

A Call for Papers in Jewish Education

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The Edah Journal is calling for essays on topics in Jewish education. A defining characteristic of Edah is its interest in integrating Judaism with contemporary theory and practice. As such, we seek to develop a discourse on topics in education that will enrich educators and lay people by focusing on two significant areas of research: educational practice and educational theory.

Let us begin with the practical. Ted Sizer's *Horace* series serves as an excellent point of departure. Formerly dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, Sizer is now chairman of the Coalition of Essential Schools, one of the largest educational reform movements in the United States. The Coalition is grounded on nine basic principles. Considering these principles from the perspective of the Jewish day school system provides a meaningful basis for taking a fresh look at our own educational practice. For example, one of the central tenets of Coalition schools is "less is more", i.e. successfully educating our students should not be assessed on the content transmitted. Focusing on a smaller amount of content in greater depth often allows for greater understanding and stronger retention of what has been learned. The concept has significant implications for an Orthodox curriculum. Thinking carefully about such an issue should generate fruitful thinking about Jewish education regardless of

whether that principle is in fact adopted. It provides fertile ground for incisive discourse on Jewish educational practice.

Another of the 'Nine Principles' states, "The diploma should be awarded upon a successful final demonstration of mastery for graduation – an 'Exhibition'...As the diploma is awarded when earned, the school's program proceeds with no strict age grading and with no system of "credits earned" by "time spent" in class."¹ Two crucial points emanate from this principle. First, meaningful learning should be demonstrated in real ways that reflect the ability of students to use information in a sophisticated and intelligent manner. Exhibitions have been and are being used successfully in many schools around the United States. What possibilities does this present for Judaic Studies programs? Taking education and the integration of ideas seriously demands that we respond thoughtfully to the volumes that have been published on exhibitions, portfolios and other modes of assessment. Second, it suggests that we should stop thinking about education in terms of Carnegie units and time spent over the course of twelve years moving from class to class and fulfilling requirements. We should be presenting clear achievement standards – both personal and academic – that reflect the mission of our particular school.

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¹ Sizer, Ted, *Horace's School* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992), p. 208.

Considering this issue demands significant energy and exchange of ideas. Such discourse would enhance educational dialogue and impact on the practice in our schools.

Sizer's fourth principle states, "Teaching and learning should be personalized to the maximum feasible extent."² This principle demands careful thinking about the varying abilities in a given class and structuring an educational program in a way that will allow the teacher and the school to respond to the needs of each individual student. For this to occur, at least two things must happen. Teachers must be given time to think about their students, plan individualized components to the educational program and have the time to meet with students in a more personal setting than that provided by the large classroom. Prior to that, educators ought to give careful consideration to the goals of the education that is being provided. What do we hope to achieve for our students through their years in our school? What characteristics would a graduate display? What skills should (s)he be in a position to exhibit? How do the goals differ for students with different abilities and strengths? Precisely because these are not questions easily answered, they can generate discussion and thoughtful exchange that will prove rewarding.

These are just three examples of issues that Jewish educators need to explore together in the area of educational practice. There are others. The implications of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences are manifold. Does our traditional educational system educate for analytic intelligence at the expense of moral, social, artistic and emotional intelligence? What balance ought we to strive for, and how do we achieve it in our schools?

Competition in schools has been explored by John Nicholls³, Alfie Kohn⁴ and others; self-esteem by Carol Dweck of Columbia University⁵; the moral life of schools by Philip Jackson of the University of Chicago⁶. Integrating the research and analysis on educational practice into a discussion of life in our own *yeshivot* will foster a self-awareness that can only strengthen our ability to achieve our educational goals. These issues could and should be explored in regard to *talmud Torah*, the study of Jewish texts and Jewish education.

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The second area of inquiry is that of educational theory. By way of example, the John Dewey Society, the Philosophy of Education Society and the University of Illinois jointly publish a journal entitled, *Educational Theory*. This journal is "devoted to publishing scholarly articles and studies in the foundations of education, and in related disciplines outside the field of education, which contribute to the advancement of educational theory". Articles bring together issues in continental philosophy, sociology or cultural studies with topics in education. This integration is both enriching and exciting. *The Edah Journal* seeks to create a space to explore this integration as it relates to Jewish education and Jewish texts.

A number of examples here are also suggestive. The study of Hans Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* stresses that

² Ibid.

³ Nicholls, John G., *The Competitive Ethos and Democratic Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989)

⁴ Kohn, Alfie, *The Schools Our Children Deserve: Moving Beyond Traditional Classrooms and "tougher" Standards* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

⁵ Dweck, Carol, *Self-Theories* (Philadelphia: The Taylor and Francis Group, 2000).

⁶ Jackson, Philip W., Boostrom, Robert E. and Hansen, David T., *The Moral Life of Schools* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1993).

hermeneutics and interpretation are of great significance, whether studying texts, art, ritual or tradition. Understanding hermeneutics, education and the way these disciplines inform each other is challenging and thought provoking. For teachers of Jewish texts, creating a discourse between *talmud Torah*, hermeneutics and education can yield richness and thoughtfulness to educational theory and practice, and stimulate further dialogue.

Autonomy is a central value in modern society, and it must be confronted seriously by Jewish educators. It is clear that this topic raises significant issues for the way in which we educate regarding *mitzvot*, observance and commitment to God. Rav Soloveichik, Rav Dessler and the Hazon Ish all wrestled with the issue in some measure.⁷ Yet autonomy is rarely discussed thoughtfully from the perspective of educators and education, despite the fact that the classroom is the front line where this issue impacts most significantly. The ability to confront the issue demands a comfort in the texts of Torah, the philosophy of Kant and the real world of education. A central purpose of this call for papers is to create a community of educators and lay people who are engaged in this conversation.

Expanding on the same theme, Hannah Arendt had much to say about authority and its role in education. She took a rather conservative stance on autonomy in the face

of a society increasingly committed to given children “freedom” from authority and tradition. Her analysis speaks directly to many of the issues that our teachers and parents face, educating young men and women in modern/postmodern society. Here, too, the theory of scholars opens doors to rich conversation about the world of Jewish education. We encourage the integration of Jewish thought and *halakhab* with philosophy, cultural studies and other related fields in order to understand the implications of this discussion for Jewish educators and education.

In sum, *The Edah Journal* is calling for papers in Jewish education that integrate theory and research from contemporary educational discourse in terms of both classroom strategies and practice, as well as the philosophy of education and culture. Papers may concentrate on various age groups, elementary, high school or adult education. They should integrate the various areas of theory and research into the world of Jewish education and successfully analyze the implications of such integration.

Surely the opportunity for this rich educational discourse will help strengthen our community of educators and all serious thinking Jews in modern society. We request that papers be submitted to journal@edah.org before June 1, 2003 so they may be published in 2003.

⁷ See also *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy*, edited by Moshe Z. Sokol (Northvale NJ: Jason Aronson 1992).