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Gender Sensitive Education in the Early Years

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In the last ten years Orthodox day schools have seen unprecedented expansion and vitality. As schools grow, so do the challenges of educating Orthodox students in a pluralistic society. In an age of gender equality, how might Orthodox schools emphasize gender distinctiveness, yet still promote equality? What messages regarding gender are conveyed to our children, particularly in their early years?

A meaningful Jewish education involves serious engagement with our foundational texts. Yet how are students to approach those texts that appear problematic in their portrayal of women, or that write women out of the tradition altogether? While it is possible to engage high school students in a frank discussion of controversial texts, such a discussion requires a level of sophistication beyond the reach of the average first grader. We need to consider the long term educational effects on students where there is an absence of a gender-sensitive curriculum, along with the impact these impressions make in shaping future familial and communal gender roles within the Orthodox community.

One way to mitigate this problem is to ensure that from the moment children begin learning Torah, they are exposed to women's voices and histories. Here it is possible to look beyond the biblical text to midrashim that accentuate the roles of the matriarchs and prophetesses. If boys and girls are encouraged to conjure the emotional lives of biblical women, they will leave lower school with a deeper appreciation of the feminine heroines of our tradition. Balancing stories of patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets and prophetesses, kings and queens, helps children view the sacred texts they study as not altogether disparate from the modern world within which they live.

In addition, educators need to be cognizant of the increasing use in the non-Orthodox community of gender-neutral language in reference to God and should consider ways of addressing this challenge within the Orthodox educational system. As students are exposed to our "Father our King" imagery, so should they be exposed to powerful feminine biblical images of God, such as the image of a mother comforting her child. Imagine the changes in women's ritual and spiritual lives twenty years hence if the kindergarten children of today were exposed to the gender balanced images of God inherent in our tradition.

Consideration of the impact of gendered language needs to extend beyond references to God to general classroom discourse. Illustrative examples should be provided in alternating he and she formats, so that girls too, imagine themselves the subject of discussion. Teachers should be sensitive to language that excludes, demeans, or satirizes either gender. In that vein, extended thought must be given to the public recitation of the blessing she-lo asani ishah, in which males thank God for not creating them female. The silent recitation of this blessing in schools, for which there is halakhic precedent, would exemplify the value of sensitivity we wish to imbue in our children.

Schools should also consider the ways they model Jewish ritual. In younger grades, girls often serve as a hazzanit (prayer leader) along with boys. But what is their understanding of the evolution of this position as they grow older? Too often, middle school girls are relegated to the role of silent spectator. If women's prayer groups existed in day schools, young girls would have real ritual responsibilities to which to aspire as they mature. And where it is halakhically acceptable for girls to lead prayers in a mixed setting, they should be encouraged. For example, visitors to our Shabbat table are always surprised when they hear our nine year old son and three daughters - ages seven, five and two, recite a full kiddush. Orthodox pre-schools should expose both boys and girls to the mitzvot of candle lighting, kiddush and motzi. If girls are accustomed to adopting ritual responsibilities at a young age, they will not shy away from Jewish public space later in life. Indeed, they will recognize the possibilities open within a vibrant halakhic system.

A key task facing all early childhood educators is to avoid Balkanizing the classroom. There must be equal expectations of boys and girls, even if they exhibit distinct classroom behaviors or disparate views of texts. Effective educators are reflective about whose voices are heard in the classroom, encouraging both boys and girls to adopt leadership roles in discussions, plays, and projects. Keen readers of adults, children pick up on subtle messages embedded in the curriculum and mindset of their teachers.

We should be mindful of the teaching found in the Passover haggadah, in which the text, referring to the child who does not know how to ask, tells us at pe-tach lo you provide an opening for him. Using the feminine second person pronoun, the rabbis remind us that the task of providing an opening for our children lies primarily with women. While men and women contribute to the education of our children, Orthodox

Jewish feminists have a unique responsibility to open up the community to an education sensitive to gender within a halakhic framework.