BS”D, 11th Shvat, 5777

**Our Town had Two Great Educators**

Grand Rabbi Klonimus Kalman Shapira HY”D was a great modernizer of traditional Hassidic education in the first half of the 20th century. An initial innovation can be seen in the very fact of his pedagogic writing, a genre of writing that was rare in the Hassidic world until then. The Great Rabbi composed a series of books devoted to education: *Chovas HaTalmidim* (The Students' Obligation), *Hachshoras HaAvreichim* (Preparation of Young Men) and an additional booklet named *Bnei Machshava Tova* (Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work). In addition to composing a series of books on education, he set up a yeshiva in Warsaw in which he applied his educational approach. This yeshiva was intended to serve his community only, the Piaseczno Hassidism. However, it became a large and significant yeshiva in pre-Second World War Warsaw.

The Great Rabbi’s educational approach is modern, and to a certain extent even radical, considering his location, time and cultural context.

In general, the Great Rabbi’s educational methodology can be considered similar to the humanistic, peidocentric educational approach developed mainly in modern times and which is significantly different from classic, traditional Torah education.

These are the innovative characteristics of the Great Rabbi’s educational thought:

1. Focusing on the pupil and not on the pedagogic program;
2. Viewing the pupil as on individual, and making the teachers responsible for fostering the pupil’s unique personality;
3. Placing the focus of educational activity on internalization and not only acquiring knowledge, and on building the pupils’ personality;
4. Transferring study from the cognitive plane to the emotional-experiential sphere;
5. Reassigning responsibility for education and for the pupil’s development from the teacher to the pupil himself;
6. Establishing a company of pupils who jointly carry the responsibility for education.

The Great Rabbi himself was aware that his educational approach was novel. When suggesting his opinions, he noted the accepted views he was renouncing:

1. The educational program is determined by the cannon to be learned and not the pupils’ needs;
2. The teachers and educators address the pupils as a whole and not the individuals;
3. Educational activity is mainly teaching without taking the pupil’s personality into account;
4. The focus when studying original texts is on knowledge and comprehension and not on internalizing and experiencing;
5. Teachers and parents are considered responsible for learning, while lack of success is considered the fault of the pupils;
6. Lack of attention to the social ties among the pupils.

The Great Rabbi does not list the sources of his educational approach. As a rule, he does not tend towards quotations and relying on the original texts in his educational works. At times he refers to classic sources such as the Sayings of the Sages. When referring to later sources in his book, he suffices with the founders of Hasidism, Ba’al HaTanya and the founders of his own dynasty, the Maggid of Koshnitz and his father Rabbi Elimelech of Grodzisk in his book Imrei Elimelech (The Writings of Elimelech). He does not mention any external sources, moreover – if he does mention such sources, it is only to refute them. For instance, he criticizes the psychological approach that explains anger as stemming from ‘nerves’ and claims that this approach eliminates the individual’s responsibility for dealing with his anger.

Having said that, it most likely that he had the tools to encounter the general culture of his time. It is known that he was familiar with the field of medicine and even offered prescriptions to his disciples. In Daniel Rieser’s opinion, though, these prescriptions were not written in the form used by doctors and pharmacists, the kind honored in pharmacies, but were merely advice to his disciples regarding the medicinal means that could be used. Existing testimony however points to his having basic knowledge of the medical terms of his time. It can be surmised that he was familiar with the official state language and possibly was also able to read and write German. This of course is no indication of his having made use of external sources to formulate his educational approach.

Another great educator who was active in the same time and place as the Great Rabbi, was Dr. Henrik Goldshmidt, better known by his nom de plume, Janusz Korczak. These two personages lived in the same period, both turning from the destiny they were trained for – the one as a community leader and the other in medicine – to deal in education as a result of the problems of that generation. They both set up educational institutions in which they attempted to apply their world view. They were both adored by their pupils, and the lives of both were cut short in the Warsaw Ghetto. Despite the similarities, their life stories and lifestyles were diametrically opposed and there is no evidence of their having met. Regardless, there are conspicuous similarities between the educational legacy of the Great Rabbi and of the doctor, and all the points listed among the Great Rabbi’s innovations above were developed extensively in Korczak’s educational approach.

How, then, can we explain the great similarities between these two educators?

As mentioned, the Great Rabbi does not list the sources of his approach and of course there no references to sources from the general pedagogic literature. Korczak too does not list his sources in his works. Korczak’s formal education was in the field of medicine and his pedagogic literature is not written in proper academic form, so here too it is difficult to point to systemic sources for the formulation of his educational approach. On the other hand, it is hard to believe that both created a new educational approach out of thin air. Humanistic pedagogic currents and approaches, focusing on the child and his unique needs, had already gained footholds in the world around them.

It seems that during the first half of the 20th century, the conditions for promoting such a humanistic educational approach among the general public had ripened. These conditions enabled both these Warsaw personalities, Rabbi Klonimus Shapira and Dr. Janusz Korczak, to publicize their educational approaches and promote the educational institutes run accordingly, and train disciples to continue their method. Both of these individuals described the circumstances that led them to develop an unaccepted educational approach, mainly as a critical reaction. The Great Rabbi was forced to contend with the collapse of traditional Hasidic education during his time, while Korczak was exposed to the wretchedness and injustice in children’s education, mainly regarding orphans – on whom he focused special care. At the start of the 20th century, therefore, negative and positive factors joined together to create a fitting atmosphere for the development of innovative educational experiments: the collapse of old social and educational systems, and the rise of new social, psychological and pedagogic theories offering ways to correct education.

Clearly, environmental phenomenon would have had no influence had these individuals been incapable of accepting these theories and if these new trends had not been echoed in their souls. Their attitude towards man, humanity and children was soul-deep and did not merely stem from adopting novel theories. They did not have a background in professional education but in other fields that required paying attention to the individual and to society – Rabbi Shapira in his role as spiritual shepherd, the rabbi’s role in Hasidism; and Korczak the doctor, whose profession focuses on the suffering individual and the uniqueness of each individual. Precisely for this reason they were able to bring these insights into the field of education. A Great Rabbi and a physician deal in somewhat similar professions. Both see people individually, who come to them in pain and request a cure for their suffering. They are both meant to diagnose the individual, identify his unique ailment and offer a suitable cure. Lengthy, general observation of thousands of patients also enables them to identify general phenomena and shape general treatment principles accordingly. It seems to me that replicating this knowledge and its accompanying human sensitivity to the field of education is the common denominator between these two individuals, enabling them to develop their special educational methodologies.

**Biography abstract**

Yehuda Brandes is president of Herzog Academic College (Etzion Bloc and Jerusalem). He lectures on Talmud, Judaic Thought, and education. He has published many books and articles on Talmudic topics, focusing on the connection between Jewish Halacha (law) and Agadah (legend). His book, In his Own Way, is a collection of essays on humanistic education directed at fostering the unique personality of each pupil based on classic Jewish sources, ranging from the Bible and Talmud all the way to Rabbi Kook. His book, In the Kingdom of Holiness, deals with the Hasidic approach of Great Rabbi Yaakov Friedman of Husiatyn, a Zionist Great Rabbi in Tel Aviv.