

What Should a Yeshiva High School Graduate Know, Value and be Able to Do?

Moshe Sokolow

Biography:

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The content objectives in *limmudei godesh* that follow are intended to prompt (or even provoke) discussion among yeshiva high school educators who are seeking to maximize their curricular and instructional efforts. Without a fixed external reference point, it is difficult to navigate even familiar terrain; without an objective standard, it is difficult to assess progress and accomplishment. These guidelines are homegrown and homespun; they represent my individual opinions predicated upon extensive observation, intensive analysis, and a modicum of discussion amongst colleagues and students at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration of Yeshiva University.

It is my hope that these guidelines will be used to measure the effectiveness of current curricula in the subject matter areas that comprise the traditional *limmudei godesh* curriculum. I am committed to all of the objectives I have delineated, but not obsessively so; I invite your responses and suggestions. From a spirited debate over what a yeshiva high school graduate should know, do and be, we can extrapolate together the guidelines we need to insure that our students meet both our most stringent requirements as well as our highest expectations.

I. NON-SUBJECT SPECIFIC AREAS

Students will develop a positive attitude towards:

- Torah study as a lifelong commitment
- *Mitsvah* observance as a way of life
- Religious authority as a guide to both Orthodoxy and orthopraxis
- Jewish communal service (including education) as a means of fulfilling our national destiny as well as realizing one's personal ambitions

Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- Read *TaNakh* and *Siddur* with proper vocalization and punctuation

- Locate classical texts by means of either a concordance or computerized data base
- Parse a sentence identifying the conjugations of verbs and the declension of nouns
- Anticipate exegetical questions and answers
- Validate those questions and answers through reference to appropriate commentaries
- Qualify those interpretations through a display of critical thinking, ranging from problem-solving, through inferential and divergent thinking, to evaluation and creativity

II. TANAKH

- Students will be able to list the names of the 24 canonical books of *TaNaKH* in their customary order, and indicate the names of their authors/redactors according to *hazek*.
- Students will be acquainted with the principal claims of biblical criticism regarding the authorship of the Torah, and their refutation.
- Students will be able to assign the principal medieval and early-modern *parshanim* to their proper historical and geographical milieus and correctly characterize their approaches as *peshat*, *derash*, philosophical, or moralistic.
- Students will demonstrate familiarity and competence with a biblical concordance, lexicon and computerized data base.

A. Humash

- **Bereishit**: Familiarity with full range of narratives of creation, flood, dispersion, and events in the lives of the *avot*, as demonstrated by ability to score 80% on a combination short-answer, multiple-choice test of 30 questions. Students will also show familiarity with the texts of 10-15 selected exegetical comments on *Bereishit*. Students will demonstrate competence in *parshanut* by correctly identifying the authors or styles of previously unseen comments. Several of those comments should comprise differences of opinion, which the students will also be asked to resolve (e.g., Rashi v. Ibn Ezra v. Ramban on Nimrod; Rashi vs. *Tosafot* on Rivkah's age at marriage)
- **Shemot**: Familiarity with full range of narratives of the oppression, slavery, redemption and exodus, as demonstrated by ability to score 80% on a short-answer, multiple-choice test of 20 questions; the *peshat* of *Yitro*,

- Mishpatim*, and the details of the *mishkan* and its furnishings. Students will also show familiarity with the texts of 10-15 selected exegetical comments on *Shemot*. Students will demonstrate competence in *parshanut bilkhatit* by correctly associating contemporary ritual and ethical laws with their scriptural roots (e.g., *Shabbat*)
- **Vayiqra**: Students will also show familiarity with the texts of 10-15 selected exegetical comments on *Vayiqra*. Students' understanding of *qorbanot* will be measured by their ability to differentiate among related major categories such as: *olah*, *batat*, *asham*, *shelamim*, *meanhot* and *nesakhim*. Students will be asked to derive contemporary consequences and morals from *parashat Qedoshim*.
- **Be-midbar**: Students will show familiarity with events that transpired during the sojourn in the wilderness, in general, and the ability to distinguish between events of year 1 and year 40, in particular, as demonstrated by ability to score 80% on a combination short-answer, multiple-choice test of 30 questions. Students will be asked to derive contemporary consequences and morals from the stories of Qorah and Bil'am, and to distinguish the major structures of holiday *qorbanot* (e.g., *Sukkot*).
- **Devarim**: Students will show familiarity with the singular--first-person, recapitulative--nature of *Devarim* by comparing and contrasting a number of narrative reports between *Devarim* and earlier books (e.g., *meragelim*), as well as the restatement of *halakhot* in *Devarim* (e.g., the "second" *luhot*). Students will display particular appreciation for biblical poetry by identifying instances of synonymous parallelism and word-pairs in *Ha'azinu* and *Ve-zot ha-berakbah*.

B. *Nevi'im*

- Students will show familiarity with the “story line” of *Nevi'im Rishonim* (NR) from Yehoshua through the destruction of the first Temple, by scoring 80% on a short-answer/multiple-choice examination of 50 questions. Students will be acquainted with the concept of “apostolic” prophecy (*sblihut*) and illustrate it by means of a “compare & contrast” question focusing on the respective prophetic careers of Moshe, Shemuel, Eliyahu and Yirmiyahu. Students will also demonstrate appreciation for the lessons we learn from the lives of characters in NR by discussing the triumphs and failings of King David.
- Students will be able to assign the *Nevi'im Aharonim* (NA) to their proper historical eras according to either information provided by the text, indications provided by the content, or the opinions of *haẓal* and *parshanut*. They will display familiarity with the major approaches to classical prophecy, i.e., Rambam and Yehudah Halevi. They will demonstrate their appreciation for the concern the NA took with matters of both ritual and ethics by citing examples of each from at least three different books. They will show their understanding and appreciation for the prophetic visions of *aharit ha-yamim*.

C. *Ketuvim*:

- Students will demonstrate an overall recognition of the major characteristics of *Ketuvim Gedolim* by correctly identifying—on the basis of content or distinctive idiom—the sources of 30 quotations from *Tehillim*, *Mishlei* and *Iyyov*. Students will be able to discuss the authorship of *Tehillim*, the distinctive character of Biblical wisdom literature, and the question of theodicy.
- Students will know the “story line” of Ruth, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah; recognize the contents of *Kobelet* and

Eikhab; discuss the question of literality vs. allegory in re: *Sbir ha-shirim*, and describe how the historiographical perspective of *Divrei ha-yamim* differs from that of *Melakhim*.

III. TORAH SHE-BE'AL PEH (*Mishnah, Talmud, Halakhah, Laws and Customs*)

A. General

- Students will list, in order, the six *sedarim* of Mishnah, and provide a brief précis of each.
- Students will be able to list two-three *masekhtot* in each of *Seder Mo'ed*, *Seder Nashim* and *Seder Neziqin*.
- Students will demonstrate familiarity with the traditional “*tsurat ha-daf*” as well as the “geography” of the “back of the book.” Students will be able to assign the principal medieval and early-modern *mefarshim* to their proper historical and geographical milieus.
- Students will list and briefly describe the constituent books of the *Mishneh Torah*.
- Students will list the four divisions of the *Shulhan Arukh*, and list several topic areas of each division.
- Students will be familiar with several contemporary halakhic works and demonstrate the ability to “navigate” them successfully.
- Students will appreciate the roots of *torah she-be'al peh* in *torah she-bi-khetav* and the differences in priority and practice that are traditionally assigned to *de-oraita* and *de-rabbanan*.
- Students will understand the differences among *halakhab*, *minbag*, *hiddur* and *humrah* and be able to cite several such distinctions as they apply to ritual practice.
- Students will understand the concept of *mitsvot aseib she-ba-ẓeman geraman* and illustrate it
- Students will understand the concepts of *le-kbatehilab* and *be-di'avad* and illustrate them
- Students will understand the concept of *lifnim mi-sburat ha-din* and illustrate it

B. Specific Subject-Matter

- Laws and customs relating to general daily Jewish life and private prayer.
- Laws and customs relating to public prayer and the synagogue, including *nusab ha-tefillah* for weekdays, *Shabbat*, holy days and high holy days.
 - The synagogue, the *beit midrash*, their special objects and physical arrangement; proper behavior within them
 - Women and public prayer
- The structure and functioning of the Jewish calendar
- Laws and customs relating to dietary laws (*kashrut*)
- Laws and customs relating to *Shabbat*
- Laws and customs relating to Jewish holy days (*mo'adei yisra'el*)
- Laws and customs relating to Israeli significant days
- Laws and customs relating to the Land of Israel and Jerusalem

IV. JEWISH HISTORY (classical, medieval, early-modern and contemporary)

- Students will appreciate Jewish history as the record of the covenantal relationship forged by God and the Jewish nation at Sinai and at *arvat mo'av*.
- Students will appreciate Jewish history as the arena in which God's providence is regularly on display.
- Students will acknowledge: that history is a process that affects, and is affected by, individuals as well as societies and nations;
 - ... that the actions of individuals and societies influence history; and
 - ... that the Torah dictates which actions will influence history for better or worse
- Students will be able to trace modern and contemporary Jewish communities back to their origins in the classical or medieval periods and appreciate how

their different origins and historical experiences account for their different complexions and attitudes.

- Students will appreciate the centrality of the Land of Israel throughout Jewish history and illustrate it by reference to specific events in each of the four main periods of history.
- Students will appreciate the role of *halakhab* as a unifying force throughout Jewish history and illustrate it by reference to specific events in each of the four main periods.

V HEBREW LANGUAGE/LITERATURE

- Students will show an appreciation for *leshon ha-qodesh* by initiating and utilizing opportunities to speak in Hebrew within both the formal and informal curricula.
- Students will appreciate the value of Hebrew as a tool for decoding classical Jewish texts.
- Students will appreciate Hebrew as a tool for contemporary intra-Jewish communication.
- Students will demonstrate passive facility in Hebrew by scoring 80% on a test combining reading and aural comprehension of classical and modern Hebrew texts.
- Students will demonstrate active facility in Hebrew by scoring 70% on a test requiring translation into Hebrew of individual words, phrases (including idiomatic expressions) and paragraphs.

VI. JEWISH PHILOSOPHY/ *MAHSHEVET YISRAEL*

Students will:

- understand Rambam's 13 principles of faith and their relevance to modern issues of faith and belief
- understand how these principles make Torah Judaism unique among all other faiths and beliefs in our times, including agnosticism and atheism

- describe the tension between *hashgahah* *peratit* and *behirah* *hofsbit*
- recognize God as creator of the universe
- recognize Man as the acme of creation.
 - understand Rav Soloveitchik's distinction between Adam I-Adam II
- recognize the Jewish nation as the elect of God
 - understand the relationship of Jews and non-Jews
- recognize prophecy as God's means of revelation to man
 - understand the views of Rambam and Halevi on prophecy
- recognize *TaNakh* as the literary record of revelation
- recognize *hazal* as the keepers of the tradition of its proper interpretation

VII. ORTHODOX COMMUNAL LIFE

- Understand the nature of a community that lives by *halakhab*
 - what a *she'eilah* is; when and how is it asked?
 - what qualifications are required of a rabbi to answer *she'eilot*
 - who are the *gedolei ha-dor* today
 - *emunat hakhamim*
 - what is a *bet din*, with what issues does it deal, and how does it arrive at a verdict?
 - what are the procedures, for example, of marriage, conversion or divorce?
- Laws and customs relating to interpersonal relationships with other Jews, and with non-Jews

- Belonging and commitment to family, community, nation and humanity
- Recognition of *tselem eloqim* in all people
- Love and respect for oneself and others' person and property; courtesy
- Active caring and thoughtfulness - *gemilut hesed*—toward others
- *Tsedaqah* and *tiqqun olam*
- Special respect towards parents, elders, teachers and spiritual and communal leaders
- Appropriate relationships between the genders at various ages
- Difference between *taryag mitsvot* and the seven Noahide laws
- Implications and responsibilities of *am segulah* and *or la-goyyim*

- Laws and customs relating to the Jewish life cycle, personal and family life
 - *berit milah*
 - naming
 - *pidyon ha-ben*
 - *bar mitsvah* and *bat mitsvah*
 - medical ethics and *halakhab*
 - sexuality and modesty
 - engagement and marriage
 - family purity laws
 - death, burial and mourning

Responses

Jack Bieler:

Dr. Moshe Sokolow's comprehensive compilation of "What Should A Yeshiva High School Graduate Know, Value and be Able to Do" is certainly worthy of discussion by Jewish day school educators. Possessing a sense of what an ideal graduate should carry away with him/her from his/her formative Jewish education contributes to properly and responsibly designing the formal and informal educational experiences that a school needs to offer in order to even potentially achieve significant results for at least the great majority of its student body. And while "Torah study as a lifelong commitment" heads the list of "Non-subject-specific areas," considerable empirical and anecdotal evidence indicates that graduation from high school marks the end of most individuals' intense formal Jewish educations (with the exception of post-high-school study in Israel), thereby sharpening the impetus to make the student's day school years as meaningful and personally transformative as possible.

Either because of personal inclination or a difference in religious educational philosophy, I would tend to devote more time and attention to defining and developing those admittedly more elusive and esoteric "Non-

subject-specific-areas" (specifically the section headed "Students will develop a positive *attitude* towards:"—notably in the title, "Know" precedes "Value", even as in the body of the listing, "Values" constitute the very first section discussed) than to subject areas such as *TaNakh*, *Torah she'be'al pib*, Jewish philosophy, etc. Evaluation of student achievement is so much more difficult when it comes to attitudes; but aren't attitudes going to serve as the basis for whether or not everything else that has been learned will be retained, practiced, applied, reflected upon, and play a decisive role in the graduate's lifestyle and general world outlook?

(For those who would like to consider my development of just those areas within a day school framework, see <http://my.mli.org.il/visions/articles/Newsletter/open/Bieler.pdf>)

Rabbi Jack Bieler is the Rabbi of Kemp Mill Synagogue. He has taught in day schools for over thirty years, written extensively about the philosophy of Jewish education, and served as a mentor for Bar Ilan University's Lookstein Center for Jewish Education Principals Seminar.

Yaakov Blau:

The general community is indebted to Dr. Soklow for his fine article, which serves as an excellent springboard for discussion. In that spirit, below are comments on several points that the article raised.

General Issues:

The article lists what a yeshiva day school graduate should know, but does not differentiate between levels within those

schools. While the list is quite appropriate for someone in one of the higher classes, it is not realistic to expect the achievement of all those goals for someone in a lower track and, I would argue, even for someone in a middle track. Students in lower tracks deserve the same first-rate education as those in higher tracks, but having unrealistic goals is not doing them a service.

Second, day schools can only devote so much of the day to *limmudei qodesh*, and the article assumes that many more areas are being covered than can be done, if a school is to take both its *limmudei qodesh* and *limmudei hol* seriously. Additionally, many of those areas suggested in the article are covered, albeit in a less depth, in elementary school (e.g. early *nevi'im risbonim*) and do not belong on the list of goals for a high school.

It could be that Dr. Sokolow, when suggesting that the students be tested on all the various areas that he feels that they ought to know, was advocating that high schools give tests even for areas covered in elementary school. It was unclear, however, if those quizzes, that he repeatedly suggested be given, were to be given along the way or at the end of high school. If it was the latter, I submit that it is highly unlikely that schools will test their students on all those areas at once. Moreover, I question whether a school would or should not graduate a student for not being able to answer all those questions at once.

Despite the misgivings mentioned above, overall I feel that the content-based parts of the article, by that I mean what material to ensure is covered, are very much in place. The requirements of what "beliefs" should be achieved are in my view more problematic. Is it truly meaningful to list all the beliefs that we would want our students to absorb? I would imagine that there is little disagreement about what values we want our students to internalize; the meaningful discussion should be about how to impart those values. One also

should be careful about the fine line between teaching and indoctrination, and I feel that the line is crossed several times in the article. Let me cite two examples. The first is the stating as a fact that God's hand is clear in history, something which I personally do not see as clear and apparent unless one starts with the assumption that it must be true. The second is the suggestion that teachers and students list the *gedolei ha-dor*, a list that I doubt all of our schools would find common ground on, even among the Modern Orthodox and certainly less so if the *haredi* view is part of the discussion.

Specific Issues

In terms of the specific content, I question students need to know, by heart, *hazal's* list of who wrote the various books of *TaNakh*. They should certainly be exposed to the *gemara* in *Bava Batra*, but instant recall from memory is not necessarily crucial.

Teaching about biblical criticism, while certainly an important area to discuss, can do more harm than good in the hands of the wrong educator and needs to be approached with extreme caution. Dr. Sokolow posits that students be able to identify the location of random *pesukim* in *ketuvim*, but the educational significance of the average student being able to do so is unclear, especially in light of other more pressing educational aims and goals that we hope to accomplish. Additionally, I question whether it is the school's job to teach *nusah ha-tefilah*, as this properly belongs in province of the synagogue and home. Finally, I think that discussing women and prayer, without a school context and an atmosphere of openness and the ability to ask really difficult questions that have no easy solutions is a risky proposition for most schools. It may, in fact, generate a whole slew of problems to which teachers will be hard pressed to give satisfying answers.

As I stated in the beginning of my response, Dr Sokolow's article is fine start to what will

hopefully be a continuing dialogue among educators, as we learn from each other's ideas.

Rabbi Yaakov Blau teaches *TaNakh*, Talmud and Social Studies at the Frisch Yeshiva High School in Paramus, NJ.

Erica Brown:

Dr. Moshe Sokolow sets out an ambitious and exciting program for yeshiva day school students in his paper "What Should a Yeshiva High School Graduate Know, Value and be Able to Do?" Whether or not this plan is realistic is another matter, given the background of many such students, the time pulls of a dual curriculum, and an already exhausting day. What Dr. Sokolow does convincingly is raise the bar on what students should know and be capable of achieving. In addition, he sets a standard for learning and for outcome-driven teaching that is rarely achieved in Judaic studies on the high school level.

I have a few specific comments about the content and one larger question about the general pedagogic stance of the paper:

Specific Educational Goals:

In the *TaNakh* section, I would not rank exposure to the "principal claims of biblical criticism" so early on, either in his list of expectations or in the developmental stages of high school education. Preparing students for what they may encounter in university and elsewhere is fine in the senior year when they are well-grounded in *TaNakh* but that was not made clear. There are both religious sensitivities and issues of development that need to be addressed and are merely assumed here.

In his approach to specific biblical books, I would have liked to see broader literary themes that appear across books and are foundational to biblical literature generally. I did not find any outright emphasis on close-reading, literary techniques that I think would have been

helpful. Children are naturally interpretive beings and, more than stress what they should know, we should be able to help them acquire reading skills for life.

Aside from women and public prayer, Dr. Sokolow makes no other mention of gender issues. It gets no attention in his section on Orthodox Communal Life. That is a lacuna in my estimation. Students need to know, both the girls and boys we teach, that gender issues are a serious matter today and are one of the ways that we are wrestling with and being thoughtful of the pressures that modernity exerts on tradition and how we deal with such encounters.

Many of the issues presented in the philosophy section were medieval in scope and not contemporary in feel. We need to discuss evolution and creation with students. We need to struggle with them on issues that are at the center of their lives, not necessarily at the center of Maimonides' life. The area of *Torah u-Madda* was absent, as were issues of doubt and the role of reason.

General Educational Issues

The larger issue for me is a function of this last critique. This is a very cognitively-based program of learning. And while it adds much needed rigor to Judaic studies on the high school level, there is something slightly arid about it that makes me wonder if it will reach children where they are and not only where we think they should be. In the language of education, there seems to be more stress on authenticity to original primary and secondary sources than there is on relevance to the lives

of children in day schools today. Certainly this program is not realistic for students with learning accommodations, who form a large part of many school populations. It had the feel throughout of an honors-only appeal. But even then...

So many students today are not interested in the intellectual depth of Judaism. That does not mean that we deny them its riches but that we think more experientially about how to reach them so that Judaism truly matters. To quote from John Kotter, a leadership thinker, "People change what they do less because they are given an *analysis* that shifts their *thinking* than because they are *shown* a truth that influences their *feelings*" (*The Heart of Change*, Harvard Business School Press, 2002, p. 1; emphasis in the original). The italics here are important. I would challenge any day school educator today to ask his or her students a most basic question: Why Be Jewish?

In formulating this question, I am not trying to reduce a sophisticated, demanding set of expectations to spiritual babble. I am trying to understand how, given what Dr. Sokolow presents, he accomplishes the first category of objectives he sets out, namely: Torah study as a lifelong commitment, *mitzvah* observance as a way of life, religious authority as a guide and Jewish communal service as a career choice. With all the rigor we can attach to *studying* Judaism, how will we add meaning to the actual *living* of Judaism?

Unquestionably, we have to add depth and somewhat uniform standards to Judaic studies on the high school level. We also need to add more experimental forms of study and other modalities of learning, in line with research we have on multiple intelligences in the classroom. We need to provide students with a richer range of Jewish experiences to add heft to their observance. We also need to speak to our

students more and find out what has made a difference to them in their learning.

Following some research by Susan Handelman, I once asked a group of teachers to have their students write them anonymous letters about where they "were at" in their religious lives. In a subsequent meeting, we reviewed the results and spoke openly about what they learned in the process. One excellent teacher was stunned by the lengthy correspondence she received from one of her most intelligent students (she was able to guess the student's identity). It was a heart-breaking record of how little she has taken in of what she has learned in her yeshiva career because she has deep-seated theological issues that have never been surfaced by any teacher to date. She was in such a posture of doubt that she was able to get good grades but not able to integrate what she was learning with whom she was becoming. Clearly the exercise opened up this teacher's mind and heart to the inner life of one of her students. She had no idea of the pain or the struggle. And then there are all of those students who are not struggling. They are just profoundly bored and indifferent. They study for grades (or not) and just let this wash over them. No meaning. No wonder. No real learning.

I thank Dr. Sokolow for provoking this important conversation. It will force us to reconsider what we mean when we say that we offer a dual-curriculum where the general studies far outshines the Judaic content in scope, methodology and sequencing. It also forces us to ask the more profound identity questions of when the "how" and "what" are eclipsed by the "why".

Dr. Erica Brown is the Scholar-in-Residence for The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington and its Managing Director for Education and Leadership

Aaron Frank:

At our final high school faculty meeting of the school year, I shared with the teachers that I see two major challenges for Jewish education. The first is to battle ignorance. Battling ignorance is done through content acquisition. One must be armed with the tools of our *masorah*, the knowledge of subjects such as *TaNakh*, *Torah she'be'al peh*, Jewish History, Jewish Thought and Hebrew in order to be an educated Jew. Achieving mastery in these areas will create literate Jews who will stand up to misrepresentations and misinterpretations of Judaism, both from within the Jewish community and from the external world. Dr. Sokolow's comprehensive exposition of specific content knowledge is an incredibly valuable tool for any Jewish high school to use as a framework when reflecting on curricular content and knowledge goals.

But battling ignorance is not enough. The second element we discussed was the goal of helping students to find relevance in Judaism. This is similar to what was referred to in the title of Dr. Sokolow's piece as "valuing" and throughout the article as "appreciation." While I do not take issue with any of the elements of Judaism that Dr. Sokolow expects students to appreciate, an expansion of the necessity for discussions surrounding relevance is important.

The most important guidance we can provide for our students is to answer the simple question, "why is this relevant?" In a world of unprecedented freedom for Jews in the United States and a commitment to universalism, why is Israel relevant today? In a world of individual choice, why is Torah law still significant? In a world of post-modernism, why is Jewish community still important? We must, in our classrooms, in our assemblies and, certainly in our informal discussions with students, show them the relevance of our

masorah in everyday modern life. While every subject in the school could and should touch upon this need, I believe that the Jewish history classroom is most critical in helping students shape their identity and their story as contemporary Jews.

Over the past few years at our school, it has been the faculty of our high school Jewish history department that has taken the role of placing our heritage in context. By exploring how the Jewish people have engaged with each other and with the surrounding societies in which they lived throughout history, our curriculum helps explore Jewish identity through social and communal context. Through studying the struggles of their ancestors to maintain Jewish tradition while still engaging with the world around them, students see that their own personal struggles to address the dichotomy of tradition and modernity are part of something much bigger than themselves. Rather than seeing their questions of relevance as singular and individual to them, they realize that Jews have always struggled with these issues, and that they can turn to their own history for insight into their questions.

As our Jewish history faculty began to understand the extent of the power that Jewish history had to speak to our students and connect them to our people's past, present and future, they decided to develop a new course for our ninth grade, implemented this past year, called "Jewish Social Studies." Divided into three parts—*Ameinu*, *Moladeteinu*, and *Artseinu*—the course uses history and other social sciences to engage students in thinking about questions of Jewish peoplehood and who is a Jew, our relationship to the State of Israel, and our relationship to America. Designed to reflect Beth Tfiloh's mission

¹ For the entire Beth Tfiloh Mission Statement, see <http://www.bethfiloh.com/podium/default.aspx?t=17137>.

statement,¹ our Jewish Social Studies course is intended to provide our newest high schoolers with the tools to address the questions that they grapple with regarding their own personal Jewish identities and philosophies – and the grounding in identification with the Jewish people that will give their Jewish identities relevance.

At Beth Tfiloh, we have found that students take their deepest questions and struggles about Judaism to their Jewish history classrooms. Because their teachers encourage discussion and debate on issues which can sometimes be too controversial for a *TaNakh* or Talmud classroom, and because the students' questions and struggles are placed in a larger context of millennia of similar questions and struggles, students find themselves identifying strongly with the relevance of Jewish history to their lives. At the same time, the Jewish history department is assisted by student perception that history is a “real” academic subject, unlike *TaNakh* or Talmud, which they sometimes mistakenly perceive as religiously coercive and non-academic. Beginning with our ninth grade Jewish Social Studies course, and continuing through the study of medieval Jewish history, modern Jewish history, and the history of Zionism and Israel, Beth Tfiloh high school students have a built-in forum to discuss and debate issues of Jewish identity, peoplehood, religious philosophy and struggles with modernity. This forum has proved enormously fruitful in helping answer that question of relevance for our students.

The success of our Jewish history department in addressing questions of relevance for our students is rooted in the way that Beth Tfiloh encourages questioning and debate regarding all issues in all aspects of the curriculum. Helping students to find their path and their story in this process are role models committed

to creating a community where it is all integrated. In a world where many are minimizing the need for full-day Day Schools.² I would claim that we need teachers in every classroom, in the math and the Talmud classroom and everything in between who can serve as models for students, who can share their stories as Jews and who are leading lives of Jewish meaning.

Students must not only see that the curriculum speaks to modern issues but that there are adults who are committed to living a life of Torah who have not checked their commitment to modern values such as gender, racial and economic equality and many others at the door.

With this in mind, I would simply add to Dr. Sokolow's thoughts that in order to be a Yeshiva High School Graduate,³ students should understand the value, relevance and preciousness of the treasure of Torah and Judaism. They should engage with it, wrestle with it and dialogue with it. They should embark on a lifelong journey to connect with God, to the Jewish people and the entire world. Students should believe in their hearts that their voice matters in the ongoing discourse of our people. They should use Jewish values to inform their life in the synagogue, in the university, in the gym and in the *beit midrash*.

While the knowing is certainly critical, ultimately, in our schools it is a means to an end, a means to the ultimate goal—the goal of making Torah matter. For, in the end, if Judaism matters to our students, we will create a generation that will put forth the light of our tradition to our people and to the entire world.

Rabbi Aaron Frank is Principal of Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community High School in Baltimore MD.

² Certainly we live in extremely challenging economic times that require much rethinking in the day school world. For a discussion on this issue, please see my article, “Grassroots Resource Merging: A Collaborative Day School Model in a New Economic Order” in *Conversations* 4, Spring, 2009.

³ Beth Tfiloh is certainly a unique day school which is, in many ways, both a yeshiva and a community school.

Mark Gottlieb:

Of the making of books there is no end. Modern Orthodox day school educators might say the same of manufactured curricula, mass produced by some well-intentioned central agency and still sitting on a shelf of many an administrator's bookcase. But by identifying a series of thoughtful content objectives in *limmudei qodesh*, Moshe Sokolow offers something both more useful and—hopefully—more enduring than typical curricular fare. In establishing baselines for the knowledge, belief—and critical skill-sets which a typical (ideal? average?) yeshiva high school graduate should possess, Prof. Sokolow is throwing down an educational gauntlet, proposing a rigorous and largely quantifiable series of standards which our students and schools can be benchmarked against.

By going back to the basics of biblical, rabbinic and practice-oriented literacy, Sokolow eschews some of the more faddish trends in educational theory that have insinuated themselves into our own educational community in favor of the simplicity of the eternal. Of course, this is not to say that the adumbrated objectives are simplistic or easily achieved—on the contrary, they are broad and ambitious, perhaps overly so for our adolescent denizens of a largely post-literate popular culture (“Students will demonstrate...by correctly identifying—on the basis of content or distinctive idiom—the sources of 30 quotations from *Tehillim*, *Misblei* and *Iyyov*. Students will be able to discuss the authorship of *Tehillim*, the distinctive character of biblical wisdom literature, and the question of theodicy”—not easy for the generation weaned on text-messaging and Twitter). But the solidity and unapologetic rigor of Prof. Sokolow's standards are refreshingly bracing, and provide an excellent starting point for serious curricular deliberation.

The cumulative effect of Prof. Sokolow's content objectives, with its focus on cultivating a foundational command of religious textual and cultural literacy, comes down heavily on the side of E.D. Hirsch's traditionalism in those heady debates on educational theory of the last quarter of the past century. Some attention is paid to the application of critical skills and the development of affective, decision-driven (religious) character education associated respectively with Bloom, Kohlberg, Kilpatrick and others; still, the emphasis on basic Jewish literacy is perhaps the most distinctive contribution of Prof. Sokolow's content objectives and a much needed corrective to the general culture's increasing impatience with the written word. On a deeper level, a recovery of religious textual literacy is a *sine-qua-non* for the development of a genuine Jewish worldview or theology of culture, a deliberate way of thinking about everything in the world, from politics and economics to pleasure and purpose, and all points between.

Thomas Mann defined authenticity as a kind of "life full of citations," a way of being that draws on our lived and total engagement with our textuality, one which constructs our consciousness out of the shared storehouse of our sacred scriptures, texts, and sources. Currently, our educational institutions fall far short of this ideal. This lack of Torah literacy—the inability of the vast majority of our students to quote or even simply recognize biblical verses, rabbinic statements, or other sources—if not countered by champions like Sokolow, will preclude all articulations of a genuinely rich and deep religious form of thinking and living. We pray this war of image and sound-byte against the Word is not already lost.

But the border between virtue and vice, in intellectual endeavor as in life, can be quite porous, and the strength of Professor Sokolow's pellucid outline of content objectives for the yeshiva high school graduate—its stark simplicity and focus on content-knowledge—is also its acknowledged limitation.

Many will be familiar with Joseph Schwab's contribution to the professional lexicon of the four "commonplaces" of educational deliberation: student, subject matter, milieu, and teacher. This heuristic may be helpful in structuring some of our observations about both the strengths and limitations of Prof. Sokolow's proposal. Clearly, Sokolow's success is in identifying a rich catalogue of general and subject-specific content objectives; the pedagogical paths to the fear and love of God, both in their affective and cognitive dimensions—the ultimate end of all our educational endeavors—are more difficult to cultivate and assess. In short, while the stated goal here is "What Should a Yeshiva High School Graduate Know, Value and be Able to Do?" there's a lot more "know", than "do" and "be."

Although the syntactical format of Professor Sokolow's content objectives starts with the student as its focus ("Students will be acquainted with the concept of apostolic prophecy, *shlibut*, and illustrate it by means of a compare & contrast question focusing on the respective prophetic careers of Moshe, Shemuel, Eliyahu, and Yirmiyahu," students will x, students will y, etc.) the actual student—the concrete particular, the flesh and blood individual, shaped in a thousand different ways by milieu, culture, community, habit, passion, personality, etc—is very nearly absent from consideration. How do we maintain our desire for clear standards while successfully addressing the interests and abilities of all our students? What is the place of spiritual specialization in our schools and educational institutions? The one-size-fits-all feel of

Sokolow's content objectives may or may not be a shortcoming of such a project, but it certainly merits more attention than the current format permits.

If genuine student-centered consideration plays a minimal role in the listed content objectives, Sokolow is silent on the intellectual and religious disposition, quality and character of the teacher delivering the intended content objectives. Erica Brown has poignantly commented on the question of authenticity and integrity in the practice of teaching ("Sincerity and Authenticity in Teaching," *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 11 ([2002-3]): 264-272) and the significance that the subjective nature of the teacher plays in student learning, especially of the religious kind. Learning is always and necessarily embodied in the person of the teacher, a ubiquitous living text. More needs to be done to ensure that our students' teachers and role-models authentically reflect the richness and depth of the divine bounty-- broad learning, ethical seriousness, and experience-- we are trying to cultivate in our community. If our particular community is to have any lasting success, these qualities of internal coherence and religious purpose, powerfully conveyed by our best teachers in the very lifeblood of their person, may play as substantive a role as any content objective possibly could.

Let me offer a couple of comments addressing specific items in Prof. Sokolow's outline, the first speaking to an issue that Prof. Sokolow courageously names; the other, to an area he curiously nearly ignores.

One of Prof. Sokolow's more suggestive content objectives would fill a lacuna in our educational community many have identified but which few have seriously tackled in practice: "students should be acquainted with the principal claims of biblical criticism regarding the authorship of the Torah and their refutation." Some more philosophically-inclined students may be satisfied with the

cognitive pluralism of Rav Soloveitchik's approach, providing epistemological justification for the jettisoning of questions of historicity, authorship and dating of our sacred text. But, truth be told, this tack has little appeal to students, especially adolescents, who are interested in doing justice to difficult textual or historical questions raised in the wider world of scholarship, looking for concrete resolutions to often intractable problems.

What may be most relevant from Rav Soloveitchik's sidestepping of the critical-historical questions confronting our students—even those who avoid the heterodox courses at university, but want to be free of the self-identification (and accompanying doubt) as intellectual Marranos in the wider world of learning outside the walls of the *beit midrash*—is the implicit acknowledgement that our community must begin to develop a non-apologetic, constructive Orthodox biblical hermeneutic. More promising than Rav Soloveitchik's approach, at least from a pedagogical point of view, of simply bypassing the historical-critical questions, may be Rav Kook's strategy of "building the palace of Torah above" the challenging claims from the world of critical historical scholarship. This is not the forum to say definitively what that theological move would yield in terms of specific content or solutions; it is enough to say that our community needs to develop multiple resources towards a theologically significant account, out of the sources of our *mesorah* (starting with which the *sugya* in *Bava Batra* 14b and the Ibn Ezra's *sod yud bet*), of the maculation of the Torah text. And whether that's through Mordecai Breuer's *behinot* method or other serious intellectual and religious approaches, I think the attempt to introduce critical historical scholarship in the Orthodox day school movement—in age- and developmentally-appropriate contexts, to be sure—is, in fact, long overdue.

Of course, Sokolow's stated goal of "refutation" is not quite right. To say that "students should be acquainted with the principal claims of Biblical criticism regarding the authorship of the Torah and their refutation" is a bit like saying "students should be acquainted with the principal claims of neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory and its refutation." Strictly speaking, both would be unrealistic objectives; even more, this (perhaps unintended) triumphalist framework borders on the intellectually dishonest, and may even cause more damage to the sincere and seeking student if not approached with sophistication and respect for the genuine complexity of the problem. Better to simply say that the case for *Torah mi-Sinai* in the modern intellectual world needs to be strongly made—credibly, with integrity, sensitivity and depth. Again, this may be too much to ask of our population; but there is no doubt that our students—and our *mesorah*—deserve no less.

After examining Sokolow's richly detailed content objectives in *TanNaKH*, I was left wondering whither Talmud? Compared to the discussion of *TanNaKH* standards, Prof. Sokolow's treatment of *Torah she'ba'al peh*, and Talmud specifically, is a bit sparse. This is speculative, but my sense is that Sokolow's relative silence in this area is a function of the very real struggle to articulate a meaningful relationship to Talmud for many in our contemporary audience. Recent conversations, mainly in Israel but slowly trickling stateside, on the omnipresence of Talmud in the traditional yeshiva high school curriculum and the perceived crisis of value looming on the *dati-le'umi* horizon have sharpened the focus of this educational deliberation. Much of the discussion to date has centered around the question of "relevance" in our contemporary Talmud curriculum, with the sides of traditional Brisker analytical study squaring off against the newer schools of applied, contextualized, values-driven interpretation

and teaching. Sokolow may not want to enter into that difficult debate now, but If Talmud is to be more than just an internally-coherent but existentially empty study for our students, much more needs to be said and done. Rav Shagar ז"ל and others in his wake have begun this important work on Talmud as a spiritual and worldview-forming discipline, but Modern Orthodoxy in North America must now play catch-up.

Prof. Sokolow's inclusion of the nature of *she'eilah* (halakhic question posed to a rabbi) as an evaluative norm is important; not only because it acknowledges the central nature of intelligent, contextually-sensitive seeking of religious counsel and authority, something our community and others have struggled to get just right, but because it opens the discussion up to not only what cognitive content we seek to convey to our students, but how we think about our relationship to the world around us, in and out of school, as divinely commanded creatures, servants of God—how and what we *value*, not just what we *know*. In this spirit, and perhaps as a postscript or sequel to Prof. Sokolow's current effort, a series of content—and value-driven—objectives that address what learning English literature, European or American History, Science, etc., would ideally

would look like *in a yeshiva high school* is an important desideratum, as well. If our community is to aspire to produce whole, integrated students, viewing their humanistic and scientific studies not as mere instruments to a career or profession, but as pathways towards creating a more coherent narrative of self, other, and world in relation to God, than this educational enterprise cannot allow a bifurcation between our students' learning and their lives.

Values, cultural context, inspired role-modeling, apprenticeship (*shimmush*) and intellectual coherence—as well as rich and compelling subject-specific content, of course—are all constitutive elements in the shaping of religious character, intellect and personality; content objectives, however clear or useful, do not a worldview make. But let us be grateful for Prof. Sokolow's modest contribution in sketching the scope of both the theological literacy and critical skills necessary to advance, with God's help always, a more vibrant educational community for our students and children.

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