**Two Great Educators in Warsaw**

Rabbi Klonimus Kalman Shapira was a great modernizer of education in traditional Hassidic society in the first half of the 20th century. An initial innovation can be seen in the very fact of his pedagogic writing, a genre that was rare in the Hassidic world until then.

The Admor composed a series of books devoted to education: *Chovat HaTalmidim* (The Students' Obligation),[[1]](#footnote-2) *Hakhsharat HaAvreikhim* (trans. as: Jewish Spiritual Growth: A Step-by-Step Guide by a Hasidic Master)[[2]](#footnote-3) and an additional booklet named *Bnei Mahshova Tova* (Conscious Community: A Guide to Inner Work).[[3]](#footnote-4) In addition to composing a series of books dedicated to education,[[4]](#footnote-5) he also established a yeshiva in Warsaw in which he applied his educational approach.[[5]](#footnote-6) 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.[[6]](#footnote-7)

The Admor's educational approach is innovative, and, considering his location, time and cultural surroundings, even radical.[[7]](#footnote-8)

In general, the Admor's educational methodology can be considered similar to the humanistic, peidocentric educational approach developed mainly in modern times[[8]](#footnote-9) and which is significantly different from classic, traditional Torah education.

These are the innovative characteristics of the Admor's educational thought:[[9]](#footnote-10)

1. Focusing on the pupil and not on the pedagogic program.
2. Viewing the pupil as an individual, and making the teachers responsible for fostering the pupil’s unique personality:

The education of each and every child must therefore be different, depending on his nature, mind, character and all of his other unique qualities. The educator must become aware of these qualities, it will not suffice for him to know himself and his own mind alone, since everything depends on the student who is being educated. It is not enough to utilize his own mind and his own strength in activating, commanding, and instructing his students; he must grasp the student's mind and the student's strength, working and acting within the parameters of each child's abilities. What he commands and instructs one child should be different from what he commands and instructs the next child, whose nature, will, and personality are completely different from the first. And this is what King Solomon is hinting to us – "educate the child according to his path" – according to the particular path of each and ever child.[[10]](#footnote-11)

1. Placing the focus of educational activity on internalization—not only acquiring knowledge—and on building the pupils’ personality:

Our goal here is not to teach the craft of pedagogy – how to utilize the student's mind in various ways, how to broaden his understanding and knowledge of the meaning of the Torah. For what we are seeking now is not the student's intellect alone: we are interested in the whole student. We wish to connect the life-force, the spirit and the soul of Jewish children to the God of Israel.[[11]](#footnote-12)

1. Transferring study from the cognitive plane to the emotional-experiential sphere:[[12]](#footnote-13)

But with this idea we still have not completed our task. We may succeed in penetrating to the independent existence of the child's mind…yet, as we have already said, it is not only his mind that has become prematurely independent, but his feelings, as well. He feels autonomous and independent concerning what excites and what moves him. If we do not first begin to arouse his soul so that it will be moved and affected by every mitzvah, by the Torah and by the light of God, we will not accomplish anything, God forbid. For even if the child understands intellectually that he is responsible for his own education, his feelings and desires will steer him off the good path to the path that he himself knows is evil.[[13]](#footnote-14)

1. Reassigning responsibility for education and for the pupil’s development from the teacher to the pupil himself:

It is not sufficient to simply teach the child that it is his duty to listen to his teacher and nothing more, for this alone will not have any effect. In the end, he will see his teacher as an opponent, a foreign despot, as we have already said. The most important thing is to make him understand the following: he must know that he himself is his own most basic and important educator. He is not a mere child or youth, but a shoot planted by God in the vineyard of Israel. God has placed upon him the duty of causing this shoot to grow, of cultivating it – himself – until it becomes a great tree, a tree of life. He must make of it – himself – a servant of God, a righteous person, great in Torah knowledge.[[14]](#footnote-15)

1. Establishing a community of pupils who jointly carry the responsibility for education: "The community of peers must also be continually renewed."[[15]](#footnote-16)

The Admor himself was aware that his educational approach was novel. When suggesting his opinions, he made note of the accepted views he was renouncing:[[16]](#footnote-17)

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 as 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 teaching and education, while lack of success is considered the fault of the pupils:

We tend to look at our youth who become heretics [*mitkhaper*] as if they alone were to blame and we were completely innocent…Can we truly put all of the blame on them?...Why should we fool ourselves with empty excuses, that we have tried to pass on the traditions and that they are at fault, having refused to accept them…Can we truly say, with an untroubled soul, "Our hands have not spilled this blood," the lifeblood of the Jewish souls that are descending to spiritual darkness?"[[17]](#footnote-18)

1. Lack of attention to the social ties among pupils.

The Admor 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 sayings of the Sages. When referring to later sources in his book, he suffices with the founders of Hasidism, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi (the author of the *Tanya*) and the founders of his own dynasty, the Maggid of Koshnitz and his father Rabbi Elimelech of Grodzisk in his book *Imrei Elimelekh* (The Sayings of Elimelech).[[18]](#footnote-19) He barely mentions any external sources, and when he does 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 own anger.[[19]](#footnote-20)

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 medicine and even offered his disciples prescriptions.[[20]](#footnote-21) In Daniel Reiser’s opinion, 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 basic knowledge of the medical terms of his time.[[21]](#footnote-22) 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.[[22]](#footnote-23)

Another great educator who was active in the same time and place as the Rebbe of Piaseczno, 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 hardships 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 ever having met. Still, there are conspicuous similarities between the educational legacy of the Rabbi and of the doctor, and all the points listed among the Admor's innovations above were developed extensively in Korczak’s educational approach.[[23]](#footnote-24) How, then, can we explain the great similarities between these two educators?

As mentioned, the Admor does not list the sources of his approach and of course there are no references to sources from the general pedagogic literature. Korczak likewise does not explain his sources in his works. Because Korczak’s formal education was in the field of medicine and his pedagogic literature was not written in academic and professional form, it is difficult to point to systemic sources for the formulation of his educational approach.[[24]](#footnote-25) 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.[[25]](#footnote-26)

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 individuals described the circumstances that led them to develop an unaccepted educational approach, mainly as a critical reaction. Shapira was forced to contend with the collapse of traditional Hasidic education during his time,[[26]](#footnote-27) while Korczak was exposed to the wretchedness and injustice in children’s education, mainly regarding orphans – on whom he focused special care.[[27]](#footnote-28)

At the start of the 20th century, therefore, many negative elements came together to create a fitting atmosphere for the development of innovative educational experiments. There was a general sense that the old social and educational systems were collapsing. But that was not enough. In previous generations, and in this period, as well, there were educators who thought that the way to deal with the most acute educational problems was to use additional discipline, coercion and control in schools. They believed – as some believe to this day – that a tolerant and forgiving attitude towards students represents weakness and failure of the education system.

The new approaches offered by these two educators from Warsaw, can also be explained based on positive changes: the development of new social, psychological and pedagogic theories offering ways to correct education.

The new theories that emerged during this period appeared simultaneously – but, perhaps independently – in various places throughout the world: In the United States,[[28]](#footnote-29) Russia,[[29]](#footnote-30) England,[[30]](#footnote-31) Germany,[[31]](#footnote-32) Italy,[[32]](#footnote-33) in Palestine[[33]](#footnote-34) and elsewhere. The common denominator amongst all these theories is the idea commonly referred to as "humanistic education" in which more emphasis is placed on the child, on the individual. The particular nature and uniqueness of each child requires responsiveness and sensitivity to the child's special needs, and the reduction of the dimension of fear, coercion and discipline. The preferred approach is love, freedom and understanding based on consent, together with self-management on the part of the students.[[34]](#footnote-35)

The rise of humanistic education starts at the beginning of the modern era. Here we find a similar phenomenon: two intellectuals who are close in time and place, with no proven connection between them, one Christian and the other Jewish, were developing new methods of pedagogy, which were revolutionary for their time and essentially similar to each other. These two individuals are the Maharal of Prague and the priest Johann Amos Comenius.[[35]](#footnote-36)

Although the Admor of Piaseczno does not mention the pedagogic sources of humanistic education, he describes the foundation of the educational challenge of his time as stemming from the humanism of the modern era: the rise of the status and dignity of the individual. The Admor frames this in a negative light, yet this brings him to a positive response, in the spirit of the humanistic era. The Admor claims that the difference between education in the past and contemporary education is that in the past the student grew up within a social framework in which the authority and status of parents, teachers and the community was unquestioned, while in his time the developing adolescent comes from an opinionated and independent approach.[[36]](#footnote-37) For this reason, he recommends developing an approach that will take these elements into consideration by empowering the student and his status, both in his own eyes and within the educational system, without making an attempt to suppress him.

With strong principles and with hard facts – not with guesses and presumptions – we must explain, first of all, the difference between generations. Why, in previous generations, did just about any kind of education seem effective? Almost every student of every teacher and every child of every father served God, while now this is not the case.

The simplest and most important reason is that today's youth consider themselves men before their time. This is not simply a wild guess: the whole world, actually, is lamenting about the same phenomenon. Our purpose is not to explain the reason or cause for this attitude among young people, but the fact is that it does exist.

This trait has caught fire to such an extent that one is sometimes astonished to encounter this independent spirit and false strength bursting forth in very small children who already consider themselves to be men.[[37]](#footnote-38)

Thus, we find that the Admor identifies the basic humanistic principle of the importance of man and his greatness, and he bases his educational doctrine on this.[[38]](#footnote-39) In a very similar manner, albeit unconnected to it, one can find an analogous phenomenon in the Mussar movement in Slabodka, whose educational approach nurtures the value of man's greatness[[39]](#footnote-40) and liberty,[[40]](#footnote-41) as well as in Rav Kook's teachings, in which he emphasizes the superiority of every Jewish person, arguing that the main task of education is to nurture the uniqueness of each and every student.[[41]](#footnote-42)

Clearly, environmental phenomenon would have had no influence had these individuals been incapable of accepting these theories and if these new trends had not resonated in the recesses of their souls.[[42]](#footnote-43) Their attitude towards man, humanity and children was soul-deep and did not merely stem from the adoption of 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 – the Admor in his role as spiritual shepherd, the Admor'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.[[43]](#footnote-44)

An Admor and a physician deal in somewhat similar practices. 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. Replicating this knowledge and its accompanying human sensitivity to the field of education is the common denominator between these two individuals, and their innovation in the educational process.

1. *Kuntres Hovat HaTalmidim*, Warsaw, Feder Bros. Publishing, 1932, including three additional essays. This is the only one of his books that was published in his lifetime. For a history of his writings, see Wacks, *The Flame of the Holy Fire*, 2010, pp. 35-50, and in greater detail in Daniel Reiser's to the edition of *Sermons from the Years of Rage* (Shapira and

   Reiser 2017, pp. 25-53). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Published by the Association of Piaseczno Hassidism, Tel Aviv, 1962, including the essays *Mevo HaShe'arim*, an introduction to *Hovat HaAvreikhim*, and *Tzav VeZiruz* (Command and Encouragement). According to the publisher, these works were discovered in the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto after the Holocaust, as was *Sermons from the Years of Rage.*  In a letter written on 26 Tevet 5703 he explains that publication of these books had begun before the war, but that circumstances kept them from being printed (the letter appears at the beginning of the 2011 edition of *Derekh Hamelekh*). The book *Hovat HaAvreikhim* has been lost and was never published, although on page 644 of *Derekh Hamelekh* there appears "a unique essay that survived from his great work *Hovat HaAvreikhim*" that is entitled: "The method of study that is unique to the Jewish people and their Torah." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Jerusalem, 1970 (Publisher unknown). Prior to the Holocaust, this essay had been sent by the author to his brother, R. Yeshaya Shapira in Jerusalem. Both *Bnei Machshova Tova* and *Tzav VeZiruz* are mentioned in a sermon that appears in *Derekh Hamelekh* (Feldheim edition, Jerusalem 2011, pp. 642-3) from the year 1931(!). Reiser, however, corrected the date to 1938 based on the manuscript (Shapira and Reiser 2017, p. 41).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Two additional works are collections of sermons: *Sermons from the Years of Rage,* which was first published as *Aish Kodesh*, and *Derekh HaMelekh*, the Association of Piaseczno Hassidism, Tel Aviv, 1976, which are sermons delivered on the weekly Torah portion and on holidays. Mendel Piekarz was the first to write about *Aish Kodesh* (Piekarz 1979), followed by Nehemia Polin (Polin 1994).

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The yeshiva was called "Da'at Moshe." See the article by Gershon Leizerson in *Dos Yiddishe Vort*, Heshvan-Kislev 5751, "The Piaseczno Rebbe," p. 34 [Yiddish]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Aside from this yeshiva, there also was a "Kibbutz Halakha" where older students studied in preparation for Rabbinic ordination. It is possible that the work *Hakhsharat HaAvreikhim* was written for these students. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Moriah Herman's M.A. thesis focused on his vision and work in the area of education (Herman 2006), and she returned to this theme in her doctoral dissertation, which was devoted to Jewish education in Poland in the inter-war period (Herman 2015). Ron Wacks devotes a chapter of his *The Flame of the Holy Fire* to an analysis of his educational doctrine (Wacks, 2010, pp. 241-268). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. For a definition of the nature and types of humanistic education, see Nimrod Aloni, *To Be a Man*, pp. 69-127 (Aloni 1998). The main perspective, albeit not the only one, that we will be referring to in this article, is called by Aloni "the Romantic-Naturalistic approach," whose origins are attributed mainly to Rousseau (pp. 43-48). See also: Lavi 1978, pp. 69-102. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. For a detailed survey of the Admor's educational teachings, see: Herman, 5766, pp. 60-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. *Hovat HaTalmidim*, p. 9. The quotes are from the Feldheim edition, Jerusalem, 2011. In his *Mevo HaShe'arim* (Feldheim edition, 2001, p. 316) he explains that every person is obligated to "comprehend his entire soul and its ways," so that he can properly develop. This follows the teaching of the Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto at the end of his *Mesilat Yesharim* (Chapter 26) that every individual has his own true path to higher service. Luzzatto is referring to behavioral differences, while the Admor is discussing personality differences. See also *Tzav VeZiruz*, pp. 332-333. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. *Hovat HaTalmidim*, pp. 9-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. See G. B. Leonard's *Education and Ecstasy* (1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. *Hovat HaTalmidim*, p. 20. Later in this passage, the Admor explains that this concept is one of the principles of Hassidic belief. Given that the intellectual connection does not constitute a permanent bond it is essential that there be a connection by means of his soul and his physical life-force. He expands on this idea in his *Hakhsharat HaAvreikhim* when he discusses the obligation to serve God with enthusiasm and excitement, as well as the means to reach that goal. In this context, he also developed an approach of using one's imagination ("Guided Imagery"). See the articles by Ron Wachs on enthusiasm and excitement (Wachs, 2003-2004), and on Guided Imagery (Wachs, "Techniques of Guided Imagery in the Thought of R. Klonimus Kalmish Shapira of Piaseczno," 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. *Hovat HaTalmidim*, p. 18. See, on p. 86, an example of a direct appeal to a student on this matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *Hakhsharat HaAvreikhim*, Feldheim edition (2001), p. 143. Also see Chapter 11, entitled *HaHevraya*, in its entirety. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. These remarks are emphasized mainly in his criticism of the educators in his introduction addressed to them at the beginning of *Hovat HaTalmidim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. *Hovat HaTalmidim* p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Wacks emphasizes the lack of source material from the Piaseczno Hassidic stream (Wacks 2010, pp. 47-50). Nathaniel Lederberg shows that the Admor argues with the leadership of the Imrei Emes, Rabbi Avraham Mordecai Alter of Gur, regarding youth education (Lederberg 2009, pp. 193-197). On the Gur-Piaseczno dispute on the matter of the study of kabbala, see the sources brought by Rieser (Shapira and Reiser 2017, p. 19, n. 33). Nevertheless, classic Hassidic sources appear more in philosophical writings and less in pedagogical writings.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. *Hovat HaTalmidim*, p. 80. See also his criticism on psychology in *Mevo HaShe'arim*, pp. 317-318.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Herman 2006, p. 108, n. 428.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Shapira and Resier 2017, p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. For further discussion of possible outside sources for the Admor's educational doctrine, see: Herman 2006, pp. 81-82, Wacks and Reiser. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Daniel Reiser already noted the similarities between the two and the need for further study of the parallels between them, together with a more general examination of the relationship between the Admor's educational philosophy and contemporary educational approaches (Reiser 2011, pp. 273-275).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. On Korczak's exposure to Western European literature in the realm of child care, see Yitzchak Perliss' introduction to *The Nation of Children*, p. 28 (Korczak 1974).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. These ideas appear as early as the beginning of the modern era, in the Jewish community in the educational doctrine of the Maharal, as well as in the pedagogic teachings of John Amos Comenius (1592-1670), a Czech educator who authored *The Great Didactic*. He was preceded in the writing of educational tracts with a Humanistic approach by Michel de Montaigne of France (1533-1592) in his essay "On the Education of Children." These educational approaches did not become accepted in educational systems until the 20th century. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. It would be appropriate to compare the educational revolution suggested by the Admor of Piaseczno with that of Rabbi Reines (1839-1915). He, too, was disturbed by crisis in Torah education, and he established an educational institution built on a new educational theory that was also grounded in Humanistic values. Rabbi Reines and his yeshiva in Lida (established in 1905) were well-known throughout the religious world of that time, and it is difficult to imagine that the Rebbe from Piaseczno was unaware of its existence, and was not influenced by Rabbi Reines' ideas. See Y. Shapira 2002, pp. 295-352. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. See, for example, in the collection *Children of the Streets* *and* *A Child of the Salon* (Korczak 1988) and in the chapters on the Dormitory and the Orphanage (Korczak 1974, pp. 279-461).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. E.g., the work of John Dewey (1859-1952) (Dewey 2000). The publication of this volume in 1916 is considered a milestone in the development of progressive education in the United States. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Tolstoy's school for farmer's children in Yasnaya, Polyana (established in 1859). See Cohen 1983. Under his influence, the brothers Zev and Abba Gordin opened the Ivriah school in Smorgon, Lithuania in 1909. See Stein 1960. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. A.S. Neill (1883-1973) established the Summerhill School (established in 1921). See Neill 1977.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. The Waldorf School was established by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who was the founder of anthroposophy. The school was established in Stuttgart in 1919. See Steiner 1963. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. The Montessori Method, which was developed by Maria Montessori (1870-1952). (Montessori 1911). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. On the progressive education in the "Labor Movement" in pre-State Israel, see Reshef 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. The beginning of this approach is usually attributed to Rousseau (Rousseau 2009), followed by the Pestalozzi (Pestalozzi 1927). See: Cohen 1983. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. They both led educational revolutions that have striking similarities, but it is difficult to point to direct connections between them or find common sources. See the discussions of Kleinberger (Kleinberger 1962, p. 157), and Kolka (Kolka 1985, pp. 297-307). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. See: Moriah Herman (Herman 2006, pp. 5, 42-45). Herman's thesis is that the Admor's efforts aimed to deal with the phenomenon of religious departure amongst religious youth in Poland, whereas the question focused on in this article is how he developed his educational doctrine and why he saw it as a solution to the crisis. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. *Hovat HaTalmidim* pp. 14-15. The Rebbe explains that there are two negative consequences to this phenomenon. One is the development of the child's hostility toward every educator who comes to pull him with a strong hand and to deprive him of the power of his independence, his intention and his will. Furthermore, the early crystallization of the self, an early maturation, leads to the formulation of immature norms of behavior and thought. Decades later this phenomenon was described by Neil Postman in his *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Postman 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Herman 2006, pp. 47-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. See, for example, Hertzman 1945, Schwartz (Jerusalem). On the approach of the "Sabba of Slabodka" and his place in the Mussar Movement, see Katz 1996, v. III. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. See: Brown 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. See: Brandes 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Another avenue of entrance for these ideas into the traditional Hasidic world was through the influence of the Haskalah, its proposals in the area of education, and the *heder metukan* – the "improved classroom" – that it established. Although the Admor never accepted the demand to add secular studies, the call for consideration of the child's soul resonates in his writings. For example, see Breuer and Graetz (2000), on the extensive public concern with the problems of traditional education and its reform see Slutzky 1971, pp. 254-265. On the general process of modernization in Jewish education in Eastern Europe following the Enlightenment, see Zalkin 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Ernst Simon and others were critical of Korczak due to the lack of a systematic educational approach in his work (Cohen 1963, p. 207). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)