

Accepting A Challenge

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

In my article, **The Case for Secular Studies in Yeshivas**, that appeared in the Jewish Press on November 19, 2004, I outlined my thoughts about problems yeshivas are having with general studies and suggested changes. I received a number of responses, both verbally and via email.

One fellow approached me after Mincha on the Shabbos right after the article appeared and asked, "Is that your article on the front page of this week's Jewish Press?" After I replied in the affirmative he said, "I was afraid that was the case!" He then proceeded to berate me in no uncertain terms for what I had written. All my attempts to explain the thesis of the article were of no avail. He insisted that I was wrong. When during his harangue I asked, "Did you read the entire article?" he replied, "I only read the first two paragraphs. That was enough!" Upon hearing this, I politely walked away. There is no sense trying to discuss anything with one who takes the approach, "My mind is made up; do not confuse me with the facts!"

All the other comments were, in general, supportive. Here is a sampling:

I read your article in the JP with great interest, and I wholeheartedly agree and concur with many of your points. I have been a Professor of Mathematics at _____ for over three decades.

As the mother of four boys (B"H), you can imagine that this is a subject that is of special concern to me. Our oldest son is in the eighth grade, and we are in the midst of 'shopping' for a high school. One of the main things that we have discovered is that, unfortunately, the more "heimish" a yeshiva is, the less you can expect from their secular studies department. I sincerely hope that your article will be read by the principals of many of these schools.

I read your interesting article in the Jewish Press. Believe it or not, the situation is even worse than you describe it. (In a private conversation the writer, who teaches mathematics at a college attended by Orthodox young women, told me that many of his students do not even know the times tables!)

However, I have yet to hear from anyone involved in the administration of a yeshiva. If there is no interest on the part of the *hanhalla* and principals, there is nothing to discuss. Will someone please step up to the plate?

A Challenge

A very interesting response from one reader was published in the Letters to the Editor section in the November 26 issue of the Jewish Press. Under the heading **Challenge For Dr. Levine**, Melissa Newman wrote:

Dr. Levine makes a very strong case for how to integrate secular studies into yeshivas, but there is one major problem — the curriculum does not exist. ... So the question needs to be asked: Is Dr. Levine willing to take on the task of creating a Jewish curriculum that truly integrates Judaism into the secular studies to a level that will not only provide a strong Jewish foundation, but would also adequately prepare a student for college, if the student desires such a path? The community wants it. Will Dr. Levine help to provide it?

What would my approach to the secular studies curriculum be, and how would it be implemented?

Before embarking on such an endeavor, one would need at least one yeshiva that is committed to the project. This means the *hanhalla* as well as the secular studies principal and faculty must all be involved. The parents must also be supportive of educational innovation. In short, all involved with the yeshiva would have to subscribe to what R. Yhonason Eybeschutz wrote in *Yaaros Devash 2:7* (as translated by L. Levi in *Torah and Science* pages 24-25):

For all the sciences are “condiments” and are necessary for our Torah, such as the science of mathematics, which is the science of measurements and includes the science of numbers, geometry, and algebra and is very essential for the measurements required in connection with the *Eglah Arufah* and the cities of the Levites and the cities of refuge as well as the Sabbath boundaries of our cities. The science of weights [i.e., mechanics] is necessary for the judiciary, to scrutinize in detail whether scales are used honestly or fraudulently. The science of vision [optics] is necessary for the Sanhedrin to clarify the deceits perpetrated by idolatrous priests; furthermore, the need for this science is great in connection with examining witnesses, who claim they stood at a distance and saw the scene, to determine whether the arc of vision extends so far straight or bent. The science of astronomy is a science of the Jews, the secret of leap years to know the paths of the constellations and to sanctify the new moon. The science of nature which includes the science of medicine in general is very important for distinguishing the blood of the *Niddah* whether it is pure or impure ... and how much more is it necessary when one strikes his fellow man in order to ascertain whether the blow was mortal, and if he died whether he died because of it, and for what disease one may desecrate the Sabbath. Regarding botany, how great is

the power of the Sages in connection with *kilayim* [mixed crops]! Here too we may mention zoology, to know which animals may be hybridized; and chemistry, which is important in connection with the metals used in the tabernacle, etc.

A Prerequisite

In discussing the curriculum I would like to see taught, it is important to keep in mind the following. One simply cannot expect a student without the proper background to comprehend the subjects taught in high school. The result is boredom and frustration on the part of the student, which usually leads to discipline problems in the classroom. How can parents send their sons and daughters to schools that do not prepare them for high school secular subjects and then expect them to perform adequately in high school?

There are two solutions to this problem. Firstly, parents must demand that their children graduate with the reading and math skills an eighth grader should have. Secondly, yeshiva high schools should give entrance exams in secular subjects to evaluate the educational level of new students. Those found to be substandard should be required to take remedial and bridge courses. This will certainly entail additional costs on the part of the yeshiva and perhaps cause some stigma to those who do not pass the entrance exam. However, the present system of simply putting all entering boys into the same ninth grade program often means that those who are at grade level do not get the education that they should. The group that is not properly prepared either holds back the class or, even worse, disrupts it.

The New York State Regents Requirements

In any event, what would the curriculum look like and how would it differ from the way things are taught today? For the sake of simplicity and ease of implementation, let's assume that a yeshiva high school is going to offer a secular curriculum that satisfies the requirements for a NY State Regents diploma.

Details of the NYS Regents curriculum are given at <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/part100/pages/1005a.html>. The requirements include (but are not limited to) four units (years) of English language arts, four units of social studies, three units of science (one in life science and one in physical science with the third in either area), three units of mathematics, and one half unit of health education. The web site also states, "Learning standards in the area of parenting shall be attained through either the health or family and consumer sciences programs or a separate course."

Let us examine some of these areas and see how a yeshiva might deal with them in order to integrate the secular education within the framework of their Limudei Kodesh studies.

English Language Arts

In addition to studying the material required to take the Regents exams, the four units of English instruction should stress the development of skills required for graduating students to be able to read and write well and speak intelligently. In my first article I proposed that students should be regularly required to write *précises* (summaries) of articles or other written documents and make oral presentations. I have no doubt that a boy required to write a one paragraph *précis* of an *amud* of *Gemara* and present it to his class would gain a better understanding of the topics discussed on that *amud*.

Social Studies

One of the four units of social studies must be a year of US history and government. Would it not make sense to supplement the text used in a “standard” course for this unit with material dealing with American Jewish history? There exists a good deal of material dealing with, say, Jewish American experiences during the Civil War. One useful source is <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar.htm>. This site features a link to such articles as “The Bible View Of Slavery” by Rabbi Dr. M.J. Raphall as well as the “Anti-Slavery Answer to Dr. Raphall by Rabbi Dr. David Einhorn.” There is material on the life and writings of Rabbi Issachar Ber Illowy as well as his “Secession Sermon” given on January 4, 1861 at “National Fast Day” services at the Lloyd Street synagogue in Baltimore (which one can visit today). “This sermon proved so popular among the Jewish secessionists that Rabbi Illowy was invited to become the spiritual leader of Congregation Shaarei Hased in New Orleans.”

Something of particular interest to observant students is a “letter to Abraham Lincoln about a Sabbath-observing soldier” in which his father wrote:

Now I stand before you as your namesake Abraham stood before G-d Almighty in days of yore, and asked, ‘Shall not the Judge of all earth do justice?’ so I ask your Excellency, the first man and President of all the United States, Shall you not do justice? shall you not give the same privilege to a minority of the army that you give to the majority of it? I beseech you to make provision, and to proclaim in another order, that also all those in the army who celebrate another day as the Sunday may be allowed to celebrate that day which they think is the right day according to their own conscience; and this will be exactly lawful, as the Constitution of the United States ordains it, and at the same time it will be exactly according to the teaching of the Bible, as recorded in Leviticus xix. 18: ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’

Similar material dealing with the role of Jews during the Revolutionary War and other periods in American history can be found on the web. Many yeshivas do not permit their students to search the Internet for information. The solution is to have teachers provide hard copies of relevant material.

Life Survival Skills

As quoted above, the NYS Regents curriculum requires that students be taught parenting skills “through either the health or family and consumer sciences programs or a separate course.” To me this statement opens the door to a wide variety of “survival skills” appropriate for yeshiva students. A sampling is listed below.

- *Basic Accounting:* Every person should know how to balance a check book and fill out a simple income tax return, say a Schedule 1040EA. They should be familiar with how credit ratings are determined and how to read gas, electric and credit card statements.
- *Childcare, Child Development, and Discipline:* One of the greatest challenges facing parents is how to raise their children to become responsible members of the Torah community. Shouldn't young people have some knowledge of this before they marry and have children? Shouldn't they be made familiar with methods and approaches that are consistent with the Torah rather than find it necessary to turn to books on child rearing that often are at odds with Torah *Hashkafa*?
- *Cooking:* In most observant homes today both spouses work. While the wife may work only part time when there are young children, the fact remains that when both parents work a division of household tasks is often necessary. Thus everyone should know the basics of cooking, **boys** and girls.
- *Law:* Every Jew is bound by the principle of *Dina d'Malchusa Dina*. It is obvious that in order to live a Torah life within the framework of this principle, one must know what the law of the land is.
- *Nutrition:* Shouldn't young people be familiar with what constitutes a good, balanced diet, given that there is a mitzvah requiring us to “guard our health?”

Implementation

Those reading the above, particularly those presently involved in the administration of yeshivas, may well shake their heads and say, “Very nice, but how can we do this?” After all, resources are very scarce and good teachers are hard to find. However, one need not do everything at once and two or three yeshivas could work on developing different aspects of the curriculum and then share their knowledge with each other. Structuring the curriculum so that the entire education of a youngster comes under the umbrella of a Torah education rather than having Limudei Kodesh and

Limudei Chol as separate entities need not be done all at once. However, it is, in my opinion, well worth doing, because those with such an education will be equipped to function as religiously committed Jews who know how to deal appropriately with our present day world.