live. Some of those lessons regard the performance of *mitzvot*, such as how to observe Shabbat or celebrate holidays. Other lessons are for coping with the everyday challenges of life. Yet among our most critical Torah lessons are those dealing with ethics and values.

I would define the core Jewish ethic as responsibility. One could define responsibility as feeling some sort of commitment or obligation to an ideal. However, this definition falls short of the many ways responsibility can be applied. This is a general attitude that affects many areas of life.

There is, first of all, the notion of personal responsibility. We teach children to take care of their belongings, keep their rooms and school desks neat, complete their homework, put their dirty socks in the hamper, follow a schedule, use time sensibly, practice piano, keep an eye on their siblings, put away their Lego, brush their teeth, clean the rabbit's cage, earn good grades in school, and write thank-you cards for presents. The small number of children (and adults) who are able to handle all these tasks shows just how difficult it is.

Then there is responsibility to one's family. This is much more important as the child grows older and builds his or her own family—but the values are planted in childhood. There is the social responsibility to treat people with sensitivity, compassion, and respect. There is fiscal responsibility, and responsibility to the community. These obviously play a central role in a Judaic school, covertly or overtly.

Finally, there is our religious responsibility, as out-