

# Cross-Currents

## Infusing Our Schools With Ahavat Yisrael

By **Guest Contributor**, on October 7th, 2010

by Shmuel Jablon

I have what may be described as a more “diverse” background than many other Rabbis who serve as principals of Orthodox Day Schools. I am a Baal Teshuvah who grew up in the Reform movement, briefly flirted (as an 18 year old) with Reconstructionism, started studying at the Conservative Rabbinical School in Los Angeles (where I did earn an education degree) and then ended up learning at Yeshiva of Los Angeles. From there I went to Hebrew Theological College (Skokie Yeshiva) where I learned Torah and earned smicha in a Makkom Torah that is truly a home for all kinds of Orthodox Jews. Since then, I have been profoundly influenced by -HaRav Shlomo Aviner shlit”a- Rosh Yeshiva of Ateret Yerushalayim, Rav of Bet El and author of over 100 sefarim. In many ways, he is my Rebbe. He not only has deepened my sense of Religious Zionism, he has also taught me a great deal about Ahavat Yisrael. As a Baal Teshuvah, I often have the impulse to be strident or extreme. Yet, he has always stressed the importance of love and respect for all, even those with whom we have honest disagreements. He also stressed the importance of focusing on what unites us, not divides us. I have tried to heed his wisdom, which has helped me in my 13+ years in day school administration. In particular, his focus on Ahavat Yisrael- combined with my experiences at Skokie Yeshiva, have served me well as I now begin my third year at Torah Academy of Greater Philadelphia (where I am honored to serve as Menahel).

This past winter, I had the honor of spending some time with HaRav Aviner at his Yeshiva. I talked to him about our school. I described to him how in our school everyone is Orthodox. However, under one roof we have different kinds of Orthodox Jews. We have families and faculty members who identify as Modern, Centrist, Dati Leumi, Charedi and Chabad. Naturally we have both Ashkenazim and Sephardim. In our school, nobody is told which kind of Orthodoxy is “better.” Rather, children are taught to follow the customs and philosophies of their families. For example, prior to Yom HaAztmaut, our students are told to know whether or not their family says Hallel on that day. Those families (and faculty members) who do, sing Hallel. Those who do not say Tehillim for Israel. Therefore, in one room one can see different children and adults doing something different. But all are together and all learn that their classmates are both Orthodox and love Israel, even if they do things slightly differently.

Because of this approach, teachers focus on meeting the educational, spiritual and emotional needs of every child- rather than on trying to create clones of themselves. One result is that every child is prepared for the Orthodox high schools of their family’s choice. Another result is that children learn that there are different kinds of Orthodoxy, and that all are legitimate and to be honored. Sometimes this even results in breaking down the stereotypes that endanger the unity of the Orthodox community. For example, our Sgan Menahel, Rabbi Naftoli Eisemann, is a product of the Yeshivot of both Philadelphia and Lakewood. He was a rebbe in our school for 24 years prior to my promoting him to his role. Last Yom haZikaron he movingly addressed our students about visiting Har Herzl and asking to visit the grave of the soldier most recently buried there. He was taken to see the grave, and read of the Hesder Yeshiva graduate who died for Israel. He told our students that he cried more at that grave than at the funeral of his own father. Our students saw that, indeed, one can be a “Charedi” and still be very much in love with Israel. Similarly, one of our shlichim, Rabbi Elad Asulin, is a graduate of a Hesder Yeshiva. Rabbi Eisemann has noted many times that his level of learning and care in mitzvot is the same as one might expect in a Charedi Yeshiva. Thus our students learn that one can be a “Tzioni” and still be very much in love with Hashem’s Torah. Students in schools where everyone is the same

never have the opportunity to truly experience that stereotypes are often wrong, and there is more that unites us than divides us.

What was HaRav Aviner's response? He told me that our approach was le'chatchila (the best) because "Ahavat Yisrael is le'Chatchila" and said "Halavay that there should be more schools like yours, including in Israel."

His answer may surprise people who don't know HaRav Aviner. After all, he is one of today's greatest leaders of Religious Zionism. One might have thought that he would have suggested to me, a devoted follower, either that I should either attempt to force our student body to fit into my brand of Orthodoxy or console myself with feeling I was doing the best I could in a "mixed" community. Yet that was not his approach. Rather, he was making clear that the Ahavat Yisrael that is taught by being around fellow Jews who may not all be exactly alike is a critical Torah value.

As the reader can imagine, I left HaRav Aviner's Yeshiva feeling a great deal of chizzuk (strength) that he felt that my school was on the path of Ahavat Yisrael. Of course, no school can claim to always get this issue "right." And we do face challenges. However, because the model of Ahavat Yisrael works so well here (and has long predated my arrival), I would humbly like to offer some practical suggestions that may assist others in infusing their homes and schools with Ahavat Yisrael.

Simply put, make Ahavat Yisrael a stated value and critical goal. In the stated curriculum of every Jewish school, and in the values expressed in our homes, it is necessary to find opportunities to explicitly teach our children about Ahavat Yisrael. There are a number of areas where this can be done quite easily.

1) When we teach Halacha, we should be sure to cite different Minhagim and, when age appropriate, different halachic opinions. Children will not only be fascinated by differences in the Jewish People, they will learn that the different opinions in Orthodoxy are all legitimate. Students in their early years of learning Mishna or Gemara often feel that a machloket (disagreement) means that people don't like one another. They need to be taught that when machloket is for the Sake of Heaven, this could not be further from the truth. We even tried to put this into practice in our choice of a text for our Middle School Girls' Halacha classes. We selected the edition of the Kitzzur Shulchan Aruch published by HaRav Mordechai Eliyahu zt"l. Under the original text, HaRav Eliyahu added notes for the Shulchan Aruch haRav, Mishna Berura, Ben Ish Hai, Kaf haHayyim and his own piskei halacha. Thus, the students in the class- whether Ashkenazi, Sephardi or Chabad- find their minhagim to be part of the curriculum being taught.

2) In an age appropriate way, we should teach texts that promote Ahavat Yisrael as a Torah value. Whether it's the Gemara about the respect that Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai had for one another, the Netziv's introduction to Emek Davar in which he defines Sinat Chinam as hatred of others simply because they are different, or the teachings of Rav Kook about the importance of Ahavat Chinam (boundless love), our sages have much to teach us about how we treat our fellow Jew. This is just as important as texts that teach any other value or practice in halacha.

3) Many of us teach our children and students about great Torah leaders of both the past and present. Rather than simply teaching about the leaders of one "camp," use the opportunity to teach about many great leaders. Students should hear Divrei Torah of a variety of Torah giants. They should see many different pictures of Rabbis in classroom and hallway displays in their schools. Make sure students not only hear stories about the various great figures, but that they hear stories about how Torah giants interacted with one another- even those with whom they had theological or halachic differences.

4) We need to find ways to connect our students to other Jews. In those schools that are not fortunate to have the diverse student body that we have, it is possible to arrange opportunities to interact with students of other local Jewish schools. In our era of communication via internet and video conference, it is also a relatively simple matter to arrange to connect with other schools nationally and internationally. We have used this to connect our students to partner classes in Israel. When the children see that there is far more that unites us than divides us they are taught a valuable lesson in Ahavat Yisrael.

5) Students need to also be taught about how to love Jews who may not be part of the Orthodox community. Children need to explicitly be taught that "a Jew is a Jew" and "all Jews are our brothers and sisters." Sometimes young children confuse non-Orthodox Jews with non Jews. They may say things like, "He doesn't wear a Kippah, he's not Jewish." Though this might be understandable for a young child (After all, we do tell

children, "Jewish boys wear kippot."), we need to correct this immediately. We tell them that every Jew is indeed Jewish, and part of Klal Yisrael. Some among our non-Orthodox brothers and sisters may not have learned, and others may not have truly understood. But they are still part of our people. Older children and young adults may be tempted to totally disregard the contributions of non-Observant Jews to the Jewish community. We need to teach them both to be proud of their own beliefs while respecting the good in all of our brothers and sisters. This can be done by telling them that even though someone did many things wrong, they have many merits for which we must be thankful. We also need to teach them that Ahavat Chinam and being a good role model will do far more to encourage other Jews to adopt Orthodoxy than any amount of insults or negativity.

6) Just as we focus on mitzvot ben adam la'Makom (between people and Hashem), we should also focus on mitzvot ben adam le'chavero (between people). This is, of course, critical as being an Observant Jew requires both. It is also because if our students gain the impression that Torah cares little for how they treat others, they run the risk of being the next allegedly Observant Jew to (G-d forbid) commit a Desecration of Hashem's Name due to unethical behavior. But when students gain the full picture of Torah observance, they are more likely to Sanctify Hashem's Name and be role models of Ahavat Yisrael in the community. In order to do this, we have stated Middot that are part of our Torah Studies curriculum. Rather than be disjointed "middot of the month," they vary by class and integrate with the published curriculum. Thus, students see that what they are studying must make a difference in their daily life. In addition, we have published a curriculum on social-emotional education, which includes contributions from the anti-bullying program developed by Yeshiva University. And when teachers see Ben Adam LeChavero issues in school, they are expected to "stop action" and focus on those teaching moments. To paraphrase a famous story, though it may mean the students go few through prakim of Torah, more prakim will go through them.

Ahavat Yisrael should also extend from the curriculum in our schools to those that are teaching it. Students should benefit from a variety of role models. When possible, our Judaic Studies faculty should reflect the diversity of Orthodoxy. Though this may be difficult in schools with specific ideological agendas, or when qualified faculty of a particular "type" cannot be located, it is a value for students to have different kinds of Orthodox role models. Not only does this teach Ahavat Yisrael, it also shows students that if one type of Orthodoxy does not appeal to their hearts or minds, there are other kinds of Orthodoxy within the Torah world. As Faranak Margolese points out in her book *Off The Derech*, people feeling that there is only one way of being Orthodox is a cause for some people to leave Orthodoxy. Thus, having a diverse faculty may not only teach Ahavat Yisrael, it may also have a critical side benefit of encouraging our students to find answers to their questions within the Torah community, rather than opting out. If a diverse faculty is not possible in a given school, having guest speakers that represent the spectrum of Orthodoxy will at least give students the opportunity to interact with those who may be different than themselves.

There are those who feel that this education for Ahavat Yisrael can wait until children are older. They argue that students in high school and beyond can study in depth various hashkafot and minhagim and only then appreciate the value of Aylu ve'Aylu Divrei Elokim Chayim ("These and those are the words of the Living G-d"). I beg to strongly differ. Children who internalize the values of Ahavat Yisrael, including respect and honor for those whose Orthodoxy is different than their own, at young ages are more likely to view these values as basic and part and parcel of being a Torah Jew. Just as the basics of emunah must be taught to elementary school students, so, too, must the basics of Ahavat Yisrael. And students who are able to be in schools where this is truly lived are able to embark upon a path that can lead to greater and greater Ahavat Yisrael. It is hard to imagine that a student who heard Rabbi Eisemann talk of crying on Har Herzl will ever say "Charedim don't love Israel." It is hard to imagine students who ever saw Rabbi and Mrs. Asulin checking for insects will ever say, "Tzionim aren't careful with mitzvot." And it is hard to imagine that students who grow up learning and playing with all kinds of Orthodox Jews will later be able to speak and act with Sinat Chinam against those who were their playmates and chavrutot in their formative years.

It is well known that the Rabbis teach us that the Second Temple was destroyed due to Sinat Chinam- unjustified hatred of our fellow Jews. Rav Kook zt"l taught us that it will be Ahavat Chinam- boundless love for our fellow Jews- that causes it to be rebuilt. There is a famous story that once a visitor asked Rav Kook how he could focus so much on love for other Jews, even for those who were far away from the Torah. Wasn't he worried that he might go too far? Rav Kook responded that he would rather pay the "penalty" for too much love than for too much hate.

May we all merit to succeed in infusing our children and students with Ahavat Yisrael, so that they not only learn about Ahavat Yisrael but also practice it- each and every day of their lives. And may we therefore merit to learn Torah with them in the rebuilt Beit haMikdash, speedily and in our days.

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