

THE DIRTY-HANDED ET ROLL-BACK MODEL OF JEWISH EDUCATION

by Jordan Hill

Think about the classical portrayal of aliens — the extraterrestrial sort — in American culture: massive heads, eyes, and finger tips held together by a spindly, almost shriveled, body. A friend of mine pointed out that this is a pretty good representation of what we as modern humans tend to develop in ourselves: our heads for thinking (almost non-stop!), our eyes for gazing at computers/books/TV/movies/phones/etc., and our fingertips for using the tools to help us navigate that which we spend so much of our time staring at. I think many would agree that we Jews go this route as much as, if not more than, our fellow society members. I mentioned this to the headmaster of the Jewish day school where I teach, and he concurred that Jewish educators put a disproportionate amount of our emphasis on teaching students' heads, often leaving their hearts, bodies, hands, feet, imaginations, and (dare I say) spirits behind. I do my fair share of "head" (a.k.a. conceptual) teaching. It's hard to avoid as a modern teacher, and anyways the point isn't to avoid it. Rather, my goal as a Jewish educator is to strike a balance.

Thus I strive to implement the dirty-handed ET roll-back model of Jewish education. Why dirty-handed? Instead of just feeding information to students, the dirty-handed approach is to give them opportunities to engage in the material in as many hands-on, experiential ways as possible — i.e., to facilitate their "getting their hands dirty" as they embark on their own direct explorations. And ET roll-back? Rolling back our tendency of turning Jewish youth into "aliens" with huge heads and eyes!

At the supplementary Hebrew High where I teach, I'm blessed to get to play around with this methodology in a number of contexts. Instead of just teaching about the history and structure of klezmer music, I've led a high-school klezmer band for musicians and non-musicians alike. In my class on Jewish storytelling, we do some talking about the tradition of Jewish storytelling, but what I find much more valuable — for my students and myself — is to facilitate the students becoming Jewish storytellers themselves and finding out firsthand about the tradition from within. In my meditation and Jewish spiritual practices classes, there are plenty of interesting conversations to be had, but what of substance is there really to talk about if I'm the only one in the classroom who's tried out these practices for myself? In short, I'm not too interested in how much information I impart to my students. What I care about is giving them an experience.

This is, of course, nothing new. Good modern teachers understand that students learn the most when they directly engage with information and do so through multiple modalities. Yet creating lessons based on this approach can be daunting, as it requires some extra time, creativity, and experience that many of us feel like we don't have. In comparison, just getting

You are encouraged to share this article with colleagues. We ask only that you let people know that this article originally appeared in NewCAJE's online journal, *The Jewish Educator*. Other articles on this topic may be found on the NewCAJE website, www.newcaje.org.

up and talking about something one already knows about seems far easier — and truth be told, far safer. However, any attempt in a dirty-handed ET roll-back direction, no matter how partial or unrefined (and Lord knows how unrefined many of my attempts are!), is often quickly rewarded by both the impact it has on the students and what this then means for the teacher. As a simple example of the latter, a more engaging approach will get more students enthusiastic about the material, and this, in turn, frees the teacher from expending energy in classroom management or in constantly trying to rouse some interest in somnolent students.

The benefits for teachers and students go on and on. This little dirty-handed exploration is of course just scratching the surface of what such an approach can mean for everyone involved in Jewish education. Indeed, the only ones I can think of who really lose out are those waiting to meet a Jewish alien.

Jordan Hill is a storyteller and dramatic educator for whom high-energy storytelling is inextricably bound to his extensive teaching in just about all types of Jewish educational venues. He now teaches at Tucson's Jewish Day School and Hebrew High, yet slips into a metaphorical phone booth to fly around the country to weave wonders, turn tales, and teach storytelling.
jordanhillstoryteller@gmail.com