



Teaching Toward Tomorrow

Setting an Agenda

for Modern

Orthodox Education

A Symposium Edited by
Yoel Finkelman

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AFFLUENZA AND ITS COMPLICATIONS

Yossi Prager

Not long ago, a veteran high school principal summarized for me the changes in the demands upon day schools: "Years ago, schools were responsible for delivering high quality Jewish and general studies. Today, on top of that, we must also ensure that students get into top colleges, stay away from drugs and alcohol, and grow to love Shabbat." Day schools are being asked to serve *in loco parentis* in ways unimaginable a generation ago. One can expect even greater demands on schools in the coming years, even as the day school funding crisis makes it less likely that schools will be able to meet those demands.

Some of the new demands on schools are due to the stressed, busy lives of parents, many of whom feel insecure imposing limits on their children in our rapidly changing world. However, it is also true that the centripetal forces of American culture pull even Orthodox Jews more strongly than ever before. The general culture in the cities with the largest Jewish communities is primarily secular, individualistic, and universalistic – while Judaism is religious, community-based, and to a large degree (though not exclusively) particularistic. The internet brings this culture into Orthodox homes on almost a 24/6 basis, increasing American culture's force of attraction.

Interestingly, at the same time as the underlying values of American culture are at odds with those of Judaism, we find increasing cultural comfort with Orthodox Jewish practices. From the singer Matisyahu to Senator Joe Lieberman, observance is no longer an impediment to social acceptance and success. America's new Attorney General, Michael Mukasey, identifies as Orthodox, a fact rarely remarked upon in the general media.

Thus, Orthodox children growing up in America today find acceptance of their outward practices and, at the same time, face a value system that is in many ways profoundly at odds with Judaism. Some young Jews will opt out of the Orthodox community, whether driven by their values or

their libidos. However, I worry less about whole-scale abandonment of Jewish practice – it has been a while since most Orthodox Jews in America could say *shver tzu zein a Yid* [it is hard to be a Jew] – than with the weakening of the *emunot vede'ot* and *avodat Hashem* that serve as

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the foundation of Judaism. Will young Jews in the coming years accept "commandedness" as an adequate basis for fidelity to halakhah? Will *kedushah* become an anachronistic concept for many? Can we instill within the next generation the feeling that prayer means standing before the Almighty? Will they love Torah? Will

young Jews be able to identify and identify with the distinctive set of values embodied within our glorious heritage? Will they see the State of Israel as our national capital, with all the implications emerging from that concept? These are the challenges already emerging, and they are likely to intensify. They must be confronted creatively and thoughtfully in developing schools' formal and experiential curricula.

A related factor, too infrequently discussed in the Orthodox community, is the materialism prevalent in Orthodoxy today. Even putting aside the extraordinary wealth of a small minority of Orthodox Jews, the standard of living for the average Orthodox Jew may be higher than ever before, and material expectations are correspondingly high. Just as influenza can kill, "affluenza" can spiritually deaden, focusing people on their own needs and wants, increasing their sense of entitlement, and reducing feelings of gratitude or amazement arising from the gifts we have been given. Because our whole communal system, which used to be based on proportional taxation, is now based on voluntary giving, few rabbinic leaders feel empowered to confront the materialism that paradoxically both provides the *kemah* for their work and, at the same time, make religious seriousness so much more difficult to achieve. As a community, and not just as individuals, we face the challenge presented by Moshe Rabbeinu in *Parshat Ha'azinu*, "And Yeshurun became fat and kicked"

(Devarim 32:15). Can we enjoy Hashem's gifts without becoming unappreciative and lost to Him?

Ironically, the relative affluence of our community is exacerbating financial pressures that already threaten our educational system. These financial pressures represent a far more significant threat to the future of the day school system than has thus far been recognized.

Affluence has given us very high expectations, including from the educators and administrators to whom we entrust our children. The educators, too, have higher expectations for their professional and personal lives. High expectations lead to high tuitions by virtue of low student/faculty ratios, higher salaries (and increased training) for teachers, increased support staffs for remediation and enrichment, and larger administrations to enable more frequent communication with anxious or angry parents. Most of these increased expenses enhance the quality of the education received by our children, and yet we are trapped in an unfortunate spiral. As parents pay more for day school, their expectations increase; increased expectations then propel schools to improve further, which leads to even higher tuitions. We have reached a crisis point, and more Orthodox parents are beginning to consider options for their children other than day schools.

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The most famous of the public discussions occurred in Lawrence, Long Island, where some families openly discussed sending their children to public school, ideally in a special arrangement with the public school board. In the current school year, the first Hebraic public charter school, the Ben Gamla school, opened in Hollywood, Florida. Ben Gamla is a public school that must be open to Jews and non-Jews alike, but because Hebrew language and secular aspects of Jewish culture are

incorporated into the school day, the enrollment is likely to remain predominantly Jewish. One would not expect such a school to attract many Orthodox families because of the secular culture and absence of *limmudei kodesh*. However, the school in its first year has reportedly drawn somewhere between twelve and twenty children from the local Orthodox day school, and the number would likely have been significantly larger had the day school not raised additional scholarship funds on an emergency basis to retain a group of wavering families. As it is, the Ben Gamla school drew heavily from local non-Orthodox day schools.

Some Orthodox parents across the country have expressed interest in a local Ben Gamla school. While these families could not in good conscience send their child to a regular public school, they see in Ben Gamla an intermediate model – a no-cost Hebraic school (with some non-Jews of course) that could be combined with after-school religious studies to replace a day school education. From my perspective, particularly given the abysmal failure of the current supplementary school system, it is hopelessly naïve to believe that they will achieve a high success rate in raising Jewishly literate, religiously purposeful Orthodox children without the support of a day school education.

Fortunately, the voices within the Orthodox community calling for a public school or Ben Gamla option are still few. However, with day schools tuitions increasing across the country faster than most parents' salaries, the financial concerns will grow. Ultimately, if the community cannot find new ways to raise significantly more money for day school education, parents and lay leaders will have to make a choice between less expensive and lower quality schools (one could imagine separate schools for children from wealthier families) and some kind of public school option. I suspect that there will be a surprisingly large number of parents who would choose free public school with some kind of after-school religious option over an acknowledged lower quality day school education which will still be quite expensive.

The experiment of Jewry in America continues. Contrary to common predictions in the 1950s and 1960s that Orthodox Judaism would decline and ultimately expire, Orthodoxy has been the segment of American Jewry that experienced the greatest success both demographically and in transmitting its practices to the next generation. The question that now confronts us is whether we can muster the will, know-how, and financial resources to raise a next generation of Jews who are not only Jewishly literate, *shomer shabbat*, emotionally connected to the State of Israel, and free from social pathology, but also spiritually alive and committed to Jewish values.

In light of my view of these challenges to the Jewish spirit, the financing of Jewish day schools becomes an even more critical issue. The success Orthodoxy has enjoyed to date, notwithstanding the pull of secular American life, is largely attributable to the strength of the day schools and the heroic commitment of their faculties. We should confront honestly the disaster that will ensue if troubling day school finances compel a return to larger class sizes, even lower teacher salaries, and fewer experiential education programs. In many ways, Orthodoxy in America is at a crossroads, and the future is in our own hands.