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RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENCE: A WORK IN PROGRESS¹

Ironically, one of the primary principles that all Jewish educators hold dear is “*hanokh la-na’ar al pi darko*,” that we take into account the individual differences among our students. It is ironic because for all of our sensitivity to this issue, our community has only relatively recently begun to make formal accommodations for the different learning needs of our diverse populations. We are finally beginning to tailor curriculum content and demands to better suit student learning styles. We can diagnose learning problems and present curricula accordingly. We have learning centers and resource rooms to help individualize educational needs. And yet, when speaking of religious concerns, religious growth, religious development, one wonders what, if any, accommodations are made for individual differences.

The question itself goes to the heart of our mission as religious educators. And yet in all of the writing about Modern Orthodox religious education, for all of the conferences and seminars, seldom does one read or hear much talk about what religious education means in terms of individual students. To be sure, there is often discussion about broad goals of commitment to *talmud Torah* or *shemirat mitzvot* or *yir’at shamayim* or *ahavat Torah* and the like, but these do not speak to how we are to inculcate these values within the students who sit in our *Tanakh* or Talmud or halakha classes every day. Put another way, there is much talk about teaching texts and ideas and not enough about teaching students.

Part of the problem lies in trying to quantify such differences, to identify “where” an individual student “is” religiously. It is too facile to try to place him on a continuum of religious observance for we know that observance, its presence or absence, does not always tell us the full story about what a student is thinking or feeling about religious commitment. It is also difficult to assess in terms of what a student actually

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says about his or her religious life, since some students cannot always articulate what they feel or believe and, more important, the nature of religious discourse is such that words or concepts may mean different things to different students at different times in their lives.

Indeed, it is precisely these kinds of differences between ninth graders and twelfth graders or between a particular student when he was in the ninth grade and that same student three years later that made me begin to think of religious commitment not in static terms but in developmental terms. The notion of development implies that a human being goes through stages of maturation. No one has been more influential in our understanding of the intellectual component of this development than Jean Piaget. Suffice it to say for our purposes that Piaget characterized growth as a series of progressive and successive stages, each one being necessarily linked to the one before it. Each stage is marked by an equilibrium, a point at which the worldview is in balance and is understood in specific ways. New experiences are incorporated into this worldview and the mental structures (for example, the ability to understand numbers) are gradually changed in order to accommodate new experiences or information that don't quite fit. When there is so much change that old understandings do not suffice then a disequilibrium is said to exist, thus marking a transition to the next and necessarily higher stage of understanding. The ultimate goal is formal operations thinking, a stage when one can think about mental images or about symbols, even in the absence of the objects about which one is thinking.

Most Jewish educators will be familiar with this system and there is certainly some evidence to suggest that if the jargon was unfamiliar to *Hazal*, the concept of cognitive development was not.² Many educators will also be aware of the subsequent work that was done in the field of moral development by Lawrence Kohlberg. Fewer Jewish educators, however, may be aware of the work of David Elkind or Ronald Goldman, who applied Piagetian principles to religious education, particularly to the area of religious thought.³ Similarly there is the work of James Fowler, who has explored the implications of this view of human development in terms of religious faith.⁴ Fowler based himself not only on Piaget and Kohlberg but also on Erikson's stages of emotional development.⁵ Alternatively, there are those who see religious development not so much in terms of distinct limiting stages as much as in terms of a child's increasing experience.⁶ And, most recently, and of special note for Jewish educators, Shraga Fisherman⁷ has used Erikson's theory of psychological development to explore the spiritual identity of religious adolescents.

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Needless to say, all of these efforts have come under intense scrutiny and criticism with scores of studies being written to replicate, expand, limit or disprove all or part of their findings.⁸ My goal is not to enter that fray, not only because I am unqualified to do so but also because I believe that taking a more eclectic approach may even be more worthwhile. For there is much that the typical educator can learn and glean from these studies in our practice that can help us interact with our students in a more directed and meaningful way. As such, my goal here is not to provide a comprehensive theory of religious guidance. Nor is it my intent to deny or belittle the enormous success that we continue to have on a daily basis in helping to create or facilitate religious growth in our students. Rather, I seek to sensitize us all to think and talk to one another about that growth in a way that often finds too little articulated expression in our field and in our practice.

We all know that adolescence can be a turbulent and difficult time, the so-called “identity crisis” examined by Erikson.⁹ At the very least, the expectations that others place upon adolescents (parents, friends, teachers, society, popular culture, Judaism), to say nothing of the expectations that adolescents may put upon themselves, make for a life of constant self-consciousness and trying on different images. A student’s value system can be called into question on a regular basis and it should therefore come as no surprise that his religious commitment, regardless of its level, will also be affected in some way.

In this light, it should come as no surprise that a nearly universal key finding in the research on religious development is that there is a drop-off in religious commitment during the adolescent years. Many of us could intuit such a finding, but it may be reassuring to know that there is significant research, across cultural and denominational lines, to attest to the phenomenon.¹⁰ On the one hand, such a finding should be liberating for those educators who unnecessarily chastise themselves for the fact that some students seemed “more religious” when they first entered the high school but now seem to be “less religious” or less observant. Instead, we need to realize that such a dip or decline may in fact be very normal and is no guarantee that the state of affairs is a permanent or even long-term one.

It is a key fact to share, too, with parents who cannot understand why their child seemed so “religious” and motivated in the eighth grade but now that he is in the tenth grade seems to have lost his enthusiasm. (Surely, they maintain, the high school is to blame!) But if a reduction in commitment to observance is common, then there is not

necessarily a need for parents or teachers to panic. Nor is there a reason to get into a tug of war with adolescents about all aspects of their observance. Exactly where one draws the line, is of course a difficult question that is worth examining further.¹¹ Meantime, teachers and parents need to consider when to insist on conformity and when to look the other way. The father who once told me that “as long as this boy is in my house, he is going to wear *tsitsit*,” may be backing his child into a corner that potentially has only a tragic exit. On the other hand, the parent who allows his child not to go to *shul* every *Shabbat* may be headed for an equally tragic outcome. Such issues are important, but educators, like parents, need to recognize them for what they often truly are: the normal adolescent struggle to try on different hats, testing or pushing limits to find out what one truly believes.

In extreme cases, it will also do the teacher well to recall that a decline in religious behavior if not outright rebelliousness may have little to do with religious observance per se. I can think of a (thankfully small) number of students whose conduct in *davening* or their posture in Torah classes was so outrageous that they managed to try my patience with some regularity. These are students who came from “good religious homes” or “good *frum* communities,” yet they seemed so oppositional. One would do well with such students to remember the words of one psychoanalyst who noted that “for some adolescents, the quest for independence can be pursued only through overthrowing and rejecting parental norms and standards. Religion in such cases may become the symbolic repository for parental authority and corresponding conflicts or continuing dependence. The adolescent who needs to reject authority may find this need penetrating his religious experience and his relation to God as well.”¹²

When that student acts out, we need to remind each other that there may well be far more involved motives, and religion is merely the place where things are played out before our eyes on a daily basis. We certainly need to be concerned about the self-destructive effects of such behavior, and we need to be concerned about the potential effects on other students, but it is critical that we recall that such behavior may have little to do with *davening* or *mitsva* observance or Torah life per se. Such students may need general professional counseling, we may need to speak with parents, we may need to provide them with the alternative of *davening* in another place such as a local morning *minyan*. But the one thing such a child probably does not need is

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musar about the importance of *davening*. Nor should his behavior be seen as representing some failure of his teachers or his home. In any event, we need to think more creatively and in a more measured and directed way about such behaviors and we need to train teachers to respond appropriately.

Religious doubt or rebellion, then, may well be part of a norm. Such doubt can be explained in a number of ways. It “is often an expression of the adolescent’s need for autonomy in the face of the regressively reactivated pull to dependency on parental objects.”¹³ Alternatively, one might see it simply in cognitive developmental terms: having achieved a level of formal operations thinking, the adolescent can now think in the abstract, so childish notions of belief are discarded or called into question. Finally, it may be understood in the broader sense of identity formation: the adolescent “is unwilling to accept slogans blindly and prefers to consolidate his own spiritual identity, in a way that will let him feel that his parents’ and teachers’ influence on this identity is as small as possible.”¹⁴ The bottom line, however, is that doubt is often a very natural if not healthy aspect of adolescence.¹⁵

And yet, what is our response to these doubts? What opportunities do we provide for students to give voice to these doubts? Are they part of the very fabric of our classroom curricula and discussions or are they reserved for only those rare moments at a *Shabbaton* or during informal educational events? Or do they finally get our attention only when we perceive (too late) that a child is in crisis? Surely if doubt is an important part of adolescent growth, if it is a part of normal spiritual and cognitive maturation, then we should be finding ways to help students address their questions. It would seem that we are not as sensitive to this issue as we can or should be. In Israel, there has been much concern of late about a whole generation of students who grew up in the *yeshiva tikhonit* and whose questions were dismissed as heretical or irrelevant, with the result that large numbers have fallen into the category of “*yotse'im bi-she'ela*.” Rav Yehuda Amital has bemoaned the fact that

We have before us a generation that ‘does not know how to ask.’ Not just that it does not know how to ask, but it does not even think to ask, due to educational indoctrination. Not knowing to ask, has evolved as an educational ideal throughout our educational system. . . . Youngsters, who naturally know how to ask, have learned to restrict their questions to limited contexts, where the questions lack significance and are mainly technical and formal, not existential. Regarding any areas outside

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these realms, the youth have internalized the educational message that questions are, if not outright forbidden, then at least inappropriate. As a result, a process has emerged whereby a sizable portion of the youth refuses to ask, not because they are afraid to ask, but because they do not know how.¹⁶

One might be tempted to say that this is not the case in Modern Orthodox high schools here in America. Perhaps; although one does hear from time to time that a student in our community who asks a sensitive question in class is simply told that the answer lies in Torah—*tse u-lemad*.¹⁷ More subtly, though, how often do students ask questions in class but the response they hear is something like “the question is not really relevant [!] to the topic at hand,” or “it will take us too far afield,” or “we don’t have the time right now,” or “if we finish this section in time then we will come back to your question.”

How often do we push off such questions because we think we don’t have the time, or because of our own discomfort? And when in fact there really is no time to talk about the issue at that moment, do we go out of our way to make the time during some later class? Our students quickly learn not to ask certain kinds of questions or not to ask questions at all! Instead, we need to take these questions and doubts very seriously and we need to find ways to address them, to give them a voice, to create environments where it will be comfortable to ask. Students need to hear possibilities from us, ones that are not prescriptive or judgmental but which they can absorb and try on for size.

The question of what questions need addressing is a difficult one as are the questions of how and when they should be asked. But especially if they are potentially an important and positive part of the educational process, as well as the process of religious maturation, then we should be thinking of ways to make the time and the place. Obviously, a *mahshava* or philosophy class might be one possible venue, as long as it is students’ questions that are raised there and not only the teacher’s.¹⁸ Yet another possibility is to examine the curricula that are already in place. *Tanakh*, *Gemara*, *Halakha*, are all subjects which provide what might be called “teachable moments” for *hashkafic* issues. One could not imagine, for example, teaching about Pharaoh and the *makkot*, without dedicating at least one lesson on the subject of free will and determinism. A class on *hilkhot Oneg Shabbat* might include the question of doing something that is less than “*shabbosdik*” because

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an individual student needs to explore its outer limits. A *mabloket* in the *Gemara* may particularly lend itself to the question of *emunat hakhamim*. Rather than leave it up to the individual teacher, we should be planning together, as a department, as a school, to decide which issues we should be addressing at which points in the curricula, and we should be sharing with one another as a faculty the different perspectives that might be possible.

Nor should such opportunities be restricted to the *limmudei kodesh* curricula. The issue of evolution and biology is the most obvious example, and the context for teaching history could be another. One thinks particularly of the English literature curriculum that could and should also be combed by religious faculty in search of *loci* for meaningful discussions about issues of belief, identity, religious inquiry, and doubt.¹⁹ To the extent that these issues cannot be addressed by the English literature faculty, then arrangements should be made for team teaching. As Fisherman points out:

Adolescents are less hesitant to discuss doubts disguised as the feelings and musings of a literary protagonist. An open and penetrating discussion of the protagonist's questions, and presentation of diverse positions, should be encouraged. This route legitimizes doubts without worrying the participants about self-exposure. Further on, adolescents can be encouraged to move from third-person to first-person expression. Discussion (especially when projective) also facilitates hearing one's peers' solutions to similar questions and the ways in which they dealt with their doubts.²⁰

The questions are not necessarily ones that can be provided by an outsider; rather, they are best when they emanate from the students themselves. One could easily imagine polling students for a list of religious or faith issues that never get talked about, collating such a list and then meeting together as a faculty to find places in the curriculum, both formal and informal, where it may be appropriate to address such questions either tangentially or head on. It might be appropriate to establish an email address where students can write to pose their questions and then have teachers respond. A collection of responses might be posted on a website as a kind of "FAQ [frequently asked questions] on Faith."²¹

Just our being open to raising such questions, however, is only part of the story. For one often has a sense that the questions that are raised by students in the ninth grade are qualitatively different from

the questions raised in the twelfth grade. Here again, looking at students' religious growth developmentally would be helpful. In the first place, it would make us rephrase the above statement to say that it is not the questions which are qualitatively different as much as the ninth grade student and the twelfth grade students who are asking the questions are different. I refer here not so much to cognitive or emotional differences alone. After all, younger and older students may understand, say, the problem of suffering differently. Rather, I refer to religious differences between them, in terms of how they live or articulate their faith. To understand this better, some reference to James Fowler's work might be helpful.

Fowler, as we have stated, is one of those theorists who maintains that humans go through a number of successive spiral stages where each stage is linked and adds to the one before. People usually reach a level of equilibrium at a particular stage until such time that dissonance sets in and they are nudged into creating a new set of structures. "Each stage represents a widening of vision and valuing, correlated with a parallel increase in the certainty and depth of selfhood. . . ." Fowler warns that "transitions from one spiral stage level to another are often protracted, painful, dislocating and/or abortive. Arrests can and do occur at any one of the stages."²²

One of the implications of this analysis is that not all students are ready for the kinds of questions that teachers may think are "important." Such questions may be too painful, cause too much dissonance, and fall too beyond the pale of what they are prepared to confront. In short, just because it is an important question does not mean that it is important to the student just yet or that the student is prepared to understand it on a level that will upset the equilibrium.

Similarly, one is frequently struck by the intensity of a student's question at the time that an issue arises and the seeming disinterest that same student sometimes has in the ensuing discussion that a teacher may try to generate or in the answers that a teacher may try to offer. Assuming that the teacher is not giving a boring or unintelligible response, how does one account for this gap? Perhaps, again, because the adolescent at this stage takes everything as a unified whole, and the attachment to religious life is non-analytical, means that questions are not important for the values or truths that they clarify. "Rather, in such discussion he seeks to establish a sense of commonality or relatedness with the other person present."²³ In other words, it may serve more to provide a sense of identification than to give him profound answers to

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his profound questions. In practical terms, this means that it is important to offer the opportunity to ask questions even if we do not necessarily spend as much time or energy on the responses as we might for students further along in the continuum of religious development. Nor should a teacher be disheartened when the student doesn't seem as interested in the answer as he was in the question. Being able to ask the question and to know that it is taken seriously, knowing that there is an answer available even if he doesn't really understand it or recall the details, may be enough at this stage of religious life.

As much as we may want to use questions and analysis to push our students to reflect upon their beliefs and values so as to create the kind of dissonance that might move them to be more reflective, we must understand the perils in pushing too much, too far, too soon. I will never forget the ninth grade student whose faith, he said, was nearly shattered at the beginning of freshman year by the teacher who suggested (Ramban aside) that Avraham was a human person with frailties and failings. Separate from the theological issues involved, the Jewish educator must always be sensitive to whether his or her approach is appropriate for all students at all ages and stages.²⁴ The non-analytic nature of belief of some students can be the protective shell which helps maintain their commitment. We should not be so quick to try to consciously break it down, nor should we be oblivious to the inadvertent assaults we sometimes make upon it.

In a similar vein, consider the fact that, according to Fowler, an adolescent at this stage sees symbols as being inseparable from their meaning. Worthy symbols are themselves sacred. They *are* depths of meaning. "Any strategy of demythologization, therefore, threatens the participation of symbol and symbolized and is taken, consequently, as an assault on the sacred itself."²⁵ Much as we may value *lomdus*, much as we may be motivated to teach our students all kinds of *hakiras* and fine distinctions, we must also recall that the unexamined nature of belief is such that, for some, it helps maintain *kedusha*. Conversely, breaking down that belief when a student is not yet ready may have the effect of robbing the symbol of its *kedusha* and its uniqueness. One might tell some students that the halakha does not require one to stand when the *Aron Kodesh* is open, but is it the appropriate thing to say to all students? What is true of symbols may be true of concepts as well: the teacher who tells his students that Judaism is opposed to "spirituality" may have precedent to rely upon, but he may be doing more harm than good by assaulting a key part of a student's religious sensibilities.

If religious development were wholly related to cognitive development then the process of religious education would be significantly easier. We would simply identify what knowledge or ideas needed to be conveyed, which ones students are capable of understanding at different stages, perhaps accounting for their emotional development, and our work would pretty much be done. In truth, however, religious commitment is related not only to what we believe about God but to what we feel as well. One does not need the numerous studies that have been done in other faiths to know that, as one study found, “cognitive knowledge about God did not guarantee conviction, since their exposure to ‘rote theology’ resulted in their knowing about God but not knowing God.”²⁶ We want our students to know and to love God and to have an ongoing relationship with Him. But how, if at all, do these goals translate into our classrooms and our schools?

What we are speaking about is the affective component of religious education.²⁷ Yet classrooms, especially those that focus on academic excellence, on acquiring the tools of learning, the skills, the *layning* of a *blatt*, and the like, do not always make room for affective education. Some do not see a place for it in the curriculum; and I have heard some suggest that it cannot be taught at all or that it emerges “naturally” from the serious study of text. I contend that it emerges “naturally” only if students see the text as having that potential from the start and, even then, they may need assistance. In any event, this is a subject worthy of exploration in its own right.²⁸ For the moment, let us assume that it is indeed a value and a goal. What do we need to know about our students that will give us insight into this aspect of their religious training?

One interesting path of inquiry relates to gender. Research has generated interesting findings about the differences between boys and girls. As religious educators, many may intuitively know that in general (there are always exceptions and large numbers of them) girls tend to be more “serious” than boys about things religious—*davening*, discussions about faith, certain attitudes, and the like. This conforms to the “universal finding of the greater religiousness of women.”²⁹ We tend to account for such differences by saying that girls are more “mature” than boys, but I think it would be helpful to try to better articulate how “maturity” may play a role so that we may better understand and help our students.

Adolescents can be somewhat narcissistic or self-centered. They come to identify with those who possess the attributes and ideals that they seek for themselves and this often leads them to certain peers and/or adult

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role models. This, in turn, can affect the adolescent's conception of God. Girls, for example, "tend to emphasize qualities of loving relationship; God becomes the ideal confidant, who understands everything, and responds to the girl's most intimate wishes and deeds."³⁰ Boys, on the other hand, tend to look at God as the perfect being, and they think of him in terms of His power and authority. Might this distinction not better help us to understand why girls seem to be better *daveners* than boys? Is it not easier and more natural to enter into an intimate dialogue with God as Confidante than with God as Authority Figure, to speak with *Hashem* rather than with *Elokim*? And might this mean that in talking about prayer to different ages and different sexes, we might do well to couch our message in the terms more appropriate to each gender?

At the same time, consider the fact that boys (again at the risk of generalizations) seem to have more difficulty expressing themselves emotionally. Much important work has been done to explain the ways in which boys are raised, by parents, teachers and society, to avoid expressing their emotions, or to keep their vulnerabilities a secret.³¹ That being the case, how can we expect boys to speak aloud about the affective components of religious life? How can they speak about their feelings about God, about *tefila*, about crisis or happiness or inspiration, when the vocabulary is so foreign to them or causes them such great discomfort? In other words, even if boys at a certain stage may want to enter into the same kind of dialogue with God as girls do, it may be much more difficult for them to do so. Surely we have an obligation to help them overcome these barriers and to create a safe and open environment which gives them permission to express their emotions and their emotional vulnerability. Most important, they need to learn, especially from the adult men in their lives, how to speak this way. Teachers and advisers need to think out loud about their own faith. They need to speak out loud about their own religiosity and spirituality. Both boys and girls are in need of role models who can not only model religious behavior but, to the extent possible, religious feelings as well. Once again, the richness of the English literature curriculum comes to mind here. For in its very use of language, poetry and prose, it not only lends cognitive understanding but also, in the words of Rav Lichtenstein, "plumbs uncharted existential and experiential depths."³² Regardless, whether in class, in daily announcements, in discussing current events, teachers and administrators need to express their emotions—and they need to talk about what it means to have a relationship with and to feel the presence of *HaKadosh Barukh Hu*.

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Nowhere does the affective component of Jewish education probably rear its head more than in *davening*, for this is one of the few places in the school day where students “do religion” in such an overt way during the school day. Yet get most Jewish educators together in a room and they will finally admit that *davening* can be one of the most difficult parts of the day, and what a way to start one’s day! If our analysis above is true, then any attempt at making *tefila* more meaningful must take into account the totality of religious needs of students. Classes on *be’ur tefila* will not suffice because *tefila* is not (only) an intellectual undertaking but an emotional experiential one.³³ A first step is to begin thinking about the regular *minyan* as a classroom rather than as a ritual.

Much of the burden for religious development in schools must inevitably lie upon the shoulders of teachers. Yet (in addition to everything else) few teachers get direction beforehand or afterwards in how to handle students’ spiritual needs. As I have tried to show thus far, there are nuances and complexities to be recognized, sensitivities and skills that can be acquired and honed. But in how many schools is there a faculty meeting convened in order to discuss just these issues? Assume a student asks, “How do we really know that God exists?” Are all teachers prepared or capable of answering such questions appropriately? Is there not some science and some art to answering such questions in ways that will give students a number of answers to choose from? Are there times when we should take a more limited and limiting approach? Why do we only seem to wrestle with such things in times of crisis, such as when a death occurs, or when a catastrophe strikes, like 9/11? How much discussion do we have about the modeling of our own behavior? As teachers we would benefit from supervision and collegial collaboration in religious issues as much as academic or psychological ones.

At the same time, we cannot realistically put this all on the teacher’s doorstep. We must admit first and foremost that there are teachers who are less capable of handling this role. They give wonderful *shiurim*, they can inspire students to great heights in the intellectual realm, but the human dimension of speaking to students about matters of the heart comes far less easily to them. Alternatively, there are teachers who, because of their enormous teaching loads (in order to make a viable wage) simply cannot reach out to all students in this way on an individual basis. And there are teachers who because of scheduling or financial issues are not in the building long enough to

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connect with students outside the classroom. In this regard, the increasing popularity in some schools of a religious adviser or “*yo’ets*” is a positive step, for it recognizes that not all *rebbeim* and teachers necessarily have the time or the wherewithal to deal with students on this level. It also recognizes that there are specific individual needs that can and should be addressed by someone other than the teacher. The adviser by definition is someone who is “outside” the normal system, which may be viewed by some students as less threatening and more supportive. And the very creation of such a position is by itself a statement to the student and parent body that religious growth is something that is serious, worthy of discussion, and ultimately of great importance to the school.

But precisely because religious development is so complex, it cannot be treated in a vacuum. The teacher, or in his or her absence, an adviser or administrator, must take into account all of the influences in a child’s life and must marshal the assistance of all of the potential players. First and foremost there are the parents. We have parent-teacher conferences and report cards to collaborate with parents about their child’s academic development; and we have guidance counselors or advisers who consult with parents about their child, usually only when the child is in crisis, but also sometimes because the school has developed a healthy sense of cooperation and communication. Yet how many of us really are in touch with parents about their children’s religious development? And I refer here not to the phone call we place or the meeting we convene about religious behavior that is treated as a disciplinary issue, but rather to communication that is about the nurturing or growth of the religious sensitivities of the child. I recall a student who was alternatively completely uninterested in *davening* or would constantly talk. He had been disciplined a number of times, didn’t really seem like he was oppositional, but couldn’t seem to control his behavior either. During parent-teacher conferences, I decided that I was going to talk to the parents about this but I made it perfectly clear that I was not speaking to them as a disciplinarian but rather as someone who was concerned about their child’s religious growth.

When I told them about his poor attitude during *davening*, the father finally said to me: “Well, Rabbi, I suppose that’s completely understandable, because, unfortunately, I’m not really much of a role model myself during *shul*.” I was struck by his candor, so much so that I was speechless other than some response which was probably platitudinous. On the one hand, the interchange simply confirmed what we

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intuitively know about the influence of the home and the possible limitations that there are on our ability to treat the issue of religious development in schools.

On the other hand, in retrospect, this incident was an opportunity lost, an opportunity to enter into a collaboration with a family on the subject of religious development. Perhaps it would have been worthwhile to call the family's *shul* rabbi to enlist his insight and his help. Perhaps it would have meant meeting together with the father and child to talk together about the issue. Perhaps it would have provided the background to go back to the student to talk about his own perceptions about his father's observance. There are any number of possible avenues and outcomes. The point is that we do ourselves and our students and their parents a disservice by not including parents more than we might already in the process. Since that incident, I have spoken to parents numerous times about their children's religious development. I now am struck not by the candor of parents but by their appreciation that someone has taken the trouble to talk to them about an issue which they themselves are often grappling with at home.

Finally, but most important, let us never take our students for granted. To be sure, there are those who come to us committed and religious, passionate about their *avodat Hashem*. Such students, by virtue of their living in this time and this place, by virtue of their exposure to or embrace of general society or culture, by virtue of their natural development as adolescents, will also have their issues, albeit of a different nature or degree than those less passionate. This does not mean that they do not need our proactive help and guidance in their growth. We need to be sensitive to their developmental needs.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who do not seem to have any passion at all. Dr. Joel Wolowelsky shares an important anecdote about having approached a student who seemed to be out of sorts, having a general gloomy demeanor in school. At the end of the conversation, after the student informed him of numerous family conflicts, Dr. Wolowelsky asked him why he had not come to discuss these issues earlier. Why had he waited for the teacher to approach him first? "What's the matter with you?" the student asked. "I sat in front of you in *minyan* for three weeks staring at a *siddur* held upside down. Don't you notice these sorts of things?"³⁴

As for the students who may not seem yet to have the passion we would like them to have, we must forever recall that they too are a work in progress. I recall speaking to a young woman whom many

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thought was simply a “talker” in *davening*; she was sent to my office for “disciplining.” I asked her what *davening* meant to her and to my surprise she burst into tears. She explained that it was such an incredibly important question to her—but nobody had ever really asked her about it before.

In the end, we must not forget that religious growth is an ongoing affair, one that, hopefully, continues even after adolescence. The present push for students to go to Israel and the amazing transformation that takes place there have been noted elsewhere.³⁵ But it is wrong to suggest that high schools should look upon Israel as a “finishing school” for a job that the high schools themselves were unable to accomplish.³⁶ To do so ignores the developmental stages that the adolescent goes through and belittles the importance of late adolescence as a time for reevaluating and restructuring one’s beliefs.³⁷ On the other hand, the accusation has merit to the extent that we did not take advantage of the key stages of development that occurred while the students passed through the classrooms and hallways of our schools.

NOTES

1. My sincere thanks to colleague and friend Dr. Jerry Zeitchik who acted as a sounding board for many of the ideas expressed here, to Dr. Joel Wolowelsky for his encouragement and support, and, as always, to Linda.
2. See, for example, *Avot* 5:21.
3. David Elkind, *Children and Adolescents: Interpretive Essays on Jean Piaget* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1970). See also, “The Child’s Conception of His Religious Denomination: The Jewish Child,” *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 99 (1961), pp. 209-225; Ronald Goldman, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).
4. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1981). See also “Faith and the Structuring of Meaning.” in Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks, *Faith Development and Fowler* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1986), pp. 15-42.
5. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963, 2nd edition); *Identity Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).
6. See the works of Gareth B. Matthews, *Philosophy and the Young Child* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); *Dialogues with Children* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); and especially *Philosophy of Childhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Also see Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

7. Shraga Fisherman, "Spiritual Identity in Israeli Religious Male Adolescents: Observations and Educational Implications," *Journal of Jewish Education*, 66:3 (Fall 2000/Winter 2001), pp. 6-18 summarize his findings. The original material as well as representative interviews which form the basis of that summary can be found in *No'ar ha-Kippot ha-Serugot* (Elkanah: Mikhlelet Orot, 1998). Subsequently, Dr. Fisherman published another volume, focusing particularly on women: *Almah Avda: Zehutan ha-Emumatit shel Datlashiyot* (Elkanah: Mikhlelet Orot, 2000). My thanks to Rabbi Avi Weiss of Orot for facilitating my access to this volume.
8. See Kenneth Hyde, *Religion in Childhood and Adolescence: A Comprehensive Review of the Research* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990). Also See Elie Gottlieb, "Religious Thinking in Childhood and Adolescence: Argumentative Reasoning and the Justification of Religious Belief," Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University. I am indebted to Dr. Gottlieb for sharing his review of the research and bibliography early on in my own reading.
9. Erik Erikson, *Identity Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).
10. See Hyde, *Religion*.
11. The complexity of the issue may be best illustrated by Hyde's summary of research related to attitudes to church attendance: "Most children regard worship as uninteresting and boring, nevertheless, it is the children who have been regularly involved in it who are more likely to retain the habit of church attendance when free to abandon it." Hyde, *Religion*, pp. 11-12.
12. W.W. Meissner, *Psychoanalysis and the Religious Experience* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 145.
13. Ibid.
14. Shraga Fisherman, "Spiritual Identity," p. 8.
15. All of this is separate from the specifically religious doubts that arise as a result of the pressures and influences of modern society. Israeli society is clearly no different in this regard. In addition to Fisherman, loc. cit., see Shlomo Kaniel, "The Religious Zionist: Toward the New Era," *Religious Education*, 9:4 (Fall 2000), pp. 453-473. It is also separate from the theological implications of doubt which may be part and parcel of religious life or at least religious life in this age. See Norman Lamm, *Faith and Doubt* (New York: Ktav, 1971), pp. 1-40.
16. Rav Yehuda Amital. "The Search for Religious Enthusiasm Among Today's Youth," www.vbm-torah.org/archive/sichot60/24vayik.ans. This was a talk from 5760 recently republished as "The Generation 'That Does Not Know How to Ask,'" in *Between Religious Experience and Religious Commitment* (Alon Shevut: Yeshivat Har Etzion, 5763), pp. 30-31.
17. See, for example, Sarah Shapiro, "Circles in the Sand: A Question of Questioning," in *Jewish Action*, Winter 5762/2001.
18. One senses that there are fewer and fewer schools teaching philosophy or *mahshava*. For a more popular lament see Chaim Eisen, "Is Yeshiva Education Accomplishing What it Should?" in *Jewish Action*, Winter 5762/2001. On some reasons for this absence, see most recently David Shatz, "Remembering Marvin Fox: One Man's Legacy to Jewish

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- Thought.” *Tradition*, 36:1 (Spring 2002), pp. 59-88, especially pp. 61-69. Focusing more on student-centered issues of belief might make such courses more palatable and attractive. On student’s ability to “do philosophy” alone or even within the context of other subject areas such as *Tanakh* or *Halakha*, see Gareth Matthews and Howard Dietcher, “Doing Philosophical Theology in the Seventh Grade at Halevy School,” *Religious Education*, 88:2 (Spring 1993), pp. 294-304.
19. See Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, “Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict,” in Jacob J. Schacter, *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1997), pp. 217-292.
 20. Shraga Fisherman, “Spiritual Identity,” p. 12. It makes the most sense in terms of adolescent development that discussions with peers should be particularly critical and beneficial. Evidence of this in a Jewish school setting can be found in a recent study of students in three different kinds of religious Israeli high schools that found that a noticeable number of students spoke with no one about their struggles, but among the majority that did, “a peer (either male or female) is the preferred consultant of all respondents.” See Avraham Leslau and Yisrael Rich, “A Study of 12th Grade Students in State Sponsored Religious Education—1999,” *Ten Da’at*, XIII (Kislev 5762/December 2001), pp. 59-60.
 21. For an example of such a site see Chaverim Makshivim at www.kipa.co.il/noar/sot.asp.
 22. James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 274. Originally published in 1981.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
 24. See, for example, Avishai David, “Perspectives on the *Avot* and *Imahot*,” *Ten Da’at*, V:2 (Iyar 5751/Spring 1991), pp. 24-26; Zvi Grumet, “Another Perspective on *Avot* and *Imahot*,” *Ten Da’at*, VI:1 (Nisan 5752/Spring 1992), pp. 25-27, especially note 15; Joel Wolowelsky, “Moral Education and Patriarchal Critiques: *Kibbud Av* and *Kibbud Avot*,” *Tradition*, 33:4 (Summer 1999). More recently, see Howard Deitcher, “Between Angels and Mere Mortals: Nechama Leibowitz’s Approach to the Study of Biblical Characters,” in *Journal of Jewish Education*, 66:1-2 (Spring/Summer 2000), pp. 8-22. Interestingly, such debate often centers upon the controversial comments of Rav Hirsch about the possible mistakes of Rivka and Yitzhak in the upbringing of their children, and the question of whether they took into account the separate and distinct religious developmental needs of their children.
 25. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, p. 163.
 26. Hyde, *Religion*, p. 72. See the note by Rav Soloveitchik *z”l*: “Maimonides’ term *leida* (*Yesodei ha-Torah*, 1:1) transcends the bounds of the abstract *logos* and passes over into the realm of the boundless intimate and impassioned experience where postulate and deduction, discursive knowledge and intuitive thinking, conception and perception, subject and object are one.” “The Lonely Man of Faith,” *Tradition*, 7:1 (Winter 1964-65), pp. 32-33.
 27. I have avoided precise definitions of this aspect of religious life for it is

- beyond my ken and I do not think that it is entirely necessary for our purposes here. One looks forward to the publication of some of the papers presented at a recent Orthodox Forum on the subject of spirituality which may help clarify matters. For the present, I refer to the affective/emotional/spiritual/faith aspects of Torah life that cannot be understood by cognitive understanding alone.
28. This issue often rears its head in discussions about the goals of teaching Talmud and the extent to which it is or should be a subject that lends itself to affective education.
 29. Hyde, *Religion*, p. 55.
 30. Meissner, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 145.
 31. See, for example, Dan Kindlon, Michael Thompson, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (New York: Ballantine Books), 1999.
 32. Rav Lichtenstein, "Torah and General Culture," p. 244.
 33. The challenge of *tefila* in yeshiva high schools is an incredibly important one that is deserving of attention in its own right. A wonderful first step in that regard may be found in the recent publication edited by Yoel Finkelman, *Educating Toward Meaningful Tefillah* (Jerusalem: Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions, 2001). A reflection (at least in print) of the paucity of suggestions for improvement may be found in *Noteworthy Practices in Jewish Day School Education, Volume II: Tefillah* (Boston: PEJE, 2001). Approximately 24 pages are dedicated to noteworthy practices in elementary schools, 11 pages to middle schools, and 4 pages to high schools, and the value of even these for a Modern Orthodox school is not immediately apparent. One notable exception is found elsewhere in the volume entitled "The Prayer Experience as a Joint School-Synagogue Enterprise," by Rabbi Jack Bieler.
 34. Dr. Joel B. Wolowelsky, "Response," in Y. Finkelman, *Educating Toward Meaningful Tefillah*, p.10.
 35. Jay Goldmintz, "The Post-High School Yeshiva Experience: Goals and Benefits," *Ten Da'at*, V:2 (Iyar 5751/Spring 1991), pp. 32-34.
 36. For a recent reference to this canard and a wonderful response, see Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, "*MeEverLeYam*: Rethinking the Relationship Between Israeli Yeshivot and Diaspora Schools," *Opinions on Jewish Education*, Academy for Torah Initiatives and Directions, January 21, 2002, www.atid.org/op-jed.htm. Rabbi Blau makes passing reference to our issue in his statement that Israeli post-high schools for Americans have an advantage over American high schools in that the former "are dealing with eighteen-year-olds that are more mature than the average high school student simply due to the age factor."
 37. "Man does not acquire true religious faith, that is, a really personal faith recognized in its transcendent finality, before the age of thirty years [!]. Experience has shown that after adolescence the whole religious formation apparently has to undergo revision—not because the child or the adolescent has not hitherto been authentically religious, but because man does not acquire sufficient maturity to make a real personal choice and to recognize reality, before he has become adult." Thus writes A. Vergote, *The Religious Man* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum, 1969), p. 300, cited in Meissner, p. 146.

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Fowler characterizes the late or post-adolescent stage of development as “Individuative-Reflective.” “The late adolescent adult must begin to take seriously the burden of responsibility for his or her own commitments, lifestyle, beliefs and attitudes.” See *Stages of Faith*, p. 182. Reflection is critical for this stage and may only be possible if one can get away from the limiting influence of peers and home.