



Our Role as Jews in Exile: EDUCATING THE TEACHERS OF THE FUTURE

Our great leaders have always known that the key to survival in exile is to establish an educational system, ensuring that our children will continue to learn and thus protect the future of the nation. As Yaakov Avinu was preparing for his descent into Egypt for what would be the first exile of the children of Israel, he sent Yehuda ahead “*le-horot le-fanav goshna*” (Bereishit 46:28). Onkelos, citing one tradition, understood this simply to mean that Yehuda was sent as the advance party to make sure that arrangements for shelter and other necessities were in place before the family arrived en masse. Rashi, too, cites this view before setting out an alternative midrashic view which,

according to Rashi, means to establish a house of study (*bet talmud*) from which “*hora'ah*,” teachings, would emerge. This approach sees Yehuda’s mission as establishing a spiritual foundation for the ensuing exilic experience.¹ A focus on educating the young has been a hallmark of the Jewish people throughout its history. Early examples, cited in the Talmudim, include the efforts of R. Shimon ben Shetah (Yerushalmi *Ketubbot* 8:11) and R. Yehoshua ben Gamla (*Bava Batra* 21a) to ensure the education of the young.

With the Great Revolt raging, and as he realized the inevitability of the destruction of both the Beit HaMikdash and the city of Yerushalayim, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai prepared for



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the future. He recognized that the Beit HaMikdash was the spiritual and religious center of our nation. He also

¹ Bereishit 46, 28, Rashi ad loc based on *Bereishit Rabbah* 95, 3; Rav Lichtenstein in a talk on Parashat Vayigash (available on the Har Etzion website <https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-bereishit/parashat-vayigash/vayigash-and-he-sent-yehuda-ahead-set-camp>) ominously suggests that Yosef, already ensconced in and comfortable with Egyptian life, did not perceive the danger that Yaakov feared. Those of us comfortable in our own *galut* to one degree or another might need to remain sensitive to small (and large) warning signs.

knew that the Beit HaMikdash was the educational center, and with its destruction, a new system needed to be established. In the famous story found in BT *Gittin*, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai asked the Roman Emperor Vespasian to spare the city of Yavneh and to protect its residents, among whom were the scholars who could already be found there. Thus, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai lay the foundation for ongoing spiritual life, even as the end of Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael appeared to be imminent.² Other tannaim established academies in their towns. A new exodus occurred in the lead up to and especially in the wake of the Bar Kochba revolt, with leading scholars shifting the balance of rabbinic talent toward the Babylonian diaspora, accompanied by the founding of the great academies housed there.

While the idea of Jewish education has been constantly valued, the question of what to teach and how to teach it has shifted over the centuries. We don't know a great deal about the curriculum of ancient schools, writes Barry Holz.³ We do know from Talmudic sources what they were teaching during the times of the Mishna and the Talmud.⁴ We also know that originally the goal of education was mimetic, for the student to know what the teacher knew. As the student matured, the focus shifted to

inquiry, to know much about what was taught. Originally, it was the father's obligation to teach his son,⁵ though the father would hire a teacher as the child grew older. The method of instruction was initially mimetic,⁶ which would transition into one of inquiry.⁷

As we fast forward to modern times, the decision about what subjects to teach and how to teach them is determined by the stakeholders of the schools,⁸ often by answering a series of questions outlined by Ralph Tyler, known as the "father of educational evaluation" of the 20th century.

- Who are the learners?
- What is the contemporary life like outside of school?
- What is the curriculum/subject matter?

Based on the answers to the questions, the school and the teachers develop a game plan: they outline learning objectives [or what they plan what to teach]; they discuss implementation [or how to teach]; and they develop assessments [or how they will evaluate if the students have learned]. This is known as the formal or standard curriculum.

In addition to a formal curriculum, every school has its own "hidden curriculum," which refers to the unspoken values and the culture of

the school. This hidden curriculum will vary depending on the school's location and demographics. Both curricula, the formal and the hidden, are important for all schools. They become increasingly important in discussions about what is being taught in Jewish day school as we prepare our students to survive in exile. Not only do we need to articulate educational philosophies about the 3R's [reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic], we need to consider the fourth R: religious philosophy. The fourth R introduces so many possibilities that it would be beyond the scope of this article.

What I would like to do, however, is to discuss another set of skills — one that can and should be in each day school. One that looks at the whole child. One that is definitely needed if we talk about living in exile. The curriculum of which I speak is that of soft skills.

What are soft skills? Why are they important in a Jewish day school? And, perhaps the hardest question of all — how can they be introduced into a Jewish day school curriculum that already has more goals than hours in the day?

Soft skills are those personal and interpersonal skills that enable one to interact effectively with other people and the world at large. There are many — Google the term and you will get a lot of hits. Some analysts will identify

2 *Gittin* 56b; Menachem Stein, <https://benyehuda.org/read/17765#fn:4>; in fact, as modern historians have observed, while exile of portions of the Jewish population did occur in the wake of the Hurban, Jewish life continued and within a generation, aspects of Jewish life in Israel had been restored to a great degree. H.H. Ben-Sasson, *A History of the Jewish People*, (George Weidenfeld and Nicholson Ltd., 1976) p. 314 et seq.

3 Barry W. Holz [2011], "Teaching the Bible in Our Times" in *The International Handbook of Jewish Education* edited by H. Miller, L. Grant and A. Pomson. NY: Springer, Science and Business Media, p. 373-388.

4 *Avot* 5, 21. At age 5, a child was to learn mikra; at age 10, he was to learn Mishna and at age 15, Talmud.

5 BT *Kiddushin* 29a.

6 Philip Jackson defines mimetic teaching as "the transmission of factual or procedural knowledge from one person to another through an essentially imitative process." Philip Jackson [1968] "The Mimetic and the Transformative Alternative Outlook on Teaching" in *Life in Classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. p. 115 [Chapter 6].

7 See Barry W. Holz [2011], "Teaching the Bible in Our Times" in *The International Handbook of Jewish Education* edited by H. Miller, L. Grant and A. Pomson. NY: Springer, Science and Business Media, p. 373-388.

8 The people or institutions who are interested in the curriculum of a school.

eight or ten soft skills. Others will specify what soft skills are appropriate for different ages of the child.

As I write this, there are many challenges facing educators and their students in our world. In a culture recovering from a global pandemic, students need to strengthen their content knowledge, learning skills, and social skills. In a world whose agendas are increasingly driven by social media, students and future leaders need to be able to communicate beyond sending text messages and emojis. In a multiverse sadly flooded with divisiveness, the students witness the worst kinds of bullying and attempts to silence dissent. Intentionally teaching soft skills can help with all these challenges and help ensure our continued survival during a time of exile.

As an introduction to the concept of soft skills, consider the following:

1. Communication
2. Critical Thinking
3. Resilience
4. Responsibility

What is Communication?

Communication is the act of transmitting information. Communication has traditionally been in four domains that revolve around different forms of a word [oral or written]. Communication can be productive [like speaking or writing] and it can be receptive [like reading and listening]. In recent years, educators have identified seven or eight C's of communication for 21st-century

students [The seven C's are: clear, correct, complete, concrete, concise, considered and courteous with the eighth being complete].⁹

Some suggestions for fostering communication in the classroom:

- Model effective communication by communicating clear expectations to the students — for how they enter the classroom, for what materials they need to bring with them to class, for how to submit assignments, for how to work independently and cooperatively.
- Build in time for students to reflect upon their learning as they begin a new unit [like with a KWL] and as they review what they have learned [like with a Turn and Talk].
- Reword your questions to the class so as not to imply there is only one right answer.
- Have students write down their responses before saying them out loud. It will help them to fully develop their ideas and give them confidence to speak.
- Encourage students to speak loudly so that all the students in the room can hear. Stand at the opposite end of the room from the speaker so that the speaker will need to speak loud enough for you to hear.
- Ask follow-up questions when a student responds so that the answer is more robust. Don't accept an answer that is only partially correct as a complete and correct answer.¹⁰
- Teach students how to track the

speaker in the classroom [whether the speaker is the teacher or a fellow student]. This will help students focus on listening to the speaker which also encourages the speaker to be more cogent.

- Assign reflective journals so that students can practice communication through writing.

What is Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking is the art of effectively analyzing information to form a judgment. Does forming a judgment about Jewish studies undermine the authority and authenticity of what they are learning? Not if you establish a ground rule that all questions are allowed if they are asked with respect. And not if you recall that our entire system of education can be traced back to teaching our children about *Yetziyat Mitzrayim* [the Exodus from Egypt] through questions. In fact, healthy doubt can be seen as an imperative in Jewish education. "A human must think and to think is to question, to probe, to criticize," says Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm in "Faith and Doubt." He continues: "We are naïve if we think we can teach Judaism, especially to a young person, without encountering genuine doubt."¹¹

Some suggestions for fostering critical thinking in the classroom:

- Formulate a big question that will direct the learning [an Enduring Understanding or Essential Question to use Understanding by Design terminology].¹²
- Refer back to the big question as

⁹ The seven C's were originally coined by University of Wisconsin professors Scott M. Cutlip and Allen H. Center in their book *Effective Public Relations* published in 1952.

¹⁰ See Technique 2: Right is Right in Doug Lemov's *Teach like a Champion*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass. p.35.

¹¹ R. Norman Lamm, "Faith and Doubt" in *Tradition* 9:1-2 Spring Summer 1967, p. 14-51.

¹² See *Understanding by Design*, Expanded 2nd Edition by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development; 2nd Expanded edition, 1985.

you introduce the material and invite students to ask their own questions.

- Generate a summative assessment that asks students to reflect on the big question that drove the unit rather than spit back standard answers. Students can be asked to explain the process of answering the question or be given “unseen” material and asked to use the same skills in making meaning out of the new material.
- Encourage students to ask questions. Teach them that any question, asked with respect, is allowed. Our *mesorah* can handle the tough questions.
- When teaching Chumash, rather than jump to introducing Rashi’s question followed by Rashi’s answer, invite students to read through the pasuk and see what anomalies are worth investigating. This can be done for other meforshim as well and is a good way to teach the students which *parshan* can help them answer their particular question.

What is Resilience?

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from adversity, about learning to cope. It is a soft skill that is encouraged and built rather than directly taught.

What are classroom practices that can help to foster resilience?

- Create a safe classroom where responsible risk-taking is encouraged and failing, and learning from the failure, is celebrated.
- Encourage students to set goals and

then to reflect on whether they have met those goals [and why or why not].

- Promote a positive sense of worth and the feeling that we should always try to do our best.
- Celebrate the progress and not only the outcome.

What is Responsibility?

“No man is an island,” notes John Donne.¹³ “Every man is a piece of the continent, A part of the main.” We live in a world where we are increasingly responsible for what is going on. What does it mean to be responsible? The Cambridge Dictionary says that to be responsible is “to have control and authority over something or someone and the duty of taking care of it, him or her.”¹⁴

Responsibility can be for oneself — nobody cares about us the way we care about ourselves. As Hillel notes in *Pirkei Avot* 1, 14: *im ein ani li mi li?* If I am not for myself, who will be for me? This idea is echoed in the Talmud in BT *Sanhedrin* 10a, with the phrase *adam karov etzel atzmo*, a person is first and foremost concerned about himself. We must learn to advocate for ourselves and conversely, be accountable for the actions we take. But responsibility extends to others — to our family, to our community, to society at large. This is famously summed up in the second half of Hillel’s saying *ukesheani le-atzmi mah ani*, if I am only for myself, what am I?

Not only does Hillel urge us to consider the other, we are held accountable for what others have done. Once again, we turn to Talmudic literature, this time to BT *Shevuot* 39a [with a parallel

statement in BT *Sanhedrin* 27b], that says *kol Yisrael arevim zeh ba-zeh*, all of Bnai Yisrael are considered guarantors for one another. The Talmud means it in a punitive sense — that if one person sins, his family and indeed the entire community can be held responsible and even punished if they did nothing to stop the perpetrator. Looking at it from a positive perspective, it means that there is an element in which we are all connected.

A beautiful analogy about our interconnectedness is seen in the words of Rabbi Moshe Alshich, a 16th-century commentator on Chumash (Adrianople-Salonika-Safed, protégé of R. Yosef Caro). On the phrase “*atem nitzavim*,” (We are all standing) [Devarim 29, 9], he explains that each person is considered to be like one piece of a complete body and that together we form the systems of a body. If one part is not working, the entire body suffers as well.

Some suggestions for fostering responsibility in the classroom:

- Expect that students show up on time with the proper materials [and model the same behavior yourself].
- Assign meaningful homework and review in a timely way in class.
- Establish rules in the classroom that are fair and easy to understand. Discuss with the students what the consequences are if the rules are not followed. Be consistent with how you enforce both the rules and the consequences.
- Have students explain why they were unable to complete an assignment and what they will do the next time to make sure they are able to do what is necessary. Insist that students ask

¹³ John Donne, 1624, line from *Devotion upon Emergent Works*.

¹⁴ https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/responsible#google_vignette.

for an extension if they need one to complete an assignment [don't give it to them automatically].

- Teach students how to work together whether as a pair or in a group.
- Hold each student accountable for work that is done with another student either as a pair or a group. [If one student winds up completing the assignment, none should get credit since they have failed to work together.]
- Ensure that students take care of their surroundings by cleaning up and leaving the place neat.
- Have students learn to accept responsibility for their actions and to follow through appropriately.

These soft skills are but the tip of the iceberg. By educating my future teachers about their value, they, in turn, can educate their students to grow up capable and strong members of society, to become the leaders of the next generation.

As Jews in exile, we need leaders. We need to communicate. We need to think critically. We need to be resilient. And we need to be responsible.

Or, in the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks:

“Be a leader. Walk ahead. Take personal responsibility. Take moral responsibility. Take collective responsibility. Judaism is God’s call to responsibility.”¹⁵

Resources on Communication:

“Teaching Communication Skills: A Toolkit for Educators” by Laura Corona, PhD, LEND (Leadership

Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities) and TRIAD (Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders) fellow; Whitney Loring, PsyD, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics and Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, TRIAD Assistant Director of Training, and TRIAD Families First Coordinator; and Kristin Dorris, MS, CCC-SLP, TRIAD Educational Consultant. Vanderbilt Kennedy Center. <https://vkc.vumc.org/assets/files/resources/teach-com-skills.pdf>

“Skills for Today: What We Know about Teaching and Assessing Communication” by Ross Metusalem, Daniel Belenky, & Kristen DiCerbo in Pearson 2017. <https://www.pearson.com/content/dam/one-dot-com/one-dot-com/global/Files/efficacy-and-research/skills-for-today/Communication-FullReport.pdf>

Resources on Resilience:

“Resilience: It Begins With Beliefs” by Sara Truebridge in *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, January-March, 2016 (Vol. 52, #1, p. 22-27), available for purchase at <http://bit.ly/1nArKuR>; Truebridge can be reached at resilienceST@gmail.com.

“Excellence for All” by Robert Sternberg in *Educational Leadership*, October 2008 (Vol. 66, #2, p. 14-19) http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/oct08/vol66/num02/toc.aspx

“We Must Teach Students to Fail Well” by Leah Blatt Glasser in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 1, 2009 (Vol. LV, #34, p. A56).

Resources on Critical Thinking:

“Getting Students Comfortable with Critical Thinking” by Bryan Goodwin in *Educational Leadership*, April 2023 (Vol. 80, #7, pp. 80-81).

“Colin Seale on Closing the Critical Thinking Gap” An Interview by Tara Laskowski in *Educational Leadership*, April 2023 (Vol. 80, #7, pp. 14-19); Seale’s books are *Thinking Like a Lawyer* and *Tangible Equity*.

“5 IDEAS for Developing Real-World Thinking Skills” by Harvey Silver, Abigail Boutz, and Jay McTighe in *Educational Leadership*, May 2022 (Vol. 79, #8, pp. 38-42).

Resources for responsibility:

“A Tool to Help Students Make Good Decisions” By Jorge Valenzuela in Edutopia, June 2021. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/tool-help-students-make-good-decisions/>.

“Social-Emotional Learning Part III: Responsible Decision Making” by Caitlin Tucker, August 2022. <https://catlintucker.com/2022/08/sel-responsible-decisions/>.

“Helping Kids Make Decisions” by Gia Miller Clinical Experts: Grace Berman LCSW, Rachel Busman, PsyD, ABPP. <https://childmind.org/article/helping-kids-make-decisions/>

15 Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, “Answering the Call” (Vayera, Lessons in Leadership, Covenant & Conversation).