

Religion Zionist Education in America: The View from Here

By Rabbi David Brofsky

As a teacher of post-high school North American yeshiva-educated students who decide to dedicate a year to learning Torah in Israel before continuing their academic studies, I have developed a great appreciation for high-school teachers. I remember the great impact the high school experience in general, and my *limudei kodesh* teachers in particular, had on my religious development, and I see a similar impact by today's teachers upon their students. I am at times envious of those who teach high school in North American Yeshiva High Schools, but more often feel weary in the face of their great challenges - educating the future generation towards Torah values and commitment, while balancing the concerns of the students, the parents, and the schools.

I was asked to offer my perspective, as a teacher in Israel, on Religious Zionist education in North America. I approach this question with great trepidation, as I am aware that it is easier to engage in critique, both positive and negative, from the vantage point of an observer rather than that of a participant.

I will share my impressions and make a few observations regarding the students I see who received a North American Yeshiva education:

1-Language: Although the past twenty years have witnessed an explosion in interest in Torah learning and observance, I believe that knowledge of basic Hebrew is on a decline. I find that students are not only unable to converse in Modern Hebrew, their basic reading and comprehension skills have decreased. I am not exaggerating when I say that fewer and fewer students are able to read a sentence in Hebrew, with or without vowels, and are even less likely to be able to understand its meaning. Aside from the impact upon one's ability to learn and identify with the Torah, which should be of great concern to us, this must certainly affect a student's ability to connect to Israel. Students are unable to read Hebrew newspapers, listen to the news, hear *shiurim* given in Hebrew, and even to socialize with those who do not speak English.

2- Knowledge of Zionist and Israeli history/current events: I, along with my colleagues, are often surprised by our students lack of knowledge of basic Israeli history, and even more so by their ignorance of modern Israeli political and social realities. While one can only imagine the educational energy invested in clarifying the differences between the Republican and Democratic candidates before a Presidential election, the issues debated by the Israeli political parties, for a Jew whose "heart is in the East", should be no less compelling and relevant, and surely deserve a degree of investment and energy as well.



3- Religious Zionist ideology: Although there are certainly numerous varieties of Religious Zionist philosophy, and there is no monopoly on which model of Religious Zionism is to be adopted, the following central tenets appear to be agreed upon by all who identify as Religious Zionists: The importance of the land of Israel in *Tanach* and *Halachah*; an acknowledgement of the miraculous nature of the establishment of a Jewish state and the gradual return of Jews to their ancient homeland; the centrality of Israel to the modern Jewish/religious experience; and the aspiration, ideological and practical, to move to Israel and plant one's roots in the home of the Jewish people. It is this overall ideology that I often feel is lacking. Although many students are familiar with Israel, and a large percentage have close relatives who already live in Israel, many do not display even the budding sparks of a Zionist ideology, let alone a burning desire to move to and raise a family in the State of Israel.

The roots of these phenomena are most likely not to be attributed to a lack of a positive and well thought out educational philosophy. As Rav Aharon Lichtenstein Shlita once commented to a close friend, who questioned him regarding prioritizing the many educational goals an American yeshiva high-school teacher hopes to accomplish, "In the High Schools- we are fighting for their souls...". I see the results of the hard work, creative thinking, and dedication to the personal and spiritual growth of North American Yeshiva graduates, and it is a pleasure to teach these students. I often wonder how here, in Israel, we can learn from and implement many of the fine and effective educational methods used in America. However, regarding religious Zionism, I humbly suggest that we consider whether there is a way to strengthen the basic Hebrew language skills, historical awareness, and ideological identification with *Eretz Yisrael* and *Medinat Yisrael* of Modern Orthodox, Religious Zionist North American youth.

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