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PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SURVIVAL BEYOND DAY SCHOOL: A CURRICULUM

Prologue:

Three years ago, I was presented with the opportunity to create a new elective course for twelfth graders. I gave the course the irresistible title of “Survival Judaism: Everything You Need to Know to Make it on the College Campus.” In what follows, I hope to explain the need for such a course as well as provide a description of its curriculum.¹ Before even beginning such a discussion, though, I will need to define terms and provide some background.

Firstly, what does “making it” mean for a yeshivah graduate? Although one could argue that such a term must be defined relative to each student’s background and relative level of observance (so, for example, marrying within the faith might suffice for certain students as a standard of Jewish “survival”), I expect that most hopeful elementary and secondary educators would answer that “survival” is defined as a student’s maintaining a careful observance of mitzvot with the same vigilance that she did while within the *dalet ammot* of the relatively safe elementary and high school walls.

Many of the students I teach and advise are not bound for Yeshiva College, Stern College or the like. Why both the students and their families are firmly (indeed, often stubbornly) committed to pursuing

undergraduate academic experiences at secular schools is a vitally important question, but one that is beyond the scope of my current topic. Even those students who do opt for an Orthodox environment for their undergraduate years, though, may well find themselves in secular environments as they either continue to graduate school or enter the workplace. In other words, they may ultimately need to have the same survival skills as the rest of their high school classmates. Thus, having accepted as a given the student's desire to leave the shelter of an Orthodox environment, whether sooner or later, along with the more positive definition of "surviving" as a goal, I set out to create a course that would provide a final attempt at inoculation against the potential challenges of such situations.

I must mention, however, one more philosophical caveat before discussing the curriculum. The underlying assumption in establishing such a course is that today's college campus is somehow threatening or dangerous to the spiritual, intellectual, or social development of yeshivah day school graduates. While I do not dispute such a claim, I would be remiss to ignore another approach, one that advocates trusting our children to find their innate good and the good in university life and integrate the two. At the risk of being labeled as too negative a thinker, I would rather err on the side of caution. I am therefore open with my students that one of my goals is to scare them about the "reality" of college campus life.

My goals for students in creating such a course, then, are simple. Indeed, I have been candid in presenting them to my class each year. Students must have a solid knowledge of certain key facts (whether *halakhic*, *hashkafic*, historical or political); they must understand certain basic rationales for beliefs and practices; and, most importantly, they need to have some concept of the consequences of the decisions that they will make during the first few years out of their parents' homes. These goals, obviously, are not unique to my course; I have found, though, that whereas students will pay attention to similar (or even identical) material somewhat less seriously earlier in their academic careers, the constant talk about college that accompanies the senior year of high school can often act as an outstanding catalyst for the level of motivation and attentiveness that is often lacking in younger students.

A related challenge, worth mentioning at this point, is that even the incentive of college anxiety cannot always help overcome the all-know-

ing nature of many eighteen-year olds. As the adage famously attributed to Mark Twain reads, “When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.” Many of my high school seniors have not yet reached the point of intellectual humility. For many, such an experience may come after they have already made choices that affect their Jewish lifestyle – choices that can be life-altering. Part of the challenge of such a class – and we will return to more later – is trying to convince high school seniors that they may not be as prepared as they are convinced they are. On the other hand, many are so afraid of the unknown that they are highly motivated to learn.

Such a challenge notwithstanding, the underlying philosophy for the syllabus has been that knowledge, in such a situation, is power. Making informed choices in advance is a far better plan than making them on the spur of or in the heat of the moment. Every year I introduce the course with the story of a friend who was a product of a single-sex yeshivah day school. During orientation at the Ivy League university that my friend attended, several situations that had simply never come up in single-gender environment (specifically, mixed dancing and *negi'ah*) abruptly made their appearance, forcing my friend to make some on-the-spot decisions. My students understand that their own points of *behirah* (to paraphrase R. Eliyahu Dessler),² may be far different than the points in this story. Nonetheless, they will run a tremendous risk by waiting until the choice is upon them to start evaluating what they know and feel about the issue at hand.

The Course:

a. kashrut

The course begins with a discussion of various *halakhic* topics pertinent to life in a dormitory situation. We start with two to three weeks of intensive study of sources on various laws of *kashrut*, including the rules for sharing and even *kashering* kitchen appliances. Students need to understand how to keep kosher in a living space where suddenly not everyone else is. We also briefly focus on the *ta'amei hamitzvot* offered by both classical and modern philosophers to explain

the rationale of *kashrut*. I repeatedly emphasize to my students that they will need to be able to explain their lifestyle choices to others in an articulate manner. (In fact, they often need to do as much for themselves as well.)

We also spend several classes going through primary sources on the laws of *bishul nokhri* and its ramifications for shared dorm space. This last topic—which, for many students, has never been really approached before—provides an excellent springboard for discussions about defining the ideal relationship between Jews and non-Jews. This topic is also addressed in greater depth later in the year.

b. Shabbat

The next major area of *halakhah* covered in class is Shabbat observance. I select aspects of Shabbat that relate specifically to dormitory life, e.g., *eiruv*, electric-eye doors, *amirah le-akum*,³ as well as those that impact upon a student's appreciation of Shabbat. Parents of young children often experience the challenge of presenting Shabbat as a positive experience, rather than a day of "no"s. This feeling is re-experienced by many of those children some fifteen or sixteen years later as they watch many of their college friends and roommates going out Friday night – the most popular "night out" on campuses – to engage in all types of revelry. It is vital for our graduates to be able to justify to others and themselves why they are opting out of so much fun. We therefore explore in-depth sources relating to the *mitzvot aseh* of Shabbat in order to focus on the positive, edifying aspects of the day, rather than focus solely on the day's prohibitions. We also try to use the *halakhic* sources as a gateway to philosophical understanding of why one would keep Shabbat. For example, we spend significant time discussing the Rambam's distinction between those tasks performed in preparation for Shabbat (*kevod Shabbat*) and those performed on Shabbat itself (*oneg Shabbat*).⁴

The goal of these classes is twofold: firstly, a review of many basic *halakhot* that many students have never learned in the text but have only seen performed in their homes. Second, and more importantly, these discussions of specific *mitzvot* force the students to begin to consider what life will be like when they have to carve out their own *shemirat ha-mitzvot*. An Israeli yeshivah educator once told me that he was more concerned about the secular college experience of his stu-

dents in the cafeteria than the experience in the classroom. Social situations, with all of their attendant pressures and dynamics, often push students into asking – and answering – questions differently than they would in their homes and yeshivah day schools. The course provides them with an opportunity to ask these questions and begin to think through their decisions in the relatively safe confines of my classroom **before** they have no one on hand to provide them with immediate answers.

Other *halakhot* that arise include issues relating to *mezuzah*. This last has provided an excellent spur for discussion: after learning the basic *halakhah*,⁵ we were able to role-play a conversation between two roommates, “Sam” and “Chris,” one of whom wanted to hang a *mezuzah* on the door and one of whom was adamantly opposed. The role-playing became interesting when I changed the second roommate’s name to “David” and told the players that they were now both Jewish roommates with the same agendas as before.

c. denominations

This role-playing scenario brings us to another major component of the syllabus. We spend several weeks discussing the various denominations of Judaism and their respective histories and philosophies. Students need to understand what their new classmates may mean when they identify themselves as Conservative, secular, Reform or Reconstructionist. I have found that as worldly as our yeshivah graduates consider themselves, they have little working knowledge of the beliefs and practices of other denominations. Such knowledge is vital for dealing with living situations with roommates or apartment-mates who are not *shomrei mitzvot*.

Another reason for including this topic on the syllabus is that the analysis forces students to define their own theology. One exercise the class performed was a comparison of the declarations of principles of the Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements with the Rambam’s thirteen *Ani Ma’amin* statements. Our students need to understand Orthodoxy as a vision that they can articulate for themselves, if not for others. My students read a piece written by Rabbi Joseph Polak, long-time director of the Boston University Hillel, who contends that the Reform and Conservative students in his campus classes were better thinkers because they had never learned religion by

rote as their Orthodox classmates had.⁶ Naturally, such an opinion provokes heated discussion.

d. dating and sexuality

A look at other denominations also logically leads to the topic of inter-denominational dating. While dating in general has only begun to be an issue of interest for many of my students, they understand that I prefer them to mull these issues over **before** they find themselves forced to make a decision in a particular social situation.

Indeed, as a class we spend a great deal of time on the topic of sex and sexuality. The fear of campus promiscuity is among the greatest concerns of the families that I advise.⁷ We do take pains to point out that sociologists have noted the incongruity between perception and reality in this area: namely, the number of young people who are sexually active is markedly lower than the number who their peers identify as sexually active.⁸ This also lends itself to a discussion about *leshon ha-ra*. This disparity notwithstanding, yeshivah graduates need to gain an awareness of the pervasive culture of sex on college campuses.⁹ I have used articles from the general media¹⁰ that dramatically contrast with traditional sources.¹¹

e. Biblical criticism

Our next two weeks are spent discussing the issue of Bible Criticism and its presence in the literary thought of the modern university. Although I share that Israeli teacher's view that the cafeteria is more worrisome than the classroom, the danger of intellectual assimilation in the form of "Bible as Literature" classes is not one to be ignored. I have seen communications from students describing their horror as their "enlightened" professors provided their first exposure to the idea of the human authorship of the Bible. I strongly feel that it is far safer for students to confront these questions in my classroom, where my colleagues and I can supply answers, than it will be in a freshman "Great Books" course.

We utilize a curriculum on Bible Criticism developed for high school students by Dr. Moshe Sokolow.¹² In addition to Dr. Sokolow's sources, we also read sections of Herman Wouk's classic *This Is My God*¹³ to provide an historical overview of the development of Bible Criticism. An important part of this unit is the "hands-on" experience.

Students prepare a *perek* of *Tanakh* with which they are well acquainted: *Bereshit* 37, the story of Yosef's dreams and his sale into slavery. They are asked to generate a list of questions that the text provokes them to ask. We then answer many of those questions twice: once using the traditional commentators, and again using the Anchor Bible's division of this *perek* into its component documentary parts. The students' appreciation of the history of criticism (learning the progression from Spinoza to Wellhausen, *et al.*) aids us in our attempt to point out the inadequacies of the critical approach as we apply it to the text.

f. Israel advocacy

A similar appreciation of history is essential in yet another key topic, which has proven enormously popular among students and which is why I like to save it for later in the year, namely that of Israel advocacy. Ramaz students have been learning about the modern and ancient history of Israel since they began high school, so this part of the course is much less of a last-minute vaccination than some other topics may be. Using *Myths and Facts*,¹⁴ each student prepares and delivers a five- to ten-minute oral presentation, after which (or sometimes during which) they are heckled mercilessly by either their classmates or, more often, by their teacher. These experiences emphasize two major points: first, one need not believe that Israel is perfect in order to be able to defend her; second, arguments that students will encounter, whether from other students or faculty members, are often emotional and conviction-based, rather than grounded in fact. Indeed, there are often two sides to determining "facts" as well.¹⁵

g. moral relativism

The final item of the syllabus is a philosophical issue. We spend approximately a week discussing ideas of moral relativism and multiculturalism. This has been one of the more challenging units of the curriculum, both because of its subtlety and because students often have a hard time understanding why this issue is even significant. Students need to understand the challenge of reconciling the politically correct notion crudely summed up as "I'm Okay, You're Okay" with the *halakhic* notion that, well, not every deed, idea, or thought is "okay." Perhaps students are resistant to such an idea because they realize that holding on to a singular philosophy will make them lone voices on

campus.¹⁶ Or perhaps they simply don't realize how difficult it will be to reconcile what they have long been told is the right path with what they will soon be told is a quaint, antiquated set of rules and values. Most of the sources for these conversations come from the internet,¹⁷ as I have yet to find a more substantial text for classroom use.¹⁸

Conclusion:

One key question that the existence of this course has raised in the minds of both colleagues and parents is the issue of waiting until the senior year to present many of these issues to students. A poll that I distributed two years running to my class had only two questions on it: what the students were most excited about as they thought about college, and what they were most scared of as they did the same. Both years, in two disparate groups, the answers were largely identical. Fully ninety percent responded that they were most excited about "leaving home," and that they were **also** most scared of "leaving home."

I have consistently found that students find a new motivation in their studies as they realize that they are on the threshold of leaving both their own parental homes as well as the protective *kotlei ha-yeshivah* that have been their sanctuaries for as long as they can remember. Often, this realization is not even conscious, but it is often a great motivator. In short, while many of these topics can – and should – be taught to students earlier in their academic careers, a last-year cram course designed to remind them of what they will need to "survive" is still a viable and necessary model.

Another critical and final issue is the very existence of such a course within the overall high school curriculum. Parents are extremely motivated to reinforce both the overt and the underlying goals of the course; they share the concern of the teacher and have a great deal invested in their child's "survival." Such parental interest and input are extremely helpful. Often the parents seem more eager to be in class on open-school night than their children do during the school day. But in truth, all parents – indeed, all of *us* – share the same goals: we want our children – our graduates – to be educated in the arts and sciences without rejecting a singular set of values and concomitant way of life. Such goals are attainable even in the morality of today's academic landscape, but both parents and educators must reinforce both the

values and the specific knowledge with which they want their children armed as they march through the gates of the academy. We cannot blithely assume the children possess this knowledge by virtue of attending twelve or more years of yeshivah education.

If the shared goal of parents and teachers is to help form thinking, informed, balanced, and well-educated adults who will contribute to society, we must be committed to work together to prepare them for the first and often defining decisions that they will make on their own.

The rest is up to our children.

NOTES

- 1 I am grateful to Rabbi Scot Berman for his encouragement – and careful editor's eye – as I crafted this essay.
- 2 See *Mikhtav me-Eliyahu* (B'nai Brak: 1969), pp. 113-114, also in *Strive for Truth!* Vol. 2, Aryeh Carmell, ed. (Feldheim, New York: 1985), p. 52ff.
- 3 For example, see *Yad, Hilkhoh Shabbat* 6:1 - 4, 8 - 10. We also use R. Y. Neuwirth's *Shemirath Shabbath*, Vol. 2, (Feldheim, Jerusalem 1989), pp. 451 – 455ff.
- 4 See *Hilkhoh Shabbat*, Chap. 30. See also *Be'ur Ha-Gra* 529:4.
- 5 We used the *Arukh ha-Shulkhan, Simanim* 385 – 386.
- 6 “On Orthodox Youth: A Debate” in *Jewish Action* (Summer 2003). I am indebted to Rabbi Jay Goldmintz for this and many other sources.
- 7 Notably the parents. One parent led me to Tom Wolfe's novel *I am Charlotte Simmons* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York: 2004), which masterfully details the life of the twenty-first century college freshman. I recommend that parents read it *after* their child has already graduated college.
- 8 See, for example, Manju Rani, Maria Elena Figueroa and Robert Ainsle, “The Psycho-social Context of Young Adult Sexual Behavior in Nicaragua: Looking Through the Gender Lens” at <http://guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/2917403.html#4>.
- 9 For whatever reason, this topic does not always seem to interest my senior students. It may be too early in the social development of some of the students – and therefore would certainly not be an appropriate topic for discussion earlier in their high school careers – but needs to be discussed nonetheless. In Ramaz, this topic is also addressed in a special guidance program for twelfth graders that is one of the only programs held in separate-gender groups.
- 10 E.g., “Sexed-Up New Haven: Yale Hosts a Campus-Wide Orgy” by Meghan Clyne in *The National Review Online*, February 17, 2004. See http://www.nationalreview.com/nr_comment/clyne200402170905.asp.
- 11 One excellent source has been R. Elyakim Ellinson, *Hatnze'a Lekhet* (World Zionist Organization, Jerusalem: 1985), pp. 55 – 59. The class spent several days discussing the prohibition of *negi'ah*, whether it was a Torah or Rabbinic prohibition, and the underlying philosophy of the *issur*.

- 12 Readings include an article from *Time* magazine called “Are the Bible’s Stories True?” by Michael D. Lemonick and a chapter by A. Cohen. “The Challenge of Biblical Criticism” from *Judaism in a Changing World* Leo Jung, ed. (Soncino Press, 1971).
- 13 Little Brown & Co., Boston, 1988 (revised edition), pp. 306 – 314.
- 14 Mitchell G. Bard (American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2002); continually updated on the Internet at www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org.
- 15 To get a general sense of how Jews are sometimes treated on campus, students also view a video, *Anti-Semitism at College* (information available at www.campustruth.org). The video serves as a wake-up call for many students of the presence of campus anti-Semitism.
- 16 This was certainly part of what motivated the now famous “Yale Five” to withdraw from campus housing. See Samuel Freedman: *Jew Vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), pp. 227 – 283.
- 17 See, for example, [http://solohq.com/Objectivism101 Evil_MoralRelativism.shtml](http://solohq.com/Objectivism101_Evil_MoralRelativism.shtml). Interestingly (but not surprisingly), most of the sources that internet searches have yielded are from fundamentalist Christian sites.
- 18 Rabbi Barry Freundel also briefly touches on the topic of multiculturalism in the general context of how Judaism views Gentiles in his *Contemporary Orthodox Judaism’s Response to Modernity* (Ktav: Jersey City: 2004), pp. 75 – 81.