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TEACH THE CHILDREN

Two guiding tenets of “Wexnerism” are teaching and learning. As members of the Wexner Heritage Program, we were privileged to study with the best Judaic studies teachers in North America. We didn’t learn just for the sake of learning; we learned so that we could teach others.

Teaching and learning are two of the most venerated values of Judaism. The ultimate source text for this is, of course, the first paragraph of the Shema, *“And these words which I command you this day, teach them to your children, and talk about them, when you are at home, when you are away, when you lie down, and when you rise up.”* Deut. 6:5-9. Rabbi Telushkin notes, “Already 2000 years ago, the Talmud prohibited Jewish parents from moving to a city that lacked teachers for their children.” The word for a Jewish religious leader – rabbi – means “teacher.”

Implicit in the words of the Shema is the complementary relationship between teaching and learning. It is not a coincidence that the Hebrew shoresh (root) for “teach” is the same as that for “learn” – lamed-mem-dalet. In English, both “teach” and “learn” are five-letter words with the same pair of vowels in the same position; and in cursive writing the two words look similar.

A traditional format for medical education is known as SODOTO or “See one, do one, teach one.” This sounds so much better than visualize, perform, regurgitate! Recall the familiar proverb (most likely of Chinese origin), “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime.”

Judaism instructs us to teach the children. One way is to model lifelong learning. Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk wrote, “If you truly wish your children to study Torah, study it yourself in their presence. They will follow your example. Otherwise, they will not themselves study Torah but will simply instruct their children to do so.” Another is to encourage questioning, as we do at the Pesach seder, through the Ma Nishtanah, and the story of the four children. It is our responsibility to answer those questions. The answer, in the Maggid section of the Haggadah, begins with *Vehigadeta*: *“And you should tell your child on that day, saying: ‘Because of what the EverPresent God did for me when I left Egypt’”*. *Exod. 13:8* (thanks to Rabbi Nathan Laufer for this translation) It is up to us to teach the children.

And of course, our generation grew up singing along to the famous 1970 hit song of Crosby, Stills and Nash, titled “Teach Your Children.” The lyrics exhort parents to “teach your children well,” and for those of “tender years” to “teach your parents well.” Each is asked to “feed them on your dreams.”

We have become a generation that, although participating in continuing Jewish education ourselves and encouraging our children to do the same, has largely abdicated the responsibility to do the teaching. Children are sent to Jewish day schools, synagogue supplementary schools, Jewish camps, and community centres. They are provided with tutors, after-school and summer educational programs. They are given computers and smartphones to explore the world through the Internet.



What role do we now take? What role should we take? To answer that, answer this: Who is the greatest Jewish leader of all time? Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our Teacher. If our greatest leader was a teacher, shouldn't it be incumbent on all of us, as leaders, to be teachers?

I am a teacher. I think I have been a teacher all my life. In my professional life, I teach university students about statistics and quantitative decision-making, and I teach clients to ask incisive and thoughtful questions about data. I teach fellow community members about collective responsibility for Jews at home, in Israel and around the world. I teach children about the joys of numbers and words. I continue to teach my (now adult) children what is important to me and what I have learned about life. My wife and I teach each other, as we discover new ideas and reinterpret old ones. I teach wherever and whenever I can; I teach all the time.

Whatever one's professional life involves, teaching is a part of it. Doctors teach their patients to participate in their medical care. Lawyers teach their clients how to navigate the sometimes impenetrable thicket that is the law. Accountants do the same with accounting. All of us teach, or at least all of us should teach.

Wexner taught us not just to learn, but to teach, to reach out to the communities we lead, as Moses did with the Israelites. Moses taught God's word. Can there be a more holy calling than to teach?

Jonathan Berkowitz, a WHF member (Vancouver 2000) is a consulting statistician in private practice and a professor at the Sauder School of Business at University of British Columbia. He has a long history of volunteerism, serving as president of Jewish Federation of Greater Vancouver, chair of the annual Federation Campaign (the only person ever to fill those two roles simultaneously), president of Congregation Beth Israel, vice president of Vancouver Talmud Torah day school, and a host of other roles. Currently he serves on the national board of Jewish Federations Canada-United Israel Appeal, and helps out with any organization that asks. Numbers are his vocation, but words are his avocation. He has written numerous scripts performed at annual Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations, and has written, produced and acted in a number of Purim shpiels for his synagogue. The shpiels are available for a small donation. He can be reached at jonathan.berkowitz@ubc.ca

