

Measuring and Promoting Religious Purposefulness in Jewish Day Schools

◆ by Scott J. Goldberg, PhD, and David Pelcovitz, PhD

Currently, most, if not all, Jewish schools approach religious and spiritual growth in a non-systematic way, uninformed by the wisdom of the fields of psychology, sociology, and general religious education. When Jewish schools do approach this topic, the outcome is often a program or seminar, as opposed to a more global understanding that is infused into all aspects of school functioning. Parents, students, and educators need guidance on how to inspire religious purposefulness in adolescents in an age when various media, and society in general, compete for an adolescent's attention.

RUACH (Religious Understanding in Adolescent Children), a project of the Institute for University-School Partnership at the Azrieli Graduate School, is addressing these issues in a unique collaboration between school and university. This initiative is bringing together eight teams of high school administrators and teachers over the course of two years to learn about the latest research related to religious purposefulness, to implement practical strategies to increase it amongst students, and to gather data on student and school-wide changes so others can learn from these experiences. As senior fellows of the Institute for University-School Partnership, we are leading this project, which has been generously funded by the AVI CHAI Foundation.

In particular, we seek to improve the capacity of Jewish high schools to promote religious purposefulness amongst their students, and to enhance the capacity of educators to work with their students in a manner that promotes spiritual growth in the areas of relationship with G-d, religious beliefs, and religious actions, including their contribution to the Jewish community. In addition to affecting eight high schools, we expect to affect our own graduate school by increasing Azrieli's knowledge base about what interventions work in promoting these goals in order to improve the training we provide in these areas. Further, through the creation and dissemination of written materials based on the learning related to this project, it is our hope that other training programs will benefit as well.

RUACH leverages the theoretical and practical expertise of specialists in religious development at Yeshiva University with the practical experience and knowledge of practitioners in schools. Accordingly, this project reflects a partnership with high schools involving mutual sharing of knowledge and experience in this area, collaborating to develop models to pilot in participating schools, and evaluating the effectiveness of these models to enhance religious purposefulness. Each participating school has two representatives who attend RUACH meetings and training workshops, and who facilitate project implementation in their respective school. Participating schools act as laboratories for testing strategies and models that promote religious purposefulness, which in turn provides a feedback loop to the entire group of participating schools and increases the knowledge base informing the project.

Students in participating schools are expected to achieve measurable growth in religious actions and beliefs over the course of the two-year project. The JewBALE (pronounced Jubilee), the Jewish Beliefs, Actions, and Living Evaluation Scale, an empirical measure of religiosity developed by the first author, will be administered to systematically evaluate religious change for students in all of the participating schools. This study includes several subscales of beliefs and actions. In addition, the extent to which each school's mission, vision, and formal curricula include expressions of religious purposefulness will be evaluated. The ability of students to articulate religious beliefs, religious actions, and an awareness of the transcendent, in class, in social settings, and during activities outside of class, will also be assessed. In particular, the presence or absence of an encounter with the Divine through textual study will be evaluated.

Based upon initial conversations with participating schools, and given that this field of study is in a nascent stage, the project begins with an initial induction period wherein the school representatives can become familiar with the concepts of spirituality and purposefulness. During this time, a common language will be developed to focus the project on particular domains of religious purposefulness.

Given the unique values and goals of participating schools, each school will select an area upon which to focus their learning. This area will consist of a single domain (e.g. tefillah, guidance, parent-school partnerships, informal education, school culture) or will involve a single group of students (a grade, an advisory group, a minyan

or the like) across multiple domains. Different strategies and assessment tools may be used by each school, depending on its unique values and culture. For year two of this project, the representatives of each school will again be charged with implementing specific strategies in their school. However, in year two, these strategies will form a more comprehensive model of school-wide implementation.

At each stage, the university-school partnership model guides the project. In order to build on the knowledge base and experience of the field, an initial accounting of current school practices was conducted. At the same time, a limited annotated bibliography on the subject of spirituality in schools was sent to school representatives to begin the process of sharing a common language for moving forward.

We will meet with the representatives of the participating schools several times during each year of the project. Consultants with expertise in adolescent religious and psychological development, informal education, positive psychology, religious education, and/or other related fields will also attend. At meetings, we will share recent research on the psychology of adolescent religious development and intervention strategies for enhancing religious purposefulness in the context of the unique psychological developmental needs of adolescents, as well as models for assessing individual student and school-wide religiosity and spirituality. The following are examples of this growing field of knowledge:

Parents are the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents.

Educators and parents are often uncomfortable sharing religious beliefs and personal inspiration. Religious practice, faith, and commitment remain vague concepts when people cannot talk about them.

The need to account for individual learning styles applies to spiritual learning.

Adolescents should be given responsibility for their own prayer and religious growth, but should be guided by adults around them.

Strategies employed by the fields of positive psychology and "mindfulness" play an important role in guiding religious purposefulness.

At these meetings representatives of the schools will share their expertise gained in the trenches, informed by the uniqueness of their setting and teaching experiences.

Although the group of participating schools will generate additional strategies, the following are examples of strategies that have been and will continue to be discussed:

Implementing joint parent-child learning and chesed/social action programs.

Exposing students to religious role models in the community - not only professionals.

Creating the role of religious mentors in a school to build relationships with students grounded in the religious values of the school.

Offering choice in prayer services (e.g., explanatory service, musical service, meditation, etc.)

Proactively teaching and practicing the trait of gratitude, utilizing findings from the new field of positive psychology.

Preparing for prayer utilizing "mindfulness" strategies to enhance concentration and proper intentions.

Implementing discussion-based classes based on traditional and contemporary sources into the curriculum.

In addition to face-to-face meetings several times during the year, monthly conference calls will bring the group of participating schools together regularly to share implementation experiences and ideas for revision of the developing strategies and models. When needed, consultants with expertise in adolescent religious and psychological development, informal education, positive psychology, religious education, and other related fields will be asked to join these conference calls.

We will visit participating schools to gain a first-hand understanding of each school's particular culture, to enable us to provide guidance on a more individual basis, and to better assess school progress in implementing strategies. A sample of students will be interviewed at this time in order to inform later analysis. Formal

observations of classrooms, non-classroom settings (e.g., hallways), programs, and other student and faculty activities will also be conducted on these site visits.

At the end of year one of the project, there will be a colloquium during which initial results of the project will be shared with graduate school faculty and school administrators. At the end year two of the project, training colloquia, informed by the learning of this project, will be designed for teachers and administrators in schools. In addition to these training sessions, the field of Jewish education will have opportunities to learn about the experiences and outcomes of this project through publication of a guide to best practices on religious purposefulness. This guide will include guidelines for parents, teachers and administrators, and assessment methods to measure efficacy of school implementation and student change.

Jewish schools must not only enhance the academic experience for students, but must also promote student social, emotional, and behavioral development. Religious purposefulness cuts across all of these domains. Indeed, success for students in Jewish schools must be informed by our religious past, present, and future. RUACH will help develop the story of our unique heritage and help to transmit and sustain the spirit of Judaism in our students and schools.

Scott J. Goldberg, PhD, is the Director of the Institute for University-School Partnership, Azrieli Graduate School, Yeshiva University. David Pelcovitz, PhD, is the Gwendolyn & Joseph Straus Chair in Jewish Education at the Azrieli Graduate School, Yeshiva University.

string(85) "Smarty error: unable to read resource: "module_db_tpl:CGFeedback;commentform_comment""