

The People of The Book.....should be able to read it

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Jewish education too often takes the form, on the one hand, of an education in the habitual (almost robotic) performance of mitzvos and, on the other hand, a socialization towards certain acceptable behaviours, attitudes, dress, and norms, of which only some have an actual basis in Torah and halacha (Jewish Law). The purpose of any education, however, should be to instil in the pupil a love of learning in and of itself – for its own sake. And more than that, the recognition that learning can happen at any time and in any place – and should continue throughout a person's entire life.

What does a Jewish child need to know? As a new Jewish school¹, this was the question that served as the starting point of our consideration of what should go into our curriculum. Note that the question was **not**: what does a child from an observant Jewish home need to know? Nor was the question: what does a child from an unobservant Jewish home need to know? For centuries, Jewish children, regardless of their religious affiliations or varying levels of home observance, sat learning side-by-side in chedarim and other such settings.

Our goal was simple: keep the children together at all costs – not one level and one subject for these children and another level and another subject for those children. Accordingly, the emphasis at Umhlanga Jewish Day School is on Jewish literacy. Put simply: The People of the Book.....should be able to read it (and understand it)! What Jewish parent does not wish that he could step into a shul and open a siddur or chumash to the right place and be able to follow along with the davening (prayers) or the leining (reading from the Torah scroll) in the service – and who does not wish this same thing for his children as well? Whether or not a child will ever choose to set foot in a shul or to open such books when he grows up is something that we cannot foresee. The bottom line is that mitzvah observance is a choice² – without a doubt, the most important choice that we make in our lives – and Jewish education, regardless of the age to which it is geared, has to be about helping people to make an informed choice. The mission of a Jewish day school must be to give Jewish children the basic and fundamental tools and skills of literacy that they will need to access their heritage – to receive the Torah that has been given to them and to enable them to transmit it on to the next generation.

There are numerous fallacies that hold people back from giving their children a Jewish education. I would like to discuss some of the ones that I regularly encounter:

Fallacy #1: Jewish education results in producing a Torah observant (i.e., religious) child or, G-d forbid, a Rabbi or Rebbetzin.

Although it may be a bit alarming to consider, the biggest influence on a child is: his parents. Children learn their values primarily from those that were embraced and modelled by their parents.³ In short, children tend to value what their parents' value and tend to measure things against the measuring stick that was passed onto them by their parents. Children whose parents are not interested in observing the Torah will, with very rare exception, grow up to be adults who are not interested in observing the Torah.

Moreover, just as with secular studies, Torah can be studied, and is studied, on a range of levels. The mere ability to open up Jewish texts, follow along inside, read and translate them – in other words, basic literacy – cannot be compared to the level of study of someone who has received semicha (i.e., Rabbinic ordination). Prior to even beginning studying for semicha (which itself can take a year or more), Rabbinic students typically spend 5 to 7 years of intensive (read: 10 – 12 hours per day) university level and post-university level Talmud study, which enables them to delve into complex, detailed, and nuanced discussions (found within books that most Jews have never even heard of) and ultimately come to authoritative decisions regarding questions in halacha (Jewish law).

Just as a student who takes the basic science and math classes given throughout an ordinary primary and prep school education does not have the skills or knowledge comparable to a doctor – so too, a student who receives a proper Jewish education focused on literacy does not have the skills or knowledge comparable to a Rabbi. And the comparison is a fitting in terms of any concern that a parent might have that his child will actually become a Rabbi – as how many children who love their science classes are dedicated enough to make the necessary sacrifices to put in the time and study necessary to become a doctor? Although every Jew is obligated to study the Torah – daily⁴ – that doesn't mean that every Jew will eventually become a Rabbi. In fact, it is quite evident that few do.

Fallacy #2: I will have to increase my level of observance if my child attends a Jewish day school

The fact is that a child who attends a Jewish day school may ask his parent to do things that the parent might otherwise not do: e.g., have a seder on Pesach; build a succah for Succos; etc. Children connect much more easily with the many mitzvos and customs than adults do and tend to get downright excited by them. What child doesn't enthusiastically look forward to attending a Pesach seder and sharing with everyone in attendance the many things that he learned at school about Pesach? Children who attend a Jewish day school may even schlep their parents to shul on Shabbos because they consider it a fun and exciting place to be – and a place that their friends will be as well. Some parents will choose to encourage their child's enthusiasm for such things....others will not. How you choose to respond to such requests will provide the biggest lesson of all for your own children regarding what you want them to consider important and what you want them to get excited about.

It is also important to distinguish between increasing your personal level of observance and being sensitive to that of others. For example, a more common and practical issue that may come up is being prepared (e.g., having a supply of kosher snacks and foodstuffs on hand) for when school children from more observant homes come to play or visit with your children.

Fallacy #3: Religious education is neither rigorous nor intellectually stimulating, but instead amounts to being little more than indoctrination

By the time a child who receives a traditional Jewish education based upon studying Torah texts reaches high school, he has reached an impressive level of study, having spent years studying from original source texts, as well as their many commentaries, in their original and various foreign languages (i.e., not translations) – including Biblical Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew, Modern Hebrew, Aramaic, etc. Moreover, the primary thrust of a traditional Jewish education is textual analysis – learning to define terms precisely, dissect incidents, quoted verses, statements and arguments by considering such things as their logic, context, evidence, authority, or other underlying support.

Students are trained to get down to the very heart of disputes – recognizing precisely the point(s) of contention between opposing positions and understanding in what cases such a difference of opinion would practically matter to the way that we actually do things. Often times, one authority is merely explaining or, perhaps, adding to the statement of another authority – so students must also learn to consider whether an argument is even taking place at all! And, these reading comprehension skills do not remain the exclusive property of the children's Jewish studies' classes, but influence how they read and process everything with which they come in contact thereafter.

Moreover, indoctrination has no place within Judaism and Jewish education, and the emphasis, in fact, is just the opposite: questioning and seeking sources/support for ideas and opinions. One of the most common phrases in the Talmud is: From where do we know (that such-and-such is the case)? In other words, children are trained to constantly ask what the source is for an opinion or idea.

Fallacy #4: The extra-curricular activities that I want for my child (e.g., sports) are not offered at your school

There is no such a thing as a perfect school. And like every decision we make in life, there are always trade-offs. Largely due to their size, the average Jewish day school simply cannot offer the variety and quality of extra-curricular activities offered at larger non-Jewish public and private schools. In this case, the choice largely comes down to priorities. Although a child may enjoy or excel in a particular area, should that mean that a decision such as what school the child should attend should be primarily determined by his proclivity for that particular activity (especially if an after-school activity will suffice)? The odds of a child who does not attend a Jewish day school marrying another Jew become almost as bad as the flip of a coin.⁵ Moreover, there is a clear correlation between the amount of Jewish education that a person receives and the chances that he will later intermarry: "Marriage to a non-Jew is rare among those who attended a Jewish day school or yeshiva, more common among those who attended a part-time program that met more than once a week, and higher still among those who attended one-day-a-week programs. In short, the more intensive the Jewish schooling, the lower the rate of intermarriage, reflecting both the types of people who obtain more intensive Jewish schooling and, quite possibly, the direct impact of Jewish education on later marital decisions."⁶ A child may be talented at art or really enjoy playing soccer. At the end of the day, is it worth gambling with his future – and the future of his children? The children in a household where both spouses are Jewish have close to a 100% chance that they will be raised Jewish – compared to only one-third of the children from homes where one of the spouses is not Jewish.⁷ Don't we owe everyone who came before us better odds than the flip of a coin that our descendants will remain Jewish?

Conclusion

The Torah is our heritage and our inheritance, but to truly appreciate it and acquire it takes significant effort, investment, and on-going education. If we fail to give our children an educational foundation that will enable them to access even the most basic and fundamental of Jewish texts and that will, as a natural result, enable them to feel at home in Jewish places, then what sort of Jewish future can we honestly expect for them?

¹ We opened our doors on 16 January 2012. Our students currently range from Grade 000 (age 3 years old) to Grade 7 (and, please G-d, we'll be adding Grade 8 in 2014).

² See Devarim 30:15-20.

³ See e.g., *We Are What We See: The Family Conditions for Modeling Values for Children*, David Popenoe, PhD (<http://parenthood.library.wisc.edu/Popenoe/Popenoe-Modeling.html>).

⁴ Rambam Hilchos Talmud Torah 1:8

⁵ *The National Jewish Population Survey 2000-01 – Strength, Challenge, and Diversity in the American Jewish Population (Updated 2004)*, page 18. (http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/downloads/4606.pdf)

⁶ Id.

⁷ Id.