

**How Schools Enact Their Jewish Missions**  
20 Case Studies of Jewish Day Schools

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A Project of the AVI CHAI Foundation

# Five Core Values in Delicate Balance

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**It was an early** August morning, and Elliot Schapiro was at his desk at the Maimonides Hebrew Academy (MHA), a Modern Orthodox K–12 suburban day school.<sup>1</sup> Even-keeled by temperament, he was particularly calm this August. In contrast to his early years as Head of School, when the month before school seemed full of daily crises and emergencies, Eli now felt he had an administrative team that could handle most anything. Having spent the last seven years clarifying their roles and recruiting or promoting virtually every one of them, he was fully confident in their abilities, and in the talented staff they built up.

There was a gentle knock on Eli’s open door. It was Shoshana, a lead-teacher at MHA’s high school.

“Hi, Eli. Welcome back.”

“Thanks, Shoshana. Come on in. Sit down.” Eli got up from his chair, motioning for her to sit in a pair of chairs on the side of his office, rather than opposite him on the other side of his desk. That was where he liked to hold less formal

conversations, certainly one that was taking place in August when the school year was still weeks away.

Eli was happy to have Shoshana teaching in his school. A creative and passionate Judaics teacher, she had moved with her family to the area not that long ago. Eli recruited her immediately, eager to fill MHA with mission-appropriate role models for Modern Orthodox girls. He was proud of her demanding teaching and the positive influence she had on the students and the school generally.

“Eli, I’ve been meaning to discuss something important with you. Do you have a few minutes?”

“Sure, Shoshana. What is it?” His curiosity was peaked. Was it about her teaching load or salary concern? He hoped no one was sick.

Shoshana took a deep breath. “It’s about the Core Values. They’re not right.”

Eli was relieved, but also surprised. “Our core values?” he said. “What do you mean?”

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The Core Values meant a lot to Eli. Most people who had been at MHA a long time would even say that introducing the “Five Core Values” at the school had been Schapiro’s signature change in the school. Before Schapiro was hired, there was a strong sense among the school’s lay leadership that it was important to clarify MHA’s identity; for too long, the school was known more by what it *was not* than by what it *was*. Everyone knew Maimonides was not a pluralistic Jewish school serving the entire community. Similarly, everyone in the area knew it was not a right-wing Orthodox school that was entirely separate-sex and which placed the curricular emphasis on Torah and Judaic studies, with general studies

playing second fiddle — and often their quality being second rate. In fact, part of hiring Eli was the expectation that he would help the school sharpen who and what it was.

Initially, Eli and his board chair considered undertaking a “mission clarification” process that would enable MHA to state more clearly, both to the general community and to its own constituents, what the school strove to accomplish with its program. An ad hoc committee was immediately formed, and the board devoted many a meeting to discussing the process. To no one’s surprise, it was discovered how contentious some elements of MHA’s mission statement actually were — was the school “Orthodox” in a general way or more specifically “Modern Orthodox”? And what exactly did that mean, given the range of views within Modern Orthodoxy? The school had been strongly Zionist since its inception 70 years earlier, but was it “religious Zionist” in an ideological way, did it encourage *aliyah*, or did it support the State of Israel as AIPAC or WZO did? As the largest Orthodox school in the area, MHA had always catered

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<sup>1</sup> This case study is based on a visit to a real day school that made the decision to present itself as embracing multiple core values. What follows is a fictionalized account of a discussion taking place among three created characters, each of whom gives voice to arguments and viewpoints heard from a wide variety of actual stakeholders — students and educators, administrators and lay leaders — at the school.

to a wide range of families, from those who were sympathetic with traditional Judaism yet not strictly observant of Jewish law to those for whom *halakhab* was the only thing that mattered. MHA was a “big tent,” and members of the committee as well as the larger board felt that clarifying the mission too finely or specifically could threaten the breadth of that tent, as evidenced by the many concerns articulated during the discussions.

The board chair at the time, who also led the school during the search process that brought Eli to MHA, discussed the matter with him and they both agreed that changing the mission at this early stage of Eli’s tenure posed considerable risks without clear benefits. But it was also evident to both of them that the school needed to do something proactive about its identity.

Observing the school’s program, Eli and his administrative team at the time discussed the concepts or ideas that in their view embodied what MHA was doing or guided what it was striving to do. After a few revisions, they came up with the school’s Five Core Values:

- *Torah* — We strive to provide our students with a firm foundation in Torah and Jewish law, a desire for a meaningful relationship with God, and a love for Jewish learning and practice.
- *Chochmah* — We encourage our students to excel academically in an atmosphere that encourages curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, and integrity.
- *Derech Eretz* — We emphasize the highest standard of personal conduct and seek to instill in our students a sensitivity towards others in all of their words and actions.
- *Acharayut* — We promote a deep sense of responsibility for ourselves, for each other, for the Jewish community, for America, and for people around the world.
- *Yisrael* — We cultivate an enduring love of the people of Israel, the land of Israel, and the state of Israel.

Discussions with the board were swift and productive. Upon reading the list of values, virtually everyone nodded in agreement — they really *were* what MHA was about, in an almost ‘obvious’ sort of way. Eli felt he had an effective instrument both to distinguish MHA, and to galvanize its stakeholders.

Ever since these core values were refined, Eli was intent on promoting and inculcating them in every corner of his school — at faculty meetings and orientations, at open houses and board meetings, in every classroom and in hallways, and in all promotional materials. Board agendas had the five core values printed at the top, and new board member induction involved study of the five core values.

The leadership wanted them everywhere, and they were.

“Shosh, could you explain what you mean?” asked Eli, intrigued. “Sure, Eli. But first you have to promise me you won’t get angry with me, or upset, or get very academic with me and use big words that I don’t understand,” she said breezily, with her disarming smile and self-deprecating sense of humor. She knew how much Eli had invested in the core values, and she wanted to have as honest a conversation as she could about them.

Eli chuckled. He appreciated Shoshana’s style that was impassioned, self-effacing and slightly scattered all at once — he knew it came straight from her heart. Speaking this way was one of Shoshana’s traits that endeared her to students and to

staff; all acknowledged that she had a bit of a cult following among the students at MHA.

Eli leaned back in his chair. “Go ahead, Shosh, I’m all ears.” Leaning forward and looking right at Eli, Shoshana began. “Eli, we’ve got to do something about the Core Values. I know you believe in them, and so do a lot of other people around here, but I don’t think they work. They’re not really clear enough, or people don’t understand them. Most importantly, the school doesn’t really observe them or follow them. They’re not a driving vision; they’re more like pegs that people hang what they’re doing anyway on, like hangers in a stuffed closet. We can do better — we need to do better — and we should

change them soon. Like maybe today, or at least before school starts in a few weeks.

“There, I said it. I’ve been meaning to say this to you for months, over a year, really. Now, tell me I don’t have a job here anymore and I’ll just send out my resume to other schools.” Shoshana smiled, lifting herself from her chair to get up and move towards the door.

Eli laughed. “Stay, Shoshana, don’t leave. I know you didn’t make a special trip down here to my office just to unload a 30-second shpiel and go back to your classroom. You crammed a lot into 30 seconds; it takes me a while to process,” he said, smiling. “Tell me more what’s on your mind.”

Shoshana accepted Eli’s invitation to elaborate. “Eli, the words all around the school are pretty, and sweet, and delicious, but they’re not really *core values*. They may make great hooks for school tours and I know they look great on marketing folders and on websites. But let’s face it, how many of the kids — especially those in high school — know the core values, let alone embody them, live them, breathe them? If you met Maimonides alumni out there — would you be able to tell they spent a dozen years in this school? After seeing an alum do something or say something, would anyone be able to say, ‘Oh, that kid must’ve gone to MHA?’”

Eli tried to slow Shoshana down. “I hear what you’re saying, Shoshana, and there’s some truth to your point. Listen, even though I don’t broadcast this, you heard me say before how we came to these core values. We didn’t start with them and build a school from them; it’s not a mission statement in the classic sense of the term. To the contrary, in that first year I observed the things we were doing or trying to do in some intentional way, and I wanted to capture all that in a few brief terms. We’re Orthodox, we follow *halakhah*, we teach our kids *Chumash*, *Navi*, *Gemara*, *Halakhah* — so I thought the term “Torah” expressed that well. At the same time, we’re committed to a secular education, not just because almost all our kids go on to college and we need to prepare them for that, but because at Maimonides we genuinely believe that there’s value in studying literature, in learning about science, and math and history. So we conveyed that with the word “*chochmah*.” Some things, like Israel, we always did well: For as long as anyone could remember, our *Yom Ha’atzmaut* (Israel Independence

Day) celebration has been the major community event around Israel, with 1200 people coming to us to observe the program *our* kids put on and sing. We’re known for this. Ask anyone in the area — this is the place to feel part of a celebration of Israel. So I saw this as something that defines us, and felt it needed to be included as a core value. Every one of the core values can be found in our school — if not every day, then certainly when looked at over a week or two.

“Look, every school can do things better — that’s why my door is always open to you and to anyone who has constructive criticism of our program. But by articulating and announcing these core values, I did *not* want to change the direction of the school at all. To the contrary, I wanted to affirm and strengthen what Maimonides was *already* doing. To me, if you name it and label it, you affect it — you give the value added *power*, more *influence*, greater *impact*. And that would help us do what I would hope any good school does — work on improving ourselves and fulfilling our mission. Wouldn’t you consider those ‘core values?’”

Shoshana paused, letting what Eli said sink in. It sounded so “administrator-y” — practical, pragmatic, reasonable. It definitely made sense. But as an educator on the front lines, talking to kids, making dozens of small decisions every day in the classroom or before a program, it still didn’t ring true to her. Shoshana rarely if ever explicitly factored in the Core Values while thinking about those decisions.

“But Eli, don’t you think a ‘core value’ is a bigger deal than some shorthand to what a school happens to be doing? I’ll tell you what a parent told me last year at *kiddush*<sup>2</sup> in shul. He’s here for a few years with his company and he mentioned to me that where he works, everyone knows what the values are because when they’re tested — when there’s a challenge or conflict, when those values posted throughout the office and in every cubicle are in competition with other things — everyone knows those posted values come first. That’s how you know it’s a core value: not just because it’s public, but because it animates your institution and guides everyone’s decisions. They offer clarity; they determine how

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<sup>2</sup> A Shabbat morning offering of light refreshments at which congregants frequently socialize after services are over.

people will act; and they form the basis for evaluating both personnel and performance.

“So to me, if Israel is one of our core values, it means we should always be talking about it, it should be in our curriculum in a major way, and there’s some expectation clearly stated that we ought to live there. At the school where I worked before moving here, everyone knew Israel was the main focus. In my early years at that school, I remember a discussion about whether to include ‘making *aliyah*’<sup>3</sup> in the mission statement — blew me away! An American school considering making its mission the goal of all its students moving halfway across the world to a foreign country. That was a core value! Israel was at the top of everyone’s agenda, period. To be totally honest, I think it’s crazy to have five core values — I found even one a challenge. How can you work on so many at once?”

Eli interjected. “Shoshana, let me stop you there. You’re saying a bunch of things so let me sort them out one by one. First, your last point — I would say there are many ways Israel can be central to a school, and it doesn’t have to be that everyone must move there and that if they don’t, they’re somehow a failure, or that the school failed. I think we do an amazing job with Israel. How many schools take not just one grade but their *whole high school* to Israel for 11 days, once every four years? It orients everyone in the building — kids know the year they’re going to be going to Israel, and their anticipation grows as it nears. Teachers mention it — obviously, more often as it gets closer — and we build our curriculum in many ways around that trip. You yourself have seen when the whole lower and middle schools come out to say goodbye to us when we walk out of the school and onto the buses — that impresses everyone, the kids leaving and those saying goodbye, thinking about their own trip when they will get to high school. That trip is something kids will never forget for the rest of their lives. Will only a few make *aliyah*? Sure. But that doesn’t mean it’s not a core value just because we haven’t articulated a very clear and explicit goal, or because we don’t hammer away at this all the time. Everyone would agree that for three generations already, Israel has been in Maimonides’s DNA.

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<sup>3</sup> Moving to Israel to live there.

“As to your point how core values function, going back to the way that parent at the *kiddush* meant it. There are things that most people don’t know about where we do *exactly* what he mentioned — the value wins out over others. Let me give you an example. You know times have been tough, and when I work with the budget committee, we have to look at what can be cut to save money. Every year, I — and the board chair, of course — make sure that Torah Mitzion<sup>4</sup> gets funded so it can be a presence in the building, that we include a budget line for *bnot sherut*<sup>5</sup> to come each year from Israel and work with the kids in classes, in programming, on Shabbat in their communities. True, that may not be a conflict everyone sees, but it’s no less real. You’re an educator, and a darn good one — you should be open to the many ways a value can be core — each school decides its ways to express, emphasize, and implement its core values.”

Shoshana had anticipated a passionate and articulate response from Eli. It was obvious he had thought long and hard about the Core Values, and could make a compelling case for them. But as she thought about the conversation, she was convinced it was not simply a difference of perspective between a Head of School and a high school teacher. For a value to be “core,” it had to be core for everyone, not just administrators.

The phone rang, and Eli excused himself to take a call he was expecting. Shoshana was relieved. It gave her time to gather her thoughts, so she could convey her concerns to Eli more clearly.

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<sup>4</sup> *Torah Mitzion Kollel* — a program, piloted in Cleveland in 1996 and then launched in communities around the US and elsewhere, in which Israeli young men who’ve completed *hesder* (a 5-year program that combines Torah study and army service in the IDF) come to a diaspora community and live and learn for a year (married couples often come for 2–3 years). The *kollel* is based in a school or synagogue, and study among themselves for a few hours a day, but spend the rest of the day studying with teenagers and adults.

<sup>5</sup> Israeli young women after high school have the option of doing “national service” (*sherut le’umi*) instead of serving in the army for two years. Several years ago, the option was created to fulfill a year of this service in a diaspora Jewish community by having the young women work in a community, teaching and developing programming, often in conjunction with the religious Zionist youth group Bnei Akiva.

Eli came back from the phone at his desk, and sat back down in the chair next to Shoshana.

“Sorry, Shosh. That was from my wife. I had to take it.”

“No problem, Eli. Life.”

“Now, where were we? Yes, your view of the Core Values. As a way of honing our message, creating a cleaner method of prioritizing our actions, generating a clearer, more direct instruction to our faculty, and communicating this clarity to our students, I agree that choosing a single or dual set of values might work better. We could hire faculty who will know exactly what they need to teach, how best to teach it and how we, as a school, will make decisions. Students will leave the school with a certain understanding of our priorities and our message.

“But to me, that message isn’t the right message at all — not for most schools, I happen to think, but especially not for a Modern Orthodox school. Because if Modern Orthodoxy stands for anything, it’s the belief in the very balance of the multiple core values that characterize us. Modern Orthodoxy seeks to strike a delicate balance among competing values — not contrasting, *chas ve-shalom*,<sup>6</sup> but competing in the sense that each one demands more time, energy, and focus than we can devote. Yeah, it’s tricky, but so is life — like having an intense conversation and then taking a call from your spouse.” Elliot smiled, pointing to the phone while still looking at Shosh.

“You’ve heard me say many times how life is complex, and the world we expect our students to participate in is getting more complex by the day. To me, regularly articulating these five different values to the kids and then helping them see how we hold them as important *all at once*, is an important life skill for a Modern Orthodox Jew. As the Head of School and steward of MHA’s vision, it’s my responsibility to convey that vision and implement it as often and as best as I can. Bottom line — focusing on one or two Core Values may be organizationally simpler, cleaner, and clearer — but wrong.

“Here, let me tell you about a conversation I was having with Sharon, the chair of the board’s education committee, just yesterday. We were catching up from the summer and talking about the committee’s agenda for the year. She started the

meeting by mentioning that she was talking with a parent from another Jewish school who had heard that they were considering dropping one Judaics class to add another secular subject in the hopes of attracting more families for whom Judaics weren’t so important. Sharon told me that if that issue came up at MHA, she felt that it wouldn’t get very far because doing that would upset the balance of *Torah* and *chochmah* — in fact, *Torah* is deliberately first, and swapping a Judaics class for a secular studies class here would not be consistent with our core values — by which she meant the totality of our core values. I tell you, Shoshana, I couldn’t have been prouder. Here was a parent who had only recently gotten involved in lay leadership, and she had ‘gotten’ the essence or purpose of the core values — to make our mission accessible to everyone so they’d understand what and why we’re doing what we do. And part of what we’re trying to do is to maintain a balance. Just ask Jennifer<sup>7</sup> — when she takes prospective parents and donors on school tours, she emphasizes the blend of the five values, and visitors walk away understanding MHA very well.”

“Eli, I know it’s part of your job, but I think you’re hanging around adults way too much,” Shoshana said, with a big smile, happy with how the conversation was going. “You quoted a parent and a lay leader, but I spend my whole day with kids. You may talk balance and complexity, but that’s not where teens are. What I see is that most students don’t know the values, or they say that they’re ‘vague,’ generic, and that anything can be a value. Other than Israel, I’m not sure whether we’re getting through to them about these values.

“Just think of our own kids, your son and my two kids, in high school: every day they juggle ten different subjects in addition to sports and other stuff. They’re going from task to task, assignment to assignment, project to project — are they absorbing the values? Are we getting through to them that these values are *core* — even one or two of them? They daven and do Judaics — do they hear or sense the value of *Torah*? They study English and math — do they see that as *chochmah*? As developing curiosity? Or are they just doing what’s expected of them — starting the day *davening*,<sup>8</sup> like most of their parents, and then getting

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<sup>6</sup> “God forbid.”

<sup>7</sup> MHA’s Director of Development.

<sup>8</sup> Praying.

good grades so that they can get into good colleges, just like their parents? Do they have any idea about...”

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation. It was Binny, the principal of the high school who arrived at MBJHA a year before Eli. He is credited by many with bringing greater order, discipline, and higher academic standards to that division of the school. Since his arrival, there were many more rules, but also many more APs, more electives and extracurriculars, and above all, more acceptances into many high-ranking colleges.

“Hi, guys! Sounds like I walked in on a pretty intense conversation. Should I come back later?”

“No, no, Binny, come on in,” answered Eli. “Shoshana and I were having a really valuable discussion about the five core values. In fact, your perspective would be helpful.”

“The Big Five? Call me a fan — they’ve made my job so much easier,” volunteered Binny, turning to Shoshana. “They really help me advance and improve the high school program. For instance, since coming here eight years ago, I wanted to implement a *chessed*<sup>9</sup> requirement for graduation. It wasn’t that easy, especially with all the work the kids get, and the extracurriculars they’re involved in, so we started incrementally. But once we had *acharayut* as one of our core values, I was able to implement the 36 hour/year requirement, and make a kid’s diploma depend on it. I don’t think I could have explained that requirement as easily to kids, to parents, and frankly to teachers if I didn’t have the core value to back me up.”

“But what do you think about the core values educationally, Binny?” asked Eli. “Shoshana’s been questioning how we can have so many and have them really make an impact on the kids.”

“Actually, I think there’s some truth to that,” said Binny, pulling over the chair on the other side of Eli’s desk. “May I?” he asked Eli.

“Sure, happy to have you join us. This is important.”

“Developmentally,” continued Binny, “I don’t believe they need to be hit over the head with the names of the core values at every turn. Sure, we should mention them at different times. For instance, when I interview prospective 8<sup>th</sup> graders, I let

<sup>9</sup> Volunteer work that helps others in the community.

them know that during the interview, I will be mentioning the Five Core Values and that by the end, I will expect them to repeat to me what the five are — so I flag it up front, even before they enter the high school. But I also think they’re absorbing them just through their normal activities — you know, the Chinukh’s *acharei ha-ma’asim nimshachim ha-levavot*<sup>10</sup>: they’re picking up the values just by doing the stuff they do every day.”

“Really, Binny?” countered Shoshana. “I’m not so sure. First, we know our goal is for them to internalize the values, which would mean we would see the value expressed outside of school. But you told me last May that you want to work on the problem of kids davening on Sundays, or learning Torah outside of school, because parents say so few kids do it. How can we be sure they’re absorbing a value if they only do it when we tell them to or the school’s structure requires them? Doesn’t that suggest they haven’t internalized Torah yet?”

“Among *adults* — administrators, board members, parents — the core values come out sounding so cute and delicious and sweet. But let me give you an example of the adults having constructed a kind of bubble around themselves, without including the kids. The Veterans Day program here is a big deal, and it should be — nation’s capital nearby, lots of veterans in the community — I get it. It’s wonderful. But I’ve heard you and other adults talk about this program in the context of *acharayut*, responsibility to our society that these veterans displayed and which we then go out and have the kids do community service, which is all true. But at last fall’s program, I listened carefully from beginning to end: the word *acharayut* wasn’t mentioned *once* throughout the whole program. Not once. Maybe there are some kids who will get the message subliminally, but I think we have to do a much better job checking that they’re hearing the value and not just doing the activity. We just can’t assume they’re going to figure it out on their own.”

“Point well taken, Shoshana,” answered Eli, as he pondered his disappointment over the missed opportunity to link the assembly to a core value. He moved over to his desk and took

<sup>10</sup> Loosely translated as “The heart follows one’s deeds” — the notion that values are inculcated and absorbed by regular action rather than by frontal speech, cited by the anonymous *Sefer ha-Chinukh* (13th century), mitzvah #20.

a sticky note, jotting this down and affixing it to the side of his computer screen. “Binny, that’s something worth bringing up at the administrators meeting we have scheduled before school starts. You both know that at the new teacher orientation, I always underscore the Five Core Values, but I see now you’re right — I may use it more as an organizing principle about what’s important to us here at Maimonides. Maybe I should emphasize it as a pedagogic tool as well. Binny, let’s talk later about mentioning this to the department chairs to talk to their faculty about how we can bring out the values more often to the students, and make the link between activities and the values more explicit.”

“Isn’t that why you started the Rosh Chodesh Assembly last year, Shoshana?” said Binny, “to make the Core Values more prominent in the school? The student awards for each value were a really great idea, as was giving it to one adult as well. All the kids rave about it.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about, Binny. I wanted to raise awareness of the core values among the kids, show them that they actually mean something. They have to participate and be active in them, not just passively absorb them. In the same vein, when I make announcements after the high school *minyan* in the morning, I try to connect the nice stuff some of them did to the core values, or link it to what we’re offering in the program that day. I want to make it public. I have no idea if I’m succeeding, but as administrators, you guys can’t just make private decisions informed by the values, and expect the kids to understand them. That’s kinda naïve, don’t you think?”

Binny was skeptical. “I don’t agree, Shoshana. First, your decision to have students nominated by others gets lots of kids to be much more attentive to the core values and to their own behavior and that of their friends. Everyone’s on the lookout now for the core values! Remember when that girl won the *acharayut* award because someone noticed her picking up the *siddurim* others left behind every day after *minyan*? She was surprised, but to me, it showed that *other* kids were now aware of what *acharayut* meant, and they were on the lookout for it. Even if they don’t do it that often themselves, I think it’s getting into their consciousness and they’ll remember that way after they leave MHA.

“Second, my sense is that kids are pretty perceptive and pick up on almost everything the adults around them are doing. I think they are getting it. Granted, they may not trot out the Jewish terms *derech eretz* or *acharayut* as much as we would like, but I hear some of them talk about “ethics” or “being nice” and to me, they’re probably just using a more culturally acceptable word. But that’s still a success.

“Finally, I would say with any group of kids, you’re going to have some that are ho-hum — possibly about everything — while others will get excited and find real value in these five things. That’s normal in any high school, with any group of teens. Bottom line: you have to be patient. It takes time.

“So I think we’re actually doing pretty okay. We shouldn’t beat ourselves up over this.”

Eli wanted to bring the conversation back to Modern Orthodoxy, MHA’s acknowledged identity. “Shosh also made the point that we have too many core values. To me, I think what Modern Orthodoxy is all about is the *blend*, the *balance* of the five — we don’t take one or two and put them above every other one. To be Modern Orthodox, as I see it, is to aim for all five values, even if that’s a large number to work with.”

Binny responded quickly — he had thought about this a lot, both in his own life and as the administrator of a high school. “I’m not sure the five values necessarily define Modern Orthodoxy in some ideological way, Eli. ‘Balance’ makes it sound like all five have ideal amounts relative to the others, as if too much of one or too little of another is bad. What we really believe is that all these things are important, and we want students to experience them regularly and even to experience them in some tension. Sure, there are students with different emphases and that is okay. We have to be realistic about our final product. Students are not all going to come out with all five, or with the same emphases or balance. If you ask me, we are proud of students who will serve as supporters of Jewish life out of a sense of *acharayut*, even if they don’t learn or daven three times a day — though I certainly hope they would, and would at least know how to daven if they wanted to.

“For our community — and talking to some of my colleagues around the country, I would quickly say we’re blessed that our values reflect the same values of almost our entire parent body

— I think that’s the best we could strive for, and I also think it’s a good thing. To me, we have to let parents and kids know that we have an ideal, but you’re not excluded if you don’t hew exactly to the ideal, that there’s a place for you in Judaism and even in Orthodoxy if you strike a different balance, or if you focus on a few, rather than all, of the values. Maybe we could do a better job of being explicit about it, or moving the core values to the surface during class time and programming. But I would wager your average graduate could identify the things we at Maimonides deem important — and those, to me, are Modern Orthodoxy. You can’t leave here thinking Judaism isn’t important, or that a secular education and a career enmeshed in the world is a grudging reality — we embrace both wholeheartedly! Same with *derech erez*, or *acharayut*, or Israel. Those are all important. We’re certainly not perfect at it, but it’s a lot better than pursuing one or two values incessantly — in my experience, that turns kids off. They end up seeing it as indoctrination — you know how skeptical, or cynical, they can be — and just tune out.”

“Do you think everyone here shares your view, Binny?” asked Shoshana.

Binny paused to think for a moment how he wanted to say what was on his mind. “I know they don’t, Shosh. For instance, last year, I heard Miriam<sup>11</sup> say at an administrators’ meeting that *Torah* and *chochmah* are the highest of the five core values, and we have to give them more time. If not, parents will go elsewhere. At a basic level, I think that’s right — after all, this is an academic institution with structure and expectations; the academics make it all possible. So while they’re in the school, I can’t really allow students to pick and choose the values they’d like to emphasize over the four years — you can’t pick *Torah* here and not take general studies classes, or you can’t make *acharayut* your calling and ignore your classes. Nevertheless, while we do have requirements here, I would want students to leave here thinking that we were not boxing them into a pre-made form, insisting that they must be a *talmid chacham* or math or science PhD to be considered a success. At the same time, I would hope that for the last three — *derech erez*, *acharayut* and Israel — there would be no debate about their

importance throughout one’s life. I struggle with conveying that while they’re in the pressure cooker of high school. I’m always looking for ways to improve that message, and help them appreciate its nuances. That’s one of the reasons we started a one-day seminar after the kids read *Lord of the Flies* — how do we get them to respect people who are different? It’s a delicate balance, especially during the teen years of black-and-white thinking. But that’s what we’re here for — to help them learn the importance of a lot of different things, of various values, and to give them tools to help them figure out the right balance for themselves.”

“But Binny,” continued Shoshana, “before you walked in Eli and I were discussing the core values and how they worked. You and Eli both seem to be saying that for you, the values are a great set of organizing principles to help you do your administrative work. That’s great, and sounds good, but to be totally honest, I’m not even sure that deep down that’s what’s going on. Let’s go back to the Veterans Day assembly. If *acharayut* were genuinely a core value, then we’d be thinking of ways to instill that in our kids, right? But to me, I get the feeling that someone thought doing a Veterans Day program was a nice idea — and it is! — and then someone else said, ‘Oh! That is a great idea! And that connects with *acharayut*!’ You see, it started with the program, and then got connected to the value after the fact. That’s not what a value should do in a school, certainly not a *core* value.”

“To be totally honest, Shosh,” said Binny, “I don’t see what’s wrong with that. Maybe we’re just arguing over semantics, and the core values are not ‘core’ enough for you, but to me, we are guided pretty consistently by these five broadly framed principles or values — we’re always bouncing them around in our head, thinking of ways to do them better and more often. You know how we work here — we’re very open to ideas all the time. So if and when an idea comes up, it’s good that we can link it to a value — it shows it’s consistent with our mission as a Modern Orthodox school.”

“But doesn’t the vagueness bother you, Binny?” countered Shoshana. “I hear kids talk about that a lot, especially the student leaders. Talk to them s’more. If it were truly a guiding core value, we’d be asking ourselves: What does ‘Torah’ mean: all things Judaic? Don’t you think we should be able to hold

<sup>11</sup> The Dean of Students in MHA’s Middle School.

what we currently do up against the core value and say “we need to do a better job” or to do it differently? For instance, in the school’s materials, we say that ‘Torah’ includes a relationship with God — that’s nice language, but where in fact do we do that? When do we work on that relationship with the kids? Do we talk about it? Are we comfortable with a kid being here for 12 years and never substantively talking about that relationship other than in kindergarten or first grade, because I’ll ask you to show me where that relationship is mentioned in the Chumash curriculum or in the Talmud curriculum. How many teachers actually say Hashem’s name when they’re not davening or quoting a passuk? Why do you think I made those ‘Hashem is great’ stickers that I wear and give out to kids? Sure, it’s corny, but if we don’t make these values real, if the values don’t tell us proactively how we should do things, can we really call them values at all?”

Eli re-entered the conversation. “Shoshana, I may have to put on my administrator’s hat again to respond, and I suspect it’s not going to sit that well with you, but we have to be realistic. For values to do the work you want them to, they have to be specific in many ways and give clear instructions, like you said. But in my experience, the more specific you are, the less freedom it gives for application in real life. I heard the board chair say this at a recent board meeting — ‘vagueness is our friend.’ Personally, I wouldn’t have phrased it that way, but a *general* value is really helpful. Sure, we could have extremely clear and detailed values, but then we’d be strait-jacketed, with a rigid curriculum and a faculty who all look alike

— something which is not only impractical, but you know it’s something I don’t believe in. I want our students to see the many ways to live a Jewishly meaningful life, even within Orthodoxy. And like Binny said, we’d also have to accept families from a pretty narrow range of Modern Orthodoxy, which none of us wants to do.

“While you may be right that a vague core value does not allow you to seriously assess its implementation, nevertheless as I said earlier, I think keeping the five all together does give us some critical tools to evaluate how we’re doing, whether we need to spend more time on *derech eretz* or whether *chochmah* is starting to eclipse other values.

“Shosh, wouldn’t you say this is how you parent your own kids? You’ve got *general* — not “vague” — values and principles to guide you in being a mother, but I’m sure you use plenty of latitude in applying them. And that’s normal, good, and healthy. That’s what we do here, too.”

“Okay, okay, I see your points. Looks like I’m going to remain a ‘conscientious objector’ to the Five Core Values. Maybe my brain is simply hard-wired for the classroom, where every lesson has one or two clear, measurable goals — you know, all that ‘Big Idea’ stuff and ‘essential questions’ in UBD. Not the worst thing in the world. But in 30 years, when we’re ready to retire, I want to have a big reunion of all Maimonides alumni — the thousands of kids who will have graduated since the Core Values were introduced — and I want them to answer one question: How many of the five can you still name?”

### Questions for Further Consideration:

1. Does your school include multiple values in its vision or mission statement? If so, how does it implement them all? When there is tension, how is priority or emphasis determined?
2. In general, does your school check to see if the values it deems important are being absorbed by the students and/or the school community? If so, how?
3. In the conversation about the core values between Eli, Shoshana and Binny, some considerations revolved around adults, both in and out of the building, while others relate more to students. Which do you think have greater importance in a school, and why?
4. For students to absorb values, do you think they must be explicit and repeatedly stressed, or can they be taken in more subliminally? Would the different strategies yield different outcomes down the road, years after graduation?
5. Can a school successfully balance and implement multiple values if the parent body is not fully on board with all of them (put another way, the more homogeneous the school population, the more values can be safely embraced)? Why or why not?