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HOT TOPIC: Can adding a spiritual dimension enhance a child's Jewish identity and practice?

SOUL NURTURE:

IGNITING AND MAINTAINING CHILDREN'S INTEREST IN JUDAISM

by Yehudis Fishman

If I had one message to deliver to anyone who cares about Jewish children, it would be "Don't extinguish the young embers!" I can speak not only for myself, but also for hundreds of former students. A key factor in awakening and fostering interest in Jewish education is a passion and exposure to aspects of Judaism that can rival the longing that children have for the mysterious. In this left-brained, competitive, and achievement-oriented world, it often is rationalized out of them in contemporary educational circles, across many denominations.

Speaking about "orient," is it any wonder that so many of our Jewish youth are attracted to Eastern cultures and even religions? There is a natural yearning in a pure *neshama*, perhaps hard-wired into the relatively neglected right brain area, for journeying into the unknown, and even cognitively, in contrast to experientially, unknowable, mystical areas of life.

When I was around *bat mitzvah* age, I wandered into a secret room with closed, heavily embossed doors at the West End library behind the State House in Boston. The smell of musty books assailed me, and I felt myself transported back in time. Most of the books contained yellowed, ancient pages, but I pulled off the shelves one English book on *Kabbalah*, with diagrams that were totally arcane, but intriguing. I withdrew it from the library, took it to my Jewish day school, and read it under my desk when whatever class I was in got too boring. Once, a rabbi came over, pulled the book away, and said that I shouldn't be reading such a book at my age. You can imagine what the rest of the class thought! But – that book changed my life. It took me out of a humdrum and even depressing welfare home environment into other worlds. The idea that there was an entire universe – or many universes – beyond my reality sustained my spirit and has continued to do so.

My point is that no matter what type of belief system a teacher, a school or a family has, if there is a lack of awareness and provision for a context in Judaism to sustain the super-rational longing in the heart of the student, he or she will try to feed that craving outside of Judaism. Arts and other kinds of creative expressions do not have the same intensity and enigma about them that stories of split seas, talking donkeys, prophets, or Hassidic masters do. Yes, I am taking for granted openness to the miraculous. I am contending that – without showing, or even by downplaying, the Jewish connection to the miraculous. The sensitive soul in particular will not be sustained by the existing Jewish curricula of mere facts and cognitive data. Some may respond that, in this modern world, these teachings are antiquated. However, I and other

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effective teachers insist that in what is becoming more and more of a quantum, rather than mechanistic, reality, no other approach can come close to exploring rationally unexplainable phenomena that parallel the cutting edge of scientific and new age research and findings. Near death experiences, studies of indigo children (children who are believed to possess special, unusual, and sometimes supernatural traits or abilities), and even facilitated communication push the boundaries between the possible and the probable, and arouse the spirit to a fuller life experience.

I am not advocating blind faith in every story or mystical teaching that comes down to us. However, I am pleading with Jewish educators to examine their conscious or even unconscious pre-judgments about the possibility of the miraculous not only to exist, but also to be a vital aspect of Jewish tradition. Unfortunately, much of our historical dynamics has involved reactivity to perceived extremes in philosophies and life styles – what I would call a fluctuation between left brain vs. right brain modalities – rather than to the inclusive richness of our tradition. So I suppose I am asking a primarily left brain system to both acknowledge and incorporate more right brain perspectives and phenomenon. Without this inclusion, the best Jewish education can remain dry and uninspiring. With it, on the other hand, the richness and fullness of our tradition can impact our youth like nothing else. As a recent slew of articles in a compilation called *Klal Perspectives*,¹ puts it, the corpus of Jewish teachings will be lifeless, without bringing soul back into the picture.

How to bring about this 'ensouling' wisdom is a topic for another article.

Endnotes:

1. Klal Perspectives: www.klalperspectives.org

Yehudis Fishman has been teaching Torah and Chassidic philosophy to people of all ages and backgrounds for over fifty years both on the East Coast and out West. For six years, she has been the spiritual director of Congregation Aish Kodesh in Boulder, Colorado, and continues to teach and counsel both children and adults in Boulder and Denver. Her qualities of erudition, relevance, sensitivity, and humor endear her to a broad spectrum of multigenerational students. She is also the 2012 Boulder recipient of the Grinspoon-Steinhardt Award of Jewish Educator of the Year.

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