

# Ethics in Jewish Schools

Bruce Powell

## Sigi Ziering Ethics

This year, the practical ethics column will focus on personal and social ethics. Each month a guest columnist wrestles on paper with situations where ethical considerations tug on the heart and demand deeply thoughtful consideration. The column is co-sponsored by Shelley and Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. The series of columns, with responses, is available on [www.shma.com](http://www.shma.com).

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FOR THOSE OF US who spend our professional and often personal lives living and learning among high school students, we understand that hormones are far more powerful than halakhah. Thus, teaching ethics to high school students is far more about culture and context than about pedagogy or curriculum. Jewish tradition suggests that in order to learn to become a great scholar, one should “sit at the feet of those scholars” and soak up their every thought and every action. So too with high school students: they must attend a school where the ethical examples of their teachers, administrators, parents, and friends create a seamless context and culture for ethical thinking and behavior. Lawrence Kohlberg refers to this as the “just community;” A.J. Heschel explains that we need fewer textbooks and more “textpeople.” Ethics and moral behavior are learned within the powerful forces of context and culture.

Of course, the obvious question is, “How does one create the context and culture within a formal educational setting?” Conceptually, the answer is simple; the hard part is execution.

Conceptually, school leadership engenders a core values shift, thereby changing the values language, metaphor, and allusion used by all members of the school community. For example, in American culture, “knowledge is power” is a core value and key metaphor. Children are urged to learn because they will become powerful, successful in the monetary sense, or politically powerful. From a Jewish perspective, whereas knowledge is certainly a source of power, it is, more importantly, a source of wisdom. But how does knowledge promote wisdom? How do we define wisdom, and what are the actions of wise people?

Other language shifts may include notions

of “rights” becoming ideas about “obligations” — “animal rights” becoming human obligations to animals; “charity” in the sense of doing that which is loving, becoming tzedakah, doing that which is just. In addition, popular ideas of beauty as an external, material notion, as displayed on the cover of almost every consumer magazine, transforms to “beauty as the inner spirit” of every human being. Language shifts help students change their perceptions of what is truly important and the context in which they think about ethics. All of these language transformations are part of what I call the “Jewish Values Matrix,” which encompasses a long list of widely accepted core values that undergo radical shifts in meaning and action when carefully disaggregated within the prism of Jewish thinking and ideals.

Perhaps the most powerful shift in language and thinking is found in a phrase of Rabbi Harold Schulweis, “the best is the enemy of the good.” In creating a high school context and culture that transforms and educates, that leads to ethical thinking and action, I have found no better axiom. America idolizes the “best.” But the notion of “best,” by definition, is an ethical anathema. If I am the “best,” then you are not. If I am the best Jew, then you are not; if I am the best ethicist, then you are not. Moreover, what does it take to become the best? Athletes are pressured to use steroids; students are pressured to cheat or participate in ethical lapses when finding information on the Internet. Indeed, striving to be the “best” may counteract our value for learning *lish'ma*. And what about humility?

To execute this values shift is the core challenge.

First, it takes constant education of faculty.

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tion contexts?

What contribution is Holocaust education making to raising generations of youth committed to individual rights, the responsibilities of citizenship, and outspoken idealism with regard to genocide? Are we clear about the extent to which we want Holocaust education to produce outrage, action, or both, and with regard to what level of injustice? Do we want to use the Holocaust to teach moral lessons? If so, which ones?

How must we refine the general goals of remembering the Holocaust and preventing its reoccurrence? Can they both be reached


via the same pedagogy and curricula? Do we sufficiently understand the developmental exposure of students to Holocaust-related education from grades K-12 (i.e., how experiences such as the ones Schweber chronicles fit with past and subsequent learning)?

To me, it is the detailed look at exemplary “Lessons from Classroom Practice” that is the most compelling aspect of this book. Reading it should lead educators — individually and collectively — to seriously revisit the pedagogy and purpose of Holocaust education, to ensure it has the potency, coherence, and continuity to reach their goals. 

### Ethics, from page 20

The teachers, office staff, janitors, and administrators must learn and speak the new values language. In 1965, had you visited a NASA base and asked the janitor what his job was, his answer would be, “to put a man on the moon.” (Hopefully, today, that same janitor would say, “to put a woman or man on Mars.”) So too with executing a rich Jewish ethical context and culture: everyone must be, literally, on the same page. Everyone’s job is values and ethics education.

Second, parents need education in how to speak ethical language, in how to recognize what is important. For example, when a child comes home from school, parents, including myself, will ask, “How was your math test? or how was the athletic tryout?” Rarely do we ask, “Did you do a mitzvah today?” “Did you invite a lonely classmate to join you for lunch?” What parents ask is what we value. Changing the questions changes the vision for our children; changing the vision engenders ethical actions.

Third, the school’s trustees need education on how their language, decisions, and financial support impact the overall institution. What they spend and how they spend it is, perhaps, the most powerful creator of culture and context. I often teach school boards that the school’s budget is really a statement of what we, at our very core, believe and value. If there are large allocations for technology, then we value technology. If, however, there is serious discussion about teacher benefits, and large allocations for pension plans and medical care, then we value our faculty and their most basic human needs. In essence, we value our ethical obligations, our Jewish obligations, if you will, to our professional community in whom we place the ethical education of our children. Faculty who know this kind of support act in accordance with the board’s vision for the school, a vision that, without exception in our nation, includes in its mission a mandate to raise up a generation of successful people and ethical human beings. 

## Discussion Guide

*Bringing together myriad voices and experiences in a sacred conversation provides Sh’ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of the ideas, we offer the following questions:*

1. Should Jewish schools use the Holocaust to teach moral lessons? If so, which ones?
2. How do we integrate the observance of Yom haShoah into Jewish educational curricula?
3. What is the rubric for teaching about the Holocaust in Jewish schools?
4. Does Holocaust education focus too much curricula attention on death?