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Toward a Passionate Modern Orthodoxy

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If the mission of the Modern Orthodox day school is to ensure the continuity of observant Judaism, then on the whole it seems that we are succeeding. Our communities continue to grow. Our shuls continue to prosper. Attendance at daily *minyanim* seems to be up, and another kosher establishment seems to open every other day.

If the mission of the Modern Orthodox day school is to increase Torah learning, then on the whole it seems that we are succeeding. The numbers of students spending a year or more in Israel yeshivot and seminaries continue to rise. The learning programs at Yeshiva College, Stern College, and their graduate schools continue to grow. Participation in community-based adult-learning opportunities continues to swell.

In fact, and perhaps most surprising to the prognosticators, who have long bemoaned the Modern Orthodox community's shift to the right, if the mission of the Modern Orthodox day school is to populate their own ranks with another generation of Modern Orthodox

children, then on the whole it seems that we are succeeding. Despite the increasing number of graduates who are choosing to raise their own children in the more cloistered confines of the right-wing community, the major co-ed Modern Orthodox day schools do not seem any worse for it. Their numbers continue to hold steady alongside those of their more right-wing counterparts.

If, however, the mission of Modern Orthodox day schools is to imbue students with an ideology of Modern Orthodoxy, then according to many of the leading voices on the subject today, we are failing. In a piece which appears online as part of the Edah monograph series, Rabbi Jack Bieler, long-time educator at Ramaz and the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy, writes that despite the accomplishments of the Modern Orthodox day school system,

modern Orthodox educators, parents, and some students have developed doubts about whether the reality of the contemporary modern Orthodox day-school experience matches its ideals. Questions are increasingly raised about whether these educational institutions really provide a modern Orthodox education and produce modern Orthodox young people.¹

Likewise, Rabbi Shalom Berger, faculty at the Lookstein Center for Jewish Education at Bar-Ilan University and moderator of Lookjed, the largest discussion group for Modern Orthodox educators, begins his essay in *Teaching Toward Tomorrow: Setting an Agenda for Modern Orthodox Education*, a volume recently published by ATID, by citing a letter he received from a former student, which he took as

further corroboration of the anecdotal evidence that the Modern Orthodox Jewish community today is having a difficult time communicating its core values to its children. This can be heard in conversations with veteran educators, seen in curricular change . . . and in the much discussed “shift to the right” which is at least partially a

rejection of interaction with—and validation of—the non-Orthodox world.²

Several of the questions posed as the framework for a recent Meorot symposium on Modern Orthodox day school education, imply a similar sense of failure in the transmission of Modern Orthodox values. Perhaps most striking is the tenth and final question asked of the prominent set of respondents:

What should be done in Modern Orthodox education to instill confidence in its graduates that they are not religiously inferior in knowledge or observance to haredi graduates?³

The obvious implication is that most of today's graduates of Modern Orthodox day schools do, indeed, see themselves as religiously inferior. They are poised to perpetuate what Rabbi Mark Gottlieb has called “a religiously minimalist community of affluence and mediocrity, unable to provide its adherents with the religious and cultural resources to realize its ambitious and holy mandate.”⁴ As part of such a community, they choose to send their children to Modern Orthodox day schools not out of deep-seated commitment to the ideological underpinnings of Modern Orthodoxy, but out of a desire to provide their children with a Jewish education that is not “too Jewish,” while simultaneously positioning them for acceptance by prestigious high schools and, in turn, for acceptance by the most prestigious of universities.

The consensus, therefore, seems to be that Modern Orthodox day schools are succeeding as launching pads for some students into a variety of alternative Orthodox ideologies, and as a treadmill for others uninterested in religious growth. They are failing, though, to produce passionate Modern Orthodoxy.

THE PASSION TEST

Evidence for the failure of Modern Orthodox schools to successfully imbue students with an ideological affinity for Modern Orthodoxy is

often sought in two complaints which have emanated from the Modern Orthodox community for years—albeit from different sectors of the community. The first comes from vocal Modern Orthodox parents who lament the tendency of certain children to “flip out” during their year or years in Israel. They come home dressing, speaking, and acting more like members of the right-wing world than the Modern Orthodox world in which they were raised. And this, according to the parents, points to the failure of day schools to successfully “make” their students Modern Orthodox.

The second complaint comes not from parents but from certain school administrators, and often it is heard as a direct or indirect defense for not “making” more students Modern Orthodox. These administrators bemoan the paucity of available Jewish educators who truly embody the ideals of Modern Orthodoxy. If only they could find educators to hold up as role models, more students would embrace and commit to a Modern Orthodox way of life.

It seems to me that both of these complaints are overstated, though they both seem to point to the same kernel of truth. With regard to the complaint of Modern Orthodox kids flipping out, the recent research of Dr. David Pelcovitz and Rabbi Steven Eisenberg on the effects of the year in Israel makes a compelling argument that this phenomenon is really not as widespread as it may seem.⁵ And, as an administrator who has built a team of Modern Orthodox educators over the last few years, my own recent experience suggests that there really are plenty of Modern Orthodox young men and women entering the field of education today.

There does seem, though, to be a certain quality that this cadre of young teachers often lacks. And it is the same deficiency that I believe leads parents to the fear of flipping out and educators to the conclusion that Modern Orthodox day schools are failing. In all of the above cases, I believe what we are witnessing is a lack of passion. Not necessarily passion in general, but passion for the ideas and ideals of Modern Orthodoxy.

So, while teachers who embody Modern Orthodox ideals may not be as hard to find as some have claimed, finding teachers who are passionate about Modern Orthodoxy is undoubtedly a rather difficult

task. Modern Orthodoxy simply is not something we generally associate with passion. Therefore, when parents see their children becoming religiously passionate during a year in Israel—even if these children adopt no wholesale, life-altering changes in their career aspirations or communal affiliations—there is often a fear that sets in. It is a fear of a mindset generally foreign to Modern Orthodox circles. A fear of religious passion.

Try performing the passion test. Go to your local Modern Orthodox high school and ask the principal to introduce you to the students who are passionate about Modern Orthodoxy. In all likelihood, instead of an introduction you will get a quizzical look in return. After all, what does such a student look like? Does he have a Rambam in one hand and Hegel in the other? Does she spend one night a week learning additional *gemara* in the local shul and one night a week reading Plato in the local library? Perhaps he has a *seder* in *The Lonely Man of Faith*, or in a comparative study of *parashat mishpatim* and its parallels in the Laws of Eshnunna? And while it is true that passion in any area is often hard to procure in adolescents, were you to ask the very same principal to find you a group of students who are passionate about *talmud Torah*, about Jewish spirituality, or about the State of Israel, in all likelihood he or she would have no trouble at all. In an instant you will meet the student who learns every evening in the *beit midrash*, the student who lives for an NCSY *havdalah*, and the student who wraps herself in an Israeli flag every time there is a school *hagigah*. Students who are passionate about such ideas are not hard to find in a typical Modern Orthodox day school. Students in a Modern Orthodox day school who are passionate about Modern Orthodoxy, however, are virtually unheard of.

IDEOLOGY FOR THE LAYMEN

Let us return to the two complaints referred to above: students flipping out in Israel and a scarcity of Judaic studies teachers who embody Modern Orthodox ideals. I argued that while both complaints seem a bit inflated, both point to the fact that religious passion is often absent and even feared in the Modern Orthodox community. I believe,

though, that the connection between these two phenomena may be even deeper.

Successful teachers are passionate beings. Their personal passion for the material they teach and the manner in which they teach it are conveyed to their students, which in turn fosters similar feelings for the ideas and ideals within the captivated student. Those students in whom such feelings burn strongest often have the greatest desire to share their passion with others, and hence they choose to become educators themselves. Indeed, a *Public Agenda* study conducted in 2000 found that 86 percent of new teachers felt “that that theirs is a profession that requires a sense of mission” and only those “with a true sense of calling” should enter education.⁶

This passion or sense of calling is born out of ideology—that is, a particular set of beliefs surrounding the subjects they teach. One who simply loves biology may well choose a career which sequesters her in a research laboratory, immersed in the subject matter she adores. However, one who believes that all people should love biology—or at the very least that all should learn it—is one who chooses the classroom over the lab, the world of education over the world of intellectual investigation. It is this sense of mission that lies at the core of good teaching. It is ideology that provides the passion for education.

For ideology to successfully induce passion and a sense of mission, however, it must contain two related ingredients. First, its core values must not only appeal to the mind, but must stir the heart as well. Second, the ideology must advocate principles which an adherent can wholeheartedly and unreservedly affirm.

I believe this is where Modern Orthodoxy has broken down. That which has been written over the last half a century in an attempt to formulate a Modern Orthodox ideology has created a highly cerebral, highly intellectual world of discourse that speaks to the minds of a gifted few and to the hearts of even fewer. Schools, in turn, seeking to infuse these *Torah u-Madda* ideals into their curricula, have begun implementing a range of curricular initiatives, from “integration weeks,” where the same topics are studied in both general and Judaic studies, to the introduction of critical study of Talmud and Bible in their programs. These, though, are duties of the mind, not duties of the

heart. I surmise that the average student studying the crossover between Jewish and Greek culture leaves no more excited than the average adult who hears a lecture on the relationship between Maimonides and Aristotle. And, while historical-critical study of our sacred texts has much to offer us at certain times and in certain contexts, for the vast majority of kids it is not the stuff of which passion is made.

What is more, the distinctive ideas that have emerged from the architects of Modern Orthodoxy, and that set it apart from its sister ideologies in the Orthodox world, are almost always cast with an eye toward temperance and moderation. Modern Orthodoxy believes in the value of secular studies, but only insofar as they enhance one's religious well-being. Modern Orthodoxy believes in the value of Western culture, but only so far as it does not run counter to our religious sensibilities. Modern Orthodoxy believes in engaging the non-Orthodox world, but only so far as it does not involve matters of theology or religious practice.

While moderation in life is undoubtedly a value, moderation in the formulation of ideology inhibits the procurement of passion and is a death knell for its successful transmission. Consider, for a moment, the alternative Orthodox ideologies to which our motivated young men and women often turn. The yeshiva world maintains that *talmud Torah* is the preeminent value in Jewish life. Their adherents believe in the primacy of *talmud Torah* at all costs whether financial, familial, social, or political. The hasidic world thinks similarly about *deveikut* and the experience of drawing close to God. Perhaps most recognizable to members of the Modern Orthodox world is the lack of moderation in contemporary Religious Zionist ideology. To an ardent Religious Zionist, the significance of *Erez Yisrael* in the past, present, and future of *Am Yisrael* is not tempered by anything. They do not subscribe to the value of *Medinat Yisrael* in moderation. Indeed, it is only the potential for significant loss of life that has sparked the debate in recent years as to whether there ought to be limits to Religious Zionist ideals. And for the ideology to survive, such must be the case. Just consider what would become of the Israel Defense Forces should its officers and generals temper their belief in the value of *Medinat Yisrael*. Yet, the ideology of Modern Orthodoxy is built, from the very

outset, on temperance. We do not advocate whole-hearted immersion in the world of secular studies, for what then of *talmud Torah*? We do not condone unfiltered encounters with Western culture, for what then of its decadence and depravity? We do not support full-fledged partnership with the non-Orthodox world for fear that it might legitimate that to which Orthodoxy stands opposed.⁷

This is not a recipe that cooks up passion. No one gets excited over something they believe in “a little.” No one gets inspired by something they are committed to “somewhat.” Moderation and mediocrity do not produce energy and enthusiasm. In many respects, today’s Modern Orthodoxy ought to engage in the same process of self-reflection that Michael Lynch, a professor of philosophy at the University of Connecticut, described in his 2005 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in regard to American political liberalism:

In different ways, liberals are asking: Could the very values they hold dear rob them of the requisite fire in the belly that conservatives, particularly social conservatives, seemingly have in abundance? Most liberals believe in equality of opportunity and resources, freedom for individuals to pursue their own vision of life, and tolerance toward those whose vision of the world is different from their own. Some of them, however, complain that in their eagerness to venerate their ideals, they too often undercut their ability to be politically effective. To put it in a nakedly partisan way, some liberals worry that Yeats was right: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.”⁸

The absence of positive Modern Orthodox ideology which stirs the emotion and into which the average layman can buy wholeheartedly leads to an absence of passion. The absence of passionate students leads to an absence of passionate teachers a few years later. Into that void step teachers—either in an Israeli yeshiva or in our own American day schools—who are passionate about other brands of Orthodoxy, and their passion is translated to a handful of students who become

similarly passionate. They, in turn, form the nucleus of the next cadre of teachers eager to step into the ideologically vacuous space of Modern Orthodox schools in hopes of sharing their passion with others. And so the cycle continues.

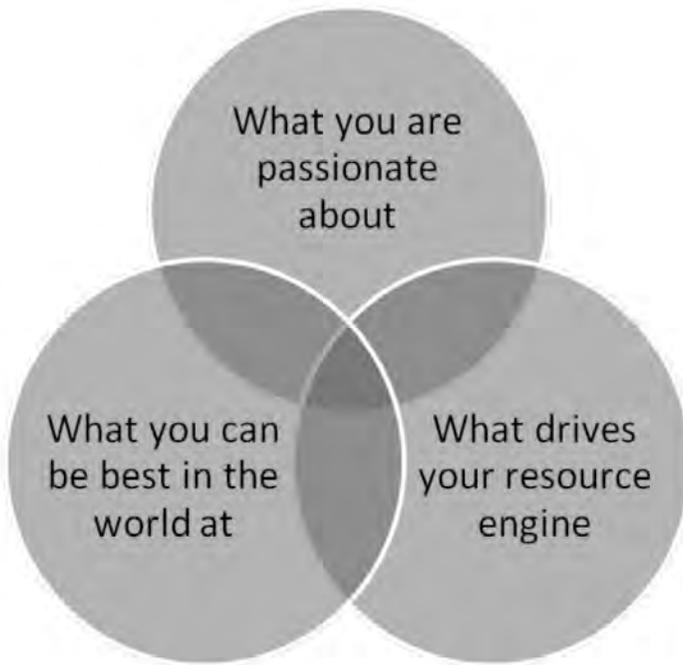
FROM FOXES TO HEDGEHOGS

In his best-selling business book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins uses Isaiah Berlin's famous essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox" as the launching point for what he calls the hedgehog concept.⁹ Applying this concept to Modern Orthodoxy may further clarify the above-described challenge, and perhaps help articulate first steps toward creating a solution.

The fox, in Berlin's essay, has a plethora of scattered ideas and divergent pieces of information but lacks an underlying concept or a unifying vision. On the other hand, the hedgehog knows far less, but what he knows relates directly and completely to the one big idea which lies at the center of all he does. Collins cites Princeton professor Marvin Bressler, who noted that "what separates those who make the biggest impact from all the others who are just as smart" is that "they're hedgehogs." As examples of high-impact hedgehogs and their high-impact ideas, Collins points to Freud and the unconscious, Darwin and natural selection, Marx and the class struggle, Einstein and relativity, as well as Adam Smith and the division of labor.¹⁰ For our purposes we might add to the list R. Hayyim of Volozhin and *Torah li-shmah*, the Baal Shem Tov and *deveikut*, and Rav Kook and *Torat Eretz Yisrael*.

Collins notes, though, that it is not only individuals who fall into the categories of hedgehog and fox, but companies as well. He and his research team found that companies which showed extraordinary growth and then proved able to sustain it over long periods of time were, without fail, companies that rallied around a single unifying concept that defined everything they did. More specifically, he describes these companies as focusing on the overlap of three different "circles." The first circle asks, "What are you deeply passionate about?" The second circle asks, "What can you be the best in the world at?" And the third circle asks, "What drives your economic engine?"¹¹ In his monograph *Good to Great and the Social Sector*, Collins replaces the term "economic engine" with "resource engine" when describing what makes nonprofit

organizations great.¹² The model for social sector organizations, then, looks like this:



To assemble these pieces and thus build the core of a successful social sector organization, Collins maintains, the following procedure must be followed: “You first begin with passion, then you refine passion with a rigorous assessment of what you can best contribute to the communities you touch. Then you create a way to tie your resource engine directly to the other two circles.”¹³

On the one hand, this model offers important insight into for Modern Orthodoxy’s failures. As outlined above, Modern Orthodoxy seems to have approached the process in the reverse. For decades the Modern Orthodox community has been asking “What can drive our resource engine?” without spending the requisite time on the two questions which should have preceded it. Hence, we have a community with significant infrastructure that is largely devoid of passion and a sense of mission.

On the other hand, this model may also provide the first steps toward a solution. Let us, for a moment, look at other Orthodox ideologies—the yeshiva movement, *Hasidut*, and Religious Zionism—and chart out, at the risk of oversimplification, how their approach to Torah Judaism may look when seen through this model.

At least for the sake of a theoretical model, I believe that as subsidiaries of Orthodoxy, all three of the above-named movements would place Torah and *mitzvot* in the first circle as the answer to, “What are you passionate about?” Where they differ is in the second circle, in answering, “What can you be the best in the world at?” Here each movement has staked out certain areas in which it excels. Where the elements overlap with circle number one, that is, where there are Torah values and *mitzvot* the group can perform or promote better than others is where the greatest passion is evoked and the deepest sustainable commitment is created.

For example, for the yeshiva world, *talmud Torah*, as defined by the study of *gemara*, is most definitely located in the intersection between circle number one and circle number two, because it is undeniably one of the 613 *mitzvot* and it is something they ardently believe they do better than anyone else. Their “resource engines,” therefore, focus on promoting the area of overlap between circles one and two. For the hasidic world, the area of overlap between circles one and two may include the *mitzvot* of *ahavat Hashem* and *tefillah*, among others. In certain Haredi circles, both hasidic and yeshivish, *tzniut* might also appear in the common area between circles one and two. For the *dati le’umi* community, on the other hand, it is the *mitzvah* of *yishuv Erez Yisrael* that dominates the overlap between the circles as an authentic and undisputed Torah value their community is uniquely poised to perform and promote. All three of these ideologies fit the model described by Collins, and all have proved generally successful in transmitting their core values to subsequent generations of adherents.

We would have great difficulty, though, placing Modern Orthodoxy into a similar model. What would we put in circle number one? What is it that we are passionate about? And if we were to focus on those within the Modern Orthodox community who do, indeed, believe that we ought to be passionate about Torah and *mitzvot*, what

would we possibly place in the second circle? What authentic Torah values, about which we are passionate, do we, the Modern Orthodox community, do better than anyone else?

Difficult as these questions may be, I believe it is exactly where we must start. To create a passionate and sustainable Modern Orthodoxy, we, too, have to begin with circle number one. We, as a community, have to overcome our fear of religious enthusiasm and support unbridled passion for Torah and *mitzvot*. That, though, is only the first step. Equally important is circle number two. We, like other movements within Orthodoxy, must identify authentic Torah values that are easily communicated across diverse populations and need not be tempered with moderation, that we—the Orthodox community that stands at the crossroads of Torah Judaism and Western society—can do better than anyone else. It may be the *mitzvah* of *kiddush Hashem*, the concept of *or la-goyim*, the notions of *ahavat Yisrael* and *arvut Yisrael*, or any of a myriad of others. But what is clear is that if Modern Orthodoxy is to perpetuate itself as a movement and an ideology, it must transform itself from the fox who does a little of everything and believes in a little of everything, into the hedgehog who has fewer but more focused objectives and does them remarkably well.

The day school system is but one cog—albeit a very significant one—in the resource engine of Modern Orthodoxy. To look to the day schools to create sustainability and continuity for Modern Orthodox ideology is to start at the end of a process and hope it will work its way backward. Instead, those in positions of influence throughout the Modern Orthodox world need to begin articulating a hedgehog concept for their constituencies. It needs to be authentic, capable of eliciting passion, and focused on the opportunities unique to the Modern Orthodox community. Armed with such an ideology, day schools will have the tools with which to build formal and informal curricula capable of fostering a unique form of Jewish inspiration. Children who are inspired by the unique sense of mission conveyed in their day schools will become adults inspired to pass on that mission to others. Then we will have taken significant strides toward a passionate Modern Orthodoxy.

NOTES

1. Rabbi Jack Bieler, *Preserving Modern Orthodoxy in Our Day Schools*. Edah Monograph Series, No. 2, <http://www.edah.org/backend/coldfusion/search/document.cfm?title=Preserving%20Modern%20Orthodoxy%20in%20our%20Day%20Schools&hyperlink=RabbiBieler.HTML&type=Document&category=Jewish%20Literacy:%20Education%20for%20Adults%20and%20Children&authortitle=Rabbi&firstname=Jack&lastname=Bieler&pubsource=Edah,%20Monograph%20Series,%20Number%202&authorid=233>
2. Shalom Berger, "Tomorrow's Challenges," in *Teaching Toward Tomorrow: Setting an Agenda for Modern Orthodox Education*, ed. Yoel Finkelman (Jerusalem: ATID, 2008), p. 8.
3. Symposium "On Modern Orthodox Day School Education," *Meorot* 7, no. 2 (Tishrei 5770), <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=4095>
4. Mark Gottlieb, "Toward a Halakhic Humanist Worldview: Recovering a Lost Vision," in Finkelman, *Teaching Toward Tomorrow*, p. 37.
5. David Pelcovitz and Steven Eisenberg, "The Year In Israel Experience," <http://www.yu.edu/uploadedFiles/Israel%20Studies.pdf>
6. Public Agenda, *A Sense of Calling: Who Teaches and Why* (2000).
7. It is worth noting that in some Modern Orthodox circles, one value that has been embraced without reserves is *talmud Torah* for women. And, not surprisingly, it is in these women today that we might find the best examples of passionate Modern Orthodoxy.
8. Michael P. Lynch, "Where Is Liberal Passion?" *Chronicle of Higher Education* 51, no. 33 (April 2005): B7–B9, retrieved February 1, 2010, from ProQuest Education Journals (Document ID: 844367421).
9. Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).
10. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
12. The "resource engine" being the time dedicated to the organization, the money raised, and the brand it builds.
13. Jim Collins, *Good to Great and the Social Sector* (Jim Collins, 2005), p. 20.