Guiding Principles for Effective and Moral Leadership in Our Day Schools

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[This is the tenth and final article in our series on day school leadership from the Leadership Commons of the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education of JTS. In this series, alumni of our leadership institutes share their visions of effective day school leadership, reflecting on their aspirations for the field and describing paths toward those goals.]

By Dr. Ray Levi

Over the past two months we have shared on these virtual pages posts from our alumni that address the critical issues leaders must focus on to secure a stronger future for day schools and, arguably, for the entire Jewish educational enterprise. They have asked us to move away from polite and safe discussion to places of greater depth and vulnerability. They have asked us to look critically at our own assumptions. Their passion, rooted in both Jewish values and comfort with taking risks, represent essential attributes of effective and moral leadership that we aim to foster in the institutes of our Leadership Commons. They each wrestled with controversial questions, and taken together, I suggest three emerging, guiding principles essential to the work as courageous leaders:

1. We must move beyond our comfortable circles to both hear and honor marginalized voices.

Harry Pell’s piece posted last week represented one of the more vulnerable voices in the series. He described the urgent need to listen to Palestinians – those with whom he could “see eye to
eye” and those “whose words felt like daggers.” He recognized his “obligation” to his students to “teach them to think” and expose them to the full complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as part of their building deep connections with Israel. Adam Eilath underscored the isolation of those communities seen as being on the periphery. While many bring their view of the “center” to others, we must honor the potential for peripheral communities to enrich all. In a similar vein, one’s focus on one’s own agenda, as Thabatta Mizrahi underscored, often distances the people with whom we must build strong bridges, including the parents of our students.

These colleagues echo my own experiences with Jewish leaders who have often felt isolated as Jews by choice, as single parents, as women, as members of the LGBTQ community, or as members of the Sephardi community. We must challenge our theoretical commitment to pluralism within our particular schools and programs by moving past assumptions that we believe others have about us. We must find ways to engage others deeply about belief and practice without offending.

This brings us to the second principle:

2. We must engage in difficult conversations and establish ground rules for safe, civil, and candid dialogue.

It is crucial to address such the fundamental questions as: What are we discussing? How do we speak with one another? How do we express curiosity about the beliefs and practices of others without offending? Ben Mann called upon his school community to look at themselves as they consider how they relate to Jews and other people of color, We must all do the same. Michael Kay advocated that it is essential to firmly articulate the power of diversity.

As a head of school and now as director of our Day School Leadership Training Institute, I experience directly the difficult yet critically important task in building a kehillah kedushah (sacred community) among remarkably diverse groups of Jewish educators. We must all create gathering places to examine the impact of painful experiences and anxieties and to learn the difficult skills of appreciative inquiry and deep listening.

3. We must cultivate educational environments that support growth mindsets for our professionals as well as our students.

Many of our authors reminded us that securing a strong future involves building systems that embody the principles just articulated. Amanda Pogany and Sara Malasky offered us a model that commits our essential resources to investing both directly in our faculties and into fostering the larger culture of the school. Doing so creates a foundation of trust, innovation, and support that serve our students, helping both students and professionals thrive. Nancy Rosen shared that curricula cannot simply be about the skills and knowledge we impart, but about engaging the souls of our students. Debby Arzt-Mor articulated a learning framework for professional development that includes cohort learning, mentorship, teaming, and a foundation of Jewish text. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, we must lead with courage. As candidly described by Andrea Cheatham Kasper, teachers must have courage to try out to new approaches to the craft; heads of school must have courage to take risks that can help continually reinvent their school;
lay leaders must have the courage to generously support the professional staff. Courage is often about moving into unfamiliar territory, an important journey for all who seek to exercise leadership to pursue.

The work of bringing people together, of listening, of creating environments that foster growth and ignite change, is challenging. Yet this important and sacred work need not be lonely. There are often tears and sleepless nights along the way, yet there is also the possibility, noted in this testimonial from one of our alumni below, to come closer to realizing our aspirations:

*Interacting with those different than you doesn’t mean you sacrifice your beliefs, but it will likely result in you becoming more empathetic, and able to work together in friendship and shalom (peace) in a variety of ways. I am so appreciative of the relationships that I have been fortunate to have made both in my cohort and within the larger network, among Jews, some more similar to me, some more different, but all united by the bonds of friendship, support, and respect.*

To bring people together, to create empathy, to foster collaboration, and to create lasting bonds in service to strengthen the future of Jewish education, day schools and beyond, is a shared goal of the Leadership Commons at The William Davidson School. To foster challenging and stimulating dialogue – our goal in this series – is one way we hope to strengthen our collective future. We invite each of you to share your ideas of the visionary, courageous leadership needed for our community as our alumni shared. What’s your perspective? What’s your voice?

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