

Modern Orthodox-Religious Zionist Education: On a Mission By Design!
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In their new book, *Schooling by Design*, Drs. Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe argue that all elements of a school's practice should derive from its mission. If one has a laser-like vision on the mission of a school, it is far more likely that both students and adults will achieve what they have set out to accomplish. They suggest various frameworks, particularly in the areas of curriculum and instruction, that can assist schools in keeping their eyes, at all time, clearly on the fast ball that is their vital mission.

As Modern Orthodox-Religious Zionist educators, we sometimes lack a focus on our mission. This sometimes leads to lack of clarity, both in thought and practice, as to what we wish to accomplish. Further, this may also lead to lack of clarity on just why we need to exist in the first place. How are our schools different from excellent "Yeshivish" Day Schools? After all, we also seek Torah observance and Torah knowledge. How are our schools different from excellent public and private secular schools? After all, our schools also need structured curriculum, focus on the needs of every individual student and financial responsibility.

If I may be so bold, I would like to suggest that following, as a summary mission statement for Modern Orthodox-Religious Zionist schools.:

Our mission is to educate every Jewish child and young adult to be active, educated, observant and personally fulfilled members of the Jewish community- ideally in Israel.

What does this mean for our schools?

Educating every Jewish child:

- We must feel a responsibility for the education of each and every Jewish child. Although this goal will definitely stretch the limits of our (and our families') resources, we must do all that we can to make sure that every family who wants our type of education can give this to their child. This means that our schools- even as we vigorously pursue and promote our mission- cannot be totally homogeneous institutions. Families of various levels of observance (provided both parents and children respect the standards of the school) and children of various levels of academic ability (including those with learning disabilities and those who are gifted) need to feel welcome and to have both their academic and emotional needs met. Differentiated education may be the "hot" new term in education. But its core principle of educating every child *al pi darko* (according to the way they best learn) and to achieve their fullest potential is inherently Jewish.
- My mission statement's reference to "every Jewish child and young adult" includes, of course, both males and females. A Modern Orthodox education needs to go further than a promise of equal rigor. It needs to provide both genders with equal access to all Jewish texts (including Mishna and Gemara) and to the very finest, professionally trained Jewish Studies teachers.

Active:

- Our students must be trained to be active participants in the community. Respectful and appropriate community activism can come in many forms. It may be practicing *chesed*- both inside and outside the confines of the school. It may include political activism, letter writing and service projects. Some students will be leaders. Others will be participants. Each student must be equipped to find his or her own way to positively change the community. But we need to give them this opportunity, and to see it as part of (and not outside of) our mission.

Educated:

- Our students must be fully educated in both Judaic and General Studies. This goes beyond simply being able to “earn a parnasah” (livelihood). Our students need to be able to go as far as their abilities and interests take them. This requires high level abilities (in both Judaic and General Studies) in reading, writing, critical thinking (including asking difficult questions), problem solving and use of technology.
- Our students also need to be educated to understand that, in most cases, one can be highly educated in *both* Judaic and General Studies. This is best accomplished when one’s school administrators, and many of its teachers, are highly qualified in both Judaic and General Studies. It shows our students that it is possible to integrate both and still achieve at the highest levels.
- Our students need textual fluency in the classical and modern texts of the Jewish People. In order to achieve this, fluency in Hebrew is critical. Whenever possible, *Ivrit b’Ivrit* is certainly the preferred method of attaining this goal. When this method is used properly, many students can graduate high school and immediately attend Israeli shiurim in Yeshivot and Seminaries in Israel.

Observant:

- As Modern Orthodox educators, we seek for our students to grow to be personally Observant adults. Thus, we teach Torah (both Written and Oral) as the revealed Word of G-d, and that we are required to follow *halacha*. We also teach the importance of both *mitzvot ben adam La’Makom* (between people and G-d) and *mitzvot ben adam le’chavero* (between people).
- We also need to allow our students to engage in the difficult theological and halachic questions and discussions that will, hopefully, result in their Observance being a deeply held conviction, and not only an inheritance from their parents or community. This does not mean that institutional standards and expectation should be altered. But it does mean that part of internalizing these halachic norms is the ability to respectfully question and actively attempt to find many layers of personal meaning.
- It is important that intensive Torah study be seen as an important part of being an Orthodox Jew. Extra-curricular Torah learning is essential for building the religious community of a school. Shabbat Mishna clubs (such as what I started in

my current community), weeknight Mishmar and Sunday morning learning options are vital.

- Even as we respect other views within Orthodoxy as legitimate Torah opinions, we must teach our students to understand that Modern Orthodoxy is not a compromise position, but a balanced one. It is indeed as observant as all forms of Orthodox Judaism. Naturally, they must also strive to live up to the observance standards taught and practiced for generations by Modern Orthodox-Religious Zionist Jews. Just as students need to be able to intelligently explain Orthodoxy to non-Orthodox Jews, they need to be able to explain Modern Orthodoxy to other Orthodox Jews. .

Personally Fulfilled

- Our students should learn that a Modern Orthodox life can indeed be one of personal fulfillment. They should see that their abilities and interests, however varied they may be, can all be harnessed in the service of Hashem and the Jewish People.
- Our students need to be presented with dynamic role models of this Modern Orthodox-Religious Zionist philosophy. When they see that their teachers and principals happily live what the mission of the school teaches, they are more likely to choose this life for themselves.
- Of course, the best way for students to feel that their adult lives as Modern Orthodox Jews can be full of happiness and joy is for their school experiences to reflect that. Yes, our schools must be places of academic rigor and expectations. But they must also be places that children love attending! One of things that I have been most proud of is when my students tell their parents how much they love going to school (despite the intense academic program). Our schools must be full of Jewish joy, emotional and physical safety, and self fulfillment for all.

Members of the Jewish Community

- Though we believe our philosophy to be the ideal, we need to explicitly teach that we are members of the wider Orthodox community, as well as members of the wider Jewish community.
- Within the Orthodox community, where all accept that the entire Torah (both Written and Oral) is directly from Hashem and that we must observe Halacha, we understand that *Eylu Ve'eylu Dirvei Elokim Chayyim* (These opinions, and also those, are both the words of the Living G-d.). This value, so essential to Jewish life, needs to be an explicit part of the curriculum. Almost yearly I am asked by students in Mishna class why we teach girls *Torah She'Ba'al Peh* while some other (more "right wing") Orthodox schools do not. I use this as an opportunity to tell them how much we respect and value other views in Orthodoxy. However, we teach according to our own Modern Orthodox philosophy (which is also an accepted Orthodox view). Sadly, some (though clearly not all) of those to our "right" do not teach with view. Though this is unfortunate, it should not cause to waver in our commitment to *Eylu ve'eylu*. We don't teach this way out of a desire for reciprocity, but rather because it's the right way to educate our children and community.

- We are also part of the wider Jewish community. As Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook *zt"l* points out, a Mizrahi theology isn't only about the Land of Israel. It's also about the People of Israel. Ours is not a "separatist" Orthodoxy. Our Orthodoxy is one that is clear and firm in our beliefs and practices, while not divorcing ourselves from our Jewish brothers and sisters with whom we may disagree. Whenever possible, we participate in the wider community. We encourage active involvement in the Jewish Federation. We teach our children that our love for, and responsibility to, all Jews is unconditional. Although, as Rav Tzvi Yehuda notes, this love for all Jews is independent of a desire for them to come closer to the Torah, this true love often results in just that positive result.

Ideally in Israel

- As Religious Zionists, we believe- and teach- that the State of Israel has deep religious significance for us. We understand that the State of Israel, despite its imperfections, is a tremendous gift from Hashem.
- But Religious Zionists also understand that *aliyah* is a *mitzvah*. Just as we teach about Shabbat, Kashrut and tzedakah (and all the other *mitzvot*), we must teach about *aliyah*. Our students need to understand that Israel is the place all Jews should live. And if we are not yet able to make aliyah, aliyah should be the stated and explicit goal to which we all aspire. Thus, the connections our students make to Israel and Israelis is vital. Their ability to fully function as Hebrew speakers in Israel is critical.
- Just as we celebrate students who have all manner of accomplishments, we must celebrate our students and families who make aliyah. We should view them as our communal role models.

I am well aware that this is an ambitious program for any school. It requires parents and faculty to join together in partnership to build and strengthen a truly Modern Orthodox-Religious Zionist school community that impacts all families every day of the week. It requires us to have extremely well funded schools in order to be able to truly achieve full, outstanding differentiated programs in both Judaic and General Studies. It requires us to have the ability to train, hire and retain the very finest educators, many of whom would be fully qualified in Judaic and General Studies and live in concert with the mission of the school. It requires the deep commitment to allow our students to grow in every way. It requires us to have schools that not only meet the best practices of the very finest Jewish and secular schools, but that far exceed them as we seek to shape the Jewish community of tomorrow. It requires us to see our schools as representing what we believe to be the greatest ideals in the Jewish community, and then to do all that we can to achieve our holy mission.

A mission cannot always be achieved quickly, and cannot always be achieved by all who set out upon the mission. But without a clear mission, we can never hope to attain all that is possible.

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