

Challenges Facing Modern Orthodox Education in Israel

Jeremy Stavisky

Abstract:

The article raises the main educational challenges facing the Modern Orthodox school in Israel. These challenges arise from the great complexities of educating towards Orthodoxy in a modern, democratic, and secular state.

Biography:

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Introduction

For the last six years I have been working as the principal of Himmelfarb high school in Jerusalem. Himmelfarb is one of the largest religious high schools for boys in Israel. The school has two main defining characteristics. First, the school identifies itself as a Modern Orthodox institution. The curriculum encompasses not only classical Jewish texts but also the basic texts of Western culture. In fact, we try to teach some of the texts in tandem. For example, the students are exposed to the great Jewish medieval philosophers and concurrently study the evolution of Christianity and Islam. They study the Hasidic movement and at the same time learn about the great philosophical revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Our students are taught that they have to understand the different worlds they live in, their intellectual roots, and the complex reality of being Orthodox Jews in a modern Israeli society. They are taught that as Modern Orthodox Jews we are constantly choosing which of the developments that define "modernity" we can embrace as part of our world view and which are alien to our beliefs. They come to recognize that this process is complex, and at times, confusing. They also realize that their school's approach is unique. All the students understand that we are trying to perform a complex theological and educational balancing act within a polarized society in which balance and compromise are out of vogue. The fact that the school is both modern and Orthodox is exhibited as well in the fact that that ninety-

nine percent of our graduates serve in the I.D.F, a much higher percentage than the population at large, for they believe that the modern Jewish state is something worth protecting even at the cost of one's life. Most of our graduates go on to pursue university degrees and become active members of Israeli society.

The school's second characteristic is that it is a public school. Most of the students come from feeders that allow them entry into Himmelfarb without entrance exams. More than ninety percent of the students who enroll in seventh grade will graduate six years later. The institution thus serves as a melting pot, fusing together children from very different backgrounds. The diversity is threefold, involving economic status, ethnicity (i.e. *Ashkenazi* or *Sefaradi*), and level of religious observance. This complexity forces both the staff and the student body to come face to face with the great diversity found in Israeli society. The ability to live with the "other" and even respect him is one of the major challenges facing Jews both in Israel and abroad.

It is my intention to present three core problems we face in our work. The first is the question of authority: To what extent do we want to adopt the values of the democratic tradition in our schools, and what is the proper power structure within our school system?

The second question is how one relates to the "other"

within society: people of different socio-economic strata or those Jews who are "traditional" but who do not abide by the *Shulchan Aruch* and those who define themselves as secular. Are we to encourage inter action with these different populations? And perhaps the ultimate "others" in the State of Israel are the Moslem and Christian Arabs. What is our relationship to them? Should they be shunned as potential enemies or embraced as monotheistic cousins and as fellow-citizens?

Finally, there is the question of family structure and sexual norms. How do we deal with the fact that many years pass between the time our students reach puberty and the time they marry? While classical Jewish teachings have dealt with these questions time and again, the questions today are more acute and complex than ever before. These burning issues are not limited to schools and pertain to adults as well to adolescents, but they tend to be emphasized when one works with adolescents because tend to struggle with them the most and demand answers to questions that adults, at times, overlook.

No one is to be blamed for these problems, which are inherent in our being products of the tumultuous history of the Jewish people and the world at large over the last three hundred years. The changes in the Jewish people's religious identity since the Emancipation in Europe and the creation of the ethnically diverse democratic Israeli State have raised many vexing questions for us and our students alike. Our students are very much aware of living in a multi-cultural society in which behavioral patterns vary widely from group to group. Unfortunately, the overwhelming complexity of these issues has discouraged their being discussed openly among parents, teachers and students, with the result that we tend to offer contradictory messages regarding them. Courageous, meaningful, and sometimes painful discussion is urgently need-

ed in order to confront the questions involved.

The ability to live with the "other" and respect him is one of the major challenges facing Jews both in Israel and abroad.

Democracy and Authority

It is fair to argue that the basic tenet of our religion is "*qabbalat ol malkhut shamayim*," accepting the yoke of the Almighty's sovereignty. In acknowledgement of that, we recite the "*shema*" twice every day and declare our allegiance to the one and only God.¹ God demands subservience, and He orders the Jewish people to submit to the Sanhedrin's authority in spiritual matters and to the king's authority in temporal matters. While it is true that the Sanhedrin ceased to function in late antiquity, local rabbinic authorities continued to exercise authority in the Diaspora Jewish communities under the rule of "*lo tasur mi-khol asher yomeru lekha yamin u'semol*," (Do not deviate from what they tell you, neither to the right nor to the left)². Accepted tradition was that this was true not only in the time of an active Sanhedrin but in all generations: "*Yiftah be-doro ki-Shemu'el be-doro*," (Jephthah, a less eminent judge, nonetheless enjoys the same authority in his generation that the far greater Samuel enjoys in his).³ The ultimate source of power was God, and He delegated a portion of this power to human rulers. Humans were to obey the authorities or else face sanctions.

The philosophical and political revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries brought forth a very different concept. According to modern theory, political power lies neither in the hands of God nor in the hands of the leaders, but in the hands of the community itself. Political power is derived not from God above but from the human community living amongst us. Of course,

¹See *Mishnah Berakhot* 2:2, 2:5

²Deut. 17:11

³*Rosh ha-Shanah* 25b

there does not have to be a complete contradiction between the traditional Jewish approach and that of modern democracy.

One can argue that the democratic revolution is essential in the process of "*tiqqun olam*," the process of repairing and redeeming the world. One should argue that democracy is a wonderful development, as important as the abolition of slavery and bigamy, and should be embraced by orthodoxy.⁴ And yet, one cannot deny the difference between the traditional attitude to power and the modern democratic approach. The modern democratic world places the free individual human being at the center of the political process rather than defining his role as one whose main obligation is to be subservient to spiritual and temporal authorities.

There are two relevant questions regarding the democratic process in the educational system. The first is whether we are interested in introducing the democratic process into the world of the sacred or only to questions of temporal power. Are our religious authorities, i.e. the rabbis, also part of the democratic process or are they exempt from it? Nowhere are the differences between the two systems more vivid than in the laws pertaining to the obligation to respect one's rabbi. According to *halakhah*, it is forbidden to contradict the opinion of one's rabbi or to give a religious ruling within his sphere of influence.⁵ The meeting of teacher and student is not the meeting of equals but the imparting of tradition by people of authority. The laws of respect due to one's teacher define a very clear hierarchy. In fact, it is the elders who have a God-like role, and respecting them is the way to come closer to God. Do we want our students to question their rabbis or do we want them to be molded by them? Are we interested in the teacher who works with the class as a partner or the teacher who rules the class? We all know that students daily question our authority and

beliefs. Do we want to encourage this questioning or do we want to stifle it?

The tension grows when we send our students to study in post high school *yeshivot*. In that world, the *rosh yeshiva* seldom stands for re-election, and he is usually the ultimate decision maker on halakhic questions and matters of policy and philosophy. Is that the model we idealize, or are we interested in a more democratic style? For instance, one of the foundations of democracy is the right to dissent. What is the amount of dissent we want to allow in our schools? What happens if a student in the Orthodox school refuses to participate in *tefillah*? To what extent do we introduce our students to the question of choice in spiritual matters and to what extent do we educate them to follow the authority of the rabbis? Do we feel free to question decisions rendered by various rabbinic authorities in the last century or should our approach be one of reverence? Is it proper to question the decision of many leading rabbinic authorities to stay in Europe just before the Second World War, or is it perhaps healthier to let that issue rest?

The second issue has to do with the management of the school as a whole. Are we interested in the authoritarian or the democratic model? To what extent do we want to involve students in deciding educational and curricular policy? For instance, in most of the high schools I am familiar with, most of the students feel that the burden of Talmud studies is too heavy. Should the students or teachers decide how many hours of Talmud they study or should the decision be a joint one? To what extent do we want the students defining the school rules and to what extent do we want our students to follow school rules laid down by the educational staff? Should disciplinary matters be decided by the students or laid out by the administration?

⁴ One can even argue that there were seeds of the democratic notion planted in our tradition as we stress that the entire Jewish community participated in the revelation on Mt. Sinai. There is also ample evidence that some Jewish medieval communities in Spain ran the affairs of the community in the a quasi-democratic manner. See M. Alon, *Ha-Mishpat ha-Ivri*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press), pp. 580-587.

⁵ *Shulhan Arukh*, Yoreh De'ah 242.

Perhaps the central religious and educational question that has to be dealt with is whether one can educate for *yir'at shamayim*, "fear of God," within a democratic institution? If the individual becomes the center of the political and spiritual realm, can he really feel like a servant of "*Ribbono shel Olam*," the Master of the Universe? Can the democratic notion coincide with a true respect and reverence for our sages?

Of course, these issues are debated in any modern school setting; they are not unique to Orthodox Judaism. They raise fundamental questions of the place of hierarchy in any institution that functions in a democratic society. My point is that our religious schools pose these issues with added force, for they function simultaneously within two systems having contradictory notions of authority. We have to consciously decide what balance we are interested in creating between these systems and what price we are willing to pay for our decision.

Our rabbinic hierarchy cannot deny the spiritual autonomy of each and every individual.

Part of the solution would be for our rabbis and teachers to view themselves as enablers of choice. Instead of issuing an absolute ruling on every question posed to him, a teacher can explain to his student the alternatives legitimately available on personal or educational matters and on halakhic matters. On many occasions, I approached my *roshei yeshivah* at Yeshivat Har Etzion for a *pesaq halakhah*, and they in turn discussed with me the various legitimate halakhic possibilities. It is this approach that enabled them to use their absolute halakhic and educational authority on the rare occasions that they saw fit.

In a democratic world, one has to ensure that the act of *qabbalat `ol malkhut shamayim*, accepting the yoke of heav-

en, is done in conjunction with respect for the autonomy of each and every individual within the system. Our rabbinic hierarchy cannot deny the spiritual autonomy of each and every individual. This is not only practical advice in a world in which no authority has absolute control over anyone else, but also a spiritually valid position. If people accept the burden of the Torah out of free will, we will have a more meaningful community of believers. Many students do, in fact, understand that a commitment to a life of Torah is the best way for them to exert their personal autonomy in a chaotic, post-modern, world. If the spiritual leaders understand that they have to help students in the complex choices the students themselves have to make, the unnecessary conflict with authority will be eliminated. The students will also be better prepared for the decisions they will ultimately have to make once they leave the secure environment of the school. Hopefully, when it is warranted, they will still come back to consult with us.

It also seems personal example must now become a more prominent educational tool than coercion. If in the Middle Ages the community had the power to coerce its members into certain modes of behavior, today, for the most part, we lack those coercive methods, and when they are used, they usually lead to disastrous results. Sincere educators who are committed to a life of Torah because of its own intrinsic values are able to convey their way of life to the next generation. Those who think Torah is a form of social control are usually ineffective.

The role of those who run institutions as a whole or classrooms as parts of institutions have the obligation to define, sometimes by themselves and sometimes with their colleagues and students, the parameters of the debate they are interested in having within their institution.

I remember the opposing positions of different rabbis at

Yeshivat Har Etzion during the dismantling of Yamit as part of the peace accords with Egypt. The *roshei yeshivah* decided that this was a legitimate debate, and they allowed the voicing of opinions different from their own. I also know that no one in the *Yeshivah* was allowed to support the Jewish underground, which was uncovered shortly after.

Students coming into an institution have to recognize the parameters of accepted behavior. Any institution, and even more so a religious institution, has to demand a certain mode of behavior. In my judgment, however, the parameters should be as broad as possible. In general, the mere expression of ideas (as distinct from actions) should not be subject to disciplinary responses. In our school, I strongly urge teachers to relate seriously to all questions respectfully asked, even if they seem to undermine everything we do and say. And yet, I demand a basic adherence to the *halakhah* for those who want to be members of our community. A principal also has to decide which of the school can be negotiated and which are cast in iron. These guidelines change from institution to institution based on the ideology and population. But any institution that does not impose boundaries encourages chaos, and any institution that does not allow freedom and choice within those boundaries will end up with an angry student body whose members will never internalize the institution's educational messages.

Unfortunately, this issue of rabbinic authority and democracy is going to be debated within a much larger immediate context. If Prime Minister Sharon in fact plans to uproot thousand of Jewish settlers in conflict with local rabbinic authority, the religious educational system will have to choose whether to support the legitimate

democratic government when in conflict with halakhic authority.

In this context, where there may be real danger of civil war, the educational issue becomes a profound one, and there is no doubt that if and when this conflict arises it will be a watershed event defining the relationship between "Church and State." The national religious population as a whole and the educational leaders in the religious high schools, and, even more, in the *yeshivot*, are going to have to decide which power reigns supreme: the democratic power of the state or the consensus of rabbinic authorities on halakhic matters. Because of the dire consequences of such an open conflict the intelligence to avoid defining the conflict as one between democracy and *halakhah*.

The Question of the "Other"

The second issue we confront is the relationship to the "others." To a large extent, this question, too, arises as a result of life within a democracy.⁶ The autonomous "other" in the democratic system is not to be killed, subdued or humiliated, but is to coexist within a system that is multi-cultural by definition. Unfortunately, each and every group within Israeli society seems to feel itself threatened by the existence of other groups. We have not yet accepted the fact that the tumultuous history of the Jewish people in the last two hundred years has created a multitude of ethnic and religious entities having no choice but to coexist together in one land.

The immediate and most threatening "other" in the religious high school system is the non-religious Israeli. He is threatening because so many graduates of the Orthodox high schools decide to live a secular life. But

⁶For an exposition of the meaning and challenges for education of a multi-cultural society, see Howard Grdener, *The Disciplined Mind*, (Penguin Books,2000) p.50.

this "other," secular, Israeli is our partner in the building of the Zionist state.

In fact, it is crucial to define the Zionist secular Israeli as our brother and partner, because there is otherwise no theological justification for participating in the secular Zionist endeavor. It was Rabbi Kook, the most important of the Zionist rabbis, who explained that Israel's secular founding fathers of Israel were unwittingly performing a religious act by returning to the land of Israel.⁷

Accordingly, our educational philosophy stresses our identification with the great secular-socialist leaders who established the State and teaches, as did Rav Kook, that their accomplishments are a fulfillment of the prophecy of the Jewish people's redemption.

And yet, we find the secularists' way of life, however Zionist in its commitment, to be disturbing. This ambivalence has led to an absurd situation. On the one hand we talk about a joint destiny with secular Israelis, and yet, on the other hand, there is almost no dialogue taking place between secular and religious Israeli high school students. It is no big secret that Gesher, the movement made famous twenty years ago for bringing together secular and religious Israeli youth can barely mobilize enough religious high schools to continue the project. Sadly, the *dati le'umi* national religious community has become another sector of Israeli society that feels threatened by the "other" groups and thus largely secluded from them. The absurdity of this situation is that the vast majority of our students serve in the I.D.F and have to face the only melting pot in the country when they turn eighteen. This new, powerful meeting with the "secular" Israeli in the army setting is often the situation in which our graduates abandon the orthodox life. Perhaps,

a more gradual acquaintance with the secular Israeli would allow our students to confront him in a more mature and confident fashion.

Another "other" to be considered is the Israeli Arab. While the secular Israeli is talked about at length within the system, usually as the "other" whose way of life is to be avoided, there is a striking silence regarding 20% of the Israeli population, the Israeli Arabs. To an average Israeli student, it seems as if they do not exist at all. This was true before the current war with the Palestinians and it is especially true after three years of bloody terror. And yet, we have to ask ourselves if it would not be smarter to broach the subject of our complex relationship with them. Do we view them as *gerim ve-toshavim*, having the right to dwell amongst us? Are we willing to treat them with the dignity of full class citizens, or do we perceive them merely as resident aliens if not potential enemies?

These frightening and painful questions are extremely complex and are part of a wider political debate, but they must be asked. I remember asking a student who was wearing a shirt which declared, "No Arabs—No Suicide Attacks" to cease wearing his shirt. I tried to explain to him that mass deportations of Israeli Arabs are not acceptable according to the way we interpret the Torah in our school. The discussion was tough and intense, especially since it took place during one of the worst periods of the Intifada. I think the student agreed to stop wearing the shirt to school mainly because I legitimized his feelings of anger and fear. And yet, it is clear to me that it would be impossible, and perhaps morally wrong, to create dialogue at this point of the conflict. It is unfair to ask our students to understand the plight of Israeli Arabs while their lives are physically threatened by the Palestinians. If we are fortunate, the future will offer new

⁷Rabbi A. I. Kook, *Orot ha-Tehiyah*, (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1985), Chap 43.

opportunities for dialogue. One would hope that the religious students, even more than secular Israelis, would be able to form a successful dialogue with members of the other great monotheistic tradition in the region.

The third "other" that has to be confronted is the Israeli of lower socio-economic status. Deborah Meier, the outstanding principal of Central Park East Secondary Schools in Harlem, New York City, has argued that the only way to maintain a true democracy is through an equal and integrated school system.⁸ This has not been the premise of the elite *yeshivah* high schools in Israel or in the United States. At times, it seems the *yeshivah* education is more about socio-economic stature than about a responsibility to "*Kelal Yisrael*", to the community of the Jewish people as a whole. In Israel, this discrimination has led to the angry, powerful, and successful Shas movement. The only way to educate toward true *Ahavat Yisra'el*, love for the Jewish people, is to accept into our educational system those from the lower socio-economic strata or less observant communities. John Dewey was right to observe that schools should be about doing and not about theorizing.

The only way to educate toward Ahavat Yisra'el is to accept into our educational system those from the lower socio-economic strata or less observant communities.

If the students see us coping with the gaps dividing our society, they will understand that this is a worthy endeavor. If they see us volunteering with the underprivileged but not allowing them into our schools, they will infer that we favor keeping these "other" Jews at a distance.

⁸D. Meier, *The Power of Ideas* (Beacon Press, 1995).

Adolescents learn from the way we behave, not from the way we talk. Having a student body that is mixed socio-economically, ethnically and religiously means that we have to acknowledge the facts that we live in a diverse society and that we have to work very hard in solving the differences within student groups. Ultimately, it is perhaps the only chance to mold Israeli society into a living organism rather than an amalgamation of threatened socio-economic and ethnic groups. Our school enjoys the happy singing of the *Sefardi selihot* before the High Holy Days as we enjoy the somber *selihot* read by members of the *Ashkenazi minyan*. At no time can I find greater satisfaction than in the friendships struck up between boys whose fathers would never have crossed paths.

The Question of Sexuality

The third major issue we face is the conflict between halakhic demands and the sexual norms of modern society. Specifically, the problem stems from the long interval between the age of puberty and the age of marriage. For years I have been telling my students that there is a major theological difference between Catholicism and Judaism and that it has to do with the way we view sexuality. I claimed that Catholics view sexuality as something evil, which has to be suppressed. According to Catholic theology, I tell my students, marriage is intended for those who are unable to suppress their sexuality. I contrasted the position of the Catholic Church with the Jewish position, which views marriage and the sexual relationship that follows as a great *mizvah*. Jews, I tell my students, should not feel bad about their sexual impulses if they are expressed according to *halakhah*. But the problem with what I tell my students is that until they marry they do in fact have to live like Catholic monks.

According to *halakhah* there is no legitimate sexual expression until marriage.

Not only is all sexual contact forbidden; so is masturbation. It seems that during most of our history young men and women married close to the time of puberty. While the *Mishnah Avot* states that one marries at the age of eighteen,⁹ we know that before the Second World War in the traditional communities of eastern Europe and North Africa, the age of marriage was often much younger.

Yet today, it is almost impossible for a young Israeli to marry before he finishes his army service at the age of twenty-one or twenty-two. And we encourage our children to pursue higher education, so it is financially very difficult for most of them to marry before their mid twenties.

The problem is of acute importance during adolescence. Many of our students develop friendships with the other sex and have no ability to express that friendship in a physical manner. The *halakhah* viewed physical relationships between men and women as something that happens within the family, as husband and wife. The concept of long-term friendship between a boy and a girl does not exist within the halakhic framework. The problem is compounded by the fact that our students live in a very coarse world, where the media presume that adolescents should be living promiscuous sexual lives.

It is my opinion that this is the hardest of all problems and is the main reason that so many leave the fold. Judaism has always been traditionally practiced within the family framework. One existed either as a child in one's

parents' home or as a spouse in one's own home. One was either a child or rearing children. Until the modern era Judaism never dealt with a situation in which a large number of adults from the ages of approximately fifteen to approximately twenty-five were not married. While an important part of our educational philosophy has to be about controlling urges, including sexual urges, we cannot deny the legitimate sexual needs of young adults. The problem is only compounded when they confront the tensions facing young men and women serving in the I.D.F.

Until the modern era Judaism never dealt with a situation in which a large number of adults from ages fifteen to twenty-five were not married.

This fact leaves the educators with a complex dilemma. As Orthodox educators, we can't compromise *halakhah* since *halakhah* is at the core of our identity as Orthodox Jews. We cannot deny *halakhah* and permit any kind of physical relationship with a woman who is not ritually pure. And yet, we cannot deny the impossible situation our students face in trying to work out their legitimate emotional needs. Many of our students have girl friends and have developed some kind of physical relationship with them. How do we coach our students when they consult with us on this matter?

One has to realize that there is no ideal solution to this problem. The educator has to insure that failure in this field does not lead to feelings of guilt that lead, in turn, to total detachment from a life of *mizvot*. This process

⁹*Avot* 5:24

does not have to legitimize unacceptable halakhic behavior, but it does have to be understanding of the difficult situation our students face. One also has to be able to differentiate between different levels of halakhic transgressions on both the halakhic and the psychological level. The overall nature of the relationship is very important. An educator has to find out if the relationship is deep and meaningful or corrupt and manipulative. What is the level of the intimacy between the couple? Both halakhically and psychologically there is a tremendous difference between limited physical contact and a full sexual relationship. We also have to learn that this complex situation forces us to use certain terminology when addressing these issues publicly and a different, more personalized, and usually more understanding one when counseling privately. When the Talmud states that if one has to sin, he should wear black clothes and go to a place where he can act anonymously, they were not talking about a general act of defiance, but an understanding of the impossible situations the individual can find himself in.¹⁰ The Talmud is also distinguishing between a private transgression of *halakhah* and a public act of defiance.

We also have to decide the proper form of sexual education in our schools. If we assume that a small percent of our students are having sexual relations, are we obliged to educate them on how to prevent the transfer of sexual diseases? It seems that if we shy away from discussing these issues in a mature and responsible manner we will be denying our students important material that they otherwise will probably learn from a less desirable source. Sexual information can be taught in conjunction with a strong ideological message insisting that love is an essential part of sexual relationships and that sexuality is

strengthened by marital commitment.

At times the challenges from the world we live in seem so great that I understand why so many Orthodox Jews want to console themselves within the confines of *Me'ah She'arim*. The extreme sexual promiscuity that comes with the cultural freedom of the modern world can be so overwhelming that one feels a deep need to protect oneself. The complexity of dealing with those "others" in our society can be extremely confusing, and the fear of our children leaving the fold is so great that we prefer no dialogue with the secular Israeli, not to mention the Arab Israeli. I also understand why it is so difficult for so many adolescents to be Orthodox and why they have immersed themselves in what they view as the total freedom of modern life. They perceive many of their educators to be frightened of the world outside and they naturally are interested in discovering that tempting world. The democratic process seems, at times, especially in Israel, to be chaotic; and, therefore, many prefer a religious world of absolute authority and, or imagined absolute order. Yet, for myself, I feel that we live not in a world of absolutes but in a world of compromises, a world where religious order has to be balanced with democratic freedom, and the need to preserve one's own religious identity has to be balanced with the acceptance of "others." We have to cope with the challenges of the modern family structure and with ethnic and religious diversity as bravely as we can. A candid discussion of the issues among students, parents and educators can help us define who we are in a difficult, but ultimately, rewarding process. An intelligent approach by educators who understand the complexity of these issues can help raise a generation of healthy, autonomous and halakhically committed Jews.

¹⁰ *Qiddushin* 40a; *Mo'ed Qatan* 17a; and see the Tosafot's reservation. This problem seems to be inherent to the human condition. Maimonides writes that in all [Jewish] communities there always existed those who sinned in improper sexual conduct *Mishneh Torah, Hilhot Issurei Bi'ah*, chap. 22.