Curricular Reform

William Berkson

The great teachers who know that Judaism is fascinating and life-sustaining have succeeded in spite of the supplementary school curriculum. The problem is that key issues that are central to Judaism and most important to life have been absent or marginal in this curriculum.

What is missing? Gil Mann has written that Judaism can be thought of as having three spheres: ethics, spirituality and peoplehood—more traditionally expressed as Torah, God and Israel. The heart of Judaism as a religion is the wedding of spirituality and ethics. And this is what was cut out of the curriculum. To understand what is really missing and the challenge of restoring it, it helps to understand how and why the curriculum was eviscerated in the first place.

Cutting spirituality and personal ethics out of the curriculum was a conscious decision by educators early in the last century. In the early twentieth century, Jewish educators were faced with massive numbers of Jewish families who were eager to become a part of American life, and going to public schools was a key and an affordable part of that process. Jewish education for most children would take place in four to six hours a week, or not at all. What should be included in that limited time?

The decision was to teach what was thought to be most ethnically or nationally distinctive: how to celebrate Jewish holidays, read Hebrew prayers, and a bit about the Land of Israel. In effect, the whole concentration became on the 'peoplehood' sphere. Some Bible reading and Jewish history was included, and the social ethics of *tzedaka* and social justice were also touched upon. However, the ethics of personal conduct was gone, and discussion of God was out. Emanuel Gamoran, one of the leading educators of the time, regarded "Sunday school moralizing" as useless, and thought any discussion of God would simply go over the heads of children. Personal ethics and spirituality would have to come indirectly, by osmosis from (re-told) Bible stories.

It is a deep irony that the personal ethics of Judaism can actually meet the greatest single felt need of the youth of our time. During the second half of the past century, in the face of rising divorce rates and family breakups, the issue of how to sustain love and a close family life has become a top priority for all Americans. This was confirmed in a recent survey. When American young adults (18-34) were asked to rate their priorities, 83 percent rated a close-knit family as a highest priority (9 or 10 on a scale of 1 to 10). This percentage is up a striking 15 percent over the past decade. By comparison, religious involvement was a highest priority for only 42 percent of young Americans, up 4 percent. [*USA Today*, April 13, 1998.]

The traditional Jewish ethical ideals of justice, kindness and humility are, in fact, at the heart of good relationships. And the combination of Jewish ethics, spirituality and ritual powerfully promote good marriages and families. The appeal of Judaism in this area is profound and authentic. But how Jewish values can help guide and sustain a better life in love, work and family is not part of the curriculum, and not something young people usually think of when they think of Judaism. If the relevance of Jewish values was taught as a guide to life, it would be a powerful change for the better in Jewish education.

How can the teaching of personal ethical values and spirituality be brought back into the curriculum in a way that will speak effectively to children and to young adults?

For younger children, we should resolve never to teach ritual without including the ethical and spiritual dimension. Further, the explicit teaching of personal ethics should be part of instruction from the earliest grades. Even young children can understand notions of fairness and sharing. As they progress through elementary school, they should be thoroughly familiar with the ethical choices they have that affect others: issues such as *lashon hara*, how to treat parents and siblings, and honesty.

What about the shortage of time? Here we still face the same reality as the educators early in the past century. However, I do not think that continuing to leave out the personal ethical dimension is an option. If we have to cut, it cannot be here, because if we do cut here, we are not taking Torah seriously. The peak of the Torah is the giving of the Ten Commandments—ethics, belief in one God, and Shabbat—and these cannot be neglected. The child's complaint, "Sunday school is boring" has come from the curriculum not being serious and ambitious enough.

However, I am under no illusion that what can be done up to bar and bat mitzva will be enough. Including a conscious chronicling of ethical choices and *gemilut hassadim* as part of the bar and bat mitzva year would be a valuable addition. But it is only beyond age 13 that children have the maturity fully to appreciate ethical issues, and also to wrestle with issues of theology. It is also post-bar and bat mitzva when there is more flexibility in curriculum and, if we can interest students, more time through the high school years. From eighth grade on is where the key challenge is, and where we need to have a new seriousness about engaging the minds and hearts of the young.

In the area of spirituality, we must engage teenagers in wrestling with theology. The key problem we face in an age of science is that most Jews cannot accept the traditional and important belief in individual providence: that God is watching and intervenes in each life and rewards or punishes after death.

The challenge to us is to show teens the relevance of these texts and the ideas in them to the personal decisions the teens face, as well as to contemporary issues of helping the poor and of social reform. My own efforts have been in the area of showing the relevance of Jewish values to the personal decisions we face today. But I am under no illusion that one or two people can accomplish the task of showing the relevance of Jewish values to youth. We live in a different world from that of Torah or of Talmud, and how to apply our traditional values today is often not at all obvious. The challenge we face is to make the connections between traditional texts and the life issues people face today, and then to teach them. Making these links and teaching them is a serious challenge to Jewish leaders, including educators, rabbis, Jewish academics, Jewish psychologists and others.

William Berkson is the Director of the Jewish Institute for Youth and Family.