

A Comprehensive Skill Building Approach to Jewish Values: Social and Emotional Learning and Caring Early Childhood Classrooms

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Think about a particular value or interpersonal mitzvah that you believe is particularly important, either to your own life and experience, or to the concerns you address in a class you teach. What is this value? Respect? Derekh erez (being courteous)? V'ahavta l'rei'akha kamokha (treating your neighbor as you would want to be treated yourself)? Tzedakah? Now, think about skills and competencies one would need to be able to enact this particular value or behavior. We have often asked Jewish educators to meet in groups and provide some answers to questions such as this.

A particularly interesting example was provided by one group of workshop participants who picked bikkur holim (visiting the sick). This group mapped out the complex set of social and emotional skills one would need to master in order to succeed in doing this mitzvah. One would need communication skills to be able to start a conversation and skills in empathy to help steer the conversation and the visit in general; one would need to be able to identify and self-regulate one's own emotions experienced during the course of the visit and to read non-verbal cues to know when it might be time to leave. The organizational skills to get to the location of the visit and negotiate all of the logistics involved are also needed. Returning to the earlier example of tzedakah, one can think about skills such as empathy and perspective taking (to understand why and when to give tzedakah), as well as social skills and problem solving (to be able to do this, as Maimonides implores us, without causing undue embarrassment to the recipient).

It has been our experience that the list of skills generated, regardless of the particular value or mitzvah, has a high degree of overlap with those skills and abilities that are a part of the construct of emotional intelligence and social and emotional learning (EQ/SEL). The skills of emotional intelligence, as formulated by Goleman¹ and others, are summarized in Table 1. The overlap should come as no surprise. EQ/SEL skills are vital for successful interpersonal functioning; their presence lays the groundwork for the positive social interactions that can become the hallmark of a positive society.

Why have we shared this brainstorming exercise here? Because we understand the issue of teaching values and morals to young children as hinging on addressing the underlying EQ/SEL skills. When we teach students certain behavioral rituals, we teach them on two levels. As implied in Parashat Mishpatim (Exodus 21 - 24), we teach the ritual and then we explain what it means. We help students learn how to do rituals and carry out mitzvot, and then we talk about the importance of what they are doing. On Sukkot, we teach children how to hold and shake a lulav and etrog. On Hanukkah, we model the lighting of the menorah and then we talk about the mechanics of the task. How many candles? On what side of the menorah do we start? With interpersonal mitzvot, the answers to the how questions bring with them a new level of understanding of what it takes to do these mitzvot and to observe these values. There is much more to tzedakah than the ability to drop a coin into a pushke. The successful completion of interpersonal mitzvot and midot (positive character traits) calls upon competency in an array of social and emotional skills. A focus on these skills not only is important for the creation of the bedrock on which midot are anchored, but also is vital in helping students become good citizens, neighbors, and family members. Further, as we have discussed elsewhere,² these skills are important in the achievement of a positive Jewish identity.

There are good reasons why children are initiated into Jewish values from the earliest years, well before they are able to understand what they are doing and why it is important. Early exposure to rituals builds a certain kind of expectation, almost an imprinting, which begins to define the practices with which one feels most comfortable. This process has its analogy in Erik Erikson's developmental stages, in which the earliest, that of trust, is established in a visceral, non-verbal manner. It is fueled by the modeling of parents, through exposure to Jewish/Hebrew terminology, which conveys special meaning over and above the English translation and lays the groundwork for children learning that these values are embedded in our history and traditions, and by bringing children into formal or informal rituals, whether at home, in school or in the synagogue.

There is another way in which early initiation makes a significant difference. It provides an opportunity to socialize parents into a family concept of Jewish education. Many have decried the tendency for parents to have minimal involvement in their children's Jewish education, taking on the role of schlepper to and from

various schools and programs. Part of this is because a concerted effort is not typically made to explain to parents the partnership nature of Jewish education. Parents need to hear that it is not a viable option to drop children off and remain uninvolved or to have a home life that is Jewishly in opposition to that which the child is learning in education settings. These may be perceived as bold or even risky demands. Yet, parents of young children are looking for the right path, the way that will be best for their children's minds and also their souls. Hence, it is viable to ask them to use these early years to "try on" aspects of living Jewishly that they might not have thought about or perhaps even rejected at an earlier point in their lives. For the sake of their children's future Jewish identity, it is time to consider these options. Note that one is not asking for commitment, but only for due consideration, with participation defined in a reasonable, but rigorous, way by the educational setting. Indeed, one of the tenets of the EQ/SEL field is that our most important learnings emerge through caring relationships, as well as what we see respected others do and what we experience with them. In early childhood, parents (and grandparents, it should be noted) occupy a preeminent role, although the actions of older siblings are not without influence.

What are the implications of such an approach to Jewish early childhood education? Such an approach would discourage a focus on covering a particular inventory of values or mitzvot as an end in itself, which might have the unintended consequence of providing children with discrete bits of information that may end up being difficult to contextualize. The emphasis would be on learning and living the learning. Further, focusing on underlying EQ/SEL skills allows for addressing a range of skills that can be called upon by the child to help in successfully navigating any number of mitzvah opportunities encountered throughout the course of their education and life. Such skills are essential for enacting rituals and living Jewish values, which starts in early childhood. EQ/SEL skills are necessary for performing the formal and informal rituals that are involved in enacting Jewish values.

While, at first glance, a focus on some of the skills in Table 1 may seem more daunting than a focus on discrete Jewish values and mitzvot, there is good news. First, an extensive body of research has shown that EQ/SEL skills can be learned by children of all ages in a school setting³. In fact, research-validated curricula, specifically designed to help early childhood educators build these skills in their students, do exist. A good example of this is Myrna Shure's *I Can Problem Solve*,⁴ a curriculum that starts in the preschool and has components for the full extent of the elementary grades. Table 2 provides a listing of the relevant EQ/SEL skills in a way that should make sense to educators and parents of young children.

A second point of optimism is that it has been our experience that educators, and early childhood educators in particular, not only realize the value in addressing these skills, but also, to varying extents, are already incorporating EQ/SEL-building activities into their practice. Sure, we wish the students showed up on the first day of school equipped with these skills or that the parents would take more responsibility for teaching them. But, Jewish educators have important roles both in fostering these outcomes in our direct work with children and in bringing parents to a greater awareness of the importance of EQ/SEL skills at home and of greater skills in carrying them out. Books such as *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting*⁵ and *Blessings of a Skinned Knee*⁶ serve as important aids in this endeavor. For most teachers, then, a focus on these skills is not entirely new. Of course, we are not suggesting that you discard any component of your practice that has proven useful. What we are suggesting is that there is a wealth of research and practice in the field that can help strengthen these efforts and let them become more systematic and targeted. To this end, we present several guidelines to assist in building EQ/SEL skills in the Jewish early childhood context.

1. *Understand the strengths and needs of your current practice with regard to EQ/SEL skills as a first step toward integrating work with values and EQ/SEL with the remainder of educational practice in your school.*

Many early childhood educators find that, in their current practice, they already address some of the skills listed in Table 2. For example, emotional awareness is often a part of early childhood education curricula. For these educators, the starting question may be "where can my practice in these areas become more effective and/or systematic?" rather than "what do I need to add to my current work?" An important and enlightening first step is to think about a particular EQ/SEL skill and look through your notes, recollections, and classroom products to develop a list of all the times this skill is addressed directly through a specific program being implemented in the school (e.g., a "friendship" curricular unit) or in a content area (e.g., talking about a character's feelings, how you can tell what they are feeling, etc., when you are reading a

story to the class). Also, think about the degree to which you reinforce these skills in a less "formal" way (e.g., saying to a child, "Gee, you look sad today."). The lists that emerge represent your efforts to build the EQ/SEL skills that underlie Jewish values and identity.

Next, think again about your classroom practice. This time, though, think about the additional opportunities that exist for you to address the EQ/SEL skills listed in Table 2. In our experience, this exercise is most productive when performed together with a colleague, brainstorming together entrance points to address EQ/SEL skills either directly in a content area or informally in your interactions with students. Might there be stories that you can pause while reading to have students suggest what might happen next or what a character can do in the situation s/he faces in the story (thereby helping to build basic problem-solving skills)? Might there be times when you can model your own ability to use EQ/SEL skills such as self-control and self-calming?

There are several advantages to conducting such an inventory. While the benefits to individual teachers are clear (teachers are conducting an assessment of strengths and needs of their own practice), we will focus here on some of the broader benefits. First, such a process enables increased coordination across classrooms. In early childhood settings where students spend more than one year, or in situations where students will be together over the course of several years as they move through nursery, kindergarten, and beyond, a wonderful opportunity exists to coordinate the work done with EQ/SEL skills. We would not expect children in different classrooms to learn different math or reading readiness skills, nor would we expect it to be left up to chance that the teacher at the next level is covering new, developmentally-appropriate content in math or reading. However, this is often what happens with regard to EQ/SEL and Jewish values. Often, teachers are left to "make their own Shabbos"; while each individual meal may taste delicious, some students may get several helpings of cholent and no gefilte fish and others may be given dessert without first hearing Kiddush. There are some broad developmental guidelines for what skills and issues are relevant for early childhood (Table 2). However, within these, there is much latitude for which skills are addressed first and by whom. That there is movement to coordinate EQ/SEL efforts, both among classes and between years in the program, is more important than the specific of which specific skills are addressed where (cf. Novick, Kress & Elias, 2002 for more in school-wide implementation issues⁷).

A second benefit to taking inventory of our EQ/SEL efforts is that it requires each of us to consider work with values and underlying EQ/SEL skills as something that is part of the everyday activity of a class and school, and not left for special occasions. Of course, there will be educational moments that arise, both planned and unplanned, when certain values will take center stage. However, what is known about building EQ/SEL skills tells us that segregating a focus on values into separate curricular pieces is not enough to help children achieve the incorporation of these values into their everyday behavioral repertoires. While approaches such as "midah of the month", or "mitzvah days" have use in helping to set the values "tone" of the school, they have questionable efficacy in terms of assisting students in developing the EQ skills that underlie these values. Research, as well as our own experiences, has pointed out the difficulties involved in skill generalization, the ability to use skills learned in one context in an unrelated context. To the extent that we integrate an EQ/SEL-building focus throughout the experience of the child, rather than focusing on specific events or times as opportunities to use these skills, we assist in such generalization.

2. *Remember what it takes to build a skill*

Another helpful exercise in thinking about building EQ/SEL skills is to take a moment to think about some skill that we possess (it does not have to be a skill in which we excel, merely something we can do that not everyone can -- a sport, a musical instrument, cooking). Now, try to think about how you came by this ability. Another approach is to think about how you learned to drive a car. As much as we are appreciating the role of genetics in behavior, it is unlikely that any of us were born knowing how to cook, play the oboe, or drive a stick shift. Coming to these skills was a process -- likely involving several components:

- A. Motivation, preferably internal but often external: Sometimes we enjoy the skill in its own right; sometimes we like what the skill can do for us. Sometimes there is a combination. Playing an instrument might be relaxing or might allow us to participate in a band or play for the entertainment of friends.

- B. Some type of coaching. This coaching would certainly include a component of modeling, but it would be much more than that (we might watch a cooking show on TV, but we cannot necessarily then recreate the meal). The coaching would, in addition, involve breaking the behavior down into its component parts, instruction in how to do these components, opportunities for practice, and feedback from the instructor or coach. We may learn how to go forward and reverse, parallel park, and do a K-turn under the watchful eye of an instructor who, as we practice each skill and then the skills in combination, keeps providing suggestions and feedback (and a wary foot on the emergency brake).
- C. Opportunities for meaningful use under an array of conditions (this is related to the generalization issue mentioned above): We drive on city streets, winding country roads or highways and in the rain and snow to do a variety of tasks that we either want to or need to do. As such, driving becomes incorporated into our everyday repertoire, through a process called overlearning, to the extent that we can do it basically with little conscious processing.
- D. A positive emotional climate in which to do our best learning. Often, learning a new skill brings with it a degree of anxiety. A good coach can help us manage this anxiety and focus on the task at hand (and certainly would not increase the anxiety level by being overly critical or using unduly harsh tones -- many people can think of skills they gave up on because an instructor turned them off). Table 3 contains some suggestions for how to create a caring classroom environment in which EQ/SEL skills can be addressed in a positive, constructive atmosphere. Importantly, teachers should be sensitive to their own use of EQ/SEL skills, both in providing feedback to students about their own skill development, and more generally throughout the course of the class.

Examples of how such an approach can be used in the Jewish early childhood classroom are shown in the accompanying boxes.

Example 1: Interpersonal Communication Skills

Communication skills are important both within the Jewish context, such as for the successful enacting of values such as *hachnasat orchim* (welcoming guests) or acts of kindness and in the general classroom context.

1. Discuss with the children why such a skill is important. Ask students how it feels if they try to speak and they are not heard or read a story with such plotlines or share an experience when this happened to the teacher.
2. Break down the skills of interpersonal communication into their component parts and pick a focus. For example, a first subskill might be that of making appropriate eye contact when speaking.
3. Model the skill and provide opportunities for students' guided practice. Demonstrate appropriate and inappropriate eye contact; have the children do the same, while providing feedback for their efforts. Be sensitive to your own use of this skill.
4. Provide opportunities for practice and feedback throughout the day. As students are called to the teacher's desk to do projects, or when students talk to one another, prompt each child to remember to use the appropriate eye contact she/he has learned.
- 5.
6. Extend practice opportunities beyond the classroom: Let other school personnel and parents know the skill areas on which you are working and enlist them as partners in helping to reinforce and model expected outcomes.

Example 2: Emotional Awareness

Understanding our own emotions and those of others underlies many important Jewish values, such as *derekh eretz* and *v'ahavat ha'Lev*. ...The everyday activities of the Jewish early childhood classroom become intertwined with the interpersonal rituals, *mitzvot*, and *midot* that we wish our students to internalize.

1. Focus on a component aspect of this skill. For example, work on non-verbal expressions of emotion -- facial expression, body posture.
2. Demonstrate, and then have students "act out," what various emotions "look like."
3. Use a version of a "book talk" in which students can look at pictures in a story and work to identify the feelings portrayed. Focus on what the clues are to the emotions that characters are experiencing (e.g., facial expression).

4. Have children role-play Bible stories, with a focus on the emotional experience of the characters.
 5. Use art projects in which students portray emotional expressions of characters in Bible stories (or any story).
 6. Use emotional terms to label your emotional experiences, and those of students, throughout the day. Tie this to emotional expressions
3. *Reach Out to Parents and Have a Parallel Curriculum*

It is vital that parents be integrally included in what you do. Let parents know which midot you are working on and how they can follow up at home. In addition, let them know what focal EQ/SEL skills you are developing at any given time and give them guidelines for how to foster these at home. Have periodic meetings, at least monthly, where parents come together to share what they are doing to promote midot and build skills. Have parents exchange phone numbers and e-mail addresses and help them become a chavruta (partner) to one another. Consider starting some kind of parents' association (what the Highland Park, NJ, Conservative Temple called a "RAP" group — Religious School Association for Parents) to help teachers, coordinate phone chains, and keep aware of curricular and extracurricular issues.

Conclusion:

Our approach to addressing Jewish values adds the consideration of which underlying social and emotional skills need to be addressed in order to be an exemplar of the interpersonal Jewish values and mitzvot that we hold dear. Educators must move beyond the cognitive aspects of values and mitzvot (What does the term mean? What is the source?) and the surface aspects of the mitzvah (What does a tzedakah box look like? Can we bring in old clothes for a clothing drive?) to understand that Jewish values and interpersonal mitzvot serve a broader purpose — that of tikkun olam, to repair the world. In doing so, educators can take advantage of this optimal opportunity to reach out to parents and help them become both partners and life-long learners. While young children cannot grasp the enormity of this task, the caring adults around them certainly can begin to put into motion an ongoing effort to help them develop the skills necessary to actualize bringing the midot directly and meaningfully into their lives.

Table 1: Five Core Competencies in Emotional Intelligence and Social and Emotional Learning

1. *Self-Awareness:*
Knowing our current feelings, realistically assessing our own abilities
2. *Social Awareness:*
Being able to sense the feelings of others and take perspectives
3. *Self-Management:*
Using our emotions constructively, delaying gratification, staying goal-focused in the face of obstacles
4. *Relationship Skills:*
Forming positive relationships, appropriately handling emotions and social interactions, resolving conflicts positively
5. *Responsible Decision-Making:*
Taking into account multiple courses of action and anticipating consequences.

Based on Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning⁸

Table 2: Key Skills in in Emotional Intelligence/ Social and Emotional Learning for Young Children

1. *Self-Awareness*
Recognizes signs of different feelings
Names many different emotions and knows when to use these terms
2. *Self-Regulation of Emotion*
Uses words to express times when feeling anxious, angry, sad
Able to calm down when prompted by adults and, to some degree, on one's own
Expresses positive feelings about self, school, family, and friends
Shows self-control (e.g., when waiting one's turn; when entering and leaving classrooms at the start and end of the day and other transition times; when working on something in a group or alone)

3. *Self-Monitoring and Performance*

Shows a good attention span

Remembers and uses feedback on tasks

Can stick with a simple project over a reasonable period of time

Eager to participate and help out in class

Generally has a positive attitude and mood

Puts forth his or her best effort most of the time

Cares about social norms regarding health, appearance, safety (e.g., washing face or hair, brushing teeth; crossing street with adults; avoiding electrical sockets, pills that look like candy)

4. *Empathy and Perspective Taking*

Pays attention to the nonverbal cues of peers, adults

Shows at least some concern for the distress of others

Shares in the positive joy of others

Listens carefully to others

Follows directions well

Responds well when presented with others' perspectives, points of view, and feelings

5. *Social Skills in Handling Relationships*

Harmonizes difficulties among peers in an appropriate way

Works well as part of a team /cooperative-learning group

Uses age-appropriate social decision-making and problem-solving skills

Responds constructively and in a problem-solving manner to interpersonal obstacles

Based on Elias, et al.⁹

Table 3: "Shalom Bayit" in the Early Childhood Classroom:
Creating a Positive Social and Emotional Climate

- Have clear, visibly-posted classroom and school rules that include expectations for positive behavior, respecting classmates and adults.
- Provide opportunities for all children to regularly make contributions to the routines and maintenance of the classroom.
- Provide frequent teacher redirection as an alternative to verbal reprimand.
- Ensure that classrooms and school-related locations are free from violence and threat.
- Arrange for school life to include consistent, stimulating contact with caring adults.
- Allow opportunities for physical movement periodically.
- Create vehicles for positive recognition and acknowledgement of the strengths of all children.
- Experience laughter, joy, fun, a sense of wonder, curiosity about how and why things happen around them in school, community, the world.
- Celebrate holidays and family customs and respect those of others.
- Participate in community events so that children earn a sense that they matter and can make a difference in the world (e.g., recycling).

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Endnotes

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