

Soulful Education

WHY IMPARTING KNOWLEDGE
IS NOT ENOUGH

For Successful Rabbis and Educators
Who Want “More”

ARYEH BEN DAVID

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איקה *Ayeka*

www.ayeka.org.il

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SOULFUL JEWISH EDUCATION

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With gratitude,

Aryeh Ben David
Director of *Ayeka*

MY CRISIS AS A TEACHER

I always dreamed of becoming a teacher, and my dreams came true at a young age. In my thirties, I had the great privilege of teaching adults at wonderful institutions – the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem, Livnot U'Lehibanot and Hillel International – and in my heart of hearts, I thought I would spend my whole life in those classrooms. Five years of teaching became 10, and 10 became 15. I was fulfilled and happy – I loved my students, and often felt their affection in return.

But then, in my 15th year of teaching, things began to change for me. Nothing dramatic occurred: there was thankfully no external event, no life-threatening disease, no serious accident. But something began to shift inside. Increasingly, I began to realize that I was entering into a crisis.

It began as a small, irking, unsettling feeling. Teaching was going well, perhaps better than ever. Students were learning and motivated, saying all the right things. I was popular, my “bosses” were delighted with my record, and I already had my contract for the next year. But something was flat, wrong, lacking.

Over time, I began to be able to put words to this feeling: the mind-focused mastery of Jewish knowledge that I had pursued, and that I was asking my students to pursue, as fulfilling as it could be, **was simply not enough.**

By the middle of the year, what started as a small, nagging feeling had become a constant queasiness. By the end of the year, I felt as if I were being strangled by an invisible force. Something had broken. After 15 years of “successful” teaching, I couldn't continue.

I wanted – I needed – more.

A small, relentless voice in my soul was begging me to acknowledge what always should have been so clear: that **Jewish wisdom is much,**

much more than information.

My soul was challenging my teacher's ego, saying, "You think you're successful? You may know how to convey the material, to cram Jewish knowledge into open minds. **But what are you bringing into their hearts, their souls, and their lives?**" The once-timid voice kept getting stronger and stronger, saying, "What you are doing, Aryeh, is just not enough!!"

To be fair, it's easy enough to understand why Jewish teaching is so focused on the intellect. The beauty of our tradition is expressed in a long chain of texts upon texts, offering endless insights to the diligent student. But what's the ultimate purpose here – **to know more, or to be more?** As Jewish educators, should we be more interested in how much our students learn, or how deeply they bring the learning into their lives? Shouldn't the texts be springboards for personal growth, for changing ourselves, our communities, our world?

ARE WE FOCUSED ON MAKING SMARTER JEWS, OR BETTER JEWS? A SMARTER PEOPLE, OR A BETTER PEOPLE?

In short, why was I, a successful teacher, so focused on penetrating my students' minds, and so nervous about touching their souls?

My inner voice would not let me rest. Henri Nouwen¹ writes, "Spiritual books must be studied in a spiritual way. Not for us to master them, but for them to master us." It is time that we, who have dedicated ourselves to Jewish education, bring this awareness into our teachings and interactions.

Over the past five years, this awareness has completely transformed my teaching approach, leading me to experiment and refine a methodology of "soulful" teaching. The small book that you hold in your hands is a "Manifesto" or "Credo" of the soulful teaching method that has evolved, and a handbook work-in-progress for those

¹ *Spiritual Direction – Wisdom for the Long Walk of Faith*, pp. 92, 93

considering joining me on the journey.

I understand that this approach is not for everyone. Many Jewish educators who are satisfied with the mind-centered approach to teaching are clearly making a valuable contribution to the Jewish People.

But I believe that we should be aiming for more. Our students want and deserve more from us. In point of fact, many of those who can't find what they need in Jewish institutions as they are today are voting with their feet, opting out of the organized Jewish community altogether.



This book is written for successful Rabbis, educators, principals – for everyone who puts their hearts, souls and minds on the line for Jewish education. It is for all those who have succeeded in their educational efforts, but, like me, feel the time has come for “more”.

If you are a successful teacher who has ever felt a relentless, urging inner voice –

If you are a searching individual who yearns to bring Jewish sources into the hearts, souls, and lives of your students –

If you are a soulful pioneer who wants Jewish knowledge to change and better the lives of your students –

Then we are kindred spirits. I invite you to share my journey as a Jewish Educator wanting “more”.

[A note: While my personal educational experience has been primarily with college age students and adults, I think you will find these principles adaptable for all ages of teaching, in both formal and informal settings.]



THE ISSUE

The issue is actually very simple: how can we bring Jewish learning from the mind to the heart? How can we teach Jewish texts so that they will be soulfully transforming for ourselves and our students?

As Jewish educators, we have proven our ability to teach mind-to-mind. We have succeeded in conveying worlds of Jewish content, familiarizing our students with countless numbers of books. But we have been less successful in reaching their hearts, their souls, and their lives. To succeed in this realm, we need to bring a fundamental change - a different perspective - to our teaching.

I believe that we need a full-out paradigm shift: in the way we prepare material, the atmosphere we aim for in the classroom – and certainly in our expectations of our students and ourselves. Most importantly,

WE NEED A PARADIGM SHIFT IN OUR DEFINITION OF “SUCCESSFUL TEACHING”

“Success” is a difficult term to define and measure in the world of education.

For me, “success” meant mastering masses of content, conveying this material to my students, and, in some fulfilling instances, sparking a life-long desire for continued learning.

But then I realized that our goal could be – and should be – about more than content and pedagogy. It could be about turning information into transformation, knowledge into wisdom. This is the “more” that we are seeking in soulful education: a different definition of success.

In Soulful Education:

- “Success” means creating a space for students to bring Jewish knowledge from their minds to their hearts, souls, and lives.

SOULFUL JEWISH EDUCATION

- “Success” means enabling students to hear their own authentic inner voices, and to feel nourished and clarified through the learning process.
- “Success” means inviting and empowering students to apply Jewish knowledge to their unique identities and paths in life.

Today, the pressing educational need is to address the “big” questions:

- “Where am I?”
- “Where is my voice?”
- “How can I personally connect to the learning?”
- “How can I bring the learning into my life in a healthy, authentic, and productive way?”

But most of today’s formal Jewish education shies away from these questions. In fact, the training offered to most of our rabbis and educators focuses exclusively on the intellect - mastering Jewish materials, developing clear lesson plans and syllabi, and perfecting skillful pedagogic methods.

Did any of your teachers offer you a class in “Evoking the soul of the learner” or “Helping the learner bring Jewish knowledge into his/her heart and life”?

I once asked an experienced and very successful Talmud teacher, “How do you help your students integrate their learning and bring it into their lives?” He replied: “It happens automatically. The students naturally incorporate their learning into their daily lives. We don’t need to take time to address it.”

I don’t think so. At least, it didn’t happen automatically for me.

One year, my study partner, Daniel, and I learned the tractate of Kiddushin, which covers the laws of marriage. We fell in love with this tractate and learned it again and again.

Not once did we ask each other: “Is this material affecting your marriage?”

Not once.

This level of awareness simply wasn't on our radar screen. If the question had been raised, I don't think we would have been interested in addressing it. Our agenda was clear: we needed to understand and master the material. If someone had dared to raise the question of how we could personalize the content and bring it into our lives, we probably would have scoffed.

My mind was fully present in the Beit Midrash, but my inner voice was not. The voices we listened to belonged exclusively to the holy texts – the beautiful, resonant voices of Hillel, Shammai, Rabbi Akiva, Maimonides and the Ba'al Shem Tov. But I did not know how to let these voices create a similar resonance inside of me: my inner voice was silent.

At the time, this did not bother me. In fact, I was not even aware that I had an inner voice. I was a serious and conscientious student who studied day in and day out, and many many nights. I was fascinated by the material – I learned, and then learned more. But this was 'effective education', not 'affective education'. When I walked out of the Beit Midrash, I was more or less the same Aryeh that walked in, albeit with much greater knowledge of Jewish texts.

The success of the educational system I experienced was measured by its ability to transmit quantities of information. The most respected figure in the Beit Midrash was the *talmid chacham*– the scholar with the most extensive and deepest mastery of Jewish texts. We lived to emulate him.

The desire to learn more and more occupied all of our time and emotional energy. This precluded our ever taking the time to stop, process, and connect personally with the texts we had studied. How could we slow down, when we had barely opened a fraction of the holy, important and scholarly books on the shelves?



THE DANGERS OF MIND-TO-MIND EDUCATION

No one ever warned me of the educational dangers – for both students and teachers – which pervade the classic mind-to-mind, content-focused educational approach which presently dominates the Jewish educational scene. I learned about them the hard way.

THE DANGERS FOR STUDENTS –

1) Feeling Disconnected

For 20 years, I taught Jewish Studies to adults ranging in age from 18-75. I taught Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, Jewish Thought, Prayer, and Ethics. I taught in Israel, the U.S. and England.

The students unquestionably absorbed a tremendous amount of information, and, for the most part, seemed to derive satisfaction and enjoyment from the process. But over the years, it became increasingly clear to me that there was a deeply-rooted problem of disconnection.

IF PEOPLE DO NOT FIND AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION TO THEIR LEARNING AND ARE UNABLE TO RECOGNIZE ITS PERSONAL RELEVANCE, THEN ALL THAT THEY LEARN WILL REMAIN DETACHED AND DISCONNECTED FROM THEIR LIVES.

Thoughts and ideas will “dangle” in the outer hemispheres, never penetrating their actual lives.

Together with other educators, I have often reflected upon the tragedy of disconnection. It seems that almost everyone is aware of this problem, though few have been forthcoming in addressing it.

My frustrations are often met with a nod of recognition, followed by

a shrug of the shoulders, as if to say, “What do you want? What can you expect?”

Rav Kook² cautions that the separation of mind and heart while learning creates a space for internal dissonance and personal destruction. A disconnect between mind and heart, between intellectual and emotional life, causes confusion and disharmony. Like the left and right hands, like the accelerator and brakes of a car, the mind and heart have to work in tandem. When they send different or colliding messages, the results can be disastrous.

2) Feeling Marginalized

I doubt that any experienced rabbi, teacher, or educator would openly profess to favoring one student over another. If asked, we would all quickly declare that we care equally about all our students, just as we care equally about all our children.

Nevertheless, in a content-focused, academic educational setting in which the goals of the class are quantifiable – namely, how much, how quickly, and how well the students learn the material – the more intellectually-gifted students tend to gain center-stage focus, while the less gifted students drift to the margins.

I once experienced an extreme example of this phenomenon while sitting in on my son’s high school Talmud class. I soon realized that the teacher was teaching to the five smartest and most actively engaged students, while the 20 students for whom it was more difficult to grasp the subject fiddled and day-dreamed. When I related the incident to the principal, he replied, “Yes, we like the bookish ones...”

Every one-to-many educational setting inherently creates a hierarchic imbalance in the intellectual abilities of the students. When education focuses on “how much and how well” to the exclusion of all other values, what happens to the students – whether in elementary school, high school or in rabbinical school – who do not excel in mastering the material?

² Orot HaKodesh III:247

THE DANGERS FOR TEACHERS –

1) Creating Insecure Teachers

A few years ago, I was asked to offer some helpful pointers to rabbinical students during the last weeks of their training. There were about 15 rabbis-to-be in the room.

I opened by asking a straightforward question: “Okay, rabbis-to-be, how many of you are scared to death that you don’t know enough?” Every hand shot up like a rocket. It was as if they had put their hands into an electric socket. They couldn’t raise their hands high enough.

And then I asked them, “And when do you think you will know enough? When will that happen?”

A long pause.

“Do you know,” I continued, “that your rabbi also thinks he doesn’t know enough? And his rabbi’s rabbi also. And his rabbi’s rabbi’s rabbi! It never ends.”

*This anxiety was palpable for these future rabbis. They had devoted endless hours to their learning. Their personal self-esteem - as well as their future career success - was entirely dependent upon their ability to prove intellectual proficiency and expertise. They defined themselves as knowledgeable educators. **And they were plagued with doubts.***

What happens to a rabbi or teacher who feels that he/she does not know enough? What happens to the inner psyche of an educator who questions his/her authenticity, who is plagued by feelings that he or she is a fraud?

This gnawing self-doubt eats away at every rabbi, teacher, and educator I know. No one ever believes that he or she knows “enough”. There are always more unopened books, more insights, more sources – people that are smarter, more experienced, wiser...

2) Creating unhealthy classroom relations

How does this insecurity affect our teaching? How does it subtly manifest itself in our classrooms? There are at least two common symptoms of this deep-seated insecurity, each of them yielding educational failures:

- **Over-Compensating:** A teacher or rabbi who is unsure of his/her scholarly authenticity will often over-compensate to demonstrate how thoroughly he or she knows the material

Several weeks ago, a guest lecturer came to our synagogue. At the beginning of his 50-minute class, he gave out three pages of sources that he intended to cover. Three pages. Seventeen profound and complicated sources. He covered all 17 sources at rapid-fire speed.

Why would an educator ever assume that even learned adults – much less average people – could both comprehend and process such a huge mass of sources in such a small amount of time?

Have you ever witnessed a rabbi or teacher talking too much and wondered why they are so long-winded? An insecure teacher or rabbi tends to talk too much, ever needing to demonstrate and validate his or her self-worth.

- **Over-Controlling:** The anxiety of not knowing enough also expresses itself in the teacher's need to over-control the class atmosphere.

Insecure teachers will tend to squelch the flow of a class, limiting students' questions and discussions. Their fear of exposing their lack of scholarship restricts and even prohibits the sometimes wonderfully spontaneous and unplanned developments that can emerge in a classroom setting.

In the past, I often felt the need to have the "final say" in my class. I would save the last several minutes of class time to present my own sparkling new and profound insight on the text.

Looking back now, I wonder – was this for sake of the students, so that they could leave class with a “bang”, or was it my ego showing off, demonstrating just how deeply I had mastered the material?

3) Creating unhealthy faculty relations

The perpetual fear of “not knowing enough” also damages faculty relations, preventing colleagues from developing a collaborative and supportive teaching environment. Educators without a strong sense of self-worth feel challenged and threatened by the expertise of their erudite colleagues. They continually compare and compete with other teachers, fearful, whether consciously or sub-consciously, that their lack of full mastery will be revealed.

Having personally felt this insecurity for many of my teaching years, I can remember feelings of both anger and anxiety arising within me when a fellow teacher offered deep insights, triggering in me doubts regarding my worth and authenticity.

WHEN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS IS MEASURED BY “HOW MUCH AND HOW WELL,” THEN BOTH STUDENTS AND TEACHERS FALL PREY TO BEING MEASURED, QUANTIFIED, AND PLACED ON A HIERARCHICAL SCALE OF WORTH. ON SUCH A SCALE, MOST STUDENTS AND TEACHERS PERCEIVE THEMSELVES AS FAILURES.



THE SOULFUL EDUCATION APPROACH

The “more” that I am talking about is a paradigm shift in education. I call this new approach Soulful Education.

After five years of developing the methodologies of Soulful Education, I can now say that the need is much greater than I imagined. How so?

IN AN ERA WHEN INFORMATION HAS BECOME AVAILABLE INSTANTLY TO EVERY PERSON IN MIND-BOGGLING, LIMITLESS QUANTITIES, WHAT WE NEED FROM JEWISH LEARNING IS LESS THE “WHAT,” AND MORE THE “HOW” – HOW CAN THIS INFORMATION AFFECT ME PERSONALLY, AND ENABLE ME TO BECOME MY BEST SELF?

Our soul is continually calling to us from within our best selves. It calls to us on many levels: in our daily lives, in our imminent decisions, and in the direction and purpose of an entire lifetime.

For Jews, Jewish wisdom is the vehicle for accessing the soul’s inner voice. But Jewish knowledge is not the same as Jewish wisdom. The intellectual process does not automatically break through to our souls and lives. It is only the first step.

For Jewish wisdom to become truly life-impacting, it helps enormously to have the support of the following five principles:

- “Safe space”
- Experiential learning
- Deep processing
- Kindred spirits
- Practical applications

Each of these principles is essential and plays a unique enabling role. They form a supportive platform that I believe must lay at the base of

any successful Soulful Education methodology.

The crystallization of these principles did not occur in a moment, a year, or even in several years. They are the end-product of a search that I embarked upon together with my own kindred spirits, who were all motivated by the same question: “What is the ‘more’ we are seeking and how can we create a replicable system to achieve it?”

As a starting point, we recognized that ‘affective education’ is often dependent upon charismatic or exceptionally gifted educators. But we wanted our system to be independent of any particular personality. We sought to develop an approach that could become part of every teacher’s repertoire, and could be integrated into every classroom, synagogue, and educational setting.

We began experimenting, with each new breakthrough leading to a new dilemma, followed by more solutions and more dilemmas. The entire process yielded both frustration and excitement. Eventually a full picture emerged, which I share with you below.

When I present this model, people often ask me the same two questions:

1. How do you know that your system actually works?

I could quote hundreds of testimonials that thank us for programs that touched and impacted them unlike any previous Jewish educational experience.

But the real reason that I know our Soulful Education methodology works is the effect it has had on me personally, changing me unlike any professional experiences in my previous 20 years of learning and teaching.

My son, Amichai is in the Israeli army. He recently told me that soldiers on their breaks often talk about their families, and that he had a really hard time describing what I do for a living. “But,” he said to me, “since you’ve been doing Ayeka, you have become a much nicer Abba.” I’d like to believe that

I was never an awful Abba. My wife, Sandra, and I are devoted to our six children. But there is no question that my own experience of soulful learning has helped me tap into my better self, and that continues to make me a better Abba.

2. How do you know that this system is actually replicable?

In the last several years, our system has been implemented in Jewish educational settings across the religious spectrum – in Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox synagogues, on university campuses, in JCC's and high schools. Over 100 educators and 1,000s of participants of all ages have experienced for themselves the Soulful Education approach.

The following chapters expand on each of the five essential principles of Soulful Jewish Education, relating the step-by-step journey which led to their formation.



THE 1ST BREAKTHROUGH – 3 VOICES OF THE SOUL

After 10 years in the race to acquire more and more information, after 20 years of teaching more and more information, my personal search for “more” led me directly into a personal quandary.

I was very much a product of the system. I knew how to learn and how to teach what I had learned, but not much more than that. I had never had role models showing me what the “more” I was seeking looked like. I didn’t know where to begin. All I really knew was that the mind-to-mind content-focused educational model I had been exposed to was not enough for me anymore. I wanted the knowledge in the Jewish books to deeply touch my students, and to become a transformational catalyst for their personal lives.

I asked many of my colleagues, teachers and rabbis alike, how they thought it would be possible to bring Jewish learning into the hearts of the students. Most of them stressed the importance of sharing personal stories and teaching with passion. But I was already doing this, and I still hadn’t witnessed the “more”. Some educators suggested techniques for making students more active learners, but I had also been doing that for several years.

Feeling driven to find some answers, I turned to Jewish sources to guide me. I couldn’t be the first educator to experience this dilemma. Jewish wisdom must somehow deal with this issue.

I started at the beginning.

The beginning of the Creation story describes a human being as a reflection of God – *Tzelem Elokim* or a living soul – *Nefesh chaya*.

The Midrash and Kabbalah explain that this soul actually has several different components or aspects. The three primary voices – Nefesh, Ruach, and Neshama – correspond to the physical nature, emotional

nature, and intellectual nature of a human being.

A FULL EDUCATIONAL PROCESS WOULD NEED TO ACCESS AND HARMONIZE THE THREE VOICES OF THE SOUL, TO INTEGRATE INTELLECTUAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL ELEMENTS.

Presently, in its mind-to-mind configuration, the Jewish approach to education contained primarily an intellectual element.

The **Neshama**, or intellectual component, was the most obvious to implement. We learned Jewish sources seriously, usually partnered up in chevruta, and then moved into a collective discussion. There would be a lot of debate, disagreement, and occasional sparks. We would slowly pick apart the texts and push each other to go deeper. Jews have been doing this form of intellectual learning for centuries.

But how to bring in the Nefesh and Ruach components? I was stumped. What would it mean to access or listen to our Nefesh or Ruach – our physical and emotional qualities – in an educational setting?

Personally, I do not naturally gravitate to anything beyond the cerebral. I don't sing, or dance, or draw, or do drama. I like to play chess. As my kids like to remind me, "Abba, we love you even though you are a nerd." Nevertheless, I understood that the inclusion of these two channels of the soul – Nefesh and Ruach – was essential to creating a full educational experience. I began to experiment.

Nefesh. If the Nefesh dimension reflected our souls communicating to us through our physical nature, then we had to do something to engage our physical selves, something physical. I couldn't see getting up to dance in the classroom, but we had to do more than just thinking or reflecting or talking. We had to do something tangible and concrete.

So we tried writing. We learned, and then we wrote about what we had learned. Trigger questions based on the learning started the writing process.

At first, we all felt a bit self-conscious. We picked up the pen, looked at the paper, and then hesitated. What if we got it wrong? What if we couldn't write anything? What if it came out trite or stupid? What would people think about us?

When I engaged intellectually, I was on safe turf, and fairly confident of my opinions. But now? Was I supposed to be a poet or a creative writer? Traumatic memories of high school English classes began to echo in my head.

To ease ourselves into this new process we set several rules:

- **No competing.** We wouldn't share what we wrote. This alleviated a lot of our anxiety and eliminated the inclination to compare ourselves to others.
- **No self-judging.** Whatever emerged was fine. It was part of our own internal learning process.
- **No self-censoring.** No editing. We let ourselves be guided by our sense of intuition and tried to write in stream of consciousness.

We wrote for about 5 to 10 minutes.

After the first trial writing attempt, we were all shocked to see the effect. We each had discovered some new aspect of the texts that had eluded us during our more cognitive analysis. Invariably, a new perspective on the subject emerged, often startling and unanticipated.

But even more significant was the awareness that **we were now engaging in a uniquely personal and candid way with the sources.** The writing, more accurately than the cognitive analysis, reflected how we personally engaged with the texts at hand.

When we explored the story of Moses and the burning bush, my writing focused on the quality of fire as an expression of passion or anger. This aspect of the story had not occurred to me while studying the text. Now, the story was not only about God's revelation to Moses, but also why Moses saw God's revelation through the particular lens of fire, and not through water or clouds

or other possible forms.

After learning the verse “And you should love your neighbor as yourself,” we wrote a blessing for someone with whom we were having a difficult time. While participating in the exercise myself, I began to see that the challenge of dealing with this person was in fact precisely the life lesson that I needed, and that it was actually possible for me to love this person. This was a lesson that had never occurred to me, even while preparing to teach the texts. The writing process revealed new aspects of the texts to me, while also enabling them to enter more deeply into my life.

As I grew bolder, I began experimenting with other expressions of the Nefesh/physical dimension in the classroom. Sometimes, after learning sources, we used pastels, drawing instead of writing. For me, this was venturing very far into my no-comfort zone. I had written extensively in college, and writing was still part of a world I could navigate. But art? Drawing? I flunked out somewhere around 4th grade.

Interestingly enough, it was precisely this lack of talent which opened up a new channel of learning, both for myself and for many of my students. Since most of us were aware that we possessed no artistic talent, we did not try to create a masterpiece. We just drew without pretense. The goal was to give the students a channel for personal expression that was tangible, meaningful, and private.

IN CLASSIC JEWISH LEARNING THERE IS VIRTUALLY NO OPPORTUNITY FOR INDIVIDUAL PERSONAL EXPRESSION.

This kind of experiential exercise provides a needed outlet for being “alone” with the sources and for personal expression. Traditionally, sources are learned in chevruta or small groups, followed by a class discussion. Rarely in the learning environment is there a venue through which a student can be alone with the learning. The writing and drawing exercises gave each student the time and opportunity to explore and express an exclusively personal connection to the sources.

Now,

WHEN I TEACH TEACHERS, ONE OF MY PRIMARY RULES IS: “ANY TEACHING – WITHOUT PROCESSING – NEVER HAPPENED.”

THE PROCESSING IS WHAT IMPRINTS THE LEARNING ONTO THE SOUL OF THE STUDENT AND LEAVES A LONG-LASTING IMPRESSION. OTHERWISE, THE KNOWLEDGE LEARNED TENDS TO SLIP AWAY WITHOUT LEAVING A TRACE.

Additionally, we immediately noticed a profound change in the class atmosphere. What had previously been a lively, dynamic, sometimes boisterous and occasionally ear-splitting setting had now become utterly quiet. What had been a paired or group activity had now become introspective and reflective. Now, everyone was intently focused on their individual writing or drawing, channeling and connecting the Nefesh dimension of their souls to their learning. The learning was finally being personalized.

SO WHAT WAS MISSING?

Ruach. The commentators connect the Ruach quality of our soul to the world of emotions, the heart, and the power of speech. In addition to “spirit”, Ruach can be translated as “wind”, linking the concept of soul to the wind or air that we blow through our vocal cords to create speech.

Numerous Jewish thinkers assert that the heart is the primary shaper of our character traits and director our lives. The Talmud³ itself states that “A person can only study from the place of his heart.” So it became clear to me that the emotional, heartfelt connection to Jewish wisdom would have to be the culminating element in Soulful Education. As an integrated whole, the learning and experiential steps would serve as

springboards for words that would emerge from the heart.

How to achieve this? How was it possible to foster “words from the heart” in a learning environment, an atmosphere often characterized by rigorous discussion and argument? We knew how to speak from our minds. To access this deep and delicate place, we had to provide an opportunity for students to speak from their emotions, from their hearts.

**I KEPT COMING BACK TO THE JEWISH EXPRESSION:
“WORDS THAT FLOW OUT FROM ONE HEART ENTER
INTO THE HEART OF ANOTHER.” HOW COULD WE
CREATE A SETTING WHICH WOULD BE CONDUCIVE
TO THIS KIND OF INTERACTION? WHAT WOULD IT
LOOK LIKE?**

Once again I was stuck. I wanted people to feel able to talk openly and honestly, as they do in a therapy environment, but certainly did not want to conduct a therapy session in the classroom. I was hindered by an intuitive sense that people would resist sharing personally with their classmates – that most people, myself included, are reluctant to talk personally in a group setting.

Questions kept circling in my mind:

- How is it possible to access the world of emotions in a classroom without having it spill over into maudlin and sappy outbursts?
- How is it possible to bring an open-hearted tone into an educational setting which for generations has been characterized by an often brutal intellectual rigor?
- And, perhaps most importantly, how is it possible to invite people to speak from their hearts without the fear of having their privacy violated?

SPIRITUAL CHEVRUTA

Ultimately, these questions gave birth to the idea of “Spiritual Chevruta”. We would talk from our hearts, but with clear guidelines, and in pairs rather than in a group setting.

The “Ruach” component of Soulful Education must be extremely private to enable people to overcome their insecurities, and to speak openly and truthfully. To enable our minds to be connected with our hearts, we must let go of the fears and inhibitions that protect our vulnerability. “Ruach” level conversations must be safe and protected.

The concept for a “Spiritual Chevruta” was for each person to take a partner, and to talk for ten minutes about their personal engagement with the texts we had studied. Then they would switch and the first talker would then become the listener. The goal was for everyone to have the chance to speak openly, without fear of judgment or agenda - to open up the heart without inhibition and to personally explore some aspect of the material studied.

Guidelines were drawn up to encourage a personal and authentic experience:

1. **Confidentiality.** What is spoken between the partners, stays between the partners. Just like the results of doctors’ examinations, these conversations are private, and regarded as ‘spiritual check-ups’.
2. **Quality listening.** Most of the time we multi-task while listening. Spiritual Chevruta requires the listener to be fully engaged, to listen actively. This enables the speaker to access his/her deepest and most authentic self.
3. **No giving advice.** We are not trying to fix each other. There are no correct answers. The role of the listener is to help the speaker articulate how he/she wants the Jewish knowledge to affect his or her own life.

Quality conversations are extremely rare. The Spiritual Chevruta

'check-up' gives each person the time and opportunity to begin the process of personal and spiritual growth.

Trigger questions for Spiritual Chevruta included:

- What part of the text resonated with you?
- What was personally challenging for you?
- How do you think you could bring these sources of Jewish wisdom into your life?

We had been studying the story of the Garden of Eden and Adam's hiding from God. After learning and processing through a writing exercise, everyone chose a partner to respond to the trigger question: "What tree(s) are you hiding behind vis-à-vis your relationship with God? What obstacles are holding you back from having a closer relationship with God?"

The effects on the group were dramatic and astonishing:

EVERY PERSON HAD A CHANCE TO TALK. NOT JUST THE TEACHER OR THE MOST VOCAL STUDENTS, BUT EVERY SINGLE PERSON IN THE CLASS. EVERYONE BECAME ACTIVE THROUGH THE TALKING AND LISTENING PROCESS. EVERYONE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE HOW THE LEARNING DIRECTLY AFFECTED THEIR LIVES.

Additionally, there was no pressure on the participants to come up with a "correct" answer. Like the writing exercises, these discussions were private: they were liberated from the expectations of the teacher and the norms of their classmates. All that was asked is that they be honest, and try to express their own authentic and unique answer.

Perhaps most exciting - and for me this was the greatest surprise - the participants genuinely bonded during their short 20 minutes in Spiritual Chevruta. I heard again and again, "We have known each other for some time, but have never talked about this. We never talked with this amount of openness and sincerity."

Over and over again, I am finding that an unanticipated outcome of Soulful Education is the forming of soul mates.

In summary, I discovered that the door to Soulful Education was the development of a holistic educational approach based on accessing and harmonizing the three voices of the soul: by studying Jewish sources, allowing for experiential expression, and promoting safe, heartfelt sharing.

A UNIQUE INNER VOICE

While experimenting with this new teaching methodology, I began to realize that something much deeper was actually going on – that we were actually creating a whole new paradigm of Jewish education.

This method was proving amazingly effective for connecting students deeply to Jewish wisdom sources, and enabling them, through the Jewish lens, to hear their own unique and individual voices. This approach allowed the voices of tradition and the educator to be heard, but also valued the inner voices of the students themselves.

THE RICH AND PRECIOUS VOICES OF JEWISH HISTORY HAD BECOME THE BACKGROUND ORCHESTRA THAT ENABLED STUDENTS TO BETTER HEAR THE EXPRESSION OF THEIR OWN SOULS.

Rav Kook⁴ writes that our soul is always communicating with us.

In his words, the soul is constantly singing, or whispering, or praying to us. Our soul is doing more than keeping us alive – it is conveying to us our inner truth, our soul's truth. God gave each of us a soul to communicate what our best self, our *Tzelem Elokim*, wants us to do. It has been implanted within us to function as our inner GPS, guiding us to our destination, our proper destiny. Each person has a different and unique soul, a different and unique journey. However, every person also has the free-will to listen or to ignore the voice of his or her soul.

⁴ *Olat HaRa'aya*, I:11

If we do not listen to this inner authentic voice – if we get off-track – we are likely to feel estranged, both from God and from ourselves. We will suffer, spiritually and perhaps physically, because of the breakdown between the life we are living and the life our soul wants us to live. The perpetual challenge facing every human being is to find the clarity and will to listen to this inner voice.

According to Rav Kook⁵, the purpose of learning Torah, Talmud, and Jewish thought is ultimately to sharpen our ability to hear the inner voice of the soul. Only this inner voice has the power to clarify our purpose in the world.

By giving students the time and opportunity to personally process what they are studying - by writing and sharing with a partner - we give them the chance to become better attuned to their own inner voices.



The nature of the “more” that I had sought – the desire that had propelled me to forego my teaching career - was now becoming clearer.

- The issue was not more or less information.
- The issue was not this or that kind of pedagogy.
- The small irking voice I had felt was not about a lesson plan.

For me, the issue was enormous and frightening: Is our educational setting smothering or setting free the inner voice of the souls of our students? Is our teaching stifling or clarifying the voice of a person’s soul? Can Jewish wisdom become the springboard for accessing and clarifying the unique soulful voice of an individual?



THE 2ND BREAKTHROUGH – SAFE SPACE

Now my question became: in an educational setting, if we are teaching to the hearts and souls of our students, how can we best create an environment which will foster deep listening to the inner voice?

Personally, I had never experienced such an educational environment. But, occasionally, I did sense that I began speaking – with an almost imperceptible ‘switch’ - from a very deep place of personal truth. During these rare moments of crystal-clear awareness, I felt as if my voice was emerging from within me “on its own”, rather than being directed “externally” by my mind. Some people describe these moments as ‘going with the flow’ or ‘being in the zone’. I called them ‘soulful’.

I did not experience such moments frequently. Primarily, I experienced them in the presence of three specific individuals: three friends who somehow elicited from me a heightened awareness of great personal clarity. In their presence, the direction of my life somehow became more visible and my thoughts more authentic and profound.

What was it about these people that evoked this soulful response? What precipitated this kind of interaction? And how could such a “switch” be replicated in an educational setting?

This quest gave birth to the centrality of **safe space** in Soulful Education.

The people who enabled me to discover a more present and deeper self had all been fully present in the conversation, listening 100%, without judgment. These qualities provided the safety net that I needed to venture into my personal unknown. Knowing that they would neither neglect nor judge me, I was able to let go of my fears and guardedness. I was now free to talk without the ever-present self-censoring that inevitably clouded my vision of who I needed to become. **They created**

a safe space for the emergence of the voice of my soul.

SAFE SPACE IS AN ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH A PERSON'S SOUL IS RESPECTED, IN WHICH WE NEITHER INVADE NOR DISREGARD A PERSON'S INNER LIFE.

It is driven by our desire to serve another and to make him or her feel valued and supported. Our questions are not driven by our own curiosity; rather, as expressed by the poet Rainer Maria Rilke⁶, "We stand at the border of the other's soul and salute it."

I was once teaching a class on Jewish prayer to a group of 20 adults. As one woman made a very sincere and personal comment about prayer, another participant, who was sitting directly across from her in the circle and was in full view of the other students, rolled her eyes. This unkind gesture lasted only a fraction of a second, but everyone saw it. Because of that one moment, everyone else in the group immediately closed down, continuing to engage intellectually, but not daring to engage emotionally or personally. No one wanted to risk becoming the next target of rolling eyes. Needless to say, the woman who had shared something personal was crushed.

It is not easy to engage personally. We fear being judged by others, anxious that they will find us lacking. We carefully guard what we share and with whom, building walls around the more vulnerable parts of our lives.

Poets have described the soul as being shy. Like an animal of prey, it is ready to emerge from hiding only if it does not fear being wounded or ignored. Safe space allows for the soul to relax, creating the possibility of emotional expression and honesty.

When there is safe space there is no:

- Cynicism
- Judging
- Attacking or criticizing
- Discrediting
- Need to be defensive

⁶ *Letters to a Young Poet, The Modern Library, p. 78*

Safe space enables us to let down our guard without concern that we will be wounded or neglected. Safe space permits us to explore the unknown without fear of not yet having found the answers. Safe space allows us to embrace the questions that spring from the life force itself – questions without which our vitality soon withers and dies.

TO MY SURPRISE, STUDENTS LOVED THIS CHANGE IN THE EDUCATIONAL SETTING. IT FREED THEM FROM HAVING TO MAINTAIN A “COOL” OR “INTELLECTUAL” VENEER, TO HIDE BEHIND A SHELL OF CYNICISM OR TO REMAIN ALOOF.

It freed them from worrying about rolling eyes or disparaging comments. In the countless number of programs we have run since instituting the policy of safe space, the participants have recognized the deep and qualitative change it brings to the learning atmosphere, and have been zealous to maintain its integrity.

An experienced teacher once said to me that he was struggling with the cynical comments in his classroom. I asked him if he allowed students to beat each other up physically in his classroom. “Of course not,” he replied. “Do you allow them to curse or steal from each other?” Again, he replied that it was a no-brainer that these actions were not allowed. Then I asked him, “Then why do you allow cynicism? Isn’t that a form of beating up another – just verbally and not physically? Isn’t that a form of stealing, since it steals from another person the opportunity to be who they are and to fully engage?”

The second step in developing the approach of Soulful Education was implementing a “Safe Space” policy in our classroom. If we wanted to bring Jewish wisdom into our souls, then we needed to be able to listen deeply both to the texts and to ourselves.



THE 3RD BREAKTHROUGH – FUTURE-ORIENTED LEARNING

By now, we were using experiential exercises and spiritual chevruta to access and harmonize the three voices of the soul. We had instituted a Safe Space policy that allowed for people to listen to their inner voice and to each other. The educational setting had qualitatively changed and was becoming soulful.

But this still wasn't enough. The new approach was making the wisdom of Jewish sources more relevant and meaningful to students personally. But I was seeking more: I wanted to see the sources actually **transforming** my students.

Now the question consuming me became: how can the Jewish wisdom we are studying become the catalyst for personal and spiritual growth?

Jewish wisdom should change us, propelling us somehow to move forward on our Jewish and life journeys.

TORAH LEARNING IS A NEVER-ENDING PROCESS - NOT BECAUSE THERE IS SO MUCH INFORMATION TO ACQUIRE, BUT BECAUSE THERE IS NO END POINT ON THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING MY BEST SELF, TO FULFILLING THE DESTINY THAT GOD CREATED ME TO FULFILL.

But there is an inherent danger here. Encouraging personal growth is extremely delicate:

- Who sets the direction of personal growth? Does the educator decide what the goals are? Does the class?
- Who decides exactly how individual growth should look?
- Who sets the pace for one's particular growth?
- Who knows what obstacles hold someone back from growing

personally and spiritually?

The path promoting personal and spiritual growth is filled with educational hazards:

- If the students sense an agenda during their learning, will they feel pressured? Will they resent being manipulated by the teacher?
- Where is the fine line between education and indoctrination?
- How can one set of expectations for personal growth fit a whole group of people? We all study the same texts, but the uniqueness of each of our lives and the composition of our personalities generate very different and subjective experiences.

Personally, I always resented the classes in which I felt the teacher was trying to remake me in his or her own image. I felt objectified and diminished. Did the educator really know me well enough to know what was best for me? Did he or she have any idea exactly how my path was different and unique? Were the teachers merely trying to have me fit into the agenda they were pushing for everyone in the same way? Were the teachers seeking personal validation?

The process of personal change is daunting. It can involve heavy doses of guilt and self-flagellation. It can involve pressure and judgment, which may foster resistance and alienation. The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of the Hassidic movement in the 18th century, believed that personal growth is like climbing a ladder. If someone wants to ascend, he must be willing to balance precariously on a single rung while climbing to the next rung. It is much easier to remain in the present and to embrace familiar patterns of behavior than to risk venturing into new, uncharted territory. It is uncomfortable – even frightening – to contemplate personal change.

Our question now became: how could we comfortably draw people away from their comfort zones – but in a comfortable way? We wanted to support personal growth, but without exerting external pressure,

without inducing guilt, or inviting the fear of failing.

In contrast to many approaches to personal change – “tshuva” – that concentrate on past behaviors, guilt and even self-reproach, Rav Kook’s approach is futuristic and positive. He writes that a person seeking change should not dwell on past actions, but rather imagine how life would look if the change had already taken place.

Instead of bemoaning past episodes of overeating, imagine crossing the finish line of a marathon. Instead of feeling guilty over getting angry at a family member, imagine the warmth of a caring moment together. In short, do not dwell on your lowest moments; instead imagine your better self.

We decided that we would take a totally hands-off approach to our students’ lives: we would offer no advice, and there would be no agenda. Deep inside, everyone knows the unique path that they should follow, and the pace at which they should follow it. The Talmud⁷ states that only the individual’s heart truly knows him or her. No one else.

THIS MEANS THAT THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD DECIDE HOW TO BE AFFECTED BY THE LEARNING. HOWEVER, WE COULD OFFER AN OPPORTUNITY – A SPACE – IN WHICH HE/SHE COULD CONTEMPLATE THE CHANGE.

Therefore, our work was to design a template for a space in which this could happen.

Our model began to take shape. The first question in a spiritual chevruta would be neutral, a check-in regarding the subject learned. Then we would move deeper, inviting the students to look ahead and envision how it would look if the subject matter affected them.

In the privacy of spiritual chevruta, each student would discuss four questions regarding the subject studied:

1. How would you describe your connection to the subject?

2. How do you think this Jewish wisdom could positively affect your life?
3. Is there anything holding you back from effecting this change?
4. What small and practical piece of advice would you give to yourself to take a step to implement this change?

There were no right and wrong answers. If a student felt that, at this stage in his or her life, the subject learned did not prompt any personal change, then so be it. But if the learning inspired deeper thoughts and feelings, the student would have the opportunity to talk them through in the safety and privacy of a Spiritual Chevruta.

We wanted students of all ages to be affected by their learning Jewish texts. But, most importantly, we wanted the change to be authentic and harmonious with their unique selves.

Rav Kook⁸ writes that there are four stages in the full learning of Jewish wisdom:

1. Learning with our minds
2. Bringing the learning into our hearts
3. Imagining how the learning can affect us
4. Putting the learning into action

FUTURE-ORIENTED LEARNING IS EXPRESSED IN THE THIRD STAGE: IMAGINING HOW OUR LIVES COULD BE AFFECTED AND ENHANCED THROUGH THE LEARNING OF THIS JEWISH WISDOM. WE DID NOT WANT THIS EFFECT TO BE DIRECTED BY THE TEACHER, OR ANY OTHER EXTERNAL SOURCE. ONLY THE INDIVIDUAL CAN GENUINELY ENVISION HOW EACH PIECE OF JEWISH WISDOM CAN AFFECT HIM OR HER AT THIS PARTICULAR STAGE OF LIFE.

We wanted the change to emerge from the union of Jewish wisdom and the inner voice of the soul. Only then could each person maintain their personal integrity and enable the educational process to yield blessing.

⁸ *Orot HaKodesh III:247*



THE 4TH BREAKTHROUGH – THE COMBINATION OF TIME AND KINDRED SPIRITS

The mind absorbs new ideas very quickly. Classes that move too slowly bore us, and professors who repeat themselves can drive us crazy. Students love the feeling that they are covering more ground, exposing themselves to new intellectual challenges, and tackling more of the books on those countless shelves. *Daf Yomi* (studying one page of Talmud a day) has fully captured this mindset of fast-paced learning.

In contrast, the heart learns slowly.

The mind, because of its capacity to detach from life, absorbs the material in a flash and is ready to move ahead. But the heart, the seat of our emotions and our inner life, is a connector. It wants to impact all of our being, not just the thoughts in our head. The heart's learning takes time, review, and work.

My first attempts at soulful teaching took place on college campuses. During a span of three years, I visited over 50 college campuses, offering workshops on spiritual awareness. The students loved these sessions, and at the end of each class clamored for more. I felt like a traveling rock-star, "doing" a different campus each night, leaving to applause and calls for encores.

**IT TOOK ME THREE YEARS TO REALIZE HOW LITTLE I
HAD ACCOMPLISHED.**

I had offered them a show. Yes, they had been exposed to new ideas, even processed and shared them. But I imagine that if I had returned to those campuses several days later, the glow would have utterly faded. The students would have been hard-pressed to recall what they had spoken about so earnestly. The moment of exhilaration would be a pale memory.

After three years I realized that personal and spiritual growth take

time. There is no quick fix for change. The heart learns slowly. The rush of intellectual exhilaration is illusory. To fully integrate Jewish wisdom into a life is like training for a race. Only a consistent and ongoing focus will yield a lasting effect.

This observation led to the next educational breakthrough: Soulful Education cannot be experienced in one-off sessions or retreats. It takes time. The Rabbis loved using the span of 40 days to mark change. I'm not sure that 40 is the magic number, but it clearly takes weeks or months of continuous focus before transformative insights can register deeply enough to begin to be integrated into the soul.

This truth can be a challenging realization, both for students and teachers.

When we are excited and want to push ahead, how can we slow down, focus and review? How is it possible for this approach not to become painfully tedious?

I realized that the same questions could be asked to any group of people training for an activity. Runners training for a race practice similar routines daily. Actors in a play endlessly rehearse their lines. Members of a weight-loss group go through the same format of sessions again and again. But in each case, they draw strength and motivation from each other as time progresses.

TIME AND REVIEW ARE ESSENTIAL KEYS FOR EFFECTING AND SUSTAINING PERSONAL AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH. EDUCATORS OFTEN CHOOSE TO OVERLOOK THIS BECAUSE OF THEIR ALL-CONSUMING FEAR OF BECOMING BORING.

YET, IN THE RACE TO COVER NEW AND EVER-MORE EXCITING MATERIAL, THEIR STUDENTS ARE LOSING THE POSSIBILITY OF FULLY INTEGRATING THE WISDOM OF JEWISH SOURCES INTO THEIR LIVES.

Thus we discovered another principle of Soulful Education: the necessity of kindred spirits – people sharing the aspiration of becoming their better selves through their learning of Jewish wisdom.

Only kindred spirits will have the patience and fortitude to take the slow pace necessary for soulful work without becoming bored or anxious. The goal of this learning is to allow texts to penetrate and to support others, not to cover the largest quantity of material. Everyone in the group must adhere to these goals. Unfortunately, sometimes tragically, it only takes one person's restless or impatient mood to deplete the energy of the entire group.

As the individuals begin to recognize that they share a common goal – that of studying Jewish wisdom to evoke their best selves – they connect very closely. As they share the experience of listening to the voice of their own souls, a “group soul-mate” bonding emerges. They sense that they are not only helping one another, but that they need one another for the experience to take root.

For several years, I ran a men's group. Brownies and schnapps accompanied pages of Talmud and Midrash. The men lived in the same neighborhood and interacted with each other on a daily basis. After several sessions, it became clear to me that one of the members was not on the same wavelength as the others, taking the sessions cavalierly and cracking a lot of jokes. The safe space and focus of the group was being compromised. I was in a dilemma: while I wanted to ask him to leave the group, I also knew that these men saw each other regularly and didn't want to create neighborhood friction.

When he was late for a session, I decided to present the issue to the group itself and ask them what they thought we should do. I was shocked when the group unanimously urged me to ask him to leave. They overwhelmingly agreed that this opportunity to learn, share, and push themselves was so precious that it was worth the possibility of injecting awkwardness into their neighborly relations.

SOULFUL JEWISH EDUCATION

I was learning something new about Soulful Education. Not only were kindred spirits necessary for creating an environment for listening to our souls; the process of soulful education immediately deepened the bonds between these kindred spirits.



THE 5TH BREAKTHROUGH – PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Just when I thought we had discovered the recipe for bringing Jewish wisdom into our hearts and lives, I sensed that something else was missing.

People were learning deeply, writing reflectively, and individually articulating their connection to Jewish wisdom. They had a safe space to listen to their unique inner voices, and kindred spirits with whom to share their plans for bringing this wisdom into their lives.

BUT, IN FACT, THE MOST ESSENTIAL ELEMENT WAS STILL MISSING: ACTION. WE OFFERED NO FORMALIZED METHODOLOGY TO HELP STUDENTS IMPLEMENT THEIR LEARNING.

When I asked other educators about this issue, most of them said, “It happens naturally. People learn and then figure out how it plays out in their lives. You don’t have to be invasive or controlling – just leave it to them. They’re mature enough to do it by themselves.”

I was dubious. I myself had learned for many years without making any attempt whatsoever to allow the subject matter to affect my life. I had even taught personal topics without being changed personally. So how could I assume that other people would naturally incorporate these ideas into their lives? Especially with so many self-rationalizing arguments working against personal change. Arguments like:

- “What will other people say?”
- “I know this is not my best habit but that’s just who I am.”
- “I’ve tried before but have never been able to stick with it.”
- “I’m not hurting anyone else, it’s just my bad habit.”
- “Lots of other people also do it. It’s not the end of the world.”

It is very, very difficult to even slightly alter an engrained mode of behavior.

But some form of action had to be formalized. I knew the following truth:

THE GOAL OF LEARNING JEWISH WISDOM SHOULD NOT BE THE ACQUIRING OF KNOWLEDGE – EVEN OF SOULFUL KNOWLEDGE. THE LEARNING SHOULD NOT END WITH DISCUSSING, PROCESSING, OR EVEN TAKING KNOWLEDGE INTO OUR HEARTS.

THE ULTIMATE OBJECTIVE IS TO USE JEWISH WISDOM TO AFFECT OUR LIVES. EVERYTHING ELSE IS A SPRINGBOARD.

There is a discussion in the Talmud⁹ about which is of greater value, learning or doing? One rabbi argues for “learning”. A second rabbi argues for “doing”. The section concludes by saying that “learning is greater - because it leads to doing.”

When is learning great? When it leads to doing. Learning and doing must be intrinsically intertwined.

Thus evolved the fifth breakthrough in Soulful Education: the practical application of Jewish wisdom into life. We would assume nothing. We would take nothing for granted. Instead we would formalize a way to bring the ideas studied into our daily lives, in a safe and non-judgmental way.

At the end of each session, an e-mail list would be sent out to the participants assigning each of them a particular day until our next session. On their designated day, they would write to the whole group and reflect on how they had grappled with bringing the subject of our collective study into their daily lives. Were they able to act upon the small piece of advice they had offered to themselves in the Spiritual

⁹ Kiddushin 40b

Chevruta? What was challenging for them? In what small way did they succeed?

The atmosphere of safe space which we established during the sessions extended to the inter-session writing practice as well. There would be no judging or comparing how others had done. We were all struggling with the same attempted objective of enabling Jewish wisdom to improve our lives.

This e-mail rotation once again freed people to hear their own authentic voices. They could write in any style that fit them. One participant wrote humorous stories, another wrote poetry. But everyone had to dedicate time, focusing on how the subjects learned were entering their lives. The responsibility to report to the group deepened the effect of the learning on the lives of each of the participants.

Additionally, the communications between the sessions further bonded the members and kept the topic present and vital in their lives between sessions.



THE BLESSINGS (AND CHALLENGES) OF BECOMING A SOULFUL EDUCATOR

Soulful Education has changed my teaching. More than that, it has changed how I perceive myself as a teacher. It has challenged my approach and my core teaching beliefs and patterns, making me a better teacher and a better person.

Parker Palmer¹⁰ writes, “The transformation of teaching must begin in the transformed heart of the teacher.”

The process of Soulful Education opened my heart. It opened my heart to the truths of my students - to listening and loving my students for who they are, not for who they might become. It challenged me to recognize that I am also a student – a seeker who continues to travel forward on my own personal journey.

In becoming a soulful Jewish educator, I faced four major challenges:

1) Letting go of MY truth

I spent many formative years studying at an Orthodox right-wing yeshiva in Israel. We were very Zionist, very religious, and very sure of our truth.

I conveyed this in the classroom, regardless of the subject being taught. It was always in the air. It was always known what Aryeh believed and, implicitly, what he would like you to believe.

Many students identified with my perspective –the “Aryeh-thing” became a ‘private joke’ of the institution, lovingly mocked during many Purim Shpiels. I was proud that it had such an impact and assumed a central position in their learning experience. Despite the fact that I always received several student evaluations at the end of the year which felt that my agenda had a detrimental effect on the classroom, in my certainty and condescension I disregarded their comments, believing that I knew best. I would allow many students to talk and express their opinions, waiting for the one who agreed

¹⁰ *To Know as we are Known*, p. 107

with my thoughts and then utter knowingly, "Ahh, very nice."

IT TOOK MANY YEARS FOR ME TO REALIZE THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF TRYING TO IMPRINT MY TRUTH ON THE STUDENTS. WHILE I THOUGHT I WAS ENLIGHTENING THEM, I WAS IN FACT, DIMMING THEIR PERSONAL LIGHT.

Their learning was always in the guise of "agree or disagree with Aryeh." The overwhelming presence of my personal beliefs subtly silenced other opinions.

I didn't know best. "My truth" was stifling my students.

I have found that most teachers, rabbis, and educators also possess a truth they hold to be sacred. It may be a religious orientation, a political stance, or even a "smaller" truth, such as how to understand a particular thinker or how to read a verse in the text. It is very tempting for an educator to try to bring students around to this point of view.

But everyone has a unique path and pace – an individual face, voice, taste buds, fingerprints, and soul. **God does not create clones.**

When I was seeking agreement in the classroom, whether on crucial life decisions or how to read a particular line of Talmud, I was in actuality searching for personal validation. I would be personally insulted if my way was rejected, mystified and disheartened over how students could reject the truth of my teaching. I was oblivious to the possibility that the students might actually possess their own truths.

I did not make enough space for their opinions and their paths, for their unique personal voices. I did not adequately value the truth of their own unique and individual journeys.

This point was actually brought home to me by my 10 year-old daughter, Ra'aya, when she was trying out for the Israel National Little League Baseball team. It was during the final try-outs. She had already made the

THE BLESSINGS (AND CHALLENGES) OF BECOMING A SOULFUL EDUCATOR

cut from 100 kids down to 25. Now, each kid had to decide which particular position he or she was going to try out for. I had been to all the practices and had scouted the rest of the kids. I also had played varsity baseball in high school and was proud to be guiding my daughter. When she came over to me to discuss her decision, I said to her, "Ra'aya, I think you'll have the best chance to make the team if you try out for second base and left field. There's less competition at those positions." Ra'aya looked at me so sincerely and said in the sweetest voice, "Thank you so much Abba. I really am so glad you're here." Feeling great about this parenting moment I then asked her, "So which are you going to choose?" "Pitcher and shortstop," she said without a second's hesitation. And she made the team.

Soulful Education demands a letting go of the need to express my truth and have it be accepted.

Soulful Education demands making space for everyone's path: space for each person to safely explore and experiment, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. Space for everyone to hear their own voice and embrace their own truth.

2) Letting Go of the Need for Control

Creating space for the students does not only involve moving back from your specific viewpoint, whether religious, intellectual or other. It also requires relinquishing control.

Though I allowed my students time to express themselves, I always had a very clear sense of where the class discussion should go. The end of the class, after studying the sources and debating them, would end with a "wow" from Aryeh, a big idea aimed at deepening and connecting the whole experience.

The students both loved it and resented it. They loved it because it was exciting to watch the process unfold and to anticipate an exciting climax to the class. They loved it because it reinforced their belief that studying Jewish books would enhance their lives. Years later, when I bump into students whose names I'm hard-pressed to remember, they

recount for me some of the “wow’s” that I have long forgotten.

But I discovered in their confidentially-written evaluations that many of them also resented the Aryeh “wow”.

Minimally, they sometimes wondered why they should exert themselves in their examination of the texts, when in the end Aryeh would surpass their analysis. More significantly, they felt co-opted into my agenda. **They felt that the class had a specific direction and that their input and opinions ultimately were just foils for my closing.**

For the first few years I didn’t feel a need to change anything. I was held captive by my arrogance, and I believed that what I offered was in their best interests.

Even when I finally accepted the validity of their feedback, I felt helpless to change my approach. It was not a truth-thing. It was a control-thing. I was petrified to go into class without a clear perception of where I would take it.

I was the teacher, the one with the knowledge and experience, the one they relied on. How could I walk into class without having already determined our final destination? It would be like a tour guide who didn’t know the route of the whole trip.

LETTING GO OF MY NEED TO CONTROL THE EDUCATIONAL SETTING WAS PROBABLY THE HARDEST THING I EVER HAD TO DO AS A TEACHER.

THE TRANSITION TO SOULFUL EDUCATION REQUIRED ME TO LET GO OF THE “WOW” AT THE END OF THE CLASS OR SESSION. IT WAS NO LONGER ABOUT ME. TEACHING WAS NO LONGER ABOUT THE STUDENTS GLOWING FROM MY LIGHT. AND THERE WAS NO PRE-ORDAINED DIRECTION OR DESTINATION FOR THE CLASS.

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The students would take the Jewish wisdom wherever they needed to. There would be no grand-slam, no “wow” ending.

The Kabbalah speaks of God’s contracting to create the space for the physical world to be created. This is a paradigm for all forms of creating. Contracting my all-powerful presence allowed for the students to create their own identities in light of the ideas we studied together.

3) Learning to Listen and to Love the Students

What does it really mean to love our students?

If asked, I am sure that every teacher would claim to love his or her students. Just like all parents would say they love their children.

But what does this actually mean?

Last year, I had the opportunity to guest-teach at a high school in the US. I sat in on a 12th grade class and opened by asking them these questions: “Where in your high school experience have you had the opportunity to talk about your spiritual lives? When does anyone on the staff openly listen to you?”

They looked at me in silence, a bit bewildered. Then in one voice answered, “Nowhere. Nowhere. No one.” At the end of their four years, four of the most formative years of their lives, they had not found a single teacher who openly listened to them.

I had met their teacher, an extremely warm and caring individual. He had left a successful law career to go into teaching solely because he was idealistic and wanted to contribute to education. He would have claimed unequivocally that he loves his students. Yet this love and caring had not translated into listening.

In Soulful Education, we are the advocates of a question which connects love with listening: “Is there anything more you would like to add?”

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It is a question which reflects the willingness to simply be there for the other person.

Several years ago, I taught at a large Jewish retreat in England. 2,200 participants. We were housed in a university that was on winter break. The first morning I rose early and went down to the massive university cafeteria. It could seat over 1,000 people. There were a dozen or so early-risers who had already arrived. I took my breakfast to a far corner and looked forward to some quiet time before the rush of the crowds and the hectic teaching day began.

Just as I got settled, to my surprise, another early-riser came and sat down right next to me. And as I began my first mouthful of breakfast this total stranger turned to me, poked me in the shoulder, and said, "Do you know what love is?"

I thought to myself, "Isn't a bit early for love?" My less gracious side growled, "A whole giant cafeteria and just my luck he sits down next to me?!"

"No," I replied. "Please enlighten me."

"Love" he said, poking me once more, "is curiosity."

"Oy." I said to myself. That was not what I was expecting. Now he had my attention. "What do you mean – curiosity?"

"When you love someone, you want to learn everything about them. You stay up all night talking. You ask questions and can listen endlessly. When you don't love someone, you're always looking for ways to end the conversation. Listening and loving go together."

And with that he got up and left, leaving me spellbound, open-mouthed - and oblivious to my breakfast.

THE TRUTH THAT LOVE IS CURIOSITY IS TESTED IN THE PATIENCE OF AN EDUCATOR, INVITING HIM OR HER TO LISTEN WITHOUT JUDGMENT OR IMPATIENCE. THE EFFECT OF THIS LISTENING IS TO ENCOURAGE

AND ENABLE THE STUDENTS TO LISTEN DEEPLY TO THEMSELVES.

I spent 10 adult years studying in yeshiva, and four very full years learning in rabbinical school, being trained to be a rabbi, teacher, and possibly a leader in the Jewish community. My learning day began at 4:30 a.m., and ended when I fell asleep over my books late at night. I spent countless hours poring over sacred texts, debating with my study partners, and listening to the brilliant insights of scholarly rabbis.

Not once during these ten years - and not once during the four years of Rabbinic training - was I ever asked: "Aryeh, how is your learning affecting your life? Aryeh, how is all this knowledge changing you? Bettering you?"

Not once.

Countless times, possibly every day, I was asked: "Aryeh, did you understand the material? Can you go deeper? Do you have a new understanding that you didn't have yesterday? Have you seen this commentator?"

But not once was I ever asked: "Aryeh, how do you think this material is relevant to your life? Are you connecting with it? What is resonating with you? What is difficult for you?"

Several years ago, in Boulder Colorado, I had the opportunity to meet Rav Zalman Schacter. I called his secretary and asked to make an appointment. I had never met or communicated with him before, and it would be unlikely if our paths would ever cross again. His secretary set an hour for us to meet.

Well into his 80's, he invited me to sit, and asked what I wanted to talk about. Rav Zalman listened, and listened and listened some more. An hour turned into two. Though many books were open on his desk, he showed no signs of impatience.

At the end of almost two hours, I was so moved that I spontaneously said to him, "I would like to ask you for something that I have never asked from

anyone else. Not rabbi or teacher. Could you please give me a blessing?"

I was quite shocked and a bit embarrassed over my request. It just came out.

We stood, and Rav Zalman put his hands on my head and gave me a blessing. Then he said, "And now, would you please give me a blessing."

Aahhh! My head was swirling. How could I? But he insisted, and somehow the words just came to me.

Listening, loving, and blessing. Three intertwined cords.

Whenever a student approaches me and says, "I know that you are very busy and I don't want to take much of your time, but. . . ," I know that, on some level, I have failed that student - I have not conveyed enough love.

It is very hard to fully listen with graciousness and patience. There are students who have seriously tested my self-control. I have been tempted to say to them, "Okay, please get to the point." I would love to end the conversation. But then I remember my mysterious breakfast acquaintance in the cafeteria, and I remember Rav Zalman. I remember that the soul is shy, easily bruised and wounded, hurriedly retreating into its shell to seek protection. If we want education to evoke the soul, to guide and inspire it, then there can be no compromising about loving and listening.

In Soulful Education, we don't listen to another in order to offer an answer. In soulful education, the aim is not to impress others with our own scholarly wisdom. In soulful education, we listen to others in order to empower them to deeply listen to themselves, to uncover their own authentic truths.

4) Modeling the Journey

The most profound educational challenge for teachers aspiring to Soulful Education is "walking the walk" of personal and spiritual growth.

This challenge can be the most daunting for a teacher. It demands letting go of the natural teacher-student hierarchy to become open, vulnerable, and speak personally with the students.

**IF WE WANT TO EVOKE THE SOULS OF OUR
STUDENTS, THEN WE MUST FIRST EVOKE OUR
OWN SOULS.**

If we want to foster their engaging with Jewish wisdom as the means for aiding their journey in life, then we must also model how we are affected and transformed by our learning – and then share the process with the students. Though it is easy to offer lip-service about being works-in-progress, admitting that we need personal change can demand great courage.

During my many years of Jewish learning, I do not recall ever hearing a teacher or rabbi share their personal journey with students, either in the classroom or outside. They appeared to have already answered all of life’s big questions, and presented themselves as having all the solutions, if only I were wise enough to ask the right questions. Everything seemed to be resolved. Later on, I found that my teaching colleagues also were reluctant to reveal anything beyond their comprehension of the book matter, rarely veering off the page.

I have often heard lectures on the importance of loving one’s neighbor, the dangers of speaking gossip, the centrality of acts of kindness, and the giving of charity in Judaism. But rarely – if ever – have I heard speakers discuss their personal struggles with these issues, or analyze what has or has not worked for them. The lecturers have focused on “what Judaism has to say” about the topics without disclosing how they personally connect to them.

Modeling an authentic and vulnerable journey in which no one person, including the teacher, has all the answers can pose some threatening questions for an educator:

- Will my sharing personally blur the line separating me, the teacher, from my students?
- Will it make the students uncomfortable with me or make them feel insecure about their own lives?
- Will it compromise my influence on them as a teacher?
- Will I know where to draw the line between a helpful admission and an improper disclosure?

Teachers – and particularly rabbis – are deemed experts and authorities. Admitting that we are works-in-progress has the potential to threaten the hierarchy, upsetting the presumed distance between teacher and student.

Nevertheless, for teachers, educators and rabbis to truly impact the lives of their students, they must find a safe way to exemplify a sincere willingness to be personally affected by the wisdom of Jewish texts, and share this process with their students.

IF WE TEACHERS ARE NOT AFFECTED BY OUR LEARNING – HOW CAN WE EXPECT OUR STUDENTS TO BE AFFECTED? WE MUST BECOME LIVING MODELS OF REAL, IMPERFECT PEOPLE.

IF WE WANT TO DEVELOP SOULFUL EDUCATORS – EDUCATORS THAT MODEL PERSONAL AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH – THEN WE NEED TO BEGIN WITH THE VERY DAUNTING STEP OF ACCEPTING OUR IMPERFECTIONS, OUR FEARS AND OUR INSECURITIES.

Otherwise they will always gather like toxic stones around our hearts, preclude our personal development, and prevent our ability to become authentic models of what it truly means to be a “work in progress”.

Years ago, I learned that a string of a guitar, when plucked, will cause the same string of a nearby guitar to begin to vibrate. It’s called sympathetic or harmonic vibration.

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A similar phenomenon occurs in every educational setting. Students reflect back to the teacher, educator, and rabbi whatever they feel in the classroom. If the teacher presents a persona of scholarship, then the students will compete to ask the most erudite questions. If the teacher displays an “out-of-the-box” creativity, then the students will stretch themselves to be resourceful and inventive.

IN SOULFUL EDUCATION, THE EDUCATOR IS ASKED TO SHARE HOW HIS OR HER LIFE HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY THE LEARNING PROCESS. HE IS ASKED TO PLUCK HIS OR HER OWN “SOUL STRING”.

THIS IMPLICITLY INVITES THE STUDENTS TO DO THE SAME. WITHOUT THIS MODELING, THE LEARNING REMAINS ACADEMIC AND IMPERSONAL, REMOVED FROM OUR ‘REAL’ LIVES OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM.

In Soulful Education, the ultimate question for the teacher, educator, and rabbi to ask is not – “What do the texts mean?” – but “What do these texts mean to me?” For the educator to become a model of personal and spiritual growth, the students must be allowed to witness the inner life of a real person wrestling genuinely with real-life issues.



CONCLUSION

I set out as an educator searching for “more”.

What I discovered was a different perspective on Jewish education: an education whose aim is not to create Jews who know more, rather a soulful education.

The goal of soulful education is to create Jews who aim to become their best, most authentic and impassioned selves. To listen and live according to the voice of the soul that God gave them, and to allow Jewish wisdom to add personal relevance and meaning to their lives.

Eventually I discovered that this “more” was actually much more than a pedagogical approach – that it was a new vision of the role that education could play in its finest moments.

In Italy, the most precious resource is their art. It permeates all of their culture. In England, it is their literature. In Scandinavia, it is the natural beauty of their landscape.

FOR THE JEWISH PEOPLE, OUR KNOWLEDGE IS OUR MOST TREASURED NATIONAL RESOURCE.

These resources are more than just commodities: they reach to the core of a national identity and shape a culture. Would any of these countries think of polluting or selling their national treasures? No price is worthy enough.

We, the People of the Book, have a different resource which lies at the core of our identity. We have our books, our combined wisdom, accumulated over 1,000s of years of thinking and living.

And we are misusing it. We are wasting it. We are learning it, and then returning it to the shelf. We are not allowing it to impact and mold us. We are not letting it reach our souls, our core identities. We are not

letting it shape us.

**THE VISION OF SOULFUL EDUCATION IS TO RESCUE
OUR NATIONAL RESOURCE FROM THE SHELF AND
BRING IT INTO OUR HEARTS, OUR SOULS, AND
OUR LIVES.**

Jewish wisdom, experiential learning, deep sharing with kindred spirits, safe space, and dedication to growth are the steps that can make this vision come true.



APPENDIX A

ABOUT *AYEKA*: CENTER FOR SOULFUL JEWISH EDUCATION

Ayeka was founded in 2008 by Aryeh Ben David to create a venue for Jewish Education focusing on personal and spiritual growth for all Jews, regardless of denomination, practice, or belief. *Ayeka* is proud to have leading Rabbis of international renown from all of the denominations on its Advisory Board.

The name – *Ayeka* – is the first question in the Torah and means “Where are you?” We believe in the eternal centrality of the question – for all individuals at every stage and day of their lives.

AYEKA DOES NOT PROFESS TO PROVIDE ANSWERS. EVERY PERSON’S CHALLENGE IS TO SEEK AND PROVIDE ANSWERS FOR HIM OR HERSELF.

The Midrash¹¹ writes that at Mount Sinai each person heard a different voice; each person had a unique experience. Only the individual knows what is genuinely in his or her heart and what he or she is able to hear. Everyone has a unique path. Everyone has a unique pace.

Ayeka provides the educational opportunity for taking small authentic steps on this path.

Ayeka trains Rabbis, educators, and community leaders in its unique educational approach. In small cohorts, *Ayeka* provides online instruction and support to enable qualified professionals to bring Soulful Education to their synagogues, campuses, community institutions, and cities.

¹¹ *Midrash Raba Exodus, Chapter 29*

Additionally, *Ayeka* has developed 5 ten-session modules, replete with facilitator guides, on important and relevant subjects:

- Living One Soulful Day
- Soulful Relationships
- Soulful Prayer
- Beginning a Relationship with God
- Soulful Holidays

To find out more, please contact info@Ayeka.org.il, or visit our website: www.Ayeka.org.il

 **APPENDIX B****ABOUT ARYEH BEN DAVID**

Aryeh Ben David is an educator, lecturer, and author. Aryeh grew up in the US, moved to Israel in 1978 and taught at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem from 1987-2007, including serving for several years as its Director of Spiritual Education. Aryeh also served as the Educational Consultant for Hillel International from 2004-2007, and the Educational Director of the Jerusalem campus of Livnot U'Lehibanot from 1993 to 1998.

Aryeh has authored two books, including *The Godfile, 10 Approaches to Personalizing Prayer*, and *Around the Shabbat Table, A Guide to Fulfilling and Meaningful Shabbat Table Conversations*.

Aryeh received Rabbinical Ordination from the Israeli Rabbinat, served in the Israeli army, and lives with his wife Sandra and their six children in Efrat, Israel.



APPENDIX C

COMMENTS ON THE AYEKA EXPERIENCE

Rabbi Eric Gurvis – Temple Shalom, MA

“Ayeka is GREAT! – The most unique and enticing learning strategy I have encountered in a long time. The journey of Ayeka – it got me asking myself the questions; has given me tools for my own Ayeka journey.”

Rabbi Joseph Meszler – Temple Sinai, MA

“Growing up I always believed that the synagogue was the home for the most important conversations. With Ayeka, this is happening.”

Rabbi Dan Liben – Temple Israel, MA

“I think I’ll be a better teacher for it.”

Rabbi Andrea Steinberger – University of Wisconsin Hillel

“Ayeka is my favorite curriculum to use in my work as a rabbi. The seminars offer adult learners an authentic Jewish text study experience and much more.”

Rabbi Jonathan Miller – Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama

“We were looking for a way to help members make a connection to the synagogue outside of the synagogue. Ayeka does just that. It allows us to go beyond the typical teaching we normally do and bring a real conversation into our education.”

Phil Glaser – Ayeka Facilitator, Ithaca, NY

“Ayeka has gotten me to rethink my role as an educator in ways I could not have imagined. It is not just because now my students can walk away from a class and know who Rambam is, but instead that they walk away and think that having a relationship with God through Jewish practice is something they can do. To have that level of optimism about what you are doing as a teacher is wonderful!”

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Edna Levy – Ayeka Facilitator, JCC, Kansas City

“Ayeka is more than cross-denominational; it is also a perfect vehicle for individuals at different levels of learning and people on very diverse paths. It just works well with everyone.”

Adrienne Silver – Participant

“My experience with Ayeka has been a transformative one. Ayeka’s safe, open environment allowed me to explore areas of my religious life that I would not have otherwise explored. It forced me to grapple with issues that I have decidedly ignored in the past. I appreciated that the sessions were not just text-based or discussion-based; they seamlessly integrated Jewish texts with an open discussion of our own practices and beliefs. Ayeka has encouraged me to continue grappling with these issues and finding a deeper spiritual connection with our tradition.”

“Not information but transformation - because Jewish Wisdom is more than information...”

We have succeeded in reaching the minds of our students, but not their hearts, their souls and their lives. This requires a serious paradigm shift – in the way we prepare materials, in the atmosphere we create in our classrooms, in our expectations of our students, in our own inner life, and most importantly, in our definition of “successful teaching”.

Soulful Education is a unique educational approach created by well-known Jewish educator and founder of *Ayeka*, Aryeh Ben David, to foster personal meaning and relevance. It enables –

- ✧ Students of all ages to bring Jewish knowledge from their minds to their hearts and souls - and into their lives
- ✧ Rabbis, educators, and teachers to let go of their doubts and insecurities of insufficient knowledge
- ✧ Educational professionals to work together in harmony, without comparison or jealousy

“The human soul has great wisdom to guide and inspire us. Ayeka’s Soulful Education approach gives educators the keys to opening people’s inner lives, connecting it with their active lives, and fostering a Jewish life of authenticity, passion, and life-giving impact on the world.”

PARKER J. PALMER, AUTHOR OF “HEALING THE HEART OF DEMOCRACY”, “THE COURAGE TO TEACH” AND “LET YOUR LIFE SPEAK”

“Soulful Education is an idea whose time has come. Aryeh Ben David poses a searing question to the Jewish community: are we missing the mark in how we educate our children, and ourselves? His answer is a new vision, one that moves beyond the classical transmission of knowledge, to embracing Jewish wisdom as a path of personal transformation.”

ERICA ARIEL FOX, HARVARD LAW SCHOOL LECTURER AND AUTHOR OF “WINNING FROM WITHIN: A BREAKTHROUGH METHOD FOR LEADING, LIVING AND LASTING CHANGE”