

JOURNAL OF J E W I S H E D U C A T I O N

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VISION AND PRACTICE IN ORTHODOX YESHIVA EDUCATION

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How can a community be moved toward a deliberative investigation of its educational goals and methods? This is among the major questions which ATID, the Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions, is exploring. Currently in its third full year of operation, ATID is a Jerusalem-based in-service training fellowship for young Orthodox educators and future educational lay leaders.

The participants — currently 18 fellows — fall evenly into three groups: those working in Israeli classrooms, those teaching Diaspora students in the many yeshivah and seminary programs in and around Jerusalem, and those who are not in the classroom, but work in informal or adult education or in school administration. In a few cases ATID Fellows are not professionally involved in education, but come from fields such as law, business, or psychology, and will be assuming roles as lay leaders. By including a select number of outstanding professionals from outside of the world of formal education, ATID shows its commitment to the notion that the players in Jewish education are found in many varied arenas — from the classroom to the boardroom, schools and homes, *yeshivot* and universities.

“TO DEVELOP THE SKILLS AND VISION NEEDED FOR THE FUTURE”

The president of the ATID Foundation is Rabbi Chaim Brovender, Rosh Yeshiva of

Yeshivat HaMivtar, who created a revolution in Jewish education some 30 years ago with the founding of HaMivtar and later Michlelet Bruria (today, Midreshet Lindenbaum), the first Torah-study institute of its kind for women. Brovender is aiming to continue taking groundbreaking steps with ATID, in cooperation with the talents of dozens of top-notch educators and Jewish leaders who serve as faculty members, mentors, and board. The program was created in order to enable talented young educators and professionals concerned about Modern Orthodox Jewish education to develop the skills and vision needed for the future.

Each ATID fellow works on a field of specific research of his/her choice associated with an issue in Jewish education, and is paired with an outstanding senior educator who serves as mentor to the individual research project, but who also serves as a resource and guide as the fellow processes the content of the program into his or her own personal and professional life. ATID is accredited as a teacher training institute by the Israeli Ministry of Education.

“ENRICHING DIAGNOSTIC AND DECISION MAKING CAPACITIES”

Recent ATID seminars have focused on “Challenges and Issues in the Teaching and Study of *Torah She-Ba'al Peh*.” Although it has classically been given that studying Gemara is the centerpiece of the traditional curriculum within Orthodox schools, this is an assumption which is coming under increasing scrutiny as issues of relevance, allo-

Rabbi Jeffrey Saks is the Director of ATID, the Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions in Jerusalem.

cation of time and resources, and students' ability to master the text all come to the fore. Regardless of one's position on the reasons for current critiques — either flaws in the status quo or merely “winds of change” — ATID believes that it is crucial for the players in the educational setting to develop a deep and sophisticated understanding of the issues. “Although the ATID fellows and faculty continue to disagree on the source of the perceived problems and the best course of action,” states Brovender, “everyone has been enriched in their diagnostic and decision making capacities in ways which are helping them in their current settings, and in ways which we believe will serve them in their future leadership roles.”

Dr. Beverly Gribetz, principal of the Rothschild Junior High School in Jerusalem, and formerly headmistress of Manhattan's Ramaz School, serves on the ATID board and as one of the faculty mentors. “I liked the opportunity to be able to help train the next generation of Jewish educators. This program is raising the level of professional discourse and exposing Orthodox educators to realms of thinking they usually do not come into contact with. One of the nicest results was that the group has had an impact on itself.”

Rabbi Zvi Grumet, who served as an ATID mentor during a recent sabbatical in Jerusalem, commented, “The ATID fellows must combine two often contradictory qualities — a feat which requires a significant level of maturity. On the one hand, it is important that they have convictions and a sense of direction, while on the other hand they need to have the self-awareness to recognize that there are areas in which they need to grow, even at the expense of those convictions. The ATID fellows I worked with underwent a process of self-discovery, challenged to alternately question and to defend many of their own basic assumptions. Whether their conclusions were those they set out to demonstrate or the re-

verse, the experience was one of growth — perhaps even the ability to step out of themselves in order to emerge from prior limitations. Personally, I found it gratifying to become a partner with the fellows in their exploration, and often found that they challenged me as much as I them.”

These sentiments are reflected by one of the ATID fellows themselves. Yael Ziegler, a teacher at Midreshet Moriah, and an alumna of the first year of the program. She commented that her “original intention in becoming an ATID fellow was twofold. First, I felt the need to introduce into my weekly routine some time for contemplation and extracurricular reading. Second, I knew that there would be other fellows interested in discussing educational initiatives, whether from the perspective of a layman or an educator. This seemed to me to be an ideal setting for professional growth. While both of these reasons were justified by my experience, the latter purpose developed in a direction which surprised me. On the one hand, I believe that the sustained discussions with the other fellows clarified many issues which I had yet to formulate. More importantly, however, these same sessions gave me a newfound confidence and boldness in my teaching career. It offered me new insights as to the extent of my obligations and prerogatives as a teacher. It also gave me the courage to press forward in the pursuit of ways in which I could implement new ideas in my teaching goals. I am grateful to ATID for this profound impact that it has had upon my professional and spiritual life.”

FORUM FOR EDUCATIONAL INQUIRY AND DELIBERATION

In its recent programming, ATID has sponsored a discussion with Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz on the role that Talmud study should play in shaping Jewish identity among students. This topic is viewed by educators and parents alike

to be one of crucial importance, as issues of “relevance” and an air of dissatisfaction plague Talmud study in all sectors, but especially among Israeli *Dati-Leumi*, or Modern Orthodox.

Steinsaltz, a world-renowned author, lecturer and educator, is perhaps best known for his widely used translation of the Talmud into modern Hebrew — an indispensable tool for “opening” that classical text to contemporary learners.

More recently, Dr. Norman Lamm, President of Yeshiva University, delivered a presentation on “Learning vs. Knowing: Which Takes Precedence?” which examined the process of Torah study versus the acquisition of sacred knowledge. Dr. Lamm emphasized that the Jewish concept of education stresses the process, and not merely the end result. Acquiring knowledge of Torah, certainly so that ritual might be properly practiced, is indeed crucial, but instilling our children and students with the passion for learning itself is of paramount importance, as the latter will necessarily culminate with the former.”

Contrasting the classical Jewish viewpoint with the Greek (and indeed, the contemporary Western approach) Rabbi Lamm charged the teachers in his audience to work toward drawing our students into the great dialogue with Torah texts and ideas which can truly engage and inspire young minds.

We see programs, such as allowing educators to interact with educational thinkers such as Rabbi Lamm and Rabbi Steinsaltz to be a valuable tool in generating a deep and explicit community-wide inquiry into the issues that we’re facing on a daily basis. These programs were part of ATID’s ongoing “Forum for Educational Inquiry and Deliberation” which sponsors such events to bring together the community of Jewish educators.

At a panel discussion on “Reforms in the Traditional Talmud Curriculum,” teachers wrestled with the consequences of introduc-

ing change to the way Gemara has been traditionally studied in light of the desire to help more students accomplish a mastery of the Talmud. The program generated a heated debate among classroom teachers and educational planners via the Internet.

FUTURE PLANS: HELPING DAY SCHOOLS REACH THE NEXT LEVEL OF EXCELLENCE

ATID’s next stage is to begin working with institutions. The plan calls for applying the rigorous methods of developing visions of education — along with goals and strategies — which have been successful with individuals in the fellowship program, to schools as an attempt at systemic improvement. The value and impact of a mission or educational vision is necessarily measured not only by its ongoing articulation, but also by its implementation. Vision driven conceptions of educational practice cannot be implemented directly from mission statements. Rather than crudely dictating practice, educational vision offers profound and philosophical insights into the aims of education. It thereby guides, infuses, animates and energizes practice.

It is precisely the linkage of vision to practice which renders it a central component in educational improvement — particularly on the institutional level, where the effort to revitalize or build new, dynamic schools demands constant attention to the articulation of vision and its “translation” into a vibrant basis for educational practice.

Yeshiva Day Schools are often educational institutions based on a strong educational vision. However, vision must be systematic, reflecting the notion that new ideas mandate care and professionalism. In order for educational vision to be a vibrant, guiding principle, which effects a school community at all levels — driving the pedagogical practice, permeating the school atmosphere, informing

the interaction between the many components within the school, etc. — those that are entrusted with that vision must be in continual deliberation in order that it remain the compelling force behind everything in the educational operation. Without such an ongoing deliberative journey in which the guiding ideas and ideals are examined and their impact on the world of educational practice evaluated, vision quickly deteriorates to little more than a bland mission statement or a pithy set of slogans.

ATID seeks to help Yeshiva Day Schools in the Diaspora to undertake an examination of their own missions and the implementation of that mission in the various components of the school. ATID is committed to the notion that in order to initiate such a process, all of the “players” invested in the success of the school must be involved in the deliberations and planning: school board, parents, administration, teaching staff, local communal and rabbinic leadership, and (where appropriate) students.

The projects will be comprised of school visitations and planning sessions with ATID faculty members. The main component will be an intense Summer Seminar in which a task force of at least 10 members of the school leadership and faculty will work together in Jerusalem toward sharply defining the school’s mission and evaluating the degree to which that mission is currently shaping the life of the Yeshiva and the experience of the students. The main task will be the development of implementable pedagogical, administrative and programmatic strategies which will enable us to move from the articulated vision into educational practice. This will include careful curriculum analysis and design planning, but will extend well beyond the business of the classroom to work on the Yeshiva experience in total.

While in Jerusalem, participants in the Summer Seminar will benefit from contacts with the leading educators in the Torah and academic worlds, as well as visits to some of Israel’s innovative educational programs. In addition to the intense work of the task force, participants will model the high-level and meaningful Torah study with daily *shiurim* and learning together as a group, and with the outstanding teachers available in Jerusalem.

The Summer Seminar will be followed by at least two week-long programs at each site during the following year in which the participants (joined by other players who may have been unable to participate in the Summer Seminar) will evaluate and retune the ongoing implementation of what they had set out to do after the Summer Seminar.

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