

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN THE JEWISH CLASSROOM: Tools for a Strong Jewish Identity

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) promotes growth in areas related to the ability to navigate successfully the complex social and emotional tasks involved in developing a strong and healthy identity. This article explores the relevance of SEL to the field of Jewish education, particularly how it can be used to operationalize the skills needed for solid Jewish values. A specific SEL program is presented as well.

The pressure is mounting for Jewish educators and Jewish schools to deliver more than they have ever been asked to before. Not only are there heightened expectations for outcomes related to Jewish knowledge (What is this week's Torah portion about? Who was the first Prime Minister of Israel?) and Hebrew language (with the all important trial-by-fire, the Bar Mitzvah), but it is also essential to forge strong positive emotional ties to Judaism, to create a desire to maintain Jewish continuity, and to steep students in *menschlichkeit*. Synagogue-based religious schools are expected to do this in just 4 to 6 hours per week. Day schools are expected to do all this plus meet the rigorous academic and extra-curricular standards that will prepare students for college and beyond.

Alongside the increased pressure on Jewish schools are societal forces that concern educators as Jews as well as Americans. Youth growing up in America today are bombarded with images of violence and disrespect, alternative lifestyles, and even diverse forms of Jewish observance. The degree of exposure to information unfiltered by adult caregivers is unprecedented in human history (O'Neil, 1997). Time spent on-line comes at the expense of opportunities for forging meaningful interpersonal relationships. Paradoxically, our well-connected students are at risk of isolation,

alienation, and poor social relationships. Students fail to reach their potential or develop the personal resources needed to handle the challenges of adulthood, family, work, and citizenship. As a result, indicators of disrespect among youth, as well as their status on 42 indicators of well-being, are at troubling levels (Goleman, 1995).

Jewish youth are not shielded from these societal forces—they come to school with the same emotional and social issues as their peers. Moreover, Jewish educators see as a major goal of Jewish education the fostering of *menschlichkeit* in their students. This major Jewish value—that of being a *mensch*—has been one of the few constants among the shifting landscape of American Jewry. But how to achieve this has been less consistently defined.

As we envision the type of student we would like to emerge from our Jewish educational efforts, our image goes far beyond simply the absence of the negative societal impacts described above. We picture young adults who care about their families, their co-workers, and those in their communities; who are committed to *tikkun olam* and other Jewish communal causes; and who are passionate, knowledgeable both in a Jewish and secular context, respectful of themselves and others, and able to solve problems in a peace-

ful, constructive manner. We would like our students to take with them fond memories of their time in Jewish schools and to feel an attachment to Judaism and Jewish education.

Further, we want Jewish schools to build Jewish identity and to contribute to spiritual development. These goals too have social and emotional aspects. Jewish students are developing memories—for better or for worse—regarding Jewish learning and Jewish practice that will affect their decisions in later life. Our attempts to foster Jewish identity, especially with adolescents, must be understood in terms of the greater search for self-identity and self-expression being undertaken by the student (Elias & Kress, 1999).

The intense impact of emotional and social experiences on identity in general and on Jewish identity specifically is supported by recent research into how the brain works (Sylwester, 1995) and by everyday common-sense observations. Our memories and beliefs are supported by the emotional and social experiences that accompany their creation. What is of particular relevance to Jewish educators is the centrality of social and emotional skills in developing a sense of Jewishness. Writing about promoting spiritual growth in public schools, Charles Suhr (1998/99, p. 14) suggests that teachers can set the stage by providing “person-to-person contact, close communication, and cognitive introspection and metacognitive understanding.” Rabbi Harold Kushner, responding to the issue of how public schools can address spiritual growth in children, points out the importance of a climate of cooperation and mutual respect (Scherer, 1998/1999). Rachael Kessler (1997, p. 13), who has done pioneering work in showing the linkages between social and emotional issues and spirituality, notes, “Any program that helps students discover and express their feelings, values, dreams, and concerns in an atmosphere of respect and caring from their teachers and peers is nourishing spiritual growth in children and youth.” Karen Stein (1999) has discussed the need for those working with adolescents around issues of prayer and spiri-

tuality to create environments in which adolescents are comfortable with the ongoing introspection involved in meaningful prayer. She also identifies the importance of relating prayer to the teen’s personal life experiences. Stein discusses the role of informal Jewish education, particularly informal summer experiences, in creating positive social and emotional climates for Jewish spiritual growth. She describes a scene of participants on a summer trip praying on the edge of the Grand Canyon, and the power of that experience. Clearly, the spiritual, the social, and the emotional are interlinked.

Too often, though, these issues and goals get lost in the pressures for academics and preparation for college. We see this as a false dichotomy; it is futile to work toward the cultivation of academic, intellectual skills without attending to the social and emotional development of Jewish students. A student who is admitted to a competitive university but lacks internal motivation and goal-setting may not be able to sustain academic achievement in the less-structured environment that is true of most colleges. Perhaps of equal or greater importance, such a student may also have difficulty sustaining Jewish identity and practices.

The relevance and historical precedent of moral education to Jewish educators have been demonstrated clearly (Ingall, 1999). In this article, we share our experiences in the field of social and emotional learning (SEL). Although they have been drawn primarily from work in secular educational settings, we show SEL’s relevance to Jewish education and share work that has been done by innovators in the field of Jewish SEL. It has been our experience that SEL can be an organizing principle for the various goals of Jewish education as described above and that social and emotional skills underlie not only successful inter- and intra-personal functioning but also sound academic skills.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL): KEY PRINCIPLES

Social and emotional learning, as articu-

lated by Elias and colleagues (1997), is an approach to education that is designed to strengthen a person's ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of life in ways that enable the successful management of such life tasks as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, adapting to the complex demands of growth and development, and forging an adult identity. SEL can be seen as an application of the theory of emotional intelligence as articulated by Salovey and Mayer (1990), Goleman (1995), and others. A wealth of psychological and educational research converges to suggest that social and emotional skills can be learned by students in classroom settings in ways that will enable them to put these skills to use in real-life situations. However, teaching these skills requires a structured approach and cannot be left to good intentions, good advice from teachers to students, or good luck.

Guidelines for the promotion of SEL (Elias et al., 1997) have been published and circulated to over 125,000 educational leaders by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. A comprehensive approach to addressing SEL emphasizes the following areas, which we have reframed as "The Four Questions of SEL Programming":

1. To what extent does the curriculum include the skills and competencies of *menschleikheit*, e.g., empathy, self-control, listening, communicating, and problem solving?
2. How are we instructing students about healthy lifestyles and avoidance of problem behaviors, such as addictions, violence, *lashon hara* (gossip), and *sinat chinam* (senseless hatred)?
3. Are we helping students cope with transitions and crises and to develop the ability to access resources, both internal and external supports, during times of stress, e.g., divorce of parents, high-school and college applications and transitions?
4. To what extent do we provide opportunities for meaningful and ongoing *tikkun*

olam and *gemilut chasadim* (deeds of lovingkindness) and the chance to develop a sense of meaningfulness and purpose through service in the community?

SEL programs focus on the skills needed for social and emotional competence, which are quite close to what in the Jewish tradition is referred to as *menschleikheit* and are often included, at least conceptually, in lessons on *derekh erez* and *mussar*. These skills should be taught through direct instruction and reinforced throughout the day. This often runs contrary to misconceptions we hold regarding the acquisition of these skills.

Too often we expect that social and emotional skills will be learned by osmosis, picked up along the way, or are just something you know. Worse, some consider these skills to be a matter of inborn character. We would hardly say such a thing about grammar, math, Hebrew language, or any other part of the curriculum. SEL skills can be taught, learned, and improved, even among children who are suffering from such conditions as autism, Asperger's syndrome, and attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity.

A related tendency is to equate telling students about SEL with teaching SEL skills. We often, for example, tell our students to be respectful. We may even read a story from the Bible about respect. Yet, respect can be a vague concept. Do we operationalize for students how to speak respectfully, for example? What is or is not a respectful tone of voice or body posture? Do students have a chance to practice being respectful and get feedback on their efforts?

The time pressures and packed curricula faced by teachers reinforce this "teach and move on" approach to SEL. However, students must be able to demonstrate their ability to perform these skills before we can assume that they have been attained. If they cannot demonstrate these skills, teachers must keep working on a few distinct skills until their use becomes routine.

A further misconception is that these skills can be promoted through a magic bullet ap-

proach to SEL—relying on brief interventions, often delivered by non-classroom personnel—to teach social and emotional skills. While assemblies, *mitzvah* art projects, *midah* (good deed) of the month programs, and the like have their place, they must be part of a school-wide approach that begins in the classroom. Indeed, successful programs are integrated into the general academic curriculum and should be seen as going hand in hand with curricular content areas (Norris & Kress, 2000).

Successful efforts to build children's SEL skills start in the early elementary grades—or even preschool—and last through high school. Establishing a common language for social and emotional skills allows these skills to be reinforced by various school personnel throughout the day and facilitates the developmental attainment of skills as students progress through the grades.

The adage—"The task is not yours to finish, but neither are you free to desist from it" (*Pirke Avot 11:21*)—can thus be seen as relevant to the teaching of SEL skills. Programming for parents—teaching them how to use, prompt, and reinforce these skills in the home—can be based on classroom efforts.

We find it helpful to compare the process of learning social and emotional skills to that of learning how to play a sport or musical instrument. Both require that complex behavioral goals be broken down into smaller parts, and clear expectations for social and emotional behavior established. Teachers model these behaviors for their students. Students have an opportunity to role play and practice these components and receive feedback from the teacher.

It is best that such instruction and practice occur in a safe setting in the classroom. We do not learn best when we are highly stressed, yet we tend to pick just these times to teach about social and emotional skills. Consider the familiar image of a very angry student being told by a teacher, "Just count to 10!" The student is then not at a point of readiness to learn techniques on how to calm down and may even become more upset by being told to do so. We would not expect to teach people how to play basketball by putting them into the midst of a

high-stakes competitive game. To illustrate the learning process, we present one approach to SEL programming, the Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS) program.

THE SOCIAL DECISION MAKING/ SOCIAL PROBLEM SOLVING (SDM/SPS) PROGRAM

The Social Decision Making Social Problem Solving (SDM/SPS) program was created in 1979 through collaborative efforts among psychologists and educators from Rutgers University, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, and school districts in New Jersey. Over the years, curriculum guides have been developed for the elementary (Elias & Clabby, 1989) and middle-school grades (Elias, 1993; Elias & Tobias, 1996). A book written specifically for parents helps carry over school-based programming (Elias, Tobias, & Friedlander, 1999, 2000). The program is implemented in the classroom by trained teachers (or other staff). The program has undergone extensive research (Bruene-Butler et al., 1997) and has received commendation from the National Education Goals Panel and the Character Education Partnership. SDM/SPS can be broken down into three "phases": Readiness, Instruction, and Application (see Table 1).

Readiness Skills

The Readiness Skills phase covers the fundamental components of self-control and social awareness/group participation. These skills are essential building blocks, or needed tools, for proper decision making. Lacking self-control and social awareness, we are unlikely to engage in productive problem solving and are subject to the "emotional hijacking" (Goldman, 1995) that derails rational thought during high-stress situations.

A major focus of the Readiness Phase is setting the stage for effective conflict management and fostering self-discipline and socially responsible behavior in the face of difficult situations. To begin to address these