

Challenges in Jewish Identity Development: On Stimulating Discussions & Experimentation

Yossi Prager presented this Dvar Torah to the North American Jewish Day School Conference (NAJDS) on February 6, 2013.

Thank you all very much. I wish you could see what I see here: a room full of people, all of whom are committed to day school education. It's truly an inspired sight. Maybe you all could come up to the podium when there's no program and see what this looks like — unbelievable. I'm really energized by your presence here, and I think that feeling is increased by my daughter's day school's *hagigat hasiddur* this morning. It was a wonderful experience for parents. The children were singing and doing hand motions for the various songs and prayers. They all made a commitment to keep the siddur they were getting into adulthood so they could use it to teach their children about *tefillah*. I thought that was a bit much to ask of a six-year-old, but it was great shmaltz for the parents; I ate it up.

Thank you for inspiring me. Thank you also to the conference planners who have put this conference together, not only for organizing this conference, but also for all of the work they do in so many different ways to enhance day school education across North America.

I want to focus on the two tellings of the Giving of the Torah, one of which was read yesterday in shul, Parshat Yitro, and one of which is at the very end of this coming week's parshah, at the end of Mishpatim. They are two strikingly different experiences. The one that was read yesterday describes an experience that overwhelmed the senses and emotions of the Jews sitting at the foot of the mountain. The mountain was aflame. There was thick cloud cover, thunder, lightning, the sound of the shofar growing increasingly loud, and a Divine voice thundering from on high. The senses of the Jews were so overwhelmed that they not only heard the voices; they saw the voices. What was the reaction of the Jews? They shrank back and pleaded with Moshe for relief; they could no longer tolerate the Divine voice. It was an experience of complete passivity on the part of human beings in the face of the awe-filled presence of the Almighty.

If you look at the end of the coming week's parshah, it's a very different kind of experience. The Torah is described as a *sefer habrit*, a "mutual covenant" — not an experience in which God alone rules people, but one in which both the people and the Almighty together form a covenant. The people offered sacrifices; and while the elders of Israel see a vision of God, they are able afterward to eat the sacrifices. It's a completely human experience. The Jews are active in establishing their covenant.

Before reflecting on the meaning of these two different tellings, I want to focus on one detail that we will read in Mishpatim. Who brought the sacrifices at this moment of covenant with the Almighty? The Torah reports "*vayishlach et naarei b'nai Yisrael*," Moshe appointed the youth of the Jewish people to offer these sacrifices. What did that mean; who were these youth? Rashi suggests that these were the firstborn who served in the ritual role before the *kohanim*, children of Aharon, were appointed. The Ramban, Nachmonides, believes something different: He posits that the plain meaning of the text is that they were, simply put, "youth." They were chosen for

their innocence; they had not yet tasted sin. Most interesting is Chizkuni who says the reason they were chosen now was as part of their *chinuch*, education, in offering sacrifices.

So think about that for a minute; it's really unbelievable. This is the pinnacle of Jewish religious experience: the giving of the Torah. Who offers the sacrifices? The youth. Why is that? We talk a lot about 21st century learning today; we talk about active roles for young people, meaningful and responsible roles, using skills they will need to employ as adults, which motivates them as students. For the Torah, the way of thinking is not 21st century, but 13th century — BCE. That is one takeaway from the Mishpatim narrative.

The larger point I want to think about with you is the lesson, the takeaway for day school educators and leaders, from a very different telling, almost contradictory, of Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah. It seems that we are obligated to instill into our students two religious experiences that are in great tension. On one hand, the Parshat Yitro version tells us that we need to help our students develop a kind of awe that is so strong that it brings students into obedience to the Torah and loyalty to the Jewish people and to Israel — an orientation of “I will do as I was told.” At the same time, Parshat Mishpatim suggests a much more active, involved role on the human side. There's a sense not only of the Jews as active, but also as initiating, and in the course of initiating they find meaning and purpose from the role they have.

As educators, I think we know those two are almost contradictory experiences: the sense of being awed into obedience, and the sense of initiating to find purpose. But the Torah asks us to instill both in our students. There are schools across the spectrum, schools that focus more on obedience and schools that focus more on meaning-making; but I think most of us would agree that achieving both remains elusive.

This educational tension is an example of what AVI CHAI is trying to do in so many of the programs we fund. We hope to stimulate discussion about difficult questions related to the Jewish identities and commitments of day school graduates and experimentation to try to answer them. You can't get the answers from us; you are the ones directly involved with the students, and the program providers we fund are the ones engaged with you. But you can look to AVI CHAI to continue stimulating and provoking the questions, and, through our program providers, trying to generate experimentation relating to challenging questions about student affective and cognitive religious outcomes.

We have seven years left to run; I'm sure everybody in this room knows that by now. As we talk internally about our legacy as a foundation, much of the conversation ends up focusing on you sitting here in this room. So many of you have participated in one or another program AVI CHAI has funded, and the thing that will most endure is the continuing thinking and educating that you do as a result of these programs. Really, you are the legacy, and so long as you continue to ask these questions and take seriously the “Jewish” in Jewish education, AVI CHAI will endure long past our formal spend-down.

The other thing I want to say is that AVI CHAI is not closing yet. Seven years is still a pretty long time; in that time, Joseph in Egypt managed a whole cycle of years of plenty before the years of famine came. We think of the work ahead of us as building a day school field in terms

of people, institutions and ideas. We're particularly focused on four different areas, and I'll mention those briefly.

One is blended and online learning. We believe that this growing pedagogical approach holds the potential for more individualized education and also could also bring down the cost of education. I hope you will all visit the Expo adjacent to the marketplace, where you'll have the opportunity to meet some vendors who are involved in online and blended learning. There will also be presentations from various organizations that we and others are funding. Please pick up the material and literature available to read once you get home. We are particularly grateful to AJE — Affordable Jewish Education— and the Kohelet Foundation who are joining with us in some of this work. So that's one topic, blended and online learning.

A second area of ours, which is not new, is Jewish day school leadership. We have funded programs for day school leaders for some time, but we hope over the next seven years to intensify those programs and generate new programs in Jewish day school leadership.

A third area is day school finance. I think that remains the number one priority for many schools, certainly for the lay leaders who are present. We work in partnership with two of the organizers of the conference, PEJE and YU, on programs intended to address day school finance, and we're developing new programs to address the sustainability issue. I have to say that the finance issues are the hardest ones for us to tackle. Working together I hope we can begin to alleviate the burden and at least reduce the high tuitions to make day school education more affordable.

The last area for us is the continuity of the programs and the organizations we have supported over the 18 years we have funded day school education. You know and have participated in so many of the programs; many of them are here as vendors if not conference organizers. We hope that when AVI CHAI closes in seven years and the years of famine begin, there will be others to step in our shoes to fund programs we have already developed, programs we will develop over the seven years, and frankly new programs that need to be developed after 2020. We welcome you here as partners in helping us to identify funders who might be interested in joining with us, whether on existing programs or on new programs.

So thank you for your very hard and holy work. I am enormously inspired — watching you, seeing the energy in the room, joining in conversations, learning about so many new things that leaders at schools have implemented just within the last six months. I speak for my colleagues here in saying not only are we happy to join with you here, but we look forward to learning from you in these next few days. Thank you very much.

Yossi Prager is Executive Director – North America of The AVI CHAI Foundation.