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Edah Happenings:

Rabbi Yehuda
Sarna on
"Judaism as
an Art Form"
March 8
@ JCC in NYC

Primed for Action

By Sara Hurwitz

"And you shall make poles of shittim wood, and overlay them with gold. And you shall put the poles into the rings by the sides of the ark, so that the ark may be carried with them. The poles shall be in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it." (Shemot 25:13-15)

Thou shalt not remove the aron's poles: this mitzvah doesn't quite have the same pizzazz as thou shalt not murder or steal, yet it is still included as one of the 613 mitzvot, one of the fundamental laws of the Torah. Significantly, even though the Rambam in his Mishna Torah does not discuss the dimensions of the aron, he nevertheless mentions the prohibition of removing the aron's poles. So what's so important about this mitzvah?

At first glance, keeping the poles attached to the aron is logical. The mishkan, while in the midbar, was frequently disassembled and moved. It would have been too time consuming to reattach the poles to the aron every time the Jewish nation continued their journey. Thus, the author of the Sefer Hachinuch writes: "We are commanded not to remove the poles of the ark from it, lest we might need to go forth with the ark out to some place in haste, and in the hurry of the moment forget to examine whether the poles are properly secured and, God forbid, the ark might slip from our hold."

However, the prohibition of removing the poles from the aron persisted even after the beit hamikdash was built, when the aron was rarely moved. In fact, the aron was permanently placed behind a curtain in the kodsh hakedoshim, to be viewed once a year by the kohen gadol on Yom Kippur.

What then does the prohibition of removing the poles come to teach us?

I believe that this mitzvah teaches us to be activists – to always be poised to transform God's Torah into action – even when we are in an apparent state of rest. In fact, the entire aron, the guardian of the Luchot, embodies this notion of being primed to fulfill God's commandments. The kruvim, the two angelic figures

towering above the aron were fashioned with their wings on high: "The cherubim shall be with wings spread upward." The outstretched wings of the kruvim signify flight and mobility, an invitation to begin a journey and soar. And so too the prohibition of removing the poles from the ark represents that at any given moment, we have to be ready to take God's laws, and fly.

It is true that we are commanded to build a permanent dwelling place for God's presence to rest. But we, its builders, should never be in a state of rest. Nechama Leibowitz points out that the verb "aseh, to make" repeats itself 200 times in the story of the mishkan – "Ve'asu li mikdash... ve'asu aron." The mishkan took great human initiative to build. It did not appear miraculously, like the manna which fell from heaven. But once built, its builders must remain proactive. The "aseh" ethic of the mishkan must be perpetuated.

The prohibition of not removing the poles reinforces the message that God's children should never remain indifferent. It's easy to brush past a stranger on the street that requires help. But the mitzvah of not removing the poles implies that we should always be ready to help others, to always keep loose change in our pockets, just in case we bump into someone in need.

There's a story of two people lamenting the atrocities of this world. One says: "Sometimes I feel like asking God why is there so much poverty, hunger and injustice in the world?" "Then why don't you ask God?" answered the other. "Because I am afraid that God will ask me the same questions."

The "aseh" ethic of the mishkan is ultimately a choice. Why weren't the poles of the aron permanently attached? The gemara in Yoma 72a indicates that even though the poles were firmly attached to the aron, with effort, they could be loosened and removed. And yet, we are explicitly forbidden to do so. The message is that we cannot become complacent; we cannot put our activism on cruise-control. We were given the gift of the mishkan with all of its vessels to build. But it is up to each one of us to be ready, at any moment, to take God's gifts and soar.

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Day Schools as Moral

Thermostats

By Rabbi Jack Bieler

As day schools multiply, it is clear that a significant percentage of the American Jewish community has finally recognized that intense Jewish education yields greater Jewish identity and commitment. But do we overlook the nature of the education that these institutions provide to our children? Are they producing only commitment to identity, or a serious commitment to Jewish values as well?

Many Jewish educators recognize that the young people sitting in these classrooms and studying Judaism are internalizing a significant portion of the values pervading the caustic general secular society. Today's day school graduates appear ill-equipped to respond thoughtfully and constructively to the immodesty, aggressiveness, violence, self-indulgence, substance abuse, materialism and overt anti-Semitism that mark our epoch when they no longer find themselves in the Jewish "hothouse" of the day school.

Even during their tenure as students under our supervision, we are struck by the degree to which our contemporary social values have made inroads into day-to-day student life. I constantly hear: statements such as: "I know that it's really not legal to download albums, but wait 'til you hear what I've got on my iPod!" or "Quick! I have to copy your homework because I spent last night watching MTV."

Can we confidently say that the typical manner of speech, dress, interaction with peers, types of after-school recreation, deportment towards teachers, administrators and even parents truly reflect internalized Jewish and spiritual values, or have Jewish learning and experience been compartmentalized, and are only called upon within specific frameworks and at finite times during the day?

The late social critic and educator Neil Postman developed what he referred to as a "thermostatic view of education". Postman claimed that education should serve as a balancing factor with regard to the general trends of society. When society is excessively rigid, schools should encourage creativity, flexibility, and change; when however society becomes overly relativistic and devoid of bedrock principles and discipline, then education must supply the momentum whereby the internal pendulum within each student can swing in the opposite direction, and engender a counter-force that will give rise to a healthy personal equilibrium.

While Postman was referring to all educational contexts, I believe that his perspective has particular relevance to the world of the day school. We attempt to educate our students not only so they can function as productive and contributing members of society at large, but also so they will be both willing and able to preserve their particularistic Jewish identity, beliefs and traditions in the face of a majority culture. This second purpose becomes more important as many of the majority

culture's values have become antithetical to Jewish belief and commitment.

For example, the media bombards all of us with unceasing examples of dishonesty in industry, politics, the sports world, and representatives of religious movements, even Judaism. Postman would argue that it is up to schools to counter the apparent growing acceptability of dishonesty as part of the "real world". Students must be made to realize how destructive the general cynicism and lack of trust in one's fellow man is that arises from the assumption that everyone is engaged in misrepresentation and lying.

Postman's mandate was for public schools. Educational establishments committed to transmitting fundamental Jewish values must make that much more of an effort to help students recognize and ultimately internalize the principles of "From a false matter you must distance yourself" and the ideal of "One who walks wholeheartedly, engages in righteousness and speaks the truth in his heart."

To accomplish this, changes would have to be made in terms of teacher training, Judaic as well as General. Educators would have to realize that they are expected to be concerned not only with subject matter, but also with the religious and ethical growth of their students; curriculum development would have to include, if not primarily focus upon, character and personality improvement, and the design of extra-curricular experiences would have to address and strive for the development of clear-cut Jewish values in one form or another.

The issue cannot be dealt with through the occasional stand-alone unit or study day; what is necessary is that the choice of which chapters to study in Bible, which Talmudic themes to investigate, and which epochs in Jewish history to explore, as well as which Shakespearian plays to study, reflect conscious choices as to which historical individuals in American and world history should be presented as role models. In addition, ethical issues that are inherent in technological advances and how the school community addresses everyday moral dilemmas should be made into case studies of the highest level of Jewish belief and teaching.

The going wisdom maintains that as a student develops proficiency in Jewish texts, Jewish values will enter into him/her by some sort of osmosis, or that values are best inculcated in the student's home by his/her parents. Such views are naive, at best, and irresponsible at worst. Unfortunately, we are all familiar with students who master Jewish subject matter, yet miss the greater ethical and theological points implicit in these disciplines.

John Dewey conceptualized the school as a "safe" environment for students where they would not be exposed to the insanities of general society. The time has come for day schools to become contexts in which Jewish values are clearly exemplified so that day schools will contribute to a Jewish continuity that makes a moral contribution to general society.

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