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Heschel School rally [New York, N.Y.]. 1986, 1993.

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*Joseph Slifka's name at Yale and  
Heschel make both schools equal.*

**Heschel School Rally - 7 December, 1993  
Remarks by Rabbi Herbert A. Friedman**

## **DECEMBER 7 - PEARL HARBOR - "DAY OF INFAMY"**

**Today we have gathered to rename it**

### **December 7 - DAY OF HESCHEL'S GROWTH**

Abraham Heschel died 20 years ago this month, but his personality will be remembered and his words studied far into the centuries ahead. He was a passionate humanist, embracing all causes in which justice was sought; and he was a devout Jew whose main search was to understand how the human being and God related to each other. This man was the exemplar par excellence of the twin streams which characterize Judaism - the universalism which prompted him to enter the struggle for every human's civil rights, and the particularism which caused him to focus on one people called chosen, not superior, but chosen for a unique relationship with the Chooser.

**You did well to name your school for this warm-hearted genius, and thus to set him up as the finest role model. If every child who passed through this school were to learn Heschel's ideas and to emulate Heschel's conduct, you, the founders would have made an incredible contribution to the strengthening of the fiber of the whole Jewish people. Your graduates and their descendants would represent the flesh and bone keeping Judaism alive and vigorous in the decades ahead.**

**Every good school must have as its goal and bounden duty three broad objectives: the transmitting of facts, which is a purely didactic approach; the establishing of a logical process of thinking so that the pupils can engage in research and discover answers for themselves, which is the cognitive approach; and finally the formation of a system of values, of what is important, what is right and wrong, which is the approach of shaping character.**

These are all very clear and accepted in theory, but often not carried out in practice. Take the first point. Facts are transmitted through reading. This is the one basic indispensable skill. If this is not acquired early, certainly by the third grade, the pupil will remain deprived throughout all future years of education and life itself will be infinitely less rich. Of course there are other techniques - story telling by the teacher, audio-visual aids, maps, drawings, etc.

But I shall never forget a visit to my grandson's classroom, when he was in pre-K, at the age of 4, and the subject of the morning was the rain forest. That lesson was incredible. The complexity of the rain forest was described by the pupils and its ecosystem hinted at - its location in Brazil was the beginning of a world geography lesson; the walls were decorated with large drawings of trees, vines, undergrowth; and there was a special table with many books which

**the children were encouraged to try to read aloud to the class. These were 4 year olds. Facts, facts, facts and already basic reading.**

**The second goal, achieving cognitive thought, so that the student learns to be more self-reliant, using logic as a means of finding answers to problems, is more difficult - but must be patiently and diligently insisted upon. When pupils are pushed and assisted to find the answer for themselves, that process becomes the gateway through which they will walk rapidly to greater achievements which will lead to greater personal satisfaction which will lead to greater hunger to learn even more and more.**

**The third goal is the matter of values, and I can think of nothing more absurd then the phrase "value-free education." If there was ever an oxymoron, this is it. Education without reference to values**

**equals sterility. There can be no civilization if there are not standards. The sense of what is right and what is wrong is absolutely basic to a society which hopes to prosper. One of the reasons for much of the lawlessness and violence so prevalent today is, of course, to be found in poverty, joblessness, broken families and other social ills. But another reason, equally culpable, is that so many young people receive no moral instruction in their formative years. Isn't it absurd that in many school districts there is actually a direct order to teachers that they shall not express their own opinions to students on matters of morals and ethics.**

**Nat Hentoff of the Village Voice some years ago wrote the story of an actual episode in a Teaneck, N.J. high school, when a young woman found a purse containing \$1000 and turned it in to the office. A student advisory council of 15 students discussed the matter and decided that she had been foolish to do that. When**

they asked the guidance counsellor what he thought, he said he believed she had done the right thing, but "he would not try to force his values on them." What a shame! What a lost opportunity! How would the 15 ever develop into honest, decent citizens. Where would the world be today if Moses had demurred at the critical moment and refused to climb the mountain.

In addition to the above general secular goals of education which the Heschel School must pursue, there are the special goals which the Jewish school must also maintain in the forefront of its curriculum. A Jewish school must address the Jewish heritage, in its broadest definition. What is the value, the worthwhileness of the Jewish heritage to its own people and to the whole civilized world? How a Jewish school deals with this fundamental question is the measure of its effectiveness in our struggle for the future.

I dislike the word continuity, because it has become an over-used buzz-word which produces yet another task force or study commission resulting in more paper and less action. In America today we witness the open visible erosion of the body politic of the Jewish people. With an acceleration that is actually measurable we see the core community of caring and committed Jews growing smaller and smaller as tens of thousands of our young adults drop off in an entropic process of not caring. They are not in open revolt. They simply don't care enough about Jewish history, religion or literature (how many have actually read through one book in the Bible) to commit themselves to marry other Jews, study a bit about Judaism, or spend a semester in Israel learning about our roots as a people. They simply don't think these subjects are of much importance. They do think of themselves as Americans with some vague notion of a Jewish identity far in their background but not meaning much to them now. Ignorance of Judaism,

accompanied by the wide acceptance granted by America has swept them up into the anonymity of the melting pot. They have forsaken the cultural pluralism of possessing two identities - Jewish and American - and have become mono-cultural Americans only.

The Jewish school of today must combat this ignorance or American Jewry will not have a tomorrow. The purpose of the Heschel School must be to give the student several specific parcels of fact and ideology as follows:

1. The long story of the Hebrew people from whom he/she springs
2. The literature (Bible, Midrash, some Talmud, codes, modern thought) which expresses the values and ideals of that people.
3. The land of Israel, which is the womb of that people.

**4. The relationship between that people and the God who chose it a millennia ago.**

**If the school succeeds in transmitting these packages of information and creating the concomitant positive attitudes toward this data, then potentially every young man and woman graduates with the desire to protect and preserve that heritage which has become by then part of his and her very identity.**

**Parenthetically, let me say the obvious, that the home and synagogue have the same responsibility in shaping the young person's Jewish identity. But tonight we speak of the school, thus omitting, but not overlooking, the role of parents and rabbis.**

**The doubts and uncertainties about the identity crisis most always crystallize in a single question with many forms - why be Jewish?**

**What does it mean? Why bother? And the answers they receive are not always clear.**

**Let me offer my summary. Why be Jewish?**

- 1. Because Judaism conceived and offered to the world the notion of one God, creator of nature, the human being and a moral code which taught right from wrong.**
- 2. Because Judaism then gave to the human free will, to choose between good and evil. Thus humans determine their own fate, and have no one to blame or credit except themselves. How wonderful.**
- 3. Because Judaism then emphasized justice as the key to establishing the equality of all people and races.**

**4. Because Judaism invented democracy, requiring that even the king was subject to the rule of the law - the Torah.**

**5. Because Judaism gave the human race a reason for its very existence, gave a purpose for life on this earth, namely, the improvement of society, the shaping of a perfect world - and named this long-term goal the messianic era, thereby endowing humanity with plenty of time to achieve it.**

**6. Thus, in one rubric, Judaism gave to civilization the idea of God, morality, free will, justice, democracy and a purpose to every human life - i.e., the constant betterment of society, so that no one on earth should be hungry or endangered. Then we can truly say that the Messiah has arrived.**

**That's quite an answer to the simple question, isn't it?**

**I began by congratulating you for having founded this school. Now you must complete the task of acquiring, renovating and endowing with many millions the two buildings comprising the lower and middle schools, with their future population of 450, then you will be ready to work on the high school, whose planning you must begin now. And so I end, with the challenge that you set your sights on that future jewel in your crown - that wonderful upper school with 600 students, beautiful brilliant students, the crown jewels of American Jewry who will grow into an adulthood wearing their two identities with dignity and pride. That is your challenge. Seize it. Do it with power and fullness - then look at the work of your hands, rest and be satisfied.**

Hertzberg

Franz Rosenzweig wrote that he could not commit himself to every word in the sacred texts, or every rule that they enjoin, but neither could he cast any part of the tradition into the dustbin. He believed that he had to try to understand it all, and to practice that which he could affirm - and both his understandings and his affirmations keep changing and deepening.

The Torah, so the midrash taught, was revealed to Jews in order to purify human character. The fundamental injunction is that we relate to Torah by studying the sacred texts: "and you shall teach (these words) diligently to your children."

Nat Hentoff

## Should Morality Be Taught in School?

Recently, in Teaneck, N.J., 15 high school students were involved in a counseling session with Jay R. Wolff, supervisor of the school's guidance program. At issue was the conduct of a young woman who found \$1,000 in a purse at the school and turned it in. The 15 students agreed among themselves that she had been foolish to do that.

They then asked Wolff what he thought of the student's behavior. According to a New York Times report, "Public Schools Avoid Teaching Right and Wrong," the guidance expert said that while he believed she had done the right thing, "he would not try to force his values on them."

Wolff added: "If I come from the position of what is right and what is wrong, then I'm not their counselor." This attitude toward teaching the difference between right and wrong would have astounded the masters at the public Boston Latin School where, like Sam Adams and Ralph Waldo Emerson before me, I was taught Homer, mathematics and decent behavior. On such of the basics as lying, cheating or pocketing someone else's money, the masters showed us instantly where

the line was drawn, and it was a bright line.

These days, however, many public school teachers are forbidden by their superiors to address directly matters of morality in their classrooms. In some cases, the reason for this careful neutrality is fear that word of a teacher express-

### SWEET LAND OF LIBERTY

ing a point of personal ethics may lead to swooping invasions of the school by members of Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum or similar true believers, who think teachers cannot be trusted to guide the young in anything outside rigorously approved textbooks. Moral values are to be instilled in the home and the church.

Another cause, however, for the notion that an adult in school ought not to "force" his moral values on kids is a doctrine of student-centered values that started in the early 1970s and has been adopted by a good many schools. The idea is

that students should learn how to identify their own convictions, and then their choices will be based on their own value systems, not imposed from above.

A forceful opponent of this notion is Bill Honig, California's superintendent of public instruction and the preeminent national leader against the dumbing-down of textbooks. Honig has no patience with the idea that it's bad for kids to be instructed in certain basic values, even if they have not yet arrived at those values by themselves.

As he says in his book, "Last Chance for Our Children": "It isn't a matter of personal conjecture, for example, whether stealing a Walkman from a classmate's locker is right or wrong. It's wrong, and so is cheating."

Honig makes another point that Wolff, the guidance supervisor in Teaneck, might think about. When adults avoid leveling with students as to their own values, "it says to children that we adults . . . don't believe in anything deeply enough to stand up for it." And, after all, "the teacher as an exemplar of the outside world, is a closely scrutinized role model."

Admittedly, there are more complex, and certainly more controversial, questions of morality than cheating or lying. Abortion, for instance, and premarital sex. Here too, however, students rightly regard it as fake behavior for a teacher to hold back his or her own views. And the teacher thereby loses credibility. But another way of losing credibility is for the teacher to become a zealous advocate of one side only. It's also a good way to get fired.

I've been in high school and junior high school classes where the kids know who the teacher is, what her beliefs are concerning moral problems. But they are encouraged—in fact, challenged—to argue with her and to do their own counter-research.

Those kids have done more serious thinking about the difference between right and wrong than most students I've seen around the country. Because their teacher is straight with them about what she thinks, they have someone against whom they can test their own discoveries of themselves and the world. And when they get lost, she tells them.

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