From Mesorah to Morasha: Reflections on Evolving Trends in Modern Orthodox Tanakh Education

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My Tanakh education began at my parents' Shabbat table. We began our conversations at each meal as many families do, with everyone sharing their thoughts and their news, and each of us vying for my mother *z"l*'s attention. And then inevitably every week, my father, who is an electrical engineer by trade but a *talmid hakham* by passion, transformed our dining room into a Beit Midrash by asking, "What do you know about the *parasha*?" We would share our *divrei* Torah, and my father would ask us questions about what we had said, sending us to look for answers –most often in the Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel, 1809–1879) –when we were stuck. As four of my father's seven children went on to have careers in Jewish education, his excitement for learning was clearly contagious. My father's method has guided me throughout my career. As Proverbs 22:6 teaches, *Hanokh l'naar al pi darko*—when every student is educated according to their personal way, *gam ki yazkin, lo yasur mimena*—they will remain on that path when they grow older. If we want our students to be lifelong learners and to see Tanakh as being relevant to their lives, we must make it personal to them. Students thrive in environments where their ideas form the basis for their further learning, and where they know that not only are their questions answered, but their voices and opinions are valued.

When I was a student in high school, I took an excellent course called *Hazara al Neviim Rishonim* (review of the "Early Prophets"). While I appreciated the opportunity to review books I had not learned since elementary school—and indeed, this informed my later decision as a Tanakh department chair to make sure this review happened as part of the larger curriculum—there was one aspect to my teacher's approach with which I fundamentally disagreed. The first time I remember hearing it, we were studying the story of David's affair with the then-married Batsheva, and our teacher told us that, although the textual narrative of the story portrays David's actions as sinful, we must view his behavior "through the eyeglasses of Tanakh." She explained that when a person wears sunglasses, everything appears dark. It is only once tinted layers are removed that we can see the "truth" of the story. She exhorted us to remove our "sunglasses," to look beyond the plain sense of the

verses that colored David in a negative light, and to view him as a perfect righteous individual, one whose actions never deviated from strictly observing the laws of God, thereby making him the king against whom all future kings are measured in terms of their service of God. She cited the opinion of R' Yonatan in *Shabbat* 56a: *Kol ha-omeir David hata aino ela toeh*—Anyone who says that David sinned is mistaken. My teacher's intention was surely to have her students maintain a level of awe for biblical figures, and to give us an ideal of unswerving devotion to HaShem. But by not presenting us with *parshanut* on both sides of the discussion—perhaps including Abravanel's opinion that David in this moment truly had sinned—she missed achieving an equally important educational objective. *Bava Batra* 17b teaches that there were only four people who died without sin, and while David's father and one of David's sons are listed there, David himself is not. The narratives in Tanakh depict characters whose relationships with God range from true believer to heretical. What we have to understand is that, ultimately, they are all people, and their stories are told so that we may learn from them, in their failures as much as in their successes.

My teacher's approach to the text is perhaps understandable when we consider that she was a graduate of the Bais Yaakov school system, and she subscribed to a dogma that Jewish education facilitates our ability to remain in insular communities that have limited contact or interaction with the world at large. The irony of this position is that Sara Schenirer, who founded the original Bais Yaakov schools in Europe to avoid secularization of Jewish girls who only received a public school education, was influenced by the teachings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch,[1] whose philosophy was that of *Torah im Derekh Eretz*, which emphasizes the importance of secular knowledge for those who study Torah.

This philosophy drives Modern Orthodox education. When the Maimonides School was established in Boston, Shulamith Soloveitchik Meiselman wrote that its aim was to ensure that religious education and connection to Judaism would not end with a child's bar/bat mitzvah, and "that the spiritual content of Jewish education should be so emphasized that it would become an integral part of the individual and would remain with him permanently." In determining curriculum, she writes that "[s]killed educators have fashioned [it] in such a way that no subject, Hebrew or English, is neglected or curtailed."[2] By housing both the Judaic and secular components of the child's education in the same building and giving them shared importance, the Day School encourages the child to view both as being part of one's life rather than seeing them as mutually exclusive pursuits.

But ultimately, the Judaics component is the *raison d'etre* for the Day School, and its role in the child's continued Jewish identity and practice is paramount. Dr. Jack Wertheimer writes that the objective of Jewish education after World War II was to foster religious connection rather than just an ethnic awareness and connection. He explains that the primary role of Day Schools that were established in the twentieth century was to foster a Jewish identity in students that would withstand the influences of the outside world. While early Conservative Day Schools were staffed by educators who had advanced degrees in education or Judaic studies, the staff of early Orthodox and Modern Orthodox schools was comprised of teachers who came from Europe and were not formally trained in pedagogy. However, despite growing demand for Day School educators, by the 1970s, many factors—including low Day School salaries and Jewish educators being perceived as having a lower social status—made it difficult to recruit qualified teachers. Rather than looking to fill open positions with graduates of the institutions of higher Jewish education that existed, Day

School teachers came from rabbinic, religious, and Israeli programs, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of hiring unlicensed educators because it was not deemed necessary for Day School teachers to have educator training.[3] In fact, in 1997, the Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education (CIJE) found that a very low number –just 19 percent—of teachers in Jewish schools had training in both education and Judaics, and they concluded that "building Jewish education as a profession is critical for improving teaching and learning in Jewish education."[4]

As such, it is not surprising that, while textual skills were taught and the level of *parshanut* might be challenging, some Jewish educators focused more on affective objectives than on creating rigorous academic curriculum, and their courses were often perceived by students as being less structured and demanding than their secular counterparts. To be fair, in many cases this was by design, as teachers who could have required a higher level of academic coursework chose not to. They may have felt compassion for students who were already burdened with work from their general studies classes or that adding to their students' already long and taxing school day would be detrimental to their individual relationships with those students. They may also have felt that students might have a negative association with religion if their learning were tied to grades.

Modern Orthodox schools have shifted from this mindset. As a profession, teaching has become more regulated, requirements for licensure have become stricter and more demanding, and opportunities for promotion have become increasingly dependent on advanced degrees and development.[5] In the same vein, administrators of Modern Orthodox schools have begun demanding more formal educational training and continuing professional development from their teachers. This shift leads to a more academic focus and bent toward Judaic studies that had not been there previously, and with that, as predicted by the CIJE study, come increased expectations that students will engage more actively and critically with texts. At a recent school Shabbaton, several of my colleagues and I sat on a panel and answered student questions. When asked how our personal teaching methods have shifted over time, a fellow teacher remarked that the idea of having students sit in *havrutot* and independently work through Tanakh texts and *parshanut* was a relatively new phenomenon at the start of her career, and now *havruta* learning is an integral part of her classroom. With the overall trend in education leaning toward student-based independent learning, where dyad and group learning in the classroom has become the norm and there is progressively less frontal teaching in more of their classes, students in Tanakh classrooms are better able to hone their learning skills while engaging with the text, since they have developed a comfort level with this methodology.

Furthermore, increased expectations in their courses throughout their school day allows for the assumption of high standards in their Judaics classes as well. This creates a unique challenge for Tanakh teachers, who view themselves as gatekeepers for inspiration and connection to the text as well as facilitators for learning it. Dr. Wendy Paterson, Dean of SUNY Buffalo State University's School of Education, summarizes the qualities of an effective teacher as "knowledge of subject matter, knowledge of teaching methods, and practical experience in applying both."[6] Creating the proper balance of *heimish* and academic takes time and is not always easy. These changes can be especially daunting for veteran teachers, who began their careers before these new expectations were placed on them. I have seen some teachers who have been lauded as exceptional educators in the past struggle to update and modernize their pedagogy to accommodate these standards.

Evolving learning methods have also led to much less rote memorization in Tanakh learning. As a student, I remember being expected to write and recite verses word-for-word on tests, and there are rabbinic passages that I still recall from weekly quizzes. When I began teaching, my high school students were expected to memorize each opening line of the Rashis we learned, and they were never allowed to use their Tanakhs on their tests. But at the turn of the century, educational research indicated that more meaningful learning occurs when students can use what they have learned and either apply it to new situations or connect it to other aspects of their lives. Rather than just remembering what they have learned, students should be encouraged to evaluate, analyze, and make inferences based on their learning.[7] Especially now that we live in a time when students can get any information through a quick internet search on their phones and other personal devices, it does not make sense to force copious memorization of material. Instead, using their Tanakhs as tools for further learning will be more impactful in the long run. Although they cannot take full notes in their Tanakhs and source books, my students are now encouraged to mark up the commentaries we learn in class, to underline, highlight, and annotate these sources, and to use them during their assessments. This allows for questions that require analysis and critical thinking, where students compare and contrast information, and use what they have learned to draw their own conclusions. As educational psychologist Richard E. Mayer writes, "retention focuses on the past; transfer focuses on the future."[8] We are dealing with ancient texts, but we must not relegate them to the past by simply forcing retention of words. Rather, we must transfer their ideas and messages so they are integral to our lives and our future. And ironically, the more relevance we find in the words of the texts, the more likely we are to remember and quote them verbatim.

Creating this personalization is the challenge of Modern Orthodox educators today. In 2019, there were 158 schools in the United States that identified as either Modern or Centrist Orthodox, comprising approximately 17 percent of all students who attended Jewish Day Schools from every denomination. Of that number, 11,699 were high school students.[9] In order to reach these young members of the community, teachers must help them see the relevance in their learning. While the wisdom of the classical commentators on the text is irreplaceable, when combined with works by modern Torah scholars, students are more likely to find perspectives and voices that resonate with them reflected in the sources they are learning in class. Books such as Yigal Ariel's series on the Early Prophets and Tamar Weissman's *Tribal Lands*, about the tribes and their land inheritance, provide analysis of events and character studies on personalities in Tanakh. The young women in my classroom especially appreciate learning from female scholars. Although some may prefer the *shiur* format of Nehama Leibowitz's books while others lean towards Avivah Zornberg's literary style, they have role models who demonstrate Torah learning at the highest level.

Students' lived experience is also of utmost importance when determining how we present our curriculum. Because *Torah u'madda* is a major tenet of Modern Orthodoxy, it is the role of its schools to model this lifestyle and to educate their students according to this belief. It is imperative that the Torah they learn not only acknowledges, but also incorporates their secular learning, allowing the knowledge they gain from their general studies classes to enhance and elevate their Judaic studies. In his commentary on Genesis 1:1, Rashi quotes Rabbi Yitzhak's question of why the Torah begins with the story of creation rather than the first mitzvah given to the entire Jewish people. In explaining this question, Ramban asserts that, although belief that God created the world is the basis of our faith, the

details of creation can only be understood by trained mystics. Therefore, he says, the statement in the Ten Commandments that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh would be sufficient for us to have this knowledge and to sustain our faith. While this may have been true in the heavily religious Christian world of the Ramban, it is impossible in our world where everything is challenged and must be proven. Our society is not content with "because I said so" information, and if Torah scholars are unable to address questions that students have on the text, those students may abandon the beliefs with which they are raised. Learning the events of creation as they connect to scientific theory, using classic *parshanut*, contemporary *parshanut*, the teachings of modern scientists such as Nathan Aviezer, the writings of scholars like Natan Slifkin, and secular scientific journals is essential to helping our students maintain faith, especially on college campuses where they are sometimes directly challenged. If we refuse to acknowledge evidence and data so that we can live in a comfortable bubble of denial, our children will have that bubble burst for them as soon as they encounter their first person with a pin.

I will never forget the first time I was challenged by someone who was well-versed in biblical criticism. I had never heard any of his assertions, and I was wholly unprepared to respond. We cannot let that happen to our students, many of whom will attend institutions where such criticism is accepted as fact. Since the best defense is a strong offense, students should encounter questions on, and contradictions in, the verses while they are still in our classrooms. They should debate and research answers, and ultimately be guided to sources that will help them find resolutions. As Rashi explains on the word *v'shinantam* in *Devarim* 6:7, the words of Torah should be sharp in our mouths, so that if someone asks us a question, we can answer immediately without stumbling. In addition to a unit on creation and science, my senior Humash class learns Snell's law of refraction when understanding the sign of the rainbow that was given to Noah, and with that they learn Ramban on 9:12, who writes that we must integrate the science of the phenomenon with our understanding of why God chooses it to be the sign of his *berit* in the postdiluvian world. We use the teachings of Rabbi Hayyim Angel to contrast Akkadian worship, as represented by Migdal Bavel, with Yaakov's ultimate statement in Genesis 28:17 that he is at the gateway to the heavens. When exploring the Covenant between the Parts in Genesis 15, they find writings in Daniel and in the *Zohar* that appear to foreshadow current events. Rather than being told to look at the stories of our progenitors with the eyeglasses of Tanakh, they look at *parshanut* on both sides of an event. In addition to those sources that describe the goodness of these people, we also look at *parshanut* that says that the person has sinned. We delve into Rav Hirsch's description of Avraham's emotional journey to Mt. Moriah in which he cannot bear to be alone with, or even talk to, Yitzhak; Rav Ezra Bick on Yitzhak's trauma during the *akedah*; Rashbam who does not whitewash Reuven's actions with Bilhah; debates regarding the behavior of Yosef and his brothers, and so much more.

There is an intellectual honesty that has to be present for true learning to take place and for love of Torah to grow. An administrator came into my class one day and watched the debate that my students were having regarding the position of a source we were learning. She later wrote to me, "What an amazing group of enthusiastic bright women studying together." Providing opportunities for intellectual discussion and respectful give-and-take in Day Schools creates confidence in the authenticity of the text when these young adults have graduated and left our enclave. They know that there are tools and teachers to use as resources for the questions they encounter to which they do not have answers, and they also know that they can live with having questions.

I have reaped incredible, unexpected benefits by allowing this interchange of ideas with students in the classroom. Over the past few years, when current and former students have reached out to arrange *havrutot* with me, rather than the more traditional texts that have been requested in the past, one student has asked to learn about *tefillah*, while others have asked for Kohelet, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Job. The young woman with whom I learn about *tefillah* wanted to make it more personal and meaningful. The books of Tanakh that were requested are some of the most intense and difficult, both technically and thematically. And that is why it was important for me to agree to those requests—girding myself with *Daat Mikra*. What I gain from learning with all of my students, those still in my classroom and those who have taken their place in the world, is incalculable. Their questions constantly challenge me to evaluate what I know, and to seek answers in new sources when they are not satisfied with those I had initially presented. In *Shabbat* 7a, Rabbi Nahman bar Yitzhak explains that the Torah is compared to a tree, because just like smaller branches light bigger ones, student scholars sharpen their teachers. The Gemara then quotes Rabbi Hanina who says that he learned a lot from his teachers and even more from his colleagues, but *mitalmidai yoteir mi'kulam*—I have learned the most from my students.

One of the earliest verses that we learn as children and then teach as parents and educators is Deuteronomy 33:4, which tells us: *Torah tzivah lanu Moshe, morasha kehillat Yaakov*. My friend and former colleague, Dr. Jeremy Kahan, presented a beautiful perspective on the message presented to us here. While the first half of the verse describes the authority of Torah and its transmission through *mesorah*, the second half tells us that it is the inheritance of future generations, and as such, proprietorship is equally theirs, and we have to relinquish it to them. As Rambam writes in his *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (3:1), Torah belongs to everyone, and anyone who wants to may come and take it. When this happens, we should welcome the perspectives our students bring, and respect them enough to engage in discussion about their thoughts.

Contemporary Tanakh education requires its teachers to be open to, and aware of, shifts in the learning landscape. It demands flexibility and focus, and it is imperative that we do not become complacent. Because when we are successful, we are fortunate to facilitate our students' investment in our people's legacy and future by allowing them to take ownership of Torah. When they see its role in their lives, it becomes *Torat hayyim*, a living text that invites continued discussion and interpretation. And ultimately, we can hope that they will then invite their children into the Torah conversations happening at their own Shabbat tables.

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[3] Wertheimer, Jack. “Jewish Education in the United States: Recent Trends and Issues.” *The American Jewish Year Book*, vol. 99, 1999, pp. 8–9, 17, 19–20, 24–26. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23605995.

[4] Gamoran, Adam, et al. “Background and Training of Teachers in Jewish Schools: Current Status and Levers for Change.” *Religious Education*, vol. 92, no. 4, 1997, p. 534 and 549.

[5] Paterson, Wendy A. “From 1871 to 2021: A Short History of Education in the United States.” *SUNY Buffalo State College*, 8 Dec. 2021, https://suny.buffalostate.edu/news/1871-2021-short-history-education-united-states.

[6] Paterson, *ibid*.

[7] Mayer, Richard E. “Rote Versus Meaningful Learning.” *Theory Into Practice*, vol. 41, no. 4, 2002.

[8] Mayer, *ibid*.

[9] Besser, Mordechai. “A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States 2018–2019.” *AVI CHAI Census*, Aug. 2020, pp. 14–15., https://avichai.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/AVI-CHAI-Census-2018-2019-v3.pdf.