

What Passover Can Teach Us About Education Reform

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This week, Jews around the world will celebrate Passover, the Festival of Freedom.

Part of the genius of the Jewish tradition is its recognition that sustaining a free society requires education. “Freedom begins with what we teach our children,” [wrote](#) Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi emeritus of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth. And nowhere is the centrality of education in Judaism more evident than on Passover, “when the entire ritual of handing on our story to the next generation is set in motion by the questions asked by a child.”

The Jewish tradition has much to teach the world about education, and Jews who seek the peace of the city and land in which they dwell would be doing their neighbors a disservice by keeping it to themselves. Fortunately, America is a society that welcomes a diversity of views and religious traditions. In their wisdom, America’s Founding Fathers created, in Thomas Jefferson’s words, “a high wall of separation between church and state.” But while religious groups and institutions were appropriately denied *power*, the constitutional right to freedom of religion guarantees them the space to *influence* public policy.

Citizens should be skeptical of religious (or secular) figures who make specific policy recommendations without any particular expertise in those areas. However, while we should not turn to clergy to devise economic or tax policy, they have an important voice in the discussion of the ends which public policy should seek to achieve. Religious traditions can help society orient its goals—respecting the dignity of every person, seeking the welfare of the poor and downtrodden—while economists, social scientists, and policy experts debate how best to achieve those goals.

With its rich and enduring tradition, Judaism has much to offer society, especially in the realm of education. Jews are, in the words of Rabbi Sacks, “a people whose passion is education, whose heroes are teachers and whose citadels are schools.” The ideal education system, in the Jewish view, provides universal access and individualized instruction while placing the needs of students above all.

Universal Access

Any discussion of the Jewish view of education policy must begin with one man: Yehoshua ben Gamla. The Talmud exhorts us to remember him favorably, “for were it not for him, the Torah would have been forgotten by Israel.” (Bava Basra 21a)

Ben Gamla served as the Kohein Gadol (High Priest) in the first century B.C.E., a period of turmoil when the Jews lived under Roman occupation. Concerned that the children of poor families—particularly orphans—did not have access to a quality Torah education despite a series of education reforms by the sages, Ben Gamla mandated that every Jewish community hire teachers to educate every child from the age of six or seven on up.

Ben Gamla's vision—heartily endorsed by the sages—was universal access to education. As the late Rabbi Aaron Levine [explained](#), “The objective of [Ben Gamla's] ordinance was that Torah education for the youth should reach the rich child, the poor child, and, especially the child who has no father to worry about his spiritual needs.” A child's family circumstances should not determine his or her access to education.

Individualized Instruction

Universal access, however, does not imply uniform instruction. Rather, the guiding principle of Jewish education is *chanoch l'naar al pi darko*. (Proverbs 22:6) The full verse is often translated as “Teach a child the way he should go, and even when he grows old he will not depart from it,” but Hebrew grammar allows another [translation](#): “Teach a child *according to his way...*” implying individualized instruction for each child. Indeed, this understanding of the verse is so widespread that [Jewish day schools ubiquitously invoke](#) it in this manner.

There is no greater example of the *chanoch l'naar* approach to education than the Passover seder. The entire ritual—the use of symbolic foods, ceremonial dipping and leaning, etc.—is designed to provoke questions from the children in attendance. Central to the seder is the concept of the four different types of children, whose personalities are reflected in the types of questions they ask. There is the wise child, the rebellious child, the simple child, and the child “who does not even know how to ask.”

As the Passover Haggadah details, each child's question (or lack thereof) requires a different response, an answer tailored to his particular temperament and level of maturity. The wise child's thoughtful question merits a discussion of the laws of Passover. The rebellious child's passive-aggressive question is met with a rebuke. The simple child's earnest question elicits a retelling of the Passover story. The final child's inability to formulate a question at all requires the tender and patient assistance of parents to stir his curiosity.

Even the seder itself is a [cholent](#) of different rituals reflecting different pedagogical approaches. The wise child might be stimulated by the Haggadah's biblical exegesis while the simple child is confused. The simple child may enjoy the storytelling while the child “who doesn't know how it ask” is bored. That child may nevertheless enjoy the singing, while the rebellious child is annoyed. And even the rebellious child may enjoy the food. At the seder table—Judaism's ultimate classroom—there is something for everybody.

Prioritizing Students and the Role of Competition

On the very page following Yehoshua ben Gamla's universal vision, the Talmud discusses whether an established teacher could prevent a newcomer from teaching in his vicinity. Though

Jewish law generally favors competition, in certain circumstances it empowers an established business to block a would-be market entrant, if it were likely that the entrant would put it out of business. However, the sages never restricted competition among educators because, they said, “*kinat soferim tarbeh chokhmah*” (“jealousy among the scholars increases wisdom”).

Two aspects of this ruling are worth highlighting. First, the sages’ primary concern was that students receive the best possible education, even if that meant that one teacher lost his livelihood because his students flocked to a superior teacher. In the realm of education, the needs of students came before the needs of adults.

Second, the sages recognized that competition among teachers proved beneficial for students. In a competitive environment, each teacher was motivated to perform as well as possible because his students had other options. The sages saw choice and competition as stronger guarantors of educational quality than the good will of the teachers alone.

Contemporary Education Policy and the Jewish Tradition

Jewish tradition provides three guiding principles for designing an education system: there should be universal access to a quality education; instruction should be tailored to meet the particular needs of individual students; and the needs of students should take precedence. The sages also believed that competition among educators was a means to ensure quality—a testable hypothesis discussed more below.

So how well does America’s contemporary education system live up to these principles? Unfortunately, not very well.

America’s system of district-based public schooling was designed to provide universal access to education. Every child is guaranteed a seat inside a classroom in his or her community, no matter their race, religion, or parents’ income. However, the guarantee of a seat is no guarantee of quality. And since students are assigned to schools based on the location of their homes, their access to schooling depends on the [home their parents can afford](#). Students from low-income families often have no financially viable options besides their assigned district school—and those schools tend to be the lowest performing.

Moreover, even a generally high-performing school might not be the best fit for all the students who just happen to live nearby. District schools are designed to meet the needs of the median student. These schools often struggle to meet the needs of students who don’t fit the typical mold.

Likewise, while students of all religions and creeds are guaranteed a seat at a district school, those schools are [not necessarily aligned](#) with the values and beliefs of all the families who happen to live in a given district. When schools are held accountable to elected officials, education policies are subject to political decision-making. A zero-sum political system creates winners and losers, [forcing citizens into conflict](#) with one another. Accordingly, the schools tend to reflect the views of the majority, leaving minorities in the untenable position of compromising

their values or paying for both the “public” school and schools for their children. District schools promise universal access in theory, but fail to provide it in practice.

Unfortunately, too many district schools also fail to put the needs of students first. Last year’s [Vergara v. California decision](#) highlighted how district policies and union rules protected low-performing teachers at the expense of students’ education. Most of the rules were likely enacted with the best of intentions—protecting teachers from capricious administrators or political payback. But many of the rules—such as guaranteed permanent employment or “last-in, first-out” policies—have long outlived their usefulness and have even become counter-productive. As the judge [found](#) in the *Vergara* case, there is compelling evidence that such policies “disproportionately affect poor and/or minority students” in such a negative manner that it “shocks the conscience.”

A Better Way Forward

A substantial body of evidence suggests that the [best education system](#) yet devised to achieve the sages’ preferred ends employs the very means that they favored: [choice](#) and [competition](#). Educational choice laws—such as [school vouchers](#), [scholarship tax credits](#), or [education savings accounts](#)—provide universal access to education while empowering parents to choose the provider that best meets their child’s particular educational needs. That in turn creates an incentive for educators to seek to meet those needs.

A 2009 global [literature review](#) of within-country studies on the effects of different types of school systems found that the freest and most market-like education systems performed the best. Out of more than 150 statistical comparisons of outcomes including academic achievement, efficiency, parental satisfaction, student attainment, and subsequent earnings, private schooling had a statistically significant advantage over government schooling in about 10 to one. In addition, market-like education systems—in which parents chose their child’s school and bore some direct financial responsibility and educators were free to determine their own curricula and pedagogy, set their own wages and tuition, and to earn a profit—beat monopolistic, government-run systems by about 15 to one.

Likewise, 11 of 12 domestic [randomized-controlled trials](#)—the [gold standard](#) of social science research—found that educational choice laws produce positive outcomes for scholarship recipients, including improved academic performance, higher high school graduation rates, and greater college matriculation. One study found no statistically discernable impact and none found harm.

Additionally, 22 of 23 [empirical studies](#) found that educational choice laws had a positive impact on the performance of students attending their assigned district schools—implying that competition spurs schools to improve. Once again, only one study found no statistically discernable impact and none found harm. These findings provide compelling evidence the sages were correct: *kinat soferim tarbeh chokhmah*. In modern parlance: competition among education providers improves student outcomes.

Passover teaches us that education is required to sustain a free society, and social science teaches us that [educational freedom](#) is required for a well-functioning education system. Those who share the Jewish vision of universal access to education, individualized instruction, and the prioritization of student needs would do well to heed the evidence. A free society should have an education system that respects and reflects that freedom.

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