

Realities, Possibilities and Dreams:

Reaching Modern Orthodox Youth

Mayer Schiller

The educator in a Modern Orthodox yeshiva high school labors under a painful double burden. First, the difficulties inherent in any adolescent yeshiva setting must be confronted.¹ Second, educators must counteract their students' unique cultural milieu. The dilemmas inherent in the former are demanding and the qualities of soul necessary to overcome them difficult to acquire. The latter, however, requires an originality² and determination which may, in the end, be beyond our contemporary collective grasp.

Before plunging into an analysis of these unique problems, let us attempt a working definition of the Modern Orthodox yeshiva high school. To begin with, there are obvious outer characteristics in terms of dress and appearance which distinguish the students of these institutions. Their appearance does not resemble the Eastern European styles adapted, in greater or lesser degree, by chasidim and "yeshivish" students. However, although Modern Orthodox dress tends to monolithic trendiness, the students are highly diverse religiously. The spectrum of observance and commitment extends from those who are thoroughly committed

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to halakhic Judaism to those who are not. The majority, however, follow a never clearly articulated life style dictated by their own particular cultural circumstances. In many cases these dictates do coincide with Torah. Often they do not. It is this basic datum of inconsistent practice coupled with a near universal inability to clearly define positions on matters of faith which most significantly distances the Modern Orthodox youth from those to the "right" On the right, non-compliance with halakha is largely aberrational³, and doctrinal self definition is within the ability of almost all (in however rudimentary a fashion).

It is not our concern at present to debate the relative merits of Modern Orthodox education. Obviously, by the very act of opening their doors to a broad clientele these schools have attracted many who are less than consistently committed. This is, conceivably, a most positive factor since surely those on the periphery will not flock to Telz or Satmar. Nonetheless, it must be noted that noble efforts, however commendable, often have undesirable side effects. The present writer, in fact, believes these efforts to be highly commendable. We must not, however, blind ourselves to the accompanying side effects.

We must also leave aside, for the moment, the reflective legitimacy of Modern Orthodoxy's philosophical underpinnings. Simply stated, whatever *Torah im derekh eretz* or *Torah u-maddah* have to say has little if anything to do with Modern Orthodox adolescents. This is a

sadly ironic situation for it is Modern Orthodox youth who, because of their greater exposure and contact, have the highest potential for articulating and living a Torah phenomenology, Torah existentialism, Torah romanticism and (included for ecumenical purposes) Torah classicism. Yet, certain painful givens intervene, for this potential can only be realized when approached via faith or at least, reverence. In sum, *Torah u-maddah*, with its advocacy of "Torah and" as opposed to "Torah only" is only relevant at the point where faith, practice and knowledge are solidified enough to make the choice between alternative *derakhim* meaningful. To the overwhelming majority of Modern Orthodox youth questions and answers on all such topics are completely irrelevant.

CONSUMERIST MODERNITY AND FAITH

The most significant knowledge that Modern Orthodox educators can acquire about their students is that they live in an affluent, insular, provincial world of a decidedly non-reflective or affective nature. (By reflective we refer to the need experienced by varying numbers of people in other times and places to articulate beliefs, dogmas, ideals, etc. relating to themselves and to the larger community. Affective is used to describe all deep seated loyalties, loves, sacrifices, emotions, etc. which have touched people to their core. Capitalism, consumerism and simplistic shock entertainment all serve to obliterate the above mentioned vir-

continued

tues.) The term bourgeois best conjures up the Modern Orthodox youth's casual disinterest in all matters not deified by the 1980's media *zeitgeist*.⁴

Yet, this knowledge alone is not enough for it does not explain the adherence of Modern Orthodox adolescents to the Orthodoxy they do preserve. In their world certain *mitzvot*, such as *kashrut* and *Shabbat*, definitely are observed. Although these practices are often heavily burdened by ignorance, the commitment is there. Washing and *bentsching* during the week are areas of lax observance but on *Shabbat* they are generally observed. *Mincha* and *Maariv* are often casually neglected, but *Shacharit* is generally recited. The wearing of *tzitzit* varies greatly from winter to summer. Sexual norms are clearly not those of Sinai but they do not reflect 1988 America either. Torah is generally not studied outside of school, but Rabbis are sometimes asked halakhic questions. While varying somewhat according to different social standards prevailing in assorted schools, synagogues, camps and communities the



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above is essentially accurate. What emerges is a confused mass of contradiction devoid of any doctrinal consistency.

The key to understanding Modern Orthodox youth is to realize that ideas, principles, philosophies or simple coherence of belief and deed are of no concern to contemporary affluent Americans. Even the most superficial observer of popular American cultural mythos (or Western European for that matter) quickly deduces that things of the mind and soul are no longer relevant to life as lived. What does matter is the acquisition of much leisure, possessions and fleeting, sensate pleasures. All that one need master are the tools necessary to achieve them. In the case of the white collar upper class this demands discipline and long hours invested in school and work. What must be remembered, however, is that the *content* of study or work has been utterly stripped of meaning. Knowledge, beauty and productivity have become merely means to the ends of security and "fun". Thus, religion, or anything else of an ideational nature, need not even be considered. Contradictions in one's principles or practices therefore do not matter because principles and practices are not at the core of the contemporary economic persona.

It is thus not surprising to see the preservation of many Torah laws among Modern Orthodox youth. Consumerist modernity has soundly defeated Enlightenment rationalism, liberal humanism, and American nationalism by rendering their agendas "illusory," i.e. non-materialist. Orthodoxy is no longer under intellectual attack. This is not because the

attack has been refuted but because intellectuals are an increasingly frivolous elite in a civilization dominated by media and capital. When one shelves those aspects of Orthodoxy that are of either a demanding nature or are in conflict with the *zeitgeist* then all one is left with is a most painless endeavor.

Of course, the dynamism inherent in the Jewish soul continues. Many Modern Orthodox adolescents become sincerely attached to specific *mitzvot* or experience moments of religious arousal. Thus, the tragic dimension of the situation emerges. Their *nekudat hapnimitut* yearns for G-d, yet they are crippled, perhaps congenitally by the surrounding culture.

ENTER THE EDUCATOR

It is into this cultural collage that educators are thrust. They realize only too well the enormous significance of their task. As the *Chofetz Chayim* wrote, "Upon *chinukh* which is correct and proper depends the entire Judaism of our sons."⁵ The rebbe's goal, succinctly defined, is to imbue students with the faith of Judaism, the desire to practice it and the knowledge necessary for both. The guiding criterion of all endeavors is how to produce a *baal(at) ha-bayit* who will be devoted, without compromise, to Torah and *mitzvot*.

Subjected to this standard, it would seem obvious that the four years spent in a Modern Orthodox high school (combined with eight years in elementary school) do little to alter the severely compromised Judaism of the majority of students. Generations come and go, but the weakened standards described above re-

main a constant. But how could it, realistically, be otherwise? As Rebbi warned his sons, "Do not dwell in Shekhnazib for its people are frivolous and will lead you to frivolity."⁶ 1988 Western culture is a civilization of frivolity. One cannot draw one's most stirring experiences from a culture and not expect that culture to shape a response to life.

But that is not all. The problem confronting the educator is not merely the surrounding culture. It is also the student's home which is firmly rooted in capitalist childishness. As one of the greatest educators of the Chasidic world, Rabbi Klonimus Kalmish Shapiro of Pieszna wrote:

How can we demand of youth that because of a mere command they will do good? It is primarily by the conduct of a home that a youth is taught...A right example at home must always be available to a child.⁷

It is this lack of an example of voluntary Torah study, communal reverential *tefillah*, careful *dikduk halakha* and *sh'ailat chakham*, and *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov* joy among family and friends which makes the Modern Orthodox adolescent deaf to the educator's entreaties.⁸ Obviously there are exceptions of motivated students and charismatic educators. We speak only of the norm.

THE ISRAEL CAPER

Yet, the above tale leaves out a recent portentous development. It has become very fashionable of late for Modern Orthodox youth, after graduating from high school, to study for a year or more in an Israeli yeshiva. This development has radically altered the contemporary scene. In Israel, Modern Orthodox youth attend yeshivot which provide the *missing link* in their previous education. They are immersed in a living environment committed to Torah and *mitzvot*. In most cases this insular yeshiva world combined with the backdrop of Israel's large Torah community influences them (usually within a few months) to reject previous life styles and pledge themselves to Torah-only piety.⁹

This Israel spiritual "high" inevitably suffers when the student is reintroduced to America, home, friends, camp, Miami Beach vacations, etc. In some cases it is a sad return to former lifestyles. Others stand firm and are currently swelling the ranks of institutions such as Yeshiva University's Y.P. department. For almost all,

however, the time spent in Israel considerably raises their standards of *yiddishkeit*. The long range effects of this trend can only be most positive for Modern Orthodox culture.

THE PRE-ISRAEL PREDICAMENT

If Modern Orthodox education in America is to have an impact beyond poorly imparting basic skills to a disinterested audience, it must seek to implement the successful methodology of the Israel years. In other words, Modern Orthodox yeshivot must become communities. They must provide their youth with a vibrant Torah lifestyle which will become a compelling alternative to the endless cycle of schoolwork, TV, movies, and parties. The goal is to create a Modern Orthodox yeshiva that is attractive and alluring, that beckons our youth day and night, *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov*. Only then will the yeshiva be able to function as the student's spiritual center from whose Judaic experiences will be derived the lifelong sustenance needed to face the seduction of culture and society. It happens in Israel. It can happen here.

A PROGRAM FOR REVIVAL

How can Modern Orthodox high schools be converted into warm, life sustaining centers for our youth? First, and most painful of all, there must be a certain weeding out process. Modern Orthodox yeshivot must, by definition, be open

to those of varying degrees of commitment and knowledge but must also be closed to the scoffer and the cynic. If the goal for a Modern Orthodox yeshiva is to function as its students' source of faith and loyalty then those incapable of attaining that level can only undermine the efforts. This will inevitably present difficulties as well as arguments over individual cases, but the reclamation of an entire culture cannot be destroyed by the few.

Second, students and yeshiva must embark on a reciprocal relationship. *Tefilla* and *Torah* must no longer be the province of command/obedience but of joint endeavor. Students must be appealed to both as individuals and in groups to convince them of the meaningful relevancy of Jewish commitment to their lives as students and beyond.

As part of this cooperative process the school must increase its activities so that students can spend leisure time under yeshiva auspices. These activities should offer everything from aesthetics to athletics, music, politics, hobbies, trips, etc. In addition, educators must be cautious to avoid self deception. They must be sincerely concerned about these activities and their students' involvement in them.¹⁰

Third, and perhaps most important, the school must provide a full schedule of meaningful activities on *Rosh Chodesh*, *Chanukah*, *Purim* and *Shabbat/Yom Tov*. There must be a steady diet of lavish and joyous *siyumim* and *melavei mal-*

continued

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kah. If all an unconvinced student sees of Judaism is davening – irrelevant in *shul* and policed in school, and lengthy *Gemara shiurim* of no seeming value in his/her Jewish milieu, then why should he/she resist that Sweet Sixteen on a Saturday night just because some rebbi gave a speech about it? We cannot hope to defeat an entire cultural continuum unless an appealing alternative is offered.

Admittedly, although a dormitory system is ideal, it is still possible without one to encourage students to view the yeshiva not as an antagonist, or as simply a means to career goals, but rather as the source of faith and its profoundest joys. This is the relationship of the chasidim and "yeshivish" to their institutions. It can be the relationship of Modern Orthodox youth to our schools as well.

This vision is one of *hasmadah*, rev-erent *tefillah*, and halakhic loyalty all cemented by a love for the school and its teachers. It is of a school which provides, supports and improves the activities which youth crave and transforms them into meaningful experiences against a

backdrop of faith and Jewish involvement. A yeshiva of this sort will be a place students can turn to after graduation. It will become *their* community.

PROSPECTS

The first step in implementing change is to recognize the need for change. Too few are willing to admit the above problem, and even more are unwilling or unable to advocate massive revolutionary change. Inertia weighs heavily on establishments.

Besides the obvious damage to its young victims, the current status quo also severely limits, if not completely destroys, the prospects of *Torah u-maddah* or *Torah im derekh eretz* communal renaissance. Modern Orthodox high schools fail. Those of its students moved by their Israel experience are not exposed to the theoretical wellsprings of Rabbi Hirsch, Rabbi Kook and others. They return pious, but not articulate *ovdei Hashem* in this particular *derekh*.

Furthermore, if all idealism is stripped from Modern Orthodox adolescents then

who, in the future, will defend and promote the tenets of Religious Zionism¹¹ or its seemingly forgotten alternative, the Western patriotism of German Orthodoxy? Not only must individuals be salvaged from the wreckage of totalitarian capitalism but whole world views as well.

Is there a revolution in the making? No, it doesn't seem so. Modern Orthodox *rebbeim* will probably proceed in the future as they have in the past with individual and partial achievements. We'll muddle through and content ourselves with the odd accomplishments. Twelve years on the front lines of Modern Orthodox high school *chinukh* has convinced this writer that honest, far-reaching reforms will, barring unforeseen events, not be forthcoming. Perhaps the eventual participation of post-Israel year(s) students in Modern Orthodox communities will force significant change. Perhaps a visionary leader looms somewhere on the horizon. Or, perhaps our calling is to forever battle in trenches, defying the maelstrom of modernity while dreaming of better times. ■

1. One of the primary questions which a high school educator must ask is: How sincere am I about educating all my students? This question yields assorted secondary questions, among them: 1) Is my level of *Gemara* instruction comprehensible to the majority of the class or only to the top ten percent? 2) Am I actively involved in addressing my students' spiritual needs—on their level of commitment, understanding and passion, or do I merely restate high school demands? 3) Upon leaving my class will most of my students conclude that Judaism is joyous and self-fulfilling or tiresome drudgery? 4) In sum, how will my *shiur* matter to my students ten or thirty years from now?

Writing in his superb introduction to that classic work of Chassidic educational philosophy *Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, Rabbi Klonimus Kalmish Shapiro points out, "The most important thing to understand is that the student is the *only* concern of the educator...and upon the educator lies the obligation to raise the child...to be a servant of G-d and great in Torah." (Vaad Chasidei Pisezna: Tel Aviv, no date given, p. 6.) The entire introduction to this work should be required reading for all high school educators. It presents an educational philosophy based upon faith, warmth, personal support and an acute sense of individual worth.

Paul Goodman stated well an old paradox confronting educators. They are called upon "to take a warm interest in the young as persons while getting them to perform according to an impersonal schedule." (See *New Reformation: Notes of a Neolithic Conservative*, Random House: New York, 1970, p.77; as well as the entire chapter "Education of the Young" in the above work.) Rabbi Shapiro, by positing that the "soul" as it becomes "more deeply involved in holiness" will "feel an ever greater yearning for further holiness" (*Chovat Ha-Talmidim*, p.7), offers us a way out of Goodman's impasse. As the rebbi's personal involvement leads the student to "holiness" then the "impersonal schedule", in reality the holy activities of *minyan*, *shiur*, etc., will inevitably become meaningful.

2. A review of the writings of humanist psychologists and personalist educators would yield much of the required creativity and enthusiasm. This article's contention is that mechanical school routine enforced by confrontational discipline will not awaken spiritual interest in suburbia's children. Only positive motivation, passionate involvement, personal empathy and communal enthusiasm will effect lasting change. An introduction to the theories and methodologies of the above schools may be found in A. H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (Harper: New York, 1954) especially chapters 4, 5, 16, 17, 18. Carl Roger's brief essay "The Person" and "Notes on Rollo May" in *Politics and Innocence* by Rollo May, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and other humanists, can also serve as a brief introduction to a positive view of education and counseling. Although deeply flawed in many ways, A.S. Neill's Summerhill school cannot help but inspire us to employ "love" as the methodology. Perhaps Bruno Bettelheim's affectionate critique of Summerhill in *Summerhill: For and Against* (Hart Publishing: New York, 1970, pp. 98-120) would do well as a reasonable balance between "love" born of anarchy and that which is rooted in certain standards.

3. The one exception to this rule is in the realm of Jewish-Gentile relations where the "right" tends to favor whatever lenient rulings they can. Their approach is deeply rooted in the "rightist" world view which sees gentiles in general as of little intrinsic significance to G-d. However, casting non-Jews as "means" and not "ends" is in no sense limited to the "right." See below note 11 on how this attitude rears its head in Modern Orthodox attitudes to the Middle East.

4. A lucid analysis of the contemporary economic reductionism of Western culture may be found in a masterful essay by Nicholas Berdyaev entitled "The Bourgeois Mind" in *The Bourgeois Mind and Other Essays* (Books of Libraries Press: Freeport, 1966). The ever insightful British journal *The Scorpion* described our particular national malaise in Issue 7, Summer 1984 entitled "In Search of America." Of more common vintage is Daniel Bell's

The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism (Basic Books: New York, 1975). This last volume does fine diagnostic work but seems unable to posit an alternative means to order society based on true community and quality of life. Where is E.F. Schumacher when you need him?

5. *Chofetz Chayim, Chomat Hadat* (Mishor: Bnei Brak, 1987) p. 124.

6. *Pesachim*, 112b.

7. Rabi Klonimus Kalmish Shapiro, *Drashah* (Vaad Chasidei Pisezna: Tel Aviv, no date given) p. 34.

8. When speaking of cultural forces and norms which are negative, it is difficult not to appear as a condemner of individuals as well. This is not our intent. Many Modern Orthodox *baalei batim* have struggled hard to achieve their current religious status and their positive deeds are doubtless of great merit.

9. This is a little noted aspect of the Israel experience. The philosophy absorbed there is not that of *Torah im derekh eretz* or *Torah u-maddah*. Most institutions involved are heavily Zionist (generally of the religious right wing of that movement) which makes some "Centrists" insensitive to its rejection of their larger world view.

10. An obvious problem here is that few educators have serious outside interests. Beyond the protection of school curriculum and rules they do not often respond to Being with enthusiasm. Do they truly see life (experience) as opposed to knowledge (school) as threatening, just as those on the right do? Even when it comes to knowledge is it *meaningful* to many Modern Orthodox educators?

11. It is unfortunate that the parameters of Modern Orthodox Religious Zionism as offered (in piecemeal haphazard fashion) in American high schools seems to be ideologically confined to somewhere between *Gush* on the left and *Kach* on the right. Aren't there other options put forth by Religious Zionists in Israel that attempt to take other peoples' national experience into account? Why aren't our youth ever exposed to them?