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## Going outside the box to reinvigorate Hebrew school

by SHAMMAI ENGELMAYER

How do you get Jewish children who attend secular schools interested enough to also want to attend Hebrew school?

Two rabbis in Bayonne — Rabbi Jacob Benzaquen of the Conservative Temple Emanuel, and Rabbi Abraham Unger of the Orthodox Congregation Ohav Zedek—are among a creative group of rabbis and Jewish educators who are thinking way outside the box to do just that.

They also are showing the importance of rabbis of different streams working together for the benefit of the Jewish community as a whole.

Judaism, of course, places a great deal of importance on education—not just “religious” education, but education generally.

Maimonides, the Rambam, put it bluntly: “If it does not employ teachers, the [community] deserves to be destroyed.” (See his Mishneh Torah, The Laws of Torah Study 2:1.)

By “employ teachers,” he means running an educational system for the children of a community. By “deserves to be destroyed,” he does not mean sending in an army to destroy the community. Rather, the community is destroying itself by not providing for its future through the education of its children, and thus deserves the future it gets.

There is a midrash (often quoted in this column) that tells of two rabbis — Ammi and Assi — who were sent on an inspection tour of various towns to see how they handled the education of their children.

Says this midrash (Lamentations Rabbah, P’sichta Bet): “They came to a city and said to the people, ‘Bring us the guardians of the city.’ [The people] fetched the captain of the guard and the magistrate.

“The rabbis exclaimed, ‘These [are not] the guardians of the city!’”

The guardians of a town, the rabbis explained, are its teachers.

That is Judaism’s take on the importance of education, but what does Judaism actually mean about education?

In our world, Hebrew school for the non-Orthodox majority is about teaching children how to read Hebrew, mainly so they can become b’nai and b’not mitzvah. Thrown in, as well, are some study of stories in the Torah and the rest of the Tanach, the Bible, and maybe even some basic laws.

In day schools and yeshivot, it is the same basic education, but with a greater intensity.

When I went to yeshivah, it was from nine in the morning until six at night, Monday through Thursday. The first half of each day was devoted to “religious studies.” The second half was devoted to the same kind of courses taught in public and private schools.

We also went to school for a half-day on Sundays, when we studied secular subjects, and a half-day on Fridays, when we studied religious subjects. That meant we had five full days of each.

Never, though, did the twain meet. Most of our secular teachers were not even Jewish, and most of our religious teachers had no interest in secular topics.

That is not what Judaism ever meant by education.

Beginning with the Torah itself, there was never meant to be a separation between the religious and the secular. Educating children meant teaching them everything they needed to know to be responsible adults living responsible lives in a manner befitting the label “Jew.”

For so many centuries, therefore, Jewish educators always took into account the communities in which they lived, and tailored their curricula to the needs of those communities. If a community survived on commerce or trade, for example, even the so-called “religious studies” were geared toward those pursuits. The teachers would concentrate their lessons on the Torah’s laws regarding how to conduct business. They would teach the Jewish ethics of doing business.

Being Jewish is more than just a title. It is a way of living every aspect of a life according to a very stringent, very fair, very equitable system of morality and ethics. Until the last few generations, Jewish education always took that into account. Then, one side of Jewish life, the religious side, was separated from the other side of Jewish life, the secular one, and our education system began to falter. “Hebrew school” became rote learning totally disconnected from real life. It became unchallenging and boring. Too many children grew into adulthood thinking Judaism is all about what food you can eat, but has nothing to do with life itself.

Now, thanks to the creativity of such people as Rabbis Benzaquen and Unger, non-day school Jewish education is being made attractive again, meaningful again.

Take, for example, their robotics program.

There is serious Jewish content in robotics. Going back many centuries, there has been a halachic debate over how to treat artificial creatures with artificial intelligence.

The creature in that debate is the mythical creature known as the golem. The debate has nothing to do with whether such a creature ever existed, but what it looks like and can do. If it has a human form, and can think and act like a person, even a simple one, could it be counted in a minyan? Could it be discarded or destroyed. The debate is ongoing, and decisions have been rendered on both sides.

Artificial beings also are at issue in cloning — how should one a cloned person, or animal, for that matter?

There is a lot of Jewish content in robotics, if you take the time to look for it, and if you take the time to teach it while also helping children advance the kind of knowledge they will need in the secular world when they are adults.

Also, when someone studies how to treat artificial beings, that person is also studying how to treat real beings, human or animal. That person is diving into a sea of Jewish law that defines what it means to be a Jew, and how to live as a Jew.

That is real Jewish education. That is the future of Jewish education.

May what is happening in Bayonne and elsewhere grow into a full-scale educational revolution that sees the secular and the religious as two halves of a whole — a Jewish whole.