

Final Exams: Pavlov's Dogs, Father Guido, Pinball Machines, and the Jews

I. A Reminder

Everything I mention in this article about schools and teachers applies to parents. Just substitute "Mother" or "Father" for "teacher" or "educator".

The same goes for youth directors and camp directors and whoever else is involved in any aspects of Jewish education, formal or informal.

II. Father Guido Sarducci and the Jews

One of the comedians on *Saturday Night Live* plays the character of Father Guido Sarducci, a rather hip, off-beat priest. One of his best comedy bits is lampooning college education. It's something like a review of every course you ever took in college — *all* of it reviewed by catch-phrases in under a minute. Physics? $E=mc^2$. Biology? DNA and RNA. English and American Lit? Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Hemingway. American History? "Give me liberty, or give me death", the Louisiana Purchase, the Emancipation Proclamation.

The Good Father rattles them off 1 after another, Subject, then 1 or 2 Facts meant to be memorized; then another Subject, another Fact Memorized. Then another round of the same. On and on, hollow and meaningless to the ex-student in his or her life at the present. From the response by the audience, Father Guido is striking some very deep chords. There is laughter and un-ease, because he is right, of course. He is right because it reduces us to nothing more than Pavlov's famous canines (though I cannot remember anything about Professor Pavlov, other than the fact that he had a Russian-sounding name, so he must have been from Russia, but *when* exactly or *where* exactly or *why* exactly he was playing with dogs is unclear to me. There's something about ringing a bell and saliva and food or lack of food and conditioned responses, but that's all I remember.) But I *do* sometimes use a borrowed throwaway line to loosen up my audiences, "Does the name Pavlov ring a bell?" (And, if they laugh, I also toss in, "Does the name Quasimodo ring a bell?")

The end result of the Sarducci-Pavlov approach is that bells ring, our adrenalin gets hyped up, and the blood flow changes slightly in the tubes and chambers and passageways of the side of the brain that remembers things...but not much more.

We have paid the price of being told to "do our homework" when we were kids, i.e., to memorize everything they told us to, plus more for extra credit.

III. The Contemporary Debate in the Field of Philosophy of Education

It was a hot issue, but not necessarily a new one.

Someone¹ published a book not too long ago advocating the theory of education that no one should graduate such-and-such a level of education without knowing certain basic, hard facts. The battle raged, rivers, oceans of ink were spilled, as the critics of philosophers of education had their field day, for and against. (They had to — it's how they make a living, filling their own self-imposed publish-or-perish quotas as they must.)

The Fact Man was right, of course, though I can't remember his name or the name of his book. (I don't have much of a head for facts.)

He was right, the ink-spilling supporters responded, pointing to studies that show X% of American high school graduates couldn't locate Chicago on a map, another Y% thought Thomas Jefferson was the CEO of a food conglomerate, and Gorbachev a kind of vodka.

The Fact Man is right that we are turning out ignoramuses of the basic facts of a functioning human being in society....They have even given us the term "functionally illiterate", a good term, indicating that graduates can't even do simple math to keep track of their finances, don't know the 1st thing about reading want ads in the paper, don't understand the process of registering to vote.

The nay-sayers said, "Nay". They said that the Fact Man is limited, that there has to be more to education than just the facts, and they are right, too, but the crux of the problem really is, "In a limited amount of school time, how much of which kind of education does a student get?"

IV. The Pinball Machine

I think a more useful image than Pavlov's Hounds is the pinball machine.^{1a}

When a word or concept is thrown out at the student, we, the educators, have to consider whether or not it will register anything at all. If it doesn't, it is as if a pinball just rolls down to the bottom because the bumpers and lights and whistles of the machine are getting no juice.

When a word or concept is thrown out at the student, we, the educators, have to consider whether or not it will hit a bumper, bounce off once with plenty of zip, then roll down a little, softly hit another light (i.e., another word, another concept), slide to the flipper, and then be flipped back up to the 1st bumper, where it bounces again and again off the side as the score racks up higher and higher.

The pinball machine takes into account (a) the interaction of different words and concepts, (b) the intensity of the response, and (c) the active participation of the player who uses the flippers to bring himself or herself back again to the 1st concept or the 2nd concept for further reinforcement.

¹I consulted my mentor in Jewish education who remembers neither the name of the book nor the author, though he narrowed the latter down to either "Bloom" or "Hirsch" (and he wasn't sure of the spelling, either). He said something to the effect that the book is "another peg in the casket of creativity in education". Recognizing that he had let me down, I dropped the subject and went on to ask him about his family.

^{1a}The image of the pinball machine is my own, but the idea of associational and responsive thinking comes from the late Professor Max Kadushin, one of my teachers at the Seminary. We learned his profound idea of Organic Thinking in Rabbinic Literature from the thinker himself, as we worked line-by-line through his book *The Rabbinic Mind*.

It's a little hard to picture, so I recommend that we take the school faculty out to the arcade for an afternoon to play the machines. After about 3 or 4 games, they should begin thinking of the analogies to education, and I think they'll understand better...and probably get higher scores and more free games as a result. In addition, everyone should have a grand old time of it and remember happier childhood days when they played the machines for hours on end. Even if they don't manage to make any pedagogical breakthroughs, it would be a nice afternoon out with the Gang.

V. Pavlov's Poor, Tortured Puppies, the Pinball Machines, And Jewish Education

We certainly don't want to produce Pavlov-Sarducci products. But we most certainly *do* want the shining graduates of our schools to react — and react deeply — when certain key words and ideas strike them in later life. And even more, we want them to *act* on their responses, to *do* certain things as a result of what they have responded to.

We would want the results to be something like this:

Sometime later on in life, when they hear the word “parent” they will think, “My mother used to drive homebound individuals to chemotherapy. I ought to do the same.” When they scan the calendar and see that Passover is coming, they should think, “Passover....We had fine Seders when I was a child, and when I was in Hebrew school, we used to deliver food packages to people who wouldn't have had such a fine Seder unless we did the packaging and delivering. I ought to find out how to do it here in my new community.” When they read the word “justice” in the newspaper, bumpers and buzzers and bells should start going wild in their heads, and they should say, “I remember when I was in confirmation class, the rabbi brought in a lawyer who used to do *pro bono* work for members of the community. I should support similar endeavors.” When they hear the word “Torah”, they should flip the flippers and get “Torah-Mitzvahs-Torah-Mitzvahs” bouncing back and forth in their minds, flashing lights, buzzers, leaping scores, and go out and *do* something.

Each school [read: *and* every household, camp, youth group, adult education class, etc.] should set up a basic list of priorities to develop a strategic plan for time allotments that can work in that specific framework. My own bias is towards Mitzvah work and human personality development, of course, or what I would call “Jewish life skills”, so I think there are universal categories of bumpers and bells we ought to set up:

1. Words: Mensch/Menschlichkeit, Torah, Kavod, Mitzvah, Tzedakah, Tzedek, Mishpat, Gemillut Chassadim, Chessed, Chevrah, perhaps 25 or 30 of the most basic functional words.^{1b}
2. Mitzvahs and The Names of Mitzvahs: Tzedakah/Gemillut Chassadim, Ma'ot Chittin, Matanot La'Evyonim, Hachnassat Kallah, Hachnassat Orchim, Bikkur Cholim, Halvayat HaMet, Nichum Avaylim, Hava'at Shalom Bayn Adam LeChavayro, and as many more as might be needed for basic, functional Jewish vocabulary.

^{1b} Note: compare on a spot check test with a sampling of Jewish adults, asking them to list 25 Hebrew, Yiddish, or Ladino words that come to mind. It would be troubling if some of them include the first 8 words of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah Haftarah among The Biggies.

3. Stories: Abraham breaking his father's idols (explaining what idols are really like in modern society), Moses's speech impediment, Isaac's blindness, Jacob's limp, and Rabbi Prayda's reviewing a text 400 times for a slow student^{1c} (and what these mean concerning individuals with disabilities nowadays), Binyamin HaTzaddik's feeding a starving woman with his own money when the community Tzedakah Fund is out of money,^{1d} and more. And they should know these stories at least as well as they know Goldilocks and the 3 Bears or Snow White and the 7 Dwarfs.

4. Quotes: Genesis 18:19 (Jews do what is right and just), Second Samuel 8:15 (King David did what is just and right), Ben Azzai's quote that everyone is created in God's image is the most important Torah principle of all,^{1e} "Even a poor person who is kept alive by Tzedakah must give Tzedakah".^{1f} The teacher [read: parent, youth director, camp director] should select as many of these quotes as the student {read: child, member of youth group, camper] can handle. They should know them as well as they know any of the catchy phrases they hear on TV commercials. You know, "You deserve a break today...at McDonald's" or "The Great American Road belongs to Buick".

5. People: Hadassah Levi, raising almost 40 kids with Down Syndrome; Janet Marchese; finding homes for hundreds of infants with Down Syndrome, Myriam Mendilow, founder of Life Line for the Old, the Jewish Family Service workers who go way beyond their job description in helping Soviet Jewish immigrants in the re-settlement process, friends who are always quietly there to get the local Mitzvah work done. They should read about these people in books, *our* books, our *Jewish* books, in newspapers, and watch and listen for them on TV and radio. Most importantly, they should be *personally* exposed to these Mitzvah heroes in real life. As best as I can tell, there's nothing more effective than face-to-face encounters with people who personify all the values we are advocating. The Mitzvah people should be brought into the classroom [read: home, camp, youth group meetings] and then the students should go out and join those Mitzvah people in their work. And they have to know at least a dozen of them, to somehow counteract the commonly-held heroes of our society: the movie stars, rock stars, sports stars, the wealthy and famous who are heroes because they are wealthy and famous.

VI. The Plan of Attack

Exam time is now. Let's get cracking.

^{1c}Eruvin 54b.

^{1d}Bava Batra 11a.

^{1e}Sifra, Kedoshim, on Leviticus 19:18.

^{1f}Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 248:1.