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ETHICS

Ethics in Jewish Schools

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FOR those of us who spend our professional and often personal lives living and learning among high school students, we understand that hormones are far more powerful than Halakhah. Thus, teaching ethics to high school students is far more about culture and context than about pedagogy or curriculum. Jewish tradition suggests that in order to learn to become a great scholar, one should “sit at the feet of those scholars” and soak up their every thought and every action. So too with high school students: they must attend a school where the ethical examples of their teachers, administrators, parents, and friends create a seamless context and culture for ethical thinking and behavior. Lawrence Kohlberg refers to this as the “just community”; Abraham Joshua Heschel explains that we need fewer textbooks and more “text-people.” Ethics and moral behavior are learned within the powerful forces of context and culture.

Of course, the obvious question is, “How does one create the context and culture within a formal educational setting?” Conceptually, the answer is simple; the hard part is execution.

Conceptually, school leadership engenders a core values shift, thereby changing the values language, metaphor, and allusion used by all members of the school community. For example, in American culture, “knowledge is power” is a core value and key metaphor. Children are urged to learn because they will become powerful, successful in the monetary sense, or politically powerful. From a Jewish perspective, whereas knowledge is certainly a source of power, it is, more importantly, a source of wisdom. But how does knowledge promote wisdom? How do we define wisdom, and what are the actions of wise people?

Other language shifts may include notions of “rights” becoming ideas about “obligations”—“animal rights” becoming human obligations to animals; “charity” in the sense of doing that which is loving, becoming tzedakah, doing that which is just. In addition, popular ideas of beauty as an external, material notion, as displayed on the cover of almost every consumer magazine, transforms to “beauty as the inner spirit” of every human being. Language shifts help students change their perceptions of what is truly important and the context in which they think about ethics. All of these language transformations are part of what I call the “Jewish Values Matrix,” which encompasses a long list of widely accepted core values that undergo radical shifts in meaning and action when carefully dis-

aggregated within the prism of Jewish thinking and ideals.

Perhaps the most powerful shift in language and thinking is found in a phrase of Rabbi Harold Schulweis, “the best is the enemy of the good.” In creating a high school context and culture that transforms and educates, that leads



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to ethical thinking and action, I have found no better axiom. America idolizes the “best.” But the notion of “best,” by definition, is an ethical anathema. If I am the “best,” then you are not. If I am the best Jew, then you are not; if I am the best ethicist, then you are not. Moreover, what does it take to become the best? Athletes are pressured to use steroids; students are pressured to cheat or participate in ethical lapses when finding information on the Internet. Indeed, striving to be the “best” may counteract our value for learning lishma. And what about humility?

To execute this values shift is the core challenge.

First, it takes constant education of faculty. The teachers, office staff, janitors, and administrators must learn and speak the new values language. In 1965, had you visited a NASA base and asked the janitor what his job was, his answer would be, “To put a man on the moon.” (Hopefully, today, that same janitor would say, “To put a woman or man on Mars.”) So too with executing a rich Jewish ethical context and culture: everyone must be, literally, on the same page. Everyone’s job is values and ethics education.

Second, parents need education in how to speak ethical language, in how to recognize what is important. For example, when a child comes home from school, parents, including myself, will ask, "How was your math test? Or how was the athletic tryout?" Rarely do we ask, "Did you do a mitzvah today?" "Did you invite a lonely classmate to join you for lunch?" What parents ask is what we value. Changing the questions changes the vision for our children; changing the vision engenders ethical actions.

Third, the school's trustees need education on how their language, decisions, and financial support impact the overall institution. What they spend and how they spend it is, perhaps, the most powerful creator of culture and context.

I often teach school boards that



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the school's budget is really a statement of what we, at our very core, believe and value. If there are large allocations for technology, then we value technology. If, however, there is serious discussion about teacher benefits, and large allocations for pension plans and medical care, then we value our faculty and their most basic human needs. In essence, we value our ethical obligations, our Jewish obligations, if you will, to our professional community in whom we place the ethical education of our children.

Faculty who know this kind of support act in accordance with the board's vision for the school, a vision that, without exception in our nation, includes in its mission a mandate to raise up a generation of successful people and ethical human beings. ■

