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### THE FEMINIST CASE FOR HOME ECONOMICS

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Home economics suffers from an undeservedly bad reputation: an 'easy A,' many assume this now irrelevant class was meant to teach women to bake cakes and conform to sexist gender norms. In fact, however, the field began as an organized social movement in the late 1800s whose main goal was to professionalize domestic work in order to give women more free time and increased satisfaction in the home. According to scholars like Megan Elias, newly established home economics departments at universities were academically rigorous, dedicated to using the physical and social sciences to study domestic labor.<sup>1</sup> Students took courses in diverse subjects ranging from biochemistry and bacteriology to economics, and in their research and experiments, they discovered and propagated the best methods for performing household tasks. These early leaders aligned home economics with exacting scientific and academic study, while others emerging around the same time, including many in Jewish schools, were more vocationally oriented.<sup>2</sup> The field had its critics on both sides of the coin. Some scientists (unfortunately) felt that the study of the home, and its association with women, degraded their disciplines. On the flip side, the courses that offered vocational training were derided as too quotidian and not academic enough. Detractors aside, however, as the century progressed, home ec gained popularity and proliferated in colleges, high schools, and lower grades.

As progress enabled women's participation in the work force and outsized consumerism made advertisers "experts" in the domestic sphere, home economics classes were gradually replaced with other subjects in most schools, both secular and Jewish.<sup>3</sup> This is unfortunate. While some negative stereotypes and other criticisms were warranted, I believe Modern Orthodox day schools should reintroduce upgraded and

contemporary versions of home economics—both theory and practical skills application—for middle and high school students.

Like others who have written eloquently about the challenges of working while parenting during the pandemic, I have observed through intimate conversations with people, especially women, that many in the Modern Orthodox community are struggling. Many have left the workforce or decreased their work hours because of increased demands at home. In addition to the virus itself, the pandemic has severely curtailed previously relied upon support systems: food/restaurants, babysitters, school, social ties, and leisure activities. Even prior to COVID-19, women most frequently bore the lion's share of household responsibility and mental load, and now large numbers of women and mothers are being set back a decade or more. Some families are drowning, and women are shouldering huge burdens as they deal with new financial challenges, changes in long-term career plans, and increased work from—and family members working and schooling together in—the home. As a professional and a mother, I understand these challenges deeply. From my work at the helm of an education foundation, I see how the home economics movement can be rediscovered to improve the lives of today's students so the next generation can avoid some of the challenges we are now experiencing. While we are optimistic about vaccinations, and we hope COVID-19 is just a terrible blip on the radar, in all likelihood, the coming decades will bring an increased number of emergencies: environmental, epidemiological, and technological. A modern home economics course in day schools could offer both men and women: (1) more shared language and responsibility for household tasks, including finances; and (2) a mindset change. Tasks in the home are commonly considered drudgery or at least secondary to the "important work" of careers, but with greater efficiency and elevated discourse, they can be more of a source of pride and satisfaction. And we would do our young

community members a great service to give them these practical tools.

Contrary to what one might assume, the modernization and reintroduction of home economics classes would be a pioneering feminist project. In the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond, activists and intellectuals opened opportunities for women to work in jobs in the public sphere (such as medicine, law, entrepreneurship, and all manner of office work) which had traditionally been reserved for men. Yet second-wave feminism, deservedly or not, has been criticized for ennobling “men’s work” while failing to elevate what was once called “women’s work,” including caregiving and domestic labor. While women gained access to the public sphere, efforts to shape men, marriage, and household labor—and to accommodate working mothers—fell by the wayside. Domestic labor, which already suffered from its perceived lower status, was also denigrated by some feminists eager to distance themselves from their unliberated sisters. Against this backdrop, it’s no surprise that home economics courses steadily fell out of favor. However, recent attempts to reshape the division of marital labor and childcare have gained popular interest as more people recognize the essential nature of this work in any functioning society and the nagging challenges posed to working people in the public sphere without support in the private. Excellent home economics classes would help feminist men and women to pick up the baton and elevate domestic work in individuals’ lives and societal discourse.

Further, the time is right for curricular innovation. Someday, we will look back at this period as one of tectonic shifts in Jewish education. In 2020, educators had to make drastic alterations to school formats with painstaking care and creativity. From these challenging circumstances, those in the field of education are drawing wisdom about how students learn and thrive (and don’t), and we will continue to implement fruitful innovations even after the pandemic. With children at home and work upended, families are also asking big questions about what expensive day school education should include and distilling what is “essential.” Many are relocating, and some have opted for homeschooling, public school, and different models. As we adapt to a future shaped by this pandemic and try to better align education with our values, the community of parents, educators, board members, and philanthropists are due for a larger conversation about the purpose of middle and high school Jewish education: What do we really want our children to know and be able to do when they graduate?

Finally, practical life skills are not just good common sense; they reflect rabbinic priorities as well. A classic passage in the Talmud (*Kiddushin 29a*) provides halakhic guidance as to what a parent must teach a child:

A father is obligated with regard to his son, to teach him Torah, and marry him, and to teach him a trade. And some say: A father is

also obligated to teach his son to swim. Rabbi Yehuda says: Any father who does not teach his son a trade teaches him banditry.

In short, the Talmud is instructing that parents must give children practical life skills. Further, preparing a child to marry and be a good partner are Torah values in which we should strive to educate our children. However, most Modern Orthodox schools are designed as college prep schools, heavily emphasizing academics over life skills. In addition to being inculcated with *ahavat ha-Torah* and *ahavat ha-beriyot*, graduates of day schools should be given more concrete options. Yes, they should be able to succeed academically in college and graduate school, but they should also have practical skills. First and foremost, they should be competent at running a home, which is in many ways both a trade in and of itself and an opportunity for young men and women to learn about the shared responsibilities of marriage.

What might such a course of study look like? We might begin by reviewing what was included in a classic home ec curriculum. The following skills were traditionally included in home ec classes over the past century:

- Preparing healthy meals;
- Housekeeping, including laundry;
- Basic household repairs/sewing;
- Menu planning and grocery shopping;
- Personal finance, budgeting; and
- Childcare/parenting.

Some adults and young people alike will see this list and get excited about learning these topics in a systematic way, whereas others are less convinced. Accordingly, Modern Orthodox day schools should rethink which of the preceding skills to cover in a 21st-century home economics class. I suggest that schools and educators planning home economics classes cherry-pick from and add to the preceding list based on (1) what they believe to be the most helpful skills for today’s world and (2) Torah values, the latter of which includes re-centering the family, elevating “women’s work,” and empowering students with practical life skills to help them succeed.

If I were building a home ec course for high school students, I would consider financial literacy and meal planning and preparation to be foundational priorities. There have been repeated calls by students and the public for personal finance to be taught in schools, and if it is not offered as a separate class, a personal finance unit should be offered in a home economics course, covering the basics of budgeting, saving, taxes, credit cards, and, most critically, financial freedom. Next, there is no more basic skill than cooking. Health and financial benefits make learning how to plan, shop, and cook deeply practical. The added creativity involved, the benefits of fostering community through hosting, and the satisfaction of feeding oneself and one’s family are too valuable to overlook.

In 2021, environmentally-conscious living is a valuable inclusion in a home ec curriculum. With these skills, students can contribute more to their home environments in the present and would gain a backbone set of skills as they leave their parents' homes.

Additional factors to consider when choosing which skills to focus on include the facilities available, grade level, student interests, how much time is dedicated to the class (project, unit, semester, or year), and the abilities of the teacher. Seventh graders, for example, are likely to benefit more from creative outlets like cooking and sewing, whereas personal finance is engaging for older students who can “see the light at the end of the tunnel” of mandatory schooling, and they can readily imagine how saving and smart planning can positively impact their lives.

### Arguments Against Home Economics

Opposition to including home economics in Modern Orthodox day schools may include limited time in the school day, a preference for academic subjects, and the argument that young people should learn these skills at home. I address each of these arguments below.

While a separate home ec class is warranted, it is of course true that schools are pressed for time. With ingenuity, home economics content can be folded into existing classes. Fusing home ec in whole or in part to other classes can combine practical skills with STEM subjects (a sewing unit in geometry or a food preparation unit in biology or chemistry), language (a unit or an abbreviated home ec course in Hebrew or Spanish), or *limmudei kodesh*. To take an example of the latter, at least one Jewish high school offers a cooking class/*hilkhot kashrut* combination. In the same vein, high schools can also consider offering more focused treatment of topics relating to home economics in electives like personal finance, accounting, sewing and design, real estate, cooking, and childcare classes, which could include anything from education theory to child development to a CPR minicourse.

The argument that home economics is not academically rigorous enough for school is not new, but it is flimsy. Earlier in the century when sociology, bacteriology, organic chemistry, botany, and more were studied as prerequisites for home economics courses at the university level, critics claimed the classes were *too* academically advanced for such unexceptional subject matter in university settings.<sup>4</sup> The bottom line is that schools can build the classes to suit their particular academic priorities. I suggest that a home economics class in a Jewish day school include academic multi-disciplinary content like text study, history, and detailed discussion of contemporary social issues. In this example, home economics teachers can facilitate conversations and assign reading about class, economics, feminism, and mental load. Drawing on the research regarding the efficacy of experiential learning, the most effective home ec class,

whether standalone or as project units, would also contain hands-on skills, build on context recognizable from home, and layer complex issues and academic knowledge atop the basic course skills.

Some skeptics would correctly suggest that children can learn cooking, cleaning, personal finance, and other home ec skills at home. However, for a variety of reasons, including parental time constraints, lack of knowledge on the part of the parents, and embarrassment about or preference for privacy around finances, they don't. One reason we have school is to systematize learning and have it facilitated by a skilled teacher, and this is no different. Educators interested in teaching home economics would likely need to augment and hone their knowledge, and limited training would be appropriate.<sup>5</sup> (Home ec teachers in day schools could also form their own associations to share best practices and uniquely Jewish subject matter or learnings, but that is beyond the scope of this article.) These skills do not come naturally, and it is simply unrealistic to expect all young people to instinctively possess domestic talents when they haven't really been exposed to them. It's true that young people might be able to “figure it out” eventually, but at a cost. Practical survival skills would give young people a better, more confident start in life, which leads to real-world success and satisfaction. For example, sticking to a simple budget, limiting delivery services, and opting instead to cook at home can save hundreds of dollars a month, which can be put into income-producing assets setting young people on a road to financial freedom. Why wait for expenses to rise and former day school students to be well into their twenties or beyond to figure this out?

The benefits of teaching practical skills and home economics will serve students well now and prepare them for their bright futures as well as for uncertainties ahead. On one hand, I want to refrain from painting too rosy a picture of students taking home economics and then deciding to cook all the family meals or file the family taxes. On the other hand, I don't want to discount these possible benefits either. Young people feel empowered with increased responsibility, but at no time in history has adult responsibility been delayed as long as it is today. With greater knowledge and skills, students can contribute more to family life and certainly should have a greater appreciation for the work it takes to shop, cook meals, clean, and manage the finances. This could be an opportunity for family learning and growth as well.

In the Modern Orthodox world, I think most would agree that getting married and having children is a value if not an expectation. However, aside from (too rarely) well-executed *kallah* and *hatan* classes given in the months and weeks before a wedding, there are few opportunities to explore what it actually takes to build a successful relationship. Financial incompatibility and resentment are major contributors to marital strife and divorce. While most modern couples aspire to fair, if not equal, partnership inside the home, few achieve

it principally because of unmet expectations around household tasks and childcare. Home economics classes are a way to bridge the gap between young men and women's expectations and the reality of running a home and raising children. Men might take on more household responsibility if they were mentored and trained to do so. Additionally, if young men and women internalize lessons about joint responsibility, we would enhance equity in marriage and promote a shared set of basic skills and, perhaps as importantly, a shared language around them for students to use when they need it.

Modern Orthodox Jewish families that fall into higher income brackets, like other Americans, frequently outsource their personal needs to varying degrees. Whether cleaning, day care, or takeout/ready-made meals, even young adults and those who are not in positions of wealth rely heavily on others to provide for their basic needs. As I advocate strongly in favor of home economics as a way to elevate the status of domestic work and gently encourage families to tackle more of their own household needs, I also recognize both the necessity for many families to outsource some domestic labor and the personal nature of that decision. In full disclosure, my husband and I work full-time and employ a housekeeper and a nanny. For those who find these decisions a source of moral and/or financial challenge, they become financially and psychologically easier to weigh when families know how to do the work themselves. Even for students who eventually outsource some of the tasks they learn in home economics, the course is beneficial in the same two major ways. First, students of home economics would know how a meal is cooked, how a house is cleaned, and what their accountants and tax professionals do, dignifying each of these service providers and increasing connection and empathy. Second, even when family work is outsourced, most of the burden of coordination, training, and management falls on women; having men trained in these areas will enable more equitable sharing of employee management and the mental load.

Even with women's improved career prospects and outsourcing, homes and children still need to be cared for, and no one will ever care more about your personal finances than you. Observant Jews continually look for inspiration and efficiency in required activities like daily prayer, study, weekly holidays, the yearly cycle of the Torah. Encouraging young people to find purpose in "mundane" daily tasks is freeing and revolutionary in today's world, but, as we've argued, it's not a stretch to identify this as a Torah principle.

Finally, requiring home economics in schools brings up values-driven questions that I believe we want students to ask as they plan their lives. For example, sewing is a skill that most people today outsource, but is this in line with our values? More people, especially younger people, want to decrease their carbon footprint and waste output, and most people strive to increase efficiency in work and life. Can we really call ourselves independent, carbon-conscious, or efficient if we

have to throw away a shirt or pay the expense in time and money to send it to a tailor when it loses a button? Rather than looking askance at the daily work it takes to run a home, home economics classes give permission to students—male and female—to find more satisfaction and meaning in building and maintaining their homes, whether they have careers outside or not.

The world has gotten much smaller with Covid-19. Contagion and regulations have forced us inward, into our domestic spheres and in closer proximity to others in our households. Working parents with children at home have faced significant challenges, but a wise person can learn from any situation. If we ask what we can learn from the past year, one lesson might be the value of these intimate domestic spaces and how their smooth functioning is the result of expertise and effort. If we consider what could have made the past year go more smoothly, better domestic skills, financial preparedness, and more equity in partnership would seem to be near the top of many people's lists. Of course, we can take action in our own lives to insulate ourselves from future challenges, but we can also ensure that our children have an easier path. Adding modern home economics classes to day school curricula would be a trailblazing project, and it could mean the difference between our students drowning, treading water, or adeptly navigating the rapids yet to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Megan J. Elias, *Stir It Up: Home Economics in American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Baron Maurice De Hirsch funded many Jewish schools including the ORT schools where vocational training and home economics were key curricular elements. See, e.g., [https://www.lostcolleges.com/baron-de-hirsch-agricultural-school?fbclid=IwAR3JC5vOnzI0 UCXdplgYWupwzj2T7YZOqvAV YmLhMN-I Y07G3Tq\\_NB5i4](https://www.lostcolleges.com/baron-de-hirsch-agricultural-school?fbclid=IwAR3JC5vOnzI0 UCXdplgYWupwzj2T7YZOqvAV YmLhMN-I Y07G3Tq_NB5i4). The Educational Alliance school included cooking classes and other practical skills; and [https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/richman-julia?fbclid=IwAR0vw-2\\_mf2IkZQbsC6PGxoqO0es1uU2GB2iF2AduSV2SwIihAI\\_9OJ2IgU](https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/richman-julia?fbclid=IwAR0vw-2_mf2IkZQbsC6PGxoqO0es1uU2GB2iF2AduSV2SwIihAI_9OJ2IgU). These classes were offered to help students learn skills they would need for life before the more academically focused and formal home economics movement started in universities and trickled down via federal funding into public high schools, middle schools, and even elementary schools.

<sup>3</sup> An exception in the Jewish context is the Bais Yaakov movement, which offers home economics classes in its right-wing Orthodox girls' schools. Other Hasidic movements also offer cooking classes to girls. Parallel boys' schools do not receive home economics training at their *yeshivot*.

<sup>4</sup> University of Missouri offered a course called General Foods from 1912-1914. Prerequisites for the course included organic chemistry, inorganic chemistry, botany, bacteriology, and physiology. Other universities had similar requirements. Still,

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the general public, and even deans of the universities, considered home economics to be “cooking classes.” Elias attributes this to gender: “To allow work that was traditionally performed by women to be considered professional [rather than amateur] was problematic because it destabilized established categories,” and “culture classified anything to do with the kitchen as amateur” (*Stir It Up*, 24-27).

### THREE IDEAS FOR REIMAGINING HIGH SCHOOL AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR JEWISH EDUCATION

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In a Our school, like many others, hosts an evening at the beginning of every school year for parents to come into school, meet teachers, and learn about their children’s courses of study for the school year. A few years back we tossed around the idea of supplementing the evening with video presentations by the teachers for each of their classes. The new idea was met with a collective “*meh.*” Some felt awkward recording themselves, and others felt just that the evening was already successful, so there was no good reason to change things up. Beginning this school year, in the midst of COVID-19, we brought back the idea of video presentations, this time as a replacement for the in-person evening. Everyone was on board and ready to make the change.

High school education during COVID has been some version of this story on repeat, where adaptations that would have been undesired, unlikely, or even impossible in the past are suddenly obvious and necessary. Teaching on Zoom, masking, cohorts, new schedules, students tuning into classes from home, video lessons, video messages, video open houses, and the list goes on. This moment of adaptation has inspired some to consider what, from the many changes that have been necessary for COVID, will prove adaptive in the long run.

There will certainly be changes to school that stay with us after the reality of this pandemic has faded. But we should pause to consider how it took a global pandemic to make significant changes to the way high schools go about student learning in the first place. How many high school students can say they have mastered the learning they are meant to master within the courses they must take and the curricula they must study? How many parents can say they feel their child’s high school experience has been one that has prioritized learning to the point that she feels successful in every class? We don’t have to look further than our own experiences to see that the idea of successful learning in high school only fully works for a small percentage of students. Is that how this is meant to be? Is high school meant to be an experience in which the majority

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the International Federation for Home Economics provides certification, community, and materials (<https://www.ifhe.org/events/professional-learning/>). In addition, there are other certifications available, as well as free and low-cost materials.

of students are unable to master the tasks set out before them? Yet in most schools, we return to the same model of learning every year, with the same sliding scale for marking and the same ten-month cap upon which all learning for the year must be completed. Perhaps it is only an event like COVID that could have moved high school education out of its comfort zone. It took a once in one-hundred-years pandemic to finally provide enough of a push to consider changes to a century-old model of high school learning. So, with the door already open to some pretty big changes, the lasting lessons from high school during COVID should not be small questions, such as if we will run Zoom classes on snow days. We should consider our ability to change what school looks like under COVID as a motivator to consider, much more broadly, how we could improve high school learning after COVID.

Asking how we can improve high school learning is nothing new. In fact, these questions have been around in various forms for decades, most notably in the work of Theodore R.Sizer, whose 1984 seminal book, *Horace’s Compromise*, remains absolutely relevant and revealing of the typical high school experience nearly forty years after its publication. Sizer provides a sweeping analysis of the fundamental mismatch between intention and outcome that seems to occur in nearly all traditional high schools. The intention, it seems, is that *all* students learn, while the outcome is that only a narrow slice of students learn the materials being taught to the standard being measured. Everyone else falls on some sliding scale of not mastering the material, forced to move on year by year experiencing formal learning as a chore they may feel they are not particularly good at, something to be endured until their time in school has ended.

What I will attempt to outline here is meant to address those who have questioned if high school is the most effective environment for adolescent learning, and if the economic model under which traditional high schools operate is the most efficient way to promote learning. This will come in the

form of suggesting a high school that is far from traditional in design, learning, and cost structure. But if there was ever a moment to consider something entirely different, this is it.

Let's begin with four questions that strike at the heart of the traditional high school:

1. Is a mostly fixed curricular model that measures performance on a sliding scale and based on mostly uniform assessments the best way to measure and encourage adolescent learning?
2. Is an educational model that divides students by age, forces annual matriculation, and relies on the classroom as the primary location of learning the best method to achieve adolescent learning?
3. Is a classroom instructor the best model for adolescent teaching?
4. With sprawling professional structures, do high schools operate in the most economically efficient manner?

I believe the answer to these questions is no. And so, in response, I will offer three ideas for reimagining high school that I believe can facilitate learning that is universally accessible, more deeply connected to a young person's natural cognitive development, and more economically efficient and fiscally transparent.<sup>1</sup> These ideas, while broad in their scope, are uniquely suited to the project of Jewish education and the current needs of the Jewish High School system. And so I will conclude by offering the relevance of their application to Jewish education today.<sup>2</sup>

Many of the ideas below have been tried in classrooms, including my own, among individual teachers, and even in a number of schools that have been able to function with a degree of independence. These ideas draw on [Universal Design Learning](#) and [teaching to mastery](#). Notably, they have been implemented in various forms at the [Coalition of Essential Schools](#) and the [Modern Classrooms Project](#), among others.

***Idea 1: Teach to mastery by eliminating arbitrary age divisions and artificial time frames for learning. Focus more on cognitive skill and less on core curriculum.***

“We are no longer in the early twentieth century, needing an institution that provides a comprehensive set of experiences to prepare adolescents for a newly modernized state. We live today, crowded together, in a culture overloaded with information, surfeited with data and opinions and experiences that we pump up with the buttons on our TV sets, home computers, telephones and word processors. The world around us, for good or ill, is a more insistent, rich and effective provider of information than was our grandparents'. Education's job today is less in

purveying information than in helping people to use it - that is, to exercise their minds.”

- Theodore R.Sizer, *Horace's Compromise* (p. 84, 2004)

Classically, our approach to learning in high school is that there is a curriculum that needs to be delivered. Even the word “delivered” implies that the teacher is the holder of information and the student the receptacle into which that information is placed, so that learning is primarily the acquisition of knowledge. Curricula are compiled into courses and contain an officially sanctioned subset of information within a broad subject area. Delivery is spread over some defined timeframe for learning. The final measure of learning is scored as a single numerical value (at least that is what is shared as a signal to other institutions via the student transcript). This single number must reflect a student's learning in the entire course as one unit of study without any subdivisions.

Let's explore: What does a course mark in a typical high school actually show us? It shows the degree to which a student, compared to his peers, mastered several areas of knowledge and/or skills that were collectively deemed important enough to be included in the curriculum. What *doesn't* the mark show us? It doesn't show us if the student was able to fully master some areas of study within the curriculum but not others. It doesn't show us what cognitive skills were being developed and measured through the process of learning. It doesn't show us what areas the teacher chose to focus on and what methods of assessment were used to demonstrate learning.

Consider Tim, a student who mastered grade 9 algebra but came up short of mastering geometry. His teacher spent more time on algebra and weighted correct answers more heavily than demonstrated work. Tim was able to work quickly through the logic of algebraic expressions but slowed down considerably through the visual processing of geometric measurements, and had trouble completing his geometry tests on time. Tim received an overall mark of 75% in the course.

Now consider Sam, a student who didn't master algebra or geometry. Prior to high school, he never properly learned how to add fractions but was promoted along with passing marks. He's developed a sense that he is a “bad math student” without realizing that he has basic skill deficiencies that have gone undiagnosed. Sam's teacher weighs demonstrated work more heavily than correct answers, and Sam is intuitive enough as a critical and spatial thinker that his solution sets showed promise. Sam can complete his tests within the time allotted for assessments but would have benefitted from a few additional months to work through some of the gaps underlying his inability to put it all together. Sam also received an overall mark of 75% in the course.

From the perspective of learning these students are entirely different cases, yet our system for measuring learning sees

them as identical. We are left asking the question: is our standardized system of curriculum, assessment, and marking providing truly useful information about what students know or how they learn?

Wouldn't it make more sense if Tim could have a metric demonstrating his mastery of algebra and have more time to focus on geometry? Isn't it useful for Tim to know that his processing time on primarily visual tasks is slower, and then to track his improvements in that area in addition to his knowledge of the material?

Shouldn't Sam have the opportunity to diagnose and address his skill gaps with time for learning that extends beyond the designated school year? If Sam likes analytic thinking but algebra is not the best way for him to hone that skill, perhaps logic or philosophy might be a better focus of study. Wouldn't it make sense for him to have the opportunity to study another subject that develops the same cognitive skill set if that better suits his learning style?

In our current system, Tim and Sam might be taken for educational assessments, which will likely pick up on some, but not all, of these issues. But then what happens with the information from the assessment? Since we operate within a standardized set of curriculum, assessment, and marking, we can only *accommodate* exceptions without actually addressing the core issues underlying the identified learning differences. As an example, Tim and Sam might be granted an accommodation providing them extra time on tests. But processing speed in learning is not only related to timed assessments. Both Tim and Sam need additional time for learning before the test, perhaps even additional weeks and months to work at their learning. And yet, each of them has a different reason for needing this. For Tim it is about problem solving and visual processing, but for Sam it is a fundamental skill gap and a lack of confidence that comes along with that.

This issue comes down to needing more time devoted to ongoing observations of learning that inform a unique understanding of each student's learning profile and how that might evolve and change over time. Forcing everyone - teacher, student, and school - to conform to a single timeframe for learning is at the heart of why so many high school students fail to achieve mastery in their learning. Further, high schools are generally bound by a system that selectively removes a school's ability to formally measure certain features of learning, like processing speed, and that can prevent teachers from targeting and tracking some of the most critical components of student learning. In the best traditional schools there is an effective working relationship between learning specialist and teacher, in which the specialist advises the teacher on modifications needed for individual students. But these modifications tend to end up as alterations to the standardized curriculum that help avoid the parts that don't fit with the student's learning style. It almost never results in an individualized learning model where the

teacher and student are partners in creating a curriculum that directly addresses the unique features of each student.

Consider another way to look at this example. There is at least one area of learning we don't place any time frame on, and it results in near universal mastery of the skill: learning to read. I didn't learn how to read until I was in the third grade on account of my own learning needs. Imagine if someone said to me after first grade, "We're sorry, you failed reading. Time to move on to the next subject and you just won't know how to read." There was a time when the conventional wisdom was that it was foolish to assume everyone could read. And while I am grateful no one took that approach with me, I am not, and never will be, equally fast at reading as others are. I am an agonizingly slow reader. This does not impact my ability to learn but it certainly impacts the speed with which I can learn and the time I need to process the written word. In other words, it was clear that I should be afforded a couple of extra years to learn how to read. The extra time allowed me to master the learning goal. But the extended timeframe I required for learning was also its own diagnostic tool. If you want a complete picture of me as a learner, you would need to know that I read at a slower speed.

So it is time to stop trying to fit teaching into a standardized model that forces us to cap student learning at particular times, limit it to particular subjects, and force it to conform to only certain assessments. We also need to stop labeling certain parts of learning as unmeasurable, such as processing time, executive functioning, and attention. These are features of human learning, not bugs. Teachers should be able to work with students on measuring, understanding, and using this information to increase awareness of what works for learning and what doesn't.

To these ends, I imagine a high school that eliminates all distinctions of age beyond the basic range for healthy socialization. Once students enter school, they can take anywhere between three and five years, or perhaps longer if needed, to complete a course of study in preparation for the next stage of life and learning that is applicable to them. That course of study will be progressive and build upon prior knowledge and skills, but need not be limited by the calendar or seasons. In addition, once students have achieved basic knowledge in literacy and numeracy, instead of offering a fixed curriculum in advanced subjects, the school will break down learning into certain core cognitive skills in need of development, such as critical thinking, analysis, sustained attention, working memory, processing style and speed, artistic expression, and so on. Students and parents will work with the school to decide on certain knowledge sets and assessment strategies that can best develop these skills.

For example, Samantha is set in her desire to be a doctor. This will likely mean she needs to develop her critical thinking, working memory, and processing speed. It also means she will need to focus on certain core areas of knowledge that will be

required for the next stage in her education, such as calculus, biology, and chemistry. I imagine an educational conversation with Samantha and her parents that leads to creating a set of curricula built to teach the subjects Samantha requires while training her in the cognitive skills most useful toward her goals. Samantha's studies in math or science, as an example, will lean toward completing tasks on the clock, committing key information to memory, and developing problem solving skills. Samantha will work in each course of study to fully master the material and the learning skills she is being assessed on.

Now let's consider another example. Andrew has no idea what he wants to study or what he wants to do professionally. He presents as a creative thinker with a keen interest in artistic design. Andrew and his parents sit with the school and decide what cognitive skills he would like to develop and the knowledge sets that he is more interested in. Andrew tries algebra to develop his critical thinking but finds that subject to be excessively challenging, or even just uninteresting, and not well suited to his design-based learning style. So he switches to Media Arts and Engineering as a way to develop his critical thinking while focusing more on developing his cognitive skills in design, creativity, and analysis. Andrew will also work to fully master the material and learning skills he is being assessed on.

Finally, a high school designed to teach subjects to mastery built on a foundation of cognitive skill development would go a very long way toward preserving the fundamental interest and curiosity which drives our natural capacity to learn that is with us from the time we are born. Assessing learning to standards, as a process, can be completely transformed from a single number, final judgment on student accomplishment. Instead, we can imagine a series of ongoing reflections on learning that create a helpful guide for students to self-correct on the path to mastering a variety of subjects and skills, all while achieving greater self-awareness as learners.

To summarize where we are, let's consider what we already know of human development. We are all born as natural learners and never lose that innate drive to learn and know. But, as schools attempt to harness and direct that learning toward certain goals, we discover that our natural learning styles vary greatly. The process of standardized education, as it forces learning toward very narrow and specific ends, struggles to accommodate diverse learning styles, and many if not most students feel they cannot master what they must learn as they progress through high school. Teaching to mastery using an individualized curriculum built on developing core cognitive skills, with no age and time restrictions, can help students connect with their natural learning styles and fundamentally change the experience of school.

Is this view utopian, unrealistic, or naive? After all, how can a school afford to differentiate so dramatically without running up costs with the need to add teachers, administrators, and

learning specialists? To answer this question, let's consider a second idea.

***Idea 2: Smaller is better and blended is best. There is no additional learning benefit to having large schools. Small cohorts making use of blended learning can achieve universally designed learning to mastery.***

"Learning is a human activity, and depends absolutely (if often annoyingly) on human idiosyncrasy. We can arrange for schools, classes and curricula, but the game is won or lost beyond these arrangements. The readiness of the students, the power of the incentives they feel for learning, and the potency of the teachers' inspiration count more than does any structure of any school. Run a school like a factory and you will get uneven goods."

- Theodore R.Sizer, *Horace's Compromise* (p. 205, 2004)

There is a significant and rarely spoken-about tension in education: the trade-off between size and quality. When a school grows bigger it only worsens the struggle to meet each student's learning needs, as there is only so much individuation that can take place within a top-down model. When a staff of ten teachers, let's say, becomes a staff of 200 teachers, consensus is replaced by directives, conversation often occurs in subject-based silos, and everyone generally feels less freedom and creativity because they are just one cog in a larger machine.

The central argument for bigger schools, or bigger anything, is invariably economies of scale. That is, as an organization grows, its size allows it to become more efficient. For example, Amazon and Walmart offer more products at lower prices because they are larger. This can be somewhat true of traditional schools. Any school administrator will tell you it is more cost-effective to run a class of twenty students than it is to run a class of ten students. But any school administrator will also tell you that the benefits of scale, eventually run contrary to the goal of learning. For example, a class of forty would lower cost dramatically, but, in most cases, would also produce far inferior learning outcomes.

Research and experience allow us to find the magic number to balance economies of scale and optimal learning. Let's say, for argument's sake, that is twenty-five students per class. After a school hits that number in a given class it becomes ineffective to add more students (diseconomies of scale) because that means either sacrificing learning or bearing the cost of opening another class. I can't think of any cost savings relating to learning that are achieved after a school has hit its ideal teacher-to-student ratio in the classroom. Growing the school larger only adds layers of administrators, learning specialists, and other staff which are a direct result of increasing the number of students. This, in turn, results in more top-down policy, less creativity, and decreased individual attention.

It is true that larger schools can often use fungible budgeting, where cost increases extrinsic to learning are spread over a larger base of paying participants. This money can be used to fund facilities, technologies, and expand institutional development and fundraising, among other perks. But transparent budgeting would reveal that, all things being equal, actual dollars toward learning are spent in more or less the same manner in a school with 100 students as they are in a school with 1,000 students.

So without the need for larger schools, what specific benefits can smaller schools provide?

Two buzzwords that are often tossed around in education are universal design and blended learning. Let's define them. Universal design is what we might call "differentiation 2.0." Instead of the teacher modifying content to suit each student's learning needs, the teacher designs a learning environment with fewer barriers, more choice, and self-direction toward students' natural and individual learning styles. Blended learning is integrating digital and online learning platforms with in-person engagement and instruction, providing greater diversity in both content and style of learning, as well as greater flexibility for the teacher, who spends less time in front of the classroom.

While both ideas sound great at educational conferences and on professional development days, many schools have struggled to implement them on any meaningful scale. But this should not surprise us because learning is not something that lends itself to scale. These models are only useful insofar as they can be implemented with nuanced observation and attention to individual circumstances. It's only when a teacher has the time to observe and reflect on student learning, consider different digital learning options, and work with the student to select and refine those choices that these models reveal their true potential. A typical full-time high school teacher might have 120-140 students to monitor, making these models for individuation mostly ineffective as learning alternatives.

To this end, I would like to suggest two ways high schools can achieve learning to mastery:

*1. Make high schools small learning cohorts.*

The primary point of learning is the interaction between teacher, student, and material. Everything in the design of a school should be an effort to enhance and enrich that primary point of interaction. To better achieve this, high schools should get small, very small. Consider a cohort model where 60-70 students are grouped with 5-6 teachers. Students will learn, not based on an arbitrary date when they were born, but in loosely formed small groupings based on learning styles and interests. These small groups, maybe 8 to 12 students in each, will allow teachers and students to collaborate on a

learning plan based on cognitive skills, individual learning styles, and personal goals instead of forcing learning into fixed curricula, as discussed above.

Being in small groups will also allow students to learn at their own paces, working with like-minded peers of different ages instead of being forced to matriculate only with their age group. What one student finishes in six months may take another twelve months. Finally, students can also focus on mastering the subjects and skills they are learning. Without a definitive cut-off date, students can work until they have mastered the material or choose to focus on something else.

*2. Blended learning is a highly effective method of universal design and teaching to mastery.*

Every information-based industry in the world has been disrupted by the ubiquity of information available online and the simple tools we all have to add our own content to that repertoire. This is true for news, entertainment, and informal education. Yet formal education in schools tends to look a lot like it did 100 years ago. Sure, there are personal devices, SmartBoards, and many teachers who supplement classes with online content. But the basic mode of educational delivery remains the same. Students still learn the same subject in one classroom with one teacher. Even as the "flipped classroom" has demonstrated how effective a new model can be, we still seem to lack the imagination (broadly speaking) to take that concept out of the classical school structure. So it's wonderful if a Math teacher wants to assign an instructional video for homework and spend class time practicing problem solving individually with students, as long as that teacher still meets her students at a fixed time, in standardized groupings, and works on the single curriculum.

Again, why must we keep to this structure? What about students studying different subjects, advancing at different paces, and using small groups to enhance that learning? Our ability to curate and create video, audio, and interactive content online has opened up a world of resources to design learning environments that are more universally accessible. A teacher can present students with multiple modes of learning at once based on what she thinks might work for a particular group of students. Students can progress at their own paces while becoming independent curators of their own learning, building the tools to independently navigate anything they want to learn. Finally, the teacher can serve as a coach who observes learning to make adjustments, facilitates group discussion and debate to enhance learning, and measures learning to standards that require mastery. Teachers as coaches of blended learning can focus less on their own lesson delivery and more on student ability to maximize critical thinking and application well beyond grasping core concepts.

***Idea 3: Reimagine the role of teacher to be administrator, learning specialist, and coach, eliminating any extra layers between the student and the primary designer of his or her***

**learning. Increase teacher compensation significantly and lower overall costs at the same time.**

“We underrate the craft of teaching. We expect to know how to teach fractions as though one needed only a formulaic routine to do so, a way to plug in. We talk about ‘delivering a service’ to students by means of ‘instructional strategies’; our metaphors arise from the factory floor and issue from the military manual. Education, apparently, is something someone does to somebody else. Paradoxically, while we know we don’t learn very well that way, nor want very much to have someone else’s definition of ‘service’ to be ‘delivered’ to us, we accept these metaphors for the mass of children. We thus underrate the mystery, challenge, and complexity of learning and, as a result, operate schools that are extraordinarily wasteful.”

- Theodore R.Sizer, *Horace’s Compromise* (p. 3, 2004)

When I hire a teacher I look for three core skills - communication, observation, and curation. First, is this teacher an effective communicator? Can he command the attention of a room of upwards of twenty-five adolescent students such that learning can occur effectively? Second, is he an astute observer of learning? Can he observe how a given student is interacting with the material and understand that student’s learning profile and make adjustments accordingly? Finally, is he an effective curator of content? Is he knowledgeable and resourceful enough to access a wide enough range of sources and ideas within a given subject to teach his class in the most expansive way possible?

What I think most administrators in traditional schools will admit is that while all three skills are great, the most important is communication. At the end of the day, a teacher needs to hold the room or nothing else can happen. And that makes sense since the classical model of education places the teacher in front of the classroom for a significant portion of the time devoted to learning. Traditional schools will also invest heavily in learning specialists, student support professionals, and administrators, who are also meant to supplement the roles of observers and curators to aid the teacher.

I would like to suggest a model of the *renaissance* high school teacher who is invested in understanding all aspects of adolescent learning while eagerly cultivating and expanding her own knowledge of a number of subjects and disciplines. Many of us already know teachers who can cover all or most areas of high school math and science, or literature and history, or Judaic studies and philosophy. As a well-known example, Sal Khan of Khan Academy has taught thousands of lessons at a high school level across a broad range of subjects from math to economics to history, just to name a few. Further, is there a reason why a single professional can not

serve the role of teacher and learning specialist, integrating both of those perspectives into the direct point of contact with each student? Shouldn’t it already be expected that *all* teachers are learning specialists?

With this in mind, let’s consider the cohort model mentioned above where 60-70 students of high school age work with a group of 5-6 highly paid and highly knowledgeable educators without any fixed class or age divisions within the school. These educators will prepare and curate learning materials using a model of blended learning that combines socratic, in-person, learning in small groups with self-paced and guided online learning. The school will not need administrators, coordinators, communications teams, or learning specialists. The goal will be to maintain the entire educational and fiscal focus of the school on the primary point of learning, the interaction between teacher and student engaged in the art of learning.

To be sure, these will not be typically hired or compensated teachers. Each teacher will be paid what is typically an administrator’s salary (think \$125,000 to \$150,000 annually). At that level of earnings, it should not be difficult to reimagine high school teaching to be a twelve-month-a-year job. Students need not stay bound to the agrarian calendar in their learning, and teachers can spend more time focused on preparation, collaboration, and their own professional development. I also see little reason why a small group of teachers working with a small cohort of students can’t serve in the roles of administrators as well. If schools didn’t have hundreds of students and traditional classes there would be far less complexity in scheduling, human resource management, and budgeting. There would still be relatively small management tasks that could be shared by the teachers and at the board level.

Finally, let’s consider the budgeting efficiencies created by this model. Five teachers earning an average of \$138,000 per year would result in \$690,000 in annual salary expenses. Salaries are typically 80% of a school budget, which would mean an approximate \$860,000 annual budget per cohort of 60. That would result in a per-child learning cost of about \$14,000 per year, significantly cheaper than most private schools. To be fair, this is a back-of-the-envelope calculation. Actually trying something like this might reveal additional cost savings, like an ability to run a slightly larger cohort effectively or decreased facility costs without the typical classroom space needed for a conventional school. Conversely, it may reveal cost increases like the need for smaller cohorts or additional teachers.

Learning, not savings, should be the primary driver of this change. But the shift to a more targeted learning experience will at the same yield a significantly more efficient cost structure on its own merits. The argument I am making is that if learning is the primary goal of high school, we can achieve far superior learning outcomes while being able to easily track how every dollar spent on tuition goes directly toward the

primary point of learning. If costs increase, it's because another teacher is added or the cohort becomes smaller because that is more effective for learning. If costs decrease, it's because student learning to mastery can be sustained with fewer teachers and/or more students. After all, how many of us who pay for private school can look at our current spending on education and easily understand how each dollar influences the actual point of learning for our children? And why are we okay with that lack of transparency?

### The Importance for Jewish Education

"The solution which I am urging, is to eradicate the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern curriculum. There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations. Instead of this single unity, we offer children -- Algebra, from which nothing follows; Geometry, from which nothing follows; Science, from which nothing follows; History, from which nothing follows; a Couple of Languages, never mastered; and lastly, most dreary of all, Literature, represented by plays of Shakespeare, with philological notes and short analyses of plot and character to be in substance committed to memory. Can such a list be said to represent Life?"

- Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (1929)

There is nothing inherently Jewish in these ideas for reimagining high school learning, but there is much they have to offer those invested, as I am, in Jewish education and Jewish Day Schools. The Jewish high schools that I have been privileged to encounter in my time all have some variation on the following two struggles within their Judaic Studies programs. First, how can we meaningfully engage our students to build core skills in Jewish literacy while at the same time creating an environment that inspires spiritual development, communal belonging, and Jewish identity? Put differently, how do we build a program that enables students to read and engage with the original texts and language in Tanakh or Talmud while also finding inspiration in prayer, *hesed*, and community leadership?

A second struggle is, how can our learning reveal an integrated worldview where Jewish knowledge and general academic knowledge are understood as forces that feed each other while animating our broad desire for discovery and learning? How can we inspire our children to not just see the value in two worlds, but to see them as one big valuable world where everything they learn is integrated in their identity as Jews, and not bifurcated into professional and personal spheres?

A good part of what makes these problems so challenging is the traditional structure of high school. When the flow of the day is defined by complex schedules, directing hundreds of students to defined periods where they focus on only one

subject, with bells to mark the shift changes, it can be hard to find the space for integration. Some schools have tried stand-alone interdisciplinary programs or cross-subject initiatives meant to bridge the gap, and some have even hired dedicated professionals to focus on this goal. But, at the end of the day, the structure of school itself undermines any incentives toward integration. Put yourself in the shoes of a typical high school student. He has forty-five minutes to learn a topic defined by a standardized curriculum and that will be distilled into a single performance metric that will play a significant role in determining what university he attends. All his incentives are to focus on what matters most within this framework: his marks in each course and little else.

Similarly, the struggle to balance Jewish literacy and identity is hampered by the traditional structure of high school. In traditional schools, there is a defined number of periods each day set aside for Judaic studies. Because of the need to move large numbers of students through the daily schedule and fixed curriculum, as mentioned, those classes are generally distributed throughout the day at different times. There is little time left for anything that doesn't look or feel like class. Recognizing this, most schools have retrofitted various elements of Jewish identity into the fixed structure of their Judaic Studies programs. This may appear as an effort to balance text-based classes (often seen as more serious) with discussion-based classes (often viewed as less serious). Or it may be an effort to cancel formal classes on various occasions to promote other activities centered on communal service, leadership, and less formal elements of Jewish education. But this all has a very "square peg in a round hole" feel to it. At best, it sends confusing educational messages and frustrates teacher planning. At worst, it incentivizes a race to the bottom in Judaic Studies where students seek out the discussion-based classes and activities at the cost of textual skills.

Now let's imagine our alternative model for high school, where learning is not limited to defined time periods, where students are learning subjects that are tied more closely to cognitive skills than core curricula; where learning is a mix of individually curated and independently paced study combined with small group reflection and analysis; where learning is measured by a full analysis of skills mastered and individual learning styles; and, most important, where the teacher herself is meant to embody a broad range of disciplines and interests.

Wouldn't our reimagined school be able to achieve a more genuine and authentic approach to interdisciplinary education? If our community aspires to integrate the worlds of Torah and *Madda* in our students, why not design our schools in a way that actually integrates those worlds fully in the structure of learning, instead of just keeping them as independent spheres that happen to exist in one building?

In addition, our alternative model would remove the need to retrofit Jewish identity into the fixed structure of daily classes

or to sacrifice Jewish literacy for Jewish identity. The learning experience of each student in this model is defined by the parents, student, and school deciding on a course of study that suits a student's learning style and enhances the development of core cognitive skills. So if Miriam, for example, enjoys logic and law, and wants to develop her critical thinking skills and pursue advanced legal and Judaic Studies, then she might pursue a curated and coached interdisciplinary course of study in general law and Talmud. If Moshe, by contrast, enjoys opportunities for active communal engagement where he can develop ideas and build programs that help others, then he may want to study aspects of business, design, and *mussar*. He can unpack his Jewish identity through the sources within our tradition that inspire his call to action while also developing the cognitive and application tools needed to implement a vision and create real change. This model will allow for a more well-rounded and genuinely interdisciplinary experience.

Every Jewish high school I know is challenged to fit the formal structure of the traditional high school model with the needs for more flexibility and creativity in Jewish learning. The general studies side of learning, if nothing else, still carries the incentive of university admissions and a collective desire not to mess with that convention. This, in essence, traps the Judaic studies side of learning in a structure that is ill-suited to the adaptations needed to make a real difference. A reimagined high school wouldn't just create better learning; it would create better *Jewish* learning and living where it is most sorely needed.

As hard as it is to imagine right now, COVID-19 will pass. There will undoubtedly, and understandably, be tremendous pressure to get everything back to normal as quickly as possible. As a Jewish community our educational goals and

economic interests will be well served by pushing back against a "normal" that perpetuates the structural inflexibility and lack of fiscal transparency we currently have within our independent school system. Now that COVID has exposed our ability to throw away convention and pursue more flexible models to meet the needs of students for a global pandemic, let's consider throwing away convention and pursuing more flexible models to meet the needs of students for universal learning.

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<sup>1</sup> My focus on high school education is not meant to imply that these ideas only have relevance at this stage of student learning. The core ideas I draw on in Universal Design and Blended Learning are certainly applicable at all stages of formal learning. I focus exclusively on high school for two reasons: 1. I attempt to outline in some detail what a reimagined school could look like and how learning and teaching would occur. Those details will necessarily be different at earlier and later stages of education and would be better detailed on their own. 2. High school does represent a unique phase in a child's educational development where one moves from essential skills to subjects of advanced knowledge (i.e. from adding to algebra). This is precisely the developmental stage where questions of subject choice and learning to mastery most poignantly push back on the core of the assumptions of the traditional school structure.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that my observations here are focused on the benefits to student learning and I do not comment on the communal opportunities and challenges that would arise in implementing this type of model within the Jewish Day School system. I offer a fuller treatment of that topic in earlier essays in these pages: [Will we support the day school of tomorrow?;](#) [To Lower Tuition Costs, Stop Donating to Schools and Start a Bank.](#)

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