

## CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

### TEACHING HASHKOFOH

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What should Modern Orthodox high schools teach their students to believe, and about belief? These questions are brought into sharp relief by the data from [Rabbi Dr. Zvi Grumet's recent survey of graduates](#). Among his key findings are large gaps between what graduates think they were taught to believe, and what they believe now; and a correlation between such gaps and declines in halakhic observance.

Rabbi Dr. Grumet deserves enormous credit for raising critical issues in a substantive and nonpolemical fashion. Now we need to have real conversations about how to teach hashkofoh.

Let us take this week's parshah as a starting point. One of my beit din colleagues often asks conversion candidates: "What happened at Sinai?" Educators should ask each other, and themselves: How would you answer this question? How would you want your children or students to answer this question? Should they all give the same answer, or even the same kind of answer? Do you want them to give the same answer at 25, or 55, as they did when they were 15 years old?

Conversion candidates who were raised Catholic often talk about being turned off by a sense that key theological questions were out of bounds (they experience Orthodoxy in all its manifestations as much more open, in ways that can astonish those of us who have always lived within Orthodoxy), and they often cite their inability to believe critical dogmas as a key impetus for leaving Catholicism. What can their experience teach us about our own pedagogy (bearing in mind that dealing with conversion in the US naturally gives one disproportionate exposure to the failure of other religious educational systems)?

One mode of theological education can be termed "catechistic". Students are taught to memorize verbal formulas, and to affirm belief in those formulas. Understanding the formulas is a secondary goal. Sometimes, especially where the formulas are consciously designed to bridge mutually exclusive positions, or to contain paradoxes, deep understanding is *davka* not a goal for many teachers and institutions.

A very different mode can be termed "inductionist". In this mode, students are not taught beliefs qua beliefs, or that belief per se is a goal. Rather, they are immersed in a way of life, and encouraged to discover what beliefs are necessary to make that way of life meaningful.

These modes can be reframed in a specifically Jewish context as "Maimonidean" or "Alboistic" approaches to the concept of *ikkarei emunah*, or root principles of faith. Maimonideans see the willingness to affirm specific propositions as a necessary (and perhaps sufficient) condition for preserving a Jew's automatic share in *Olam Haba*. Alboists think it necessary to understand which propositions must be affirmed for the structure of Torah and mitzvot to stand in this world.

Alboists can concede that some non-*ikkar* propositions are nonetheless sine qua nons for a share in *Olam Haba*, and Maimonideans can concede that some *ikkar* propositions have no reverberations whatsoever. The difference between them is not necessarily about which propositions one ought to believe. It can be about whether the purpose of education is getting students to *Olam Haba*, or rather about enabling them to live with meaning in this world. Maimonideans may also believe that the only meaning this world has is as a vestibule in which to earn *Olam Haba*, while Alboists may find it difficult to fathom how a meaningless life can deserve an infinite sequel.

While Maimonideans and Alboists can be in complete substantive agreement about what Jews should ideally believe, their differing priorities will generate substantive differences in terms of what sorts of mistakes they will tolerate educationally, and what sort of theological latitude they give students.

Let us go back to Sinai. A Maimonidean might focus on having students affirm that every letter of the Torah today is exactly the same as the text that Mosheh wrote in a scroll at G-d's dictation after descending from Sinai. Furthermore, while Mosheh was on top of the mountain, G-d taught him every possible true interpretation of Chumash. Mosheh then taught all these interpretations to the Jewish people, creating a live and comprehensive oral tradition that continues to this day. There is nothing new in Torah, although things can be forgotten and then rediscovered.

An Alboist might focus on the goal of having students relate to the Torah as a text worth studying so intensely and rigorously that even changes in orthography deserve attention. Students should find that the study of Torah through the lens of Rabbinic literature yields interpretations that consistently resonate with their souls in ways that no other interpretations can. Students should find it necessary and rewarding to bring all aspects of their being to bear on the study of Torah, including their creativity.

I emphasize again that we are discussing strategies, not ends. It may be that only students who believe in literal Divine dictation will relate to the text with ultimate intensity and rigor; that only students who believe that all of Rabbinic tradition was included in the original Revelation will find it a uniquely meaningful mode of study; and that only students who believe that all true interpretations were already given can use their creativity to uncover G-d's intent rather than their own desires in the text.

I also need to make clear that these strategies are not opposed and incompatible. Students are unlikely to arrive at these kinds of meaningfulness purely by induction, without having their models and mentors expressly state their own beliefs. Different approaches are likely to work better with different students. It may be possible and advisable to use different modes for conveying different beliefs. Furthermore, propositions may move into and out of the Alboistic *ikkar* framework, depending on external pressures and internal plausibility structures.

And – students' plausibility structures and sensitivity to external pressures change over time, as do their intellectual and spiritual capacities – hopefully for the better, at least for a very long time. These inevitable changes have implications for both Alboistic and Maimonidean educational contexts.

In my humble opinion – a fundamental error made by many Modern Orthodox schools is that they educate their students *ba'asber hem sham* – as they are now, without sufficient thought for whether and how what they teach will age as their students grow.

For example – imagine a high school which teaches its students that the truth of Orthodox Judaism is logically demonstrable. Every teacher affirms this, and experts are brought in occasionally to demonstrate or refute specific arguments, say in the fields of geology or cosmology or cryptography. If the school is at all competent at what it does, a strong majority of its students will graduate believing what it wants them to believe, with confidence and intensity.

Some of these graduates will go on to academically strong secular colleges. In those colleges they will meet very smart people who do not find the truths of Orthodox Judaism logically demonstrable; who are unimpressed by the arguments and evidence of the high school experts; and some of whom seem to be really good people. A high percentage of these graduates will have crises of faith, and many of them will go OTD. Is that their fault for choosing secular college, or the fault of their school or developing in them only a weak and cloistered virtue?

college is a bugaboo. What about high schools which teach students that the text of chumash is unquestionably and perfectly what Mosheh gave us – “kol haTorah shemetzuyah atah b'yadeinu hanetunah leMosheh Rabbeinu”, only to be devastated in yeshiva by the one-letter difference between Ashkenazic and Sefardic scrolls, or the Rav Akiva Eiger on Shabbat 5b that lists all the places where the Talmud seems to have a different text than we do? There are academic and theological explanations for each of these that are compatible with the formulation in the *ani ma'amins*, but will students be able to accept them if they feel betrayed?

Issues of historical fact are rarely the key questions. What about schools that teach their students that there is a clear answer to why bad things happen to good people, or that great Torah scholars always show excellent character and judgment? These beliefs are likely to be falsified by experience later in life, and what will happen to their graduates then?

Most of our students will experience doubt and uncertainty at points in their lives. The *ani ma'amins* are generally aspirational rather than descriptive, or we would live in a very different world. Many or most of them will also have long or short periods in which the practice of yahadut does not consistently provide them with meaning. We need to educate in a way which will enable them to get through these periods without despair. They need beliefs that can sustain their commitment when experience doesn't, and experiences that can motivate them when belief wavers.

Bottom line: We do not necessarily want Orthodox adults to believe religiously exactly what they believed when they graduated high school. (We should not want this in any other field either.) Recognizing this should have a significant impact on the way we teach hashkofoh.