

It's Torah Education, Stupid

- Basil Herring.

Why should effective Jewish education cost Jewish parents an arm and a leg, if not a good part of their torso? What kind of wisdom was it that led American Jews to pour hundreds of millions of precious charity dollars into community hospitals such as Long Island Jewish and Beth Israel and Mount Sinai, but putting pittances into serious Torah education? Why the massive Jewish social action alliances and funding for the poor and the indigent, of all colors and creeds, but hardly any lucrative incentives for talented Jewish men and women to choose the field of Day School education as a career, rather than to pursue business or law or medicine?

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A few days ago, I sat down and did what thousands of Jewish fathers and mothers do round about this time of the year. I wrote out several checks, with a total in excess of \$30,000, in payment of this year's tuition for my children's yeshiva education. I cannot say, in all honesty, that it was a pleasurable exercise that sent me dancing ecstatically around the room. I did it, in the first place, thankful to God that we can afford to do it; and in the second place I signed those checks knowing that there was no other single act I could perform that would so strengthen our children's identities as Jews who would withstand the tidal wave of assimilation that engulfs the Jews of America.

But with equal honesty, I must also tell you that I did it with a due measure of anger. Anger at the machers of American Jewish life, the monied mandarins who establish the priorities, and direct the flow of resources, of the organized Jewish community. After all, given the undeniable wealth of American Jews relative to every other group in this country, why should American Catholics be able to send their children to their parochial schools for an average tuition bill of \$1500? Are the Catholic Irish or Hispanics richer than the Jews of this country? I don't believe so. Angry too, because so little attention and support is given to the mostly struggling Day Schools that alone ensure the much-headlined "continuity" that is the hottest issue in the community today. And angry as well because of the misplaced zeal and energy expended over the years by the likes of the American Jewish Committee, to the ridiculous fight against government aid to parochial schools, most recently illustrated by the case of handicapped Satmar children in Monroe, New York, a fight that prominently featured Jews worried that the United States is in imminent danger of becoming a Christian version of Iranian theocracy. After all, given that I, like every law-abiding citizen, pay my property taxes, a large chunk of which go to the local school board, why shouldn't some of those taxes be credited to a school of my choice, if not for religious studies, then for its general studies component? Why should effective Jewish education cost Jewish parents an arm and a leg, if not a good part of their torso? What kind of wisdom was it that led American Jews to pour hundreds of millions of precious charity dollars into community hospitals such as Long Island Jewish and Beth Israel and Mount Sinai, but putting pittances into serious Torah education? Why the massive Jewish social action alliances and funding for the poor and the indigent, of all colors and creeds, but hardly any lucrative incentives for talented Jewish men and women to choose the field of Day School education as a career, rather than to pursue business or law or medicine?

The answer, of course, is that the priorities were all wrong. Too much effort and energy, too many resources, were expended in pursuing the twin goals of achieving acceptance into the American mainstream, and reducing all of Jewish life to one dimension, its moral one. Now please don't get me wrong. I have nothing against social acceptance, and I would be the last one to denigrate the Jew's penchant for universal justice and the amelioration of poverty and suffering. But, as we have lately discovered, such a meager diet does not sustain Jewish identity. Young Jews raised exclusively on such a menu are vastly more likely to flock to Woodstock on a Shabbas morning in August, as they did by the tens of thousands last week, there to worship on the altar of Dionysus, than come to shul and meditate on the multi-dimensional profundities of Deuteronomy as we encountered them this morning.

Now in talking of Deuteronomy and the rebellious young, there is a particular passage in this parshah worth considering, one that is, on its face, excruciatingly difficult to decipher. It is of course the story of the ben sorer u-moreh, the rebellious and gluttonous youngster. As the Torah puts it in 3 short verses, Deut. 21:18-21, if the parents of an adolescent realize that they can no longer discipline or control his wild ways, and have despaired of ever straightening him out, then they are to bring him to the elders who sit in judgment in the center of the city. There, after their statements are corroborated, he is to be stoned to death by all the citizens of the town. Now this punishment, is, to say the least, problematic. First of all, the guilty party is a minor, and minors are never held legally responsible in a Jewish court. Secondly, the transgressions for which he stands convicted are that he treats his parents disrespectfully, and that he is a glutton for meat and wine. These are hardly capital crimes deserving of the death penalty even for an adult. Why then so extreme a punishment? Rest assured that Hazal too were deeply troubled by these questions, and more. And in the Gemara Sanhedrin they say that no child was ever put to death as a ben sorer u-moreh, insofar as the conditions required for a conviction were too fantastic to ever be satisfied. It was included in the Torah, they say, so that we should learn certain principles and concepts from it. And in this regard, there is one principle that does emerge forcefully from the passage, the principle of communal responsibility for the development of the young. Why, after all, does the Torah here expect, and practically demand, that the parents themselves denounce and deliver their wayward offspring into the hands of the court to be killed? Is this not callous, if not inhumane? As explained by Rabbi Menahem Ben Zion Sachs, the very fact that the parents bring the youngster into the public domain before the elders of the town, to declare his incorrigibility in the presence of the townspeople, is in itself intended as an indictment, not so much of the parents, but of the elders, and the citizenry at large. It declares in fact that they all, leaders and plain citizens alike, share the guilt and the onus, for the behavior and attitudes of the young in their midst. It is true that there is a unique parental role - but a home is not an island. Youngsters go out in the world, into the streets and the corners and the classrooms, and they learn from their peers and any number of role models. Parents cannot be expected to withstand those influences alone; it is for the community as an organic whole to set the standards, to invest the resources, devote the time, create the wholesome spiritual and moral environment wherein the impressionable young can take root and grow in the right direction. By demanding that the parents declare publicly their inability to handle the adolescent that is theirs, the Torah effectively indicts the entire polity, for its failure as a community, in the sacred partnership to mould the next generation, to be faithful to the dictates of God and Torah. For this reason, the entire town must carry out the punishment, each citizen being thus required to contemplate the

sorry consequences of his or her delinquency.

Indeed there is a telling statement found in the Gemara Shabbas 119b, spoken by one who knew all too well of which he spoke.

Said Resh Lakish in the name of Yehudah Nesiah: "we do not cease from building or maintaining Torah schools for children, tinokot shel beit raban, even if it is to build the Temple" And in his own name said Resh Lakish "I have learned from my fathers that if there is a Jewish city without a Yeshivah, it is to be destroyed"

Resh Lakish knew whereof he spoke: as a young man he was a highway robber, a gangster who terrorized his contemporaries, until with the help of a sublime and inspirational teacher, Reb Yoh'anan, he became one of the greatest Jewish scholars of all times. He knew how easily a Jewish child can go wrong; how alluring are the fruits of licentiousness, how dangerous the comforts of conformity, how powerful the herd instinct within. And how indispensable a good Jewish education, not 2 or 3 or 5 or even 10 hours a week, but a thorough exposure to and grounding in the unsurpassed brilliance of Torah in all its expressions: Scripture, midrash, mishnah, Gemara, codes, moral tracts, philosophical works, kabbalistic speculations, responsa literature, and more. That, and that alone, a pursuit stretched throughout one's youth, a few hours a day at the least, is the only effective Jewish antidote to the poison of spiritual decay in an idolatrous world. Only such sustained Torah study, as Resh Lakish attested, can transform an am ha-aretz, into a knowledgeable, self-respecting, fully committed, Jew.

All of which, brings me in the end, to recent statements as to the proper apportionment of UJA funds, raised from American Jews, as they have been historically directed in the main to support Israel. A few months ago, the deputy foreign minister of Israel, Yossi Beilin, told an American Zionist leadership group to keep its money in America. Israel, he said, is no longer a poor cousin in need of our handouts, or our pity. Israel, thank you very much, has 2 million cars choking its highways, vast shopping malls, cable TV, and a booming stock-market. We ought to be doing, he said, is redirecting those dollars in the fight against assimilation, so as to strengthen the identity of American Jewish youth, and ultimately have them come and live in Israel. The \$500 million that we send to Israel annually, he said, would be much better spent at home, in New York, Los Angeles, and the Jewish communities in between.

What should we say to such a proposal? I would say that both Resh Lakish and Yehudah Nesia would agree. Resh Lakish would agree because, to paraphrase his words, a Jewish community which does not provide universal, affordable, access to a yeshivah education that will prime and educate all Jewish children effectively, does not have to be destroyed, for it ultimately destroys itself. And Yehudah Nesia would agree, because, again to paraphrase, building the Land of Israel, or even Jerusalem, or for that matter the Third Temple, does not preempt the absolute imperative to thoroughly educate and inspire Jewish youngsters in Wichita Falls, Kansas. Besides, the moneys that we so designate for Israel from the UJA and the like, are relatively small compared to the foreign aid provided to Israel by the Congress of the United States, in lieu of the not insignificant benefits to the US Treasury that flow from Israel's strategic alliance with Uncle Sam.

To conclude then: as parents we make a grievous error if we choose to educate our children through high school anywhere but in a Yeshivah or strong Day School environment. I can only

plead with you to expose your children, no matter the cost, to much, much more than a Hebrew School experience, or even an elementary Day School by itself. Those who allow their children to cease their Jewish education at bar or bat mitzvah virtually guarantee that their children will remain ignorant of Judaism for the rest of their lives. And I speak here not only to parents, but to grandparents too. And if you support UJA, as you surely ought, let your opinion be heard, as to how you would like to see your charity dollars spent. And for those among us who are communal leaders, whose voice is heeded in such circles: let it be known that as a community we must redirect our precious resources to hold on to our children, nay our future. As the siddur says, *al tikra banayikh, ela bonayikh*; they are not our children, they are the builders of our future. It is a task from which none are exempt, lest each of us be called upon in the end to cast a stone, not on our wayward progeny, God forbid, but on the burial ground of American Jewish life.

For it is not too late. There is indeed much that can yet be done to strengthen and save the remnant of our people, and together to build a glorious future both here and in Israel, in New York and Jerusalem, on the East River and the West Bank. For the redemption of our children has been promised to us by God, not least in the words placed in the mouth of the prophet Isaiah in this morning's haftarah, *zarekh goyim yirash, ve'arim neshamot yoshivu* (Is. 54:3), that our children shall indeed inherit the nations, even as they recreate once decimated, and desolate, Jewish communities, to rally round the flag, and renew the age-old covenant until that day when the righteous messiah, of the seed of Jesse, will appear in our midst, a people redeemed.