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Moral Education

The Challenge to Conservative Judaism

David Breakstone

Are we to judge morality solely on the basis of exhibited behaviors, or need we also consider the motivation behind the deeds? If the former, then our goal might simply be to instill within the young an acceptance of the authority of Jewish law without concern for developing within our charges the skills of moral reasoning. If the moral process in which moral action germinates is important to us, however, then we have little choice but to commit ourselves to an educational undertaking which might lead to outcomes other than those we would wish for. The dilemma is particularly confounding for the Conservative Jewish educator who holds concurrent commitments to halakiah as a binding code of behavior on the one hand, and to the autonomy of the individual and the principle of free choice on the other. Is there a way for us to teach the concept of mitzvah while also engaging our children in an honest search for a personally relevant value system?

Who is the moral being?

Is it enough to consider an individual's behavior, or must that behavior also be an expression of personally held values and beliefs? Do we judge one's morality solely on the basis of his or her deeds, or must we also examine the motivation behind them?

It is tempting to argue in favor of behavior and deeds as being sufficient. What difference should it make why a person visits the sick, contributes *tzedakah*, cares for the elderly, or honors one's parents?

That depends. It depends on whether one is talking about right action, or about character; whether one's concern is with what an individual will do in specific and prescribed circumstances, or with the approach that he or she will adopt in a moral situation, confronted with conflicting values.

A woman jumps into the ocean to save a drowning child. She swims well,

and need only venture a few feet from shore to execute the rescue. Would we say that she was being particularly brave? What if there were sharks circling only a few yards away and she knew that? What if she didn't?

Is it possible that one may do something which appears moral, but is not, just as one may do something which appears brave but is not? An elderly man lies in the hospital, terminally ill. His nephew is an extremely busy young executive, but nevertheless manages to visit him a few times a week. We are naturally impressed, and ask him how he manages to find the time. "It is a mitzvah," he explains with elegant simplicity. Yes, but is it also an example of moral behavior? Does the fact that the nephew considers the visit to be a religious commandment enhance or detract from its being an expression of right values?

Another young man visits a second patient in the next bed over even more regularly, once a day, in fact. We ask him the same question. "My uncle is an exceedingly wealthy man and has yet to draw up his will," he confides to us with a wink. Is what he is doing moral at all?

A third young man is sitting by the side of yet another patient, and his explanation for being there is altogether different. "I volunteer once a week to visit the sick in the hospital," he tells us. Why? "It seems like the right thing to do, that's all."

Is there a difference in the level of morality between one who hearkens to his sense of obligation, and another who is guided by his conscience?

If two individuals are confounded by a moral dilemma, do we prefer that they engage in a process of moral reasoning, or consult a rabbi? Should they be taught to weigh the relative merits of the values in conflict, or to pore over the pages of the Shulhan Arukh looking for halakic precedent?

Practical Implications

I was recently struck by the practical (never mind philosophical) importance of these questions while preparing a *devar Torah* on *parashat Mishpatim* (Exodus 21-24). Immediately after receiving the Ten Commandments, the recently emancipated Hebrews are given a long inventory of ordinances by which they are to live their lives and structure their society. It is an appealing segment of the Bible, for the laws laid down do not deal with ritual and sacrifice (which oftentimes leave us feeling uncomfortable or distant), but with matters of social justice and personal responsibility in a manner consistent with our own Western, humanistic, and politically correct sensibilities. (Even the discussion of slavery which begins the *parashah* need not trouble our collective conscience, for—as contemporary commentators are quick to point out—the regulations governing its practice were light years ahead of what was acceptable elsewhere in the ancient world.) In just a few short chapters, then, we have spelled out for us a set of behaviors which, if we were to follow them, would make us an exemplary people. But why should we bother? It is the answer that struck me.

Take chapter 22, verse 21: "*You shall not afflict any widow or orphan.*" Why? One would expect the next line to read, "for they are weak and defense-

less," or, "for you must not take advantage of those less fortunate than yourself." Yet there is no mention of any such concern. Instead the would-be perpetrator is warned, "My wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives will become widows and your children orphans." (Exodus 22:23) Similar consequences for misbehavior abound in this *parashah* as they do, of course, throughout the Bible. In *Mishpatim* alone there are several offenses indicated for which a person is to be put to death, among them murder, striking or cursing one's parents, irresponsibly maintaining an ox which gores someone to death, witchcraft, and sodomy. But in none of these instances is any ethical consideration offered for abstaining from these practices; there is only the threat of punishment. It would appear that the author of the Bible (God or otherwise) considered it sufficient to instill within the Jews a code of behavior without concern for the process of moral reasoning.

If our own expectations of others might also be satisfied by their *behavior*, without any need for probing the *moral process* in which they remain, then the authoritative nature of the biblical narrative should satisfy us as well. Is the promise of divine retribution any less legitimate a motivation for right action than the appeal to social responsibility? If it is enough for us that one follow the Ten Commandments without considering their value foundation, then almost any means by which the young might be taught to observe them would appear to be legitimate.

The question is one of philosophy, not strategy. In other words, to those who would argue that divine retribution is an insufficient motivation for moral action because we cannot expect adolescents today to accept the literal notion of a God who punishes, I would counter that they are merely discussing tactics, not ideology. That is, if the threat of punishment is not acceptable pedagogy only because it won't work, then some other authoritative, heavy handed methodology might be substituted instead.

The operative principle still remains *na'aseh v'nishma* ("we shall do and we shall hear")—also from *parashat Mishpatim*—which has become a watchword of our faith, a ringing declaration that the archetypal Jew first submits him/herself to God's will, and only then asks questions or searches for explanations. According to this model, those entrusted with the sacred task of training the young—be they parents or educators—have the job of conveying to their charges the norms and expectations of the Jewish value system, and of finding a way to ensure that they will live by them.

Strategies of Moral Education

Moral socialization is, of course, a legitimate position in the realm of moral education, argued most cogently by Emilie Durkheim, nineteenth-century French philosopher.² He believed authority to be the essential ingredient of

¹ For a discussion of this question, see: William K. Frankena, "Toward a Philosophy of Moral Education," in Barry Chazan and J. Squires, *Moral Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1973), pp. 155-158.

the educational enterprise, and while he wrote that children should have some understanding of the *reasons* for the moral discipline they are asked to practice, he did not feel such reasons to be critical to the school's success. Reason and reflection might raise the level of the individual's morality, he agreed, but went on to contend that they are not necessary conditions of its development. He argued that they should be incorporated into the educational process not in order to encourage children to arrive at their *own conclusions*, but rather to insure their *acceptance of society's norms*.³ It is the teacher who is charged with embodying these values in his or her own life, who must strive to achieve a certain "moral ascendancy" in the eyes of the child, and who, in doing so, acquires a degree of influence in the moral socialization of the students.

A diametrically opposed approach begins not with any set of moral principles or "bag of virtues," but with the conviction that values "are rooted in and ultimately determined by the individual and his experience, rather than by social forces or contexts . . . Values education is about the development of the valuing process in children, not the transmission of specific contents."⁴ The school of Values Clarification (VC) asserts that "We cannot give children an absolute set of values, but we can give them something better. We can give them a system that they can use to arrive at their own values." In this system, teachers, rather than being responsible for imposing society's standards on their students, are charged with defending them from such influences: "Values and valuing are uniquely personal dimensions of the human experience; therefore, the program itself must not suggest particular values which should be taught or acquired. . . ." In fact, "When operating within this value theory, it is entirely possible that children will choose not to develop values. It is the teacher's responsibility to support this choice also."

Rather than promoting an ethic of *na'aseh v'nishma*, VC would seem to suggest an attitude of *nishma v'nashit* (let's hear, then we'll decide). It is the process of valuing which is the supreme objective of this approach, and those who adopt it do so knowing that their students may end up with values very different from their own—if any at all. It is important to emphasize, then, that VC not only encompasses a methodology but a philosophy. The well-defined structure of the valuing process it promises is predicated on an ultimate respect for the autonomy of the individual, and denies that there is any

² For a fuller discussion of this position, see Emilie Durkheim, "Education: Its Nature and Its Role," in Emilie Durkheim, *Education and Sociology* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1956), pp. 61-90; and Barry Chazan, "Emilie Durkheim: Moral Education as Moral Socialization," in Barry Chazan, *Contemporary Approaches to Moral Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1985), pp. 9-28.

³ cf. Emilie Durkheim, *Selected Writings*, Anthony Giddens, translator (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 243: "The greater concessions a religious group makes to individual judgment, the less it dominates men's lives, and the less its cohesion and vitality."

⁴ For an overview of the Values Clarification approach, see Louis E. Raths, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney B. Simon, *Values and Teaching*, 2nd edition (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill, 1978). See also, Barry Chazan, *Contemporary Approaches to Moral Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1985), pp. 45-67.

such thing as objective truth in the domain of values. If this is the case, then no one has the right to impose any particular interpretation of that truth on another. VC adapted to the realm of Jewish education could only seek to engage children in a search for personal meanings in the tradition, not to have them internalize any particular interpretation of that tradition or concomitant lifestyle.⁵

We return, then, to *Midyanim*—and Shabbat, *kashrut*, *tefillah* and myriad other values and mitzvot. As Conservative Jewish educators, what are we to do with them? “Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and passed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the men of the Great Assembly.” (Pirkei Avot 1:1) We represent a tradition and we proclaim a commitment to halakha as a binding code of conduct; we live in the modern world and argue that Judaism has always evolved in reference to current philosophical trends and socio-economic realities; we recognize that our children are subject—as are we—to a variety of social influences, and we champion the democratic cornerstones of tolerance, pluralism, and choice. Do our temperament and our convictions then, predispose us to an authoritative educational approach with clear behavioral objectives, or to one that is existential in nature, engaging students in the pursuit of relevance? And might there be a difference between what we would like our schools to be doing, and what actually goes on within them?

The example of TALJ education in Israel is one that might prove instructive for all those involved in the task of exposing essentially non-observant youth to the life of tradition. With all that is unique unto the TALL school, it is also an authentic attempt to straddle two worlds, to synthesize the universal and the particular, to harness for the good of our children the tension inherent in living a life of tradition and choice. And it doesn’t always work. The effort, however, is a noble one.

In an article outlining the underpinnings of TALJ education, Lee Levine, one of its founding parents and ideologues, writes:

“The TALJ system strives to fuse tolerance and commitment, openness and identification. The success of TALJ education is marked by the blending of an authoritative tradition inherited from the past, and the values of a modern, western society in which we live . . . Our aim is to seek a balance between . . . relating seriously to the freedom of

choice that an individual has, while also developing a commitment to tradition and values.”⁷

These goals are echoed in the handbook distributed to parents and students of the TALJ high school in Jerusalem:

The students of the Masorti High School learn to know and value Jewish culture in all its aspects, from both an historical and pluralistic perspective. Our approach to Jewish culture is not as to something of the past, whose time has come and gone, but rather as to something alive and breathing, of the here and now, dynamic and evolving. This encounter with Jewish culture (an intellectual and experiential encounter) provides the student with the possibility of building a Jewish Zionist identity in the modern world . . . The school believes in the right and in the ability of the students to choose their own values, and to fashion their own identity.

The handbook of the Frankel school in Jerusalem, the first of the TALJ schools and still the flagship of the movement, similarly states:

“The educational perception of the school is based on the need to deal with the question of the status, applicability, and cultivation of Jewish tradition in a contemporary and pluralistic society. Central to this questioning is an attempt to present [to the students] a perspective integrating the values of the Jewish tradition with social and human values in general—with the hope that the student will develop an approach to the tradition which is personally meaningful.”

I quote these various documents at length in order to illustrate that TALJ education is *not* about fostering ritual observance, nor does it attempt to present any specific set of behaviors or beliefs as normative. TALJ education is about providing young people with the tools they will need in order to choose a lifestyle of their own on the basis of intimate familiarity with Jewish culture, history, and tradition. Jewish practice and values are not imposed; they are explored.

Clearly, then, TALJ educators do not subscribe to a *na'aseh v'nischina* educational paradigm. For every apparition of authoritative educational practice, the child has access to a real and viable alternative, particularly during the critical adolescent years when real choosing begins. Students are required to attend *tefillah*—unless they opt for *tzun tefilah* (the study of prayer) instead; food at all school functions is kosher—but students may (and do) eat *tryfin* in the courtyard during recess; school outings are all *shomer* Shabbat—but there is no attempt at regulation (official or social) of “extra curricular” activities, and the teens do hold parties and visit discotheques and pubs on Friday nights; male students are required to don *kippot* during services and religious studies—but often don’t and face no consequences; Tahmid is taught scri-

⁵ cf. Dov Peretz Elkins, *Charting Jewish Values* (Rochester, NY: Growth Associates, 1977).

⁶ TALJ is a Hebrew acronym for “increased Judaic studies” and refers to a small number of non-Orthodox schools in Israel that seek to enhance the Jewish character of the educational enterprise in several ways: by providing extra classroom hours for Judaica, by studying traditional Jewish texts in an open and critical atmosphere, by involving parents in the education of their children, and by making Jewish experience (prayer, holiday celebration, etc.) an integral part of the child’s schooling. The first TALJ schools were created in response to lobbying pressure by immigrants from the United States, including many Conservative rabbis and others involved in the Conservative Movement, and very much reflect that influence.

⁷ Lee Levine, “TALJ—A New Model for Jewish-Zionist Education in Israel,” *Midyanim*, Vol. 122 (Winter 1990), pp. 33 [in Hebrew; translated here by the writer].

ously with students engaged in havruta-style learning and exposed to positive religious role models—along with the vast majority of their teachers who are *not* religious, some of them adamantly so.

In educational terms, I am not being cynical. TALM was established in order to create a learning environment that would exist in—and partake of—two worlds simultaneously: It has done that, which in and of itself is a unique and important achievement in an otherwise polarized society. Israel's Orthodox schools unabashedly require of their students (and often of their students' parents) as well as of their faculty—a personal lifestyle consistent with normatively defined religious practice (at least in the public domain, or the domain of public discourse). Non-religious state schools, on the other hand, offer no opportunity for contact with the world of tradition in the realm of experience, and precious little more in the sphere of the intellect. But if in theory TALM seeks a balance between commitment to tradition on the one hand, and freedom of choice on the other, in practice there is far more of the latter. It is rare—if not unheard of—for the child who begins his TALM education with his head uncovered to complete high school wearing a *kippah*.⁹ The same holds true regarding Shabbat, *kashrut*, and *tefillah*. Movement in the opposite direction is not infrequent.

Again, this might not be cause for complaint. If the child has indeed been exposed to the values of the Jewish tradition, and has nevertheless chosen to incorporate less of it into his or her life than the interested observer and practitioner might like, intellectual honesty would require of them to be silent. The problem is elsewhere.

Choice and Tradition

The problem is that the founders of TALM had more faith in the power and appeal of tradition than the results of their efforts indicate was warranted. Uncomfortable for both practical and philosophical reasons with an approach of *na'arsh v'hismina*, they nevertheless did believe in a model of *nishma p'na'arsh*: if our children would but only hear, they would—of their own accord—also do. Shabbat, *kashrut*, and *tefillah*—along with caring for the widow and the orphan—would be observed not because of the threat of divine retribution, nor as a result of indoctrination, but because of the values they encompass and reflect. Have the Solomon Schechter day schools, USY, or Kannah been any more successful than TALM? All have created warm and supportive environments in which tradition and values are taken seriously; but what happens to our youth when they wander beyond these institutional walls? The Conservative Movement—in terms of its soul, if not its numbers—is not succeeding in perpetuating itself, the very *raison d'être* of the educational enterprise, and one of society's major responsibilities to itself.

Our children have taken the freedom of choice which we have held out to them in one hand; they have been less enthusiastic about developing a commitment to the values and traditions we offered them in the other.

Might we be more demanding and more normative in our educational efforts? For more than thirty years now, schools in the United States have slid away from teaching specific values. A pervading sense of moral relativism (generated by trends in science, psychology, and philosophy) gave rise in the 1960s to a movement of "Personalism" that

"celebrated the worth, dignity, and autonomy of the individual person, including the subjective self It emphasized rights more than responsibility, freedom more than commitment. It led people to focus on expressing and fulfilling themselves as free individuals rather than on fulfilling their obligations as members of groups such as family, church, community, or country."¹⁰

Values Clarification, with its emphasis on *valuing* rather than *valves* flourished in this social climate, as did Kohlberg's cognitive-development approach to moral education with its emphasis on process rather than moral content.¹¹

Recently, however, we are witnessing a shift away from this trend.¹² More and more frequently we are hearing educators stand up and state what it is that they believe in, and arguing that schools have the right—and the responsibility—to engage in value education that will restore a sense of the moral and the immoral in keeping with objective societal norms. This may be a function of spreading fundamentalism; it may reflect a growing confidence in the legitimacy of staking a claim to one's own value system—and to educating one's children towards accepting it as well.

Conservative Jewish educators witnessing these developments have reason to be encouraged. They should also proceed carefully. As Chazan has warned, there remain significant philosophical, sociological, and educational arguments against value education in general, and Jewish religious education in particular.¹³

⁹ Thomas Lackona, *Educating for Character* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), pp. 7-12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹ This shift is well documented by Lackona, *ibid.*, and is exemplified by an article such as Jean M. Bonus, "The Three R's of Moral Education: Emile Durkheim Revisited," *The Educational Forum*, Vol. 57 (Winter 1993), pp. 180-185, as well as in popular literature. An interesting example is Jonathan Alter and Pat Wingers, "The Return of Shame," *Newsweek* (February 6, 1995), pp. 15-19.

¹² These arguments—or reservations—have been spelled out in detail by Bary Chazan, "Should We Teach Jewish Values?" *Studies in Jewish Education*, Asher Shkedi, ed., Vol. VI (1992), pp. 66-83. "The philosophic reservations are rooted in epistemological questions about the nature of knowledge and truth and axiological questions about imposition and manipulation of the minds of others The sociological reservations revolve around the pluralistic and heterogeneous nature of the Jewish people today [which] is very problematic for teaching Jewish values because it either invites sectarianism and denominationalism or a parochialism from effectively doing Jewish values education. . . . The third body of reservations is rooted in the educational complexities of actually teaching values, and it suggests that contemporary Jewish education simply does not have the minimal resources necessary to engage in this activity." (pp. 77-79). While Chazan ultimately believes that the Jewish educator should attempt to teach values, he warns all who would do so to be aware of the problematic nature of the undertaking. See also, Bary Chazan, *Contemporary Approaches to Moral Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1985), pp. 91-102.

⁸ Frank Dunkheim, "Education: Its Nature and Its Role," in Emile Dunkheim, *Education and Sociology* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1956), pp. 67-71.

• Is it legitimate to guide our children towards the acceptance of non-verifiable truths, or to “stifle” their development by presenting them with pre-packaged belief and behavioral systems?

• Even if we do believe in our own values strongly enough to legitimize the teaching of them, is it appropriate to do so in a society as pluralistic as ours? Do we not run the risk of splintering the Jewish people even further by presenting *our* Judaism as the preferred Judaism? And if we merely present it as one of several legitimate choices, then are we not back to where we began, in terms of being non-directive and non-normative?

• Even if we were to put these reservations aside, questions would remain as to whether or not we have the time, community support, teaching staff, or students (in terms of access, particularly at critical developmental stages) to engage in Jewish values education in any kind of meaningful fashion.

To these questions, Rosenak adds another: Is religious *ethnicism* even a conceptual possibility? Whereas he ultimately argues powerfully that it is, he is also very much aware of the fine line that distinguishes between the model he proposes and the process of indoctrination which he condemns.¹³

While the answers to these questions would allow us to enter the classroom forearmed and forewarned to face the challenge of teaching a normative Conservative Judaism (as well as offering legitimacy to the undertaking), they do not provide a great deal of hope regarding the chances of success. Choice, not authority, remains the operative principle (and we have already commented here as to where that leaves us). “In teaching Jewish values,” writes Chazan, “we should be interested both in developing a reflective valuing process in the young, as well as in confronting them with some values that seem to be central to the Jewish experience.”¹⁴ And Rosenak, even as he notes that religious education “initiates into a language and into a spiritual world” and “presents models of ideal personality” (specifically, in Judaism, one who loves, observes, and reflects on the meaning of the mitzvot), he also states that the enterprise is ultimately about finding “a proper balance between authority and freedom,” without which it would degenerate into indoctrination.¹⁵ Here, as with TAL, the divine retribution characteristic of *Mishpatim* is not an operative pedagogic principle.

¹³ Before setting out his argument in favor of Jewish religious education, Rosenak summarizes the position that would “participate in indoctrination: ‘The teaching of commitment to a specific or explicit religion, even not as an illustration of a general human tendency but as an autonomous source of truth, is all but universally condemned as indoctrination. And since indoctrination is, by definition, uneducative and worthy of condemnation, education in a specific religion is said to be doctrinally unacceptable to the thoughtful person who believes in human freedom and self-development.’” Michael Rosenak, “Jewish Religious Education and Indoctrination,” *Studies in Jewish Education*, Vol. 1 (1983), pp. 117–138.

¹⁴ Barry Chazan, “Should We Teach Jewish Values?” *Studies in Jewish Education*, Asher Meshkin, ed. Vol. VI (1992), p. 81.

¹⁵ Rosenak, *op. cit.*, pp. 133–135.

Moral Education and Conservative Judaism

Apparently I alluded to this during my *devar Torah*, for at its conclusion a thirteen-year-old congregant came up to me and asked, “Are you saying that the Bible is lying?” I was struck. That certainly is not what I intended to say, but neither did I want to be apologetic. The fire and brimstone of the Bible does not speak to me, nor would I expect it to speak to our children. That something is written in the Torah might just be reason enough for them to explore and consider it—but certainly not enough to demand their loyalties. The reality is that the values and behaviors which our children will ultimately adopt are those which are accepted by the society in which they live, and/or those in which we can help them find some personal meaning.

For Conservative Jewish education, then, the operative model of the moral being must indeed be the individual who engages in moral reasoning and the moral process. Authoritarian and doctrinaire teaching methods are neither pedagogically sound nor philosophically defensible in the realm of religious values education. So, with all the attendant risk, we probably have no practical or ideological alternative but to continue offering choice in our educational endeavors, even as we hope to promote a normative traditional Judaism. “Are we not, then, heading down a path of self-destruction?” asked another of the congregants.

I will answer his question with a question. Are we capable of creating communities living the kind of Judaism we would like our children to choose? If so, then we need not despair. To the extent to which our Judaism is perceived of by our children as enriching our lives, and to the extent to which our lives are able to inspire them, there is the chance that the choice they will make will be the choice that we would like them to make.

But if the answer is “no,” if we cannot create such communities, then with all our talk of choice, we are really offering our children no choice at all—not because we are being too authoritarian, but because we are being inauthentic. Under such circumstances, the “failure” of the school would be more appropriately understood as a failure of the population which it serves. In other words, *we cannot expect the school (or camp or youth movement) to succeed in promoting a normative traditional Judaism if there is no social environment in which that traditional Judaism is indeed the norm.* Society is a prerequisite of socialization, and any “attempt to teach Jewish values in the classroom will be trite and worthless if the Jewish community of which we are part is not prepared to be a living embodiment of the virtues that we propose to teach.”¹⁶

The school is no substitute for the real world in which the child lives and learns, and parents who do not pray cannot realistically expect the school to instill in their children a commitment to prayer as either a value or a practice. To demand this is to risk reducing Judaism to an intellectual exercise or a

¹⁶ Chazan, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

trivial pursuit in the eyes of the child; the mandate of moral education is much more profound than that. The real challenge that it poses to Conservative Judaism, then, is to create a vibrant social entity which gives expression to the values the movement cherishes. The threat of God's wrath is not going to induce our children to choose a life of commitment to the authority of our tradition. The powerful example of those who already have, combined with the appeal of moral reasoning applied to the values of our inheritance, just might.

Dr. David Brokstone teaches Moral and Values Education at The Seminary of Judaic Studies in Jerusalem. He is the director of Ramah Programs in Israel, and the past director of the Pedagogic Center for Jewish Education in the Diaspora at Hebrew University. He is the author of "The Israel Experience" Book, The Israel Connection, and numerous articles.