



Teaching Toward Tomorrow

Setting an Agenda

for Modern

Orthodox Education

A Symposium Edited by
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MAPPING THE TERRITORY

Jeffrey Saks

The authors in this symposium have addressed a broad range of issues, have raised a number of serious questions regarding Orthodox education in North America, and, hopefully, posed new agenda items as well. By way of conclusion, I would like not so much to comment on particular ideas or recommendations, but rather to try to map the territory, to describe issues that were addressed, identify disputes that arose between various writers, point to sacred cows that have been questioned if not slaughtered, identify some issues that were not addressed, and add a few of my own thoughts *en passant*.

To begin with, it is important to note that there is some consensus that the situation in North American Orthodox day school education is quite good (Goldmintz, Gottlieb, Prager). The field is larger, more professional, and more sophisticated than it has ever been, and (with the exception of Waxman's question marks) there seems to be general agreement that day schools serve as one of the linchpins in the successful establishment of Orthodoxy in America in the second half of the twentieth century. Personally, I am in full agreement with this assessment.

Clearly the most recurring theme in this symposium has been the question of finances. There is a sense among those in the trenches that the resources available to schools are not expanding at the same rate as the demands being made on those schools. For the collective body of writers, this is a challenge that threatens to undermine the successes of Orthodox day school education. If the collective frustration of these educators is any indication, it seems that concern about this problem has also proceeded more rapidly than concrete plans and proposals to actually address the challenge.

While only the most obtuse commentator would deny that financing Jewish education, and the related problem of the so-called tuition crisis, are significant challenges, I urge some degree of caution in exploring this

particular agenda item. There is a common line of reasoning regarding educational problems and their amelioration. In dreaming about the solutions 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), we should be loathe to subscribe to any "magic bullet" theory that will solve all problems—it's just never that simple. (While our authors have not fallen into this trap, I nevertheless caution readers of its potential pitfall. Interestingly, no one dealt with the manpower issue directly either.)

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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 *hinnukh* because it is not "vision-driven." We must be careful that the money question doesn't become the monkey wrench retarding further

inquiry into our larger goals and aspirations as educators and as a community. Here I will echo my friend Mark Gottlieb, who reminds us that it is not enough to have a religious vision. We must also do the heavy lifting of translating that into pedagogical practice.

That being said, let us note that many authors are in agreement that one key to solving the challenge of finances is for Orthodoxy to break out of its growing factionalism and isolationism (Kardos, Goldmintz, Gottlieb, Bieler). The Jewish community as a whole has the funds to support

Jewish schools, but the schools must convince philanthropists to provide resources for a whole educational community, not merely one sector. To do so, Orthodox schools would have to rethink how they perceive their constituency and their mandate. This rethinking would be valuable irrespective of the financial motivation for doing so, but let us not fool ourselves into thinking it would be a simple process.

Without minimizing the very real budgetary pressures and needs, we should also contextualize the issue by noting that, by and large, we have well financed institutions, in modern facilities, with teachers who are paid if not extravagantly, then reasonably, and on time – conditions which were not a given twenty or thirty years ago.

Another recurring theme is a sensed inability to educate the whole student, to touch his soul, to transform her worldview. We struggle not only to transmit information, but a sense of love for the values that Judaism teaches and represents. Some writers associate this with increased affluence, as well as a sense of entitlement and complacency, on the part of students. No doubt, these are serious challenges (Berger, Weiss, Gottlieb, Prager, Goldmintz). Tragically, there are some students who leave Orthodoxy without ever having felt touched by Torah's warmth, or remain sociologically attached to Orthodoxy without any emotional and spiritual attachment to its message. But I wonder if this problem may not be, at least in part, an optical illusion. Many of our students do emerge from our educational system with a sense of passion, attachment, and religious vocation. Since it is always easier to educate the mind than the soul, since religion always demands of the person more than he or she can achieve, perhaps it is inevitable that educators will feel inadequate to the task of spiritual education. While we all must strive for more, our sense of unease may be more a systemic feature of the challenges we face, and less an indicator of our collective failures as educators. The suggestions offered here might improve the situation; they will not and cannot solve the problem.

Israel remains central to the agenda of Orthodox education, but there is a sense that helping students come to identify with Israel is becoming more challenging (Berger, Waxman, Goldmintz, Prager). As American Jews

drift further from Israel, as studies repeatedly tell us, and as students' time spent learning in Israel is dominated by bubble-like Americanized environments, there is a fear that Israel as a reality, with all its blemishes, flaws, and more importantly, challenges, will be left behind.

Contributors also focused on our students and their changing experiences and needs. Some focused on specific issues, such as how to understand the inner lives and experiences of our students (Finkelman), or how to educate students given changing intellectual and technological environments (Perl, Kobrin). Others took a broader approach, focusing on the changing gestalt of students' lives. This focus on students makes sense, given that in the end education is about students. Yet, it seems to me that not enough was said about teachers. The matter was touched on, in terms of a suggestion for studying teachers' background (Bieler), a general sense that religious leadership must be on their toes, capable and available to learn on the fly (Carmy), and a concern that teachers use their summers in ways that will further their teaching abilities (Blau). But little attention was paid to what teacher training ought to look like. What kinds of education are yeshivot, universities, and various teacher training programs providing for future teachers, and what should they provide such that *pirhei hinnukh* will start their careers on the right foot? Is there room for coordination between schools and teacher-training institutions regarding the best ways to prepare teachers for their careers? What would a healthy and vibrant professional community of teachers look like? What could or should a school do to foster one? These are some of the issues we have been addressing for over ten years in our ATID Fellows program, and they require further thought, planning, and hard work.

Interestingly, gender was largely absent from the discussion. Have we figured out the best ways to educate in single-sex and coed environments? Are there significant differences between the kinds of education our boys and girls are receiving? Has the so-called revolution in women's education succeeded so well that the issue is no longer central to our collective agenda? My sense is that the answer to these questions is "probably not," and the community still has much work to do. What role should gender play in Torah education? How can we

bridge the gap between boys' and girls' education (for those who see that as a goal)? What is the task for Torah education in light of changing gender roles in both general and Orthodox society?

Parents and parenting were also not given the attention that they might have, and, to quote Rashi, *eino omer ela darsheni*. Perhaps that is natural in a symposium dominated by school people, but Jewish education happens not only, and perhaps not primarily, in schools. So much happens at home, for both better and worse. Schools' ability to influence what happens in homes is certainly limited, but it behooves the Orthodox community as a whole to think about how to help parents provide a better Jewish environment for their children within the home. If trends outside Orthodoxy inevitably find their way into our community, as several contributors suggested, then this will certainly also require paying significant attention to families that are something other than religiously passionate, two-parent, middle class, nuclear families. The unique challenges that divorce, remarriage, poverty, and parental ignorance or religious indifference can raise for religion in the home are serious indeed. But beyond this dark prophesying, we must always remember that parents are the main "shareholders" in our educational work, investing with their most precious commodities, their children. They are our partners, not our rivals, and it is our responsibility as professionals to build that into a healthy relationship.

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There seems to be a fundamental dispute between two camps in this discussion in terms of how they view the relationship between the classroom, outside advisors, and umbrella organizations. Kardos and Waxman, among others, emphasize the importance of cooperation between schools, outside organizations, universities, and research foundations. Schick and Blau suggest that focus ought to be put on classrooms, where real education occurs, with Schick claiming that outside advisory organizations generally spend resources inefficiently,

and draw assets, both financial and human, away from classrooms. Schick is also skeptical about the positive effects of research bodies, thereby challenging Bieler, Waxman, and Finkelman to explain how research can be made to matter. This position challenges the advocates of research to think long and hard about the mechanisms by which research filters down to policy makers and classroom teachers. What can be done to get that research out of the ivory tower, to make sure that educators in the field can get access to that research and can use it to improve the educational product?

Perhaps the biggest surprise in this symposium is Waxman's questions regarding the role of day schools in Orthodoxy's successes and failures. He is questioning the very paradigm that seems to motivate almost all of Orthodox educational discourse (in this symposium voiced by Prager most clearly): namely, the centrality of day schools in keeping students in the fold, the necessity that day schools meet or exceed the highest standards in secular studies, and the role that day schools have played in the history of American Orthodoxy. Although I am not convinced that he is correct, Waxman's questions require us to consider how day schools might be modified, and what other institutions could or should be created as alternatives to day schools. What can schools be doing to limit the negative effects of "perfectionism" on students who are being hurt by that system? Indeed, if Waxman's speculations are even partially correct, then there is a need for a significant paradigm shift in Orthodox educational thinking.

Finally, I would add a word of thanks to my colleague and friend, Dr. Yoel Finkelman, ATID's Director of Projects and Research, for generating such a stimulating dialogue, and for keeping these issues on our radar, with the hope and expectation that this debate will help clarify positions, point us in proper directions, suggest strategies, and aid us in our holy work.

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