

Jewish Texts for Teaching

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How do we educate students in the elementary Jewish supplementary school and day school to incorporate into their lives the moral and ethical values implicitly and explicitly presented in our tradition? As successful as students may be in responding to teachers' questions and in doing the workbook exercises, they often seem to shed what they have learned when they exit the school portals. While many of the values taught in Jewish schools are a part of Western culture, the youth who are products of our schools show unfamiliarity with their origins. Jewish educators often find themselves subject to criticism from parents because graduates of their schools do not reflect in their behavior the values touted by the leadership of the Jewish educational institutions in which they placed their children.

Part of the problem, undoubtedly, lies in the fact that, for most students, the only place where they encounter these values in their classic formulations is in the Jewish educational setting. Aside from the intrinsic difficulty in comprehending some of these values in their classical form, students find the values taught in school are often isolated from their application in real-life situations. In prior generations, children encountered these values reflected in the home, the Jewish street and the synagogue, as well as in the school. In addition to learning Jewish values cognitively from the texts which they studied, these values were imbibed and reinforced by the Jewish environments in which they lived and by the exemplary behavior of parents, grandparents, teachers and other significant people in their lives. For most students, these conditions no longer exist.

A second difficulty in teaching Jewish values is their innate complexity. It would be much simpler if the Jewish educator could teach moral values without regard for their religious origins, as does the public school educator. However, for the Jewish educator, moral and religious values are intertwined. Any honest attempt to teach moral values in the Jewish educational setting requires the educator to relate them to the religious context from which they arose and to examine how they are reflected in the classic Jewish texts which are the bedrock of formal Jewish learning.

By and large, our teachers are competent teachers of the texts where these values are imbedded. In the limited time available to them, they appear to succeed in communicating to most students the plain meaning of these texts, mainly selections from the Siddur and Humash. Yet it often seems that what the students are learning intellectually remains a dead letter in practice. What can be done?

CONNECTING TEXT AND LIFE

It would seem clear that many, if not most, students are unable independently to make the vital connection between text and life. Or perhaps more precisely, they are as yet unaccustomed to the habit of relating text (or better, the values crystallized in the text) and life. And certainly the degree to which students exercise this skill varies according to one's level of psychological development, innate level of personal sensitivity, and the particular value that is being considered.

What can the school do to facilitate the students' incorporating textual values into everyday behavior?

USING CLASSICAL JEWISH TEXTS

First of all, the school must construct its curriculum so as to include the study of values-laden classical Jewish texts. While students in religious schools do spend significant percentage of time in Siddur study, they spend little time in confronting the biblical text. Many students never get beyond the study of Bible stories, Bible paraphrases, or the study of Bible disguised as Jewish history. Day school students will undoubtedly be studying the Bible text itself, but even here the amount of time spent in examining the moral or ethical implications of the text for daily living is usually quite limited.

Careful attention should be given to the content of texts which are already a part of the curriculum (e.g. Siddur, Hebrew language, Torah, and holiday materials) to articulate what values these contain. This process should be done methodically by the school faculty, under the leadership of the school administrators--not left to individual teachers to do on their own. If these texts can be employed for education in Jewish values, there can be a valuable maximization of the available time. If values deemed to be important cannot be found in those texts, or the ones that are present in those texts are deemed to be developmentally unsuited to the students, then additional materials should be imported into the curriculum to concretize or exemplify those values. As deliberately as the school selects the texts that will be taught for their cultural content, so too it ought to consider whether the values embedded in those texts are those which ought to be emphasized

The matching of values to texts and the identification of values within texts are skills well within the ability of teachers, and probably students as well. Not long ago, I had the pleasure of attending a workshop given by Marcia Kaunfer, a master Judaica teacher who lives and practices in Providence, Rhode Island. She presented an exercise in which the teachers were asked to suggest biblical texts which had embedded within them Jewish values that she specified, and conversely, they were asked to examine texts which she specified and draw out the values reflected in those texts. It became clear to me that, in this day when analytic and critical skills are widely taught, these tasks are well within the capabilities of the mostly college-educated members of our teaching staffs.

Among the reasons for the school to take the initiative in assisting teachers to deal with these matters is that often the message of the text (a) is unclear, (b) reflects a conflict between two or more values or (c) reflects unacceptable behavior on the part of one of the heroes of our faith (e.g., Jacob takes the birthright from Esau in exchange for a bowl of soup; Jacob deceives Isaac into thinking that he is Esau). As for the latter difficulty, short of rationalizing or explaining away anti-social behavior (which traditional commentaries and midrashic texts often do), teachers are at a loss as to how to utilize these texts to teach positive values.

Having identified for themselves the explicit and implicit values in the text, teachers must help students to recognize how these values are pertinent to them, how they have relevance to situations that they will be encountering in life. When teaching classic Jewish texts, teachers must become accustomed to going beyond helping the student to grasp the meaning of a text and its grammatical structure. They must help students to a) recognize the values embedded in the text, b) recognize when this is a value shared with other texts they have studied, and, c) most importantly, perceive how this value can become or is already operative in real-life situations in which students find themselves.

AN INVENTORY OF VALUES

Let the teachers in a given school make an inventory of the values that are implicitly or explicitly present in the materials utilized in their curriculum. At the same time, they should make an inventory of the situations that occur in the classroom and on the playground which cry out for the application of values. The two inventories should be compared with one another. Values derived from the texts should be sought out in school life. Values reflected in school life should be sought out in the texts. Because it is likely that situations exemplary of the values taught in the text will not occur in the classroom or in the school, there is need for the teachers (as a faculty group) to create a library of such instances. If important values are not reflected in the texts used, new relevant texts should be added to the course of study.

Care should be taken to specify the grade levels at which various values will receive emphasis. The school should keep a cumulative record of the values that have been highlighted at each grade level. Much as the school follows a spiral curriculum for areas such as Siddur, holidays and Hebrew language, so there should be one for values. If the importance of not insulting a fellow student is emphasized in the kindergarten, it should be reiterated throughout the curriculum, though with increasing attention given to the subtlety and complexity of the situation in which such a value is infringed upon among older children.

Like any learning, the values that are taught cognitively in school through texts need to be reinforced through the school milieu. We are speaking here of fostering a broad context in the school that will encourage the application of Jewish values--by students, by teachers, and by administration. This calls for the creation of venues in the school program where values can be concretized. There is the need for the creation within the school community of activities and committees where values can be publicly exercised. At times, simulations, such as Kaunfer's "Dilemma" game, can be useful, but they can never take the place of an actual situation. Their chief usefulness ought to be in preparing students for real value-laden deliberations, such as deciding where the school *tzedakah* collection should be allocated.

HOW DO WE EVALUATE?

Evaluation is an essential part of the curriculum process. When we are speaking of education to promote values, it is difficult to establish an evaluation process that will assess the degree to which the educational experiences provided to the child will achieve their objective. The test of the possession of particular values by students is whether they have been internalized, not whether they can be verbalized. This can only be seen in how the student behaves in situations where that value ought to be exhibited. Unfortunately, because that behavior will likely be manifested outside the school--and months or even years later--it will not be seen by the teacher. It may well be that various types of maturation must occur before the student can exhibit the internalization of particular values. For this reason, educators should not despair if students fail to display the values emphasized in school, nor be surprised when, in later life, difficult students prove to be exemplary citizens.

In a very instructive monograph, Elliot Dorff comments that "Jews have gone further than any other cultural group in using text study as one method to inculcate moral values."

He goes on to point out there is a rabbinic view rejecting study which does not lead to action, while

embracing study which does lead to action as the highest order of human activity.

Rabbi Hiyya said: If a man learns the Law without the intention of fulfilling it, it were better for him had he never been born.

Rabbi Akha said: He who learns in order to do is worthy to receive the Holy Spirit

I am convinced that, unless the relationship between the moral and ethical values in our Jewish texts and the lives of our students is made explicit in our schools, there will be fewer and fewer Jews "worthy to receive the Holy Spirit."

Bibliography

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