

An Education for all of Our Children

Ki Tisa 5779

Rav Ahron Soloveichik was the youngest son of one of the greatest Talmudic scholars of the first part of the twentieth century, Rav Moshe Soloveichik, and the grandson of the greatest Talmudic scholar of the 19th century, Rav Chaim Brisker.

He was reared in a world of the most intensive form of intellectual rigor, of uncompromising standards in the study of Torah, and, in candor, a deep intolerance of any form of mediocrity.

And yet, remarkably, Rav Ahron, despite his rearing in the very bastion of intellectualism, and long before it was accepted, long before there were schools and summer camps and shabbatonim across the country for those with developmental disabilities and special needs, was, without question, the greatest rabbinic champion of the emerging community of those children in our community who met this description.

Rav Ahron repeatedly said that the strength of our heritage, our mesorah, would not be measured by those who were most talented, most gifted, the intellectual and spiritual elite of the community, but rather, but by those who were most vulnerable, who needed the most specialized care and educational attention, whose contributions could indeed be enormous, but who needed the most help in discovering and developing their own potential.

As we read about this morning, while Moshe was busy on the very top of the mountain, completing the most sublime experience any human being has

ever had, literally communing with the Divine and mastering His revealed will, the fate of the Jewish people was being forever altered on the foothills of that mountain in the orgiastic spectacle of the Golden Calf. And so, Moshe is told, **לך רד**, go down, for, if we are to be responsible, we cannot, metaphorically, concern ourselves only with those who are at the top of the educational pyramid, and neglect the needs of those who anxiously await below. If we make that mistake, the *luchot* will be shattered, our precious mesorah will not be successfully and safely transmitted.

We have all come a long way, and in no small measure, thanks to Rav Ahron's trailblazing leadership on this issue. As the community gathers together tomorrow in support of Sinai schools, where I will have the privilege of representing our kehillah, we can, and should, collectively take pride in the remarkable network of schools that exist to grant an education to those who, a generation or two ago, may never have received one, in both the general sense of the term, and Judaically as well.

As my esteemed colleague and dear friend, Rabbi Chaim Jachter, the Rabbi of Sha'arei Ora, who, along with his beloved wife Malka, have a daughter, Chaya Tziporah, with Down's Syndrome, wrote about this week, there are few more difficult moments in the life of any parent than discovering that one's child has a profound disability. To say that it is dispiriting, demoralizing, and disconcerting does not begin to describe the immense pain and anxiety triggered by such a realization.

And yet, as Rabbi Jachter wrote, the fact that his dear daughter is receiving a wonderful education, individualized for her needs and for her personality, allowing her to read and to write and to engage in the world of Torah in her

own unique way, is a source of deep comfort, not only to Chaya Tziporah, but to the entire family.

In truth, Sinai is just one of many organizations that have emerged in our community to help provide for this most special population.

And yet, proud as we should be regarding the incredible leaps we have taken in caring for these individuals who are, in every sense, an integral part of our community, more must be done regarding differentiating Jewish education in general. For, as broad as the spectrum of children is, we ought to do all that is in our power to ensure that we have appropriate models for each of our children, each of whom, we must believe, is a world unto themselves.

Please allow me to be perfectly clear. I am a product of, and unabashed supporter of the day school movement. Alongside American Jewry's heroic efforts on behalf of Soviet Jewry of decades past, and ongoing efforts on behalf of the State of Israel, I consider it to be one of the three greatest historical achievements of the American Jewish community.

Our day schools, as demonstrated repeatedly by numerous studies, have become the primary vehicle for Jewish continuity in this country, and enabled those so inspired and so inclined to pursue the highest levels of general and Torah scholarship. Moreover, our day schools, in recent decades, have made heroic efforts, and it is, with the already unsustainable level of cost of tuition, far from cheap, to engage a far wider spectrum of learners than was true even ten or fifteen years ago.

And yet, our day schools are simply not equipped to handle every type of learner. Resources are, by very definition, finite.

As is always the case, it is far better to be honest regarding one's limitations when this is the truth, than to waste valuable and precious years of a child's life when critical life skills must be attained. These conversations, it must be said, are so difficult and so painful, and they must be conducted with the highest degree of compassion and sensitivity, but the greatest crime is to do anything which is not in a child's best interest.

And yet, for those families who find themselves with a child who cannot be properly serviced in a day school- and, as I spoke about a number of weeks ago, we are always mindful not to judge, not to cast aspersions on families and their choices, **אל תדין את חברך עד שתגיע למקומו**. We are a proudly diverse and accepting community, where mutual respect is a cornerstone of our worldview.

And, as is our obligation, **כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה**, we must not allow even one child to slip through the cracks. Please be mindful of those children and families who may be outside of the traditional system, invite them for playdates, consider the birthday parties to which they may not be invited.

First and foremost, we must all feel the immense pain that a mother or father feels when his or her child is struggling to find the right setting, who is constantly receiving concerning information about that which is most precious to them in the world. We must all pause to recognize and honor the indescribable pain of watching a child in such a situation.

And then, we must ask ourselves if we have done everything possible, as a community, to ensure that each child in our community, as we would wish

for our own children, or grandchildren, has access to a meaningful Jewish education.

As such, I want to update you on a project that I have been involved in with a wonderful partner, Dr. Debby Rapps, over the last number of months, to bring Jewish education to the Teaneck public school system, in an afterschool program, a number of times a week, in addition to the Sunday morning Jewish Youth Encounter program which she has so successfully ran for decades, bringing together students from day school with students from public school to ensure that all of our children have the benefit of a Jewish education, beginning in September 2019. I wish to publicly thank the superintendent of schools in our district, Dr. Christopher Irving, and Ms. Terry Corallo, the director of community education, for their support of this project.

We know that there are a growing number of students from our community in the public school system for many different reasons, educational, emotional, developmental, social, financial, and psychological.

We are trying to systematically map out the need and desire for quality after school Jewish education in our public school system, to determine the proper age groupings, location, timing, pricing and the proper school in which to house this program, to ensure that all of our children are fully engaged. If you know someone who has a child for whom this program would be appropriate, please let us know.

We have no intention nor any pretense of being able to offer the equivalent of a day school education, but we equally know our responsibility to every single child. The Talmud describes the inchoate phases of organized Jewish

education, enacted by R. Yehoshua b. Gamla, and noted that while the initial system worked for some, it did not accommodate others, and thus, needed to be corrected, so as to provide access to each and every student. We dare not hold ourselves to a lower standard.

This is just one piece of a very large and complex puzzle. From traditional day schools, to Sinai schools, to inclusion models, to afterschool programs, to private tutoring, and one day, what I hope will one day emerge, a vocational Jewish school for those students whose greatest gifts are with their hands, who might have been the ones so lauded in the *parshiyot* we read during these weeks of the Mishkan's construction, but who often feel so neglected in our current system, the pieces are many indeed. And yet, the goal is one: to provide the optimal Jewish education for each one of our children, affordable and inspirational.

לא עליך המלאכה לגמור, the work of providing spiritual sustenance for all of our children, especially those who might otherwise not receive it, during these challenging and complex times is never finished.

And yet, ולא אתה בן חורין להבטל ממנה, for each and every one of our children, we must be prepared to walk the extra mile, to do all that which is our power, as if he, or she, was our very own.