

Owing to school vacation, as well as the sheer emotional weight of Orthodox scandal this week, I have not been able to write my usual dvar Torah. My consolation has been the hope and belief that the work I do helps produce better leadership toward a better community, and in that light I will offer this week some brief remarks supplementing the superb post below from the blog AddeRabbi, by SBM alum Rabbi Eli Fischer. I also want to encourage you to read this [Kol Hamevaser](#) article by SBM alum Jonathan Ziring, on a topic I hope to address again at length in the near future. But I need to acknowledge upfront, and apologize, that there is little if any formal Talmud Torah in the following.

One of the touchstones of my pedagogic practice has been the movie “Dead Poets Society”, but not because I see the character played by Robin Williams as a role model – quite the contrary. The movie depicts a charismatic teacher at an all-boys prep school who seeks to inspire students to independence of mind and spirit, and/through love of literature. This teacher, perhaps more than most such. is aware that one road to young men’s heads is through eros, but he is not aware of the extent to which, for at least some of his students, independence/liberty is directly and exclusively translated into erotic terms. Nor does he take responsibility for what happens when students’ newfound love of independence clashes with other aspects of their life, such as family.

One way of articulating the flaw in such teaching is that it replaces or distorts rather than develops the students’ self. In the same way that we must be avadim of Hashem, and not of other avadim, so too every human being must be a tzelem Elokim, and not a tzelem of another tzelem. This is a very delicate distinction, and not one that can be empirically tested, but that I nonetheless contend has great significance. It therefore pays to see if we can develop some set of intellectual and pragmatic tools to help limn the boundary between teaching that replaces with teaching that develops students’ selves.

There is of course a potentially easy pragmatic tool, which is to oppose genuinely transformative education. What makes this question particularly challenging for the Jewish community at this point, and Modern/Centrist/Open Orthodoxy in particular, is the broad conviction that our children authentically do not enter high school with sufficiently deep commitment to Jews and Judaism, and that unless we transform them, our community will not endure. So we need to find a model for transformative education that nonetheless maintains students’ selves.

Paul Shaviv sets out a fascinating formulation, that the problem with at least some charismatic teaching is that at core the relationship between teacher and student is not educational, and teachers begin to play roles more properly belonging to trained counselors or social workers. (But what if the teachers *are* trained counselors, as rabbis often are to some degree?) Lest he be thought to be arguing for a purely academic school, though, it must be noted that elsewhere he notes that the affective goals of Jewish studies are always in tension with their academic normalization, and thus that effective experiential education is critical. I wonder (a thoughtful answer is likely elsewhere in the book, which I have not yet had the opportunity to read) whether it will not always be the case that the experiential educators, like camp counselors, will inevitably develop these non-educational relationships with students – indeed, the intent of these events is often to encourage the development of such relationships, as in all religious youth groups. And it seems to be becoming more and more evident that at least many “year in Israel” yeshivot are entirely about relationships that, in this formulation, are not educational.

In other words – It seems to me that non-educational relationships are central to the current paradigm of Jewish education. Furthermore, I suspect that this must be the case when one is educating for counter-assimilation rather than for assimilation, that the mere fact of greater knowledge, even accompanied by deep appreciation, will never be sufficient to create resistance on a mass scale to a dominant cultural paradigm. And in truth, I wonder specifically with regard to Torah whether we wish to restrict the relationships created by education in this manner, although the answer to that question may vary by developmental level.

I therefore think that we need, with great caution, to see if we can develop guidelines for safe “charismatic” education, a kind that does not lead to emotional wreckage and abuse of power. These guidelines are necessary for charismatic teachers themselves, who should not be disqualified from the profession, and to enable the rest of us to properly evaluate them.

AddeRabbi gives us one crucial “don’t” – that the educator must never become more important than the Torah he/she teaches. The connection to the general thesis of developing rather than replacing the self is evident. But this flaw is often not easy to spot – indeed, the problematic charismatic educator him/herself will often make precisely that point to students, without self-consciousness. A portrait gallery of the teacher is pretty clear evidence, but that generally shows up when things have already gotten deeply out of

hand. As in Dead Poets Society, the Pied Piper often preaches the gospel of individuality and independence.

I think one “do” is that the charismatic teacher and those associated with him/her must be very aware – although I am very unsure whether and how this should be communicated to students – that charismatic energy is easily transformed into eros, and that such teachers must be hyper-vigilant about yichud, negiah, and the like. To my mind, the failure by such teachers to go lifnim mishurat hadin in such matters, even in the absence of any accusations, should, after a first warning, be a firing offense.

Another subtle “don’t” is that educators should generally seek to add rather than detract from students’ perceptions of value in the world. There is a difference between seeking to convince students that what you think is important really is important, and seeking to convince them that *only* what you think is important really is important. And yet, there must be room to challenge students’ perceptions of value.

Another “don’t”: - and here I acknowledge likely idiosyncrasy – I am comfortable modifying Shaviv’s typology to say that educators should never replace peers. I will argue tentatively that we should worry less about educators replacing social workers than we should worry about them replacing friends. I am also comfortable with the formulation that educators must never presume the right to non-educational relationships, and must never make the development of such relationships a sine qua non for a full educational relationship.

These guidelines all skirt the question of what it means to teach so as to develop rather than replace or distort students’ selves. On this core issue I can offer only that my touchstone is the brilliant introduction to Shiurei Daat (see the text and audio shiur at torahleadership.org), which argues that three forms of knowledge must always advance together, or else distort one another – knowledge of Torah, knowledge of self, and knowledge of the world outside the self. Teachers – especially charismatic teachers – must always give students the opportunity to decide – not just to argue - that something they’ve been taught does not feel authentic, or conform to their experience, even if the teacher sees the student’s decision as an expression of immaturity, naïveté, or ignorance.

One more point: Of all the forms of non-educational impact for which charismatic educators are often valued, the one that seems to me most problematic and perhaps least valuable is “spiritual inspiration”, sometimes framed as the capacity to produce “ruach”.

In most cases this inspiration is wholly content-less, and can be directed toward football and color war as easily as davening and zemirot, and produces no more or different meaning in the latter contexts than in the former. As such, it can never be about anything other than the inspirer.

Last year, one session of CMTL's Rabbis and Educators Conference was originally titled "The Dangers of Charisma", but I found myself largely unable to explain to colleagues why this issue was a serious concern. I am very glad that others have succeeded where I failed, and hope that these remarks serve to further the conversation that they have so ably begun. Responses as always are encouraged.

Shabbat Shalom!

Aryeh Klapper

www.torahleadership.org

The Problem of Charisma

So that I'm not accused of piling on, read [what I wrote 3.5 years ago](#) about monolithic and monologic charismatic strains of Judaism in general, and about an experience that I had when interviewing at a particular organization. The organization that I interviewed with in March 2006 was Mibreishit, and the rabbi whose portrait, placed at intervals of every few feet, weirded me out was the recently disgraced Motti Elon.

I don't know what Rav Elon did, if anything. I trust the signatories of the letter (a very diverse and extremely well respected group of mainstream Religious Zionist leaders, including Rav Lichtenstein and Rav Ariel). I do not know if Rav Elon is a criminal, a sinner, or none of the above.

I do know that Rav Elon is extremely charismatic, and I do not trust charismatic rabbis. Not a single one. Moreover, I believe that God does not like charismatic teaching, and that this is His critique of Eliyahu ha-Navi in Melachim I:19 - the path to God does not lie in earthquake, wind, and fire, but in the still, small voice. And the path to God never, ever, leads through an individual human being. Long time readers of this blog know that this is a theme that I have often returned to. (for example, see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#), among other places).

An excellent (but somewhat different in that it relates specifically to the high school milieu) articulation of this mistrust appears in a recently published book by Paul Shaviv called [The Jewish High School: A Complete Management Guide; Leadership, Policy and Operations for Principals, Administrators and Lay Leaders](#). He has a section entitled "The Charismatic Teacher" that he actually posted in a comment over at [Hirhurim](#) about 4 years ago. It is in the public domain ([here](#)), but I'll reproduce the relevant sections here anyway:

The charismatic teacher (the 'Pied-Piper') is one of the most difficult situations for a Principal to deal with. A charismatic teacher will deeply affect and influence some students, but will almost always leave a trail of emotional wreckage in is/her wake .

Charismatic teachers are often themselves deeply immature, but their immaturity is emotional, not intellectual, and it is not always obvious. They can be brilliant in

inspiring students to go beyond their wildest expectations, and are often regarded (by their following of students, by parents, and by the Board or the community) as the 'most important' or 'best' members of staff. There is always, however, a price to be paid. One of the effects of charisma is to convince the recipient that he or she is the centre of the charismatic personality's concern. A teenage student (or a particular class) may feel as though he or she is the protégé of the charismatic teacher. The moment they realize that they are not (sometimes when the teacher 'moves on to the next'), deep emotions come into play. In the same way, many charismatic teachers will lavish attention on a student or group of students as long as the student(s) do things the teacher's way, or accept every piece of advice or 'philosophy' or Torah uncritically. The moment the student shows independence or objectivity, they are dropped. As soon as they are disillusioned or dropped, they are written out of the teacher's story. Often such students, very hurt, leave the school. Mild characteristics of cult leaders may be observed.

Other parents, however, will rave about how their son/daughter 'adores' Mr./Ms/ or Rabbi X, and is learning 'so much from them'. Events linked to that teacher will be showcase events, and in certain cases the Principal (or Head of Department) will come to be dependent on the teacher. 'We need something special for the prize-giving...or the ground-breaking ... or the community event... can you put something together?' The teacher will protest that the time is short, and it's impossible, but will, of course, accept and do a fabulous job.

The problem is that at core, these are not educational relationships. The emotional dependency and entanglement between teacher and student leads to boundaries being crossed. The teacher throws open his/her house to the students. Teens idolize the teacher, and fantasies begin to develop. The charismatic teacher will solve the teen's angst and will sympathize with their intimate family problems. The teacher becomes party to knowledge about students and their families that reinforces the teacher's view that they are the only teachers who 'really' are reaching the students. The teacher, however, is neither a trained counselor nor a social worker. That knowledge becomes power. A really charismatic teacher can end up running a 'school within a school'.

In the classroom, the teacher will often employ techniques (and texts) which take students to the extremes of emotion or logic, and will then triumphantly show them how they are holding the key to resolution ('At this moment, you have agreed that life has no meaning -- but here is the answer').