Unshackling the Chains of Spiritual Poverty
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Children are organically connected. When a child asks twenty questions about the nature of a snail, sees the beauty of a star-studded night's sky, bucks convention unknowingly by taking up an unusual hobby, or gets lost in his imagination, he is naturally expressing the nature of his soul. But when adults fail to acknowledge the child's curiosity, dismiss the beauty of a clear night's sky, condemn the child's passion by asserting gender stereotypes, or yell at the child for daydreaming, children's souls suffer. A deep and unnecessary spiritual deficit can occur when these children are unsupported in exploring this healthy and natural wonder in the world.

Tragically, our society often disenfranchises youth from these types of expressions. As a result, their spiritual growth is stunted and their darker natures are exposed. In her book, The Soul of Education, nationally renowned educator and practitioner Rachel Kessler warns us what might lie ahead, imploring, “Do we need periodic reminders from sawed-off shotguns to show us that these young people feel...when schools systematically exclude heart and soul, students in growing numbers become depressed, attempt suicide, or succumb to eating disorders and substance abuse.”¹ Warren Nord, describes the situation in detail, asserting,

We modern day Americans have a spiritual problem. There is something fundamentally wrong with our culture. We who have succeeded so brilliantly in matters of economics, science, and technology have been less successful in matters of the heart and soul. This is evident in our manners and our morale; in our entertainment and our politics; in our

preoccupation with sex and violence; in the ways we do our jobs and in the failure of our relationships; in our boredom and unhappiness in this, the richest of all societies.²

Educational leaders, parents and students alike need not accept this reality. In particular, Jewish education can and must do something to help children simultaneously cope with the difficulties in our world and also to experience the joy that a spiritual life has to offer.

“Spirituality” is a word whose definition is elusive, like “love” or “culture”. Even those consciously steeped in processes of spiritual discovery articulate different understandings of spirituality. Martin Luther King Jr., when preaching about modern man's “poverty of the spirit” describes spirituality as humanity's ability to “walk the Earth as brothers and sisters.”³ Rabbi Jonathon Slater, Co-Director of Programs of the Institute of Jewish Spirituality, connects his definition of spirituality to environmental consciousness and Eco-Judaism⁴. Education scholar Parker Palmer explains it simply as, “the eternal human yearning to be connected to something bigger than our egos.”⁵

The ambiguity surrounding the definition of spirituality should not hinder one's resolve to approach a solution. Kessler makes us aware that, "The inner life of...young people is intimately bound up with matters of meaning, purpose, and connection, with

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creative expression and moments of joy and transcendence." Children are inherently inquisitive, constantly asking questions about why things are the way they are perceived. This fascination with the world, the experience of wonder and awe through the grand and the simple, is what Abraham Joshua Heschel calls radical amazement. Children are in a constant state of questing, searching for authentic ways to connect to themselves, others, nature, and God. Whereas contemporary society too often views compassion, astonishment, and reflection as weaknesses, and tends to drive these healthy human and spiritual inclinations out of children, Jewish tradition is well equipped to deal with this dilemma, and can be mined for solutions.

Of course, Jewish educators cannot alone be expected to radically change all of the underlying American culture. Instead, Jewish educational leaders must work within their communities to devise educational responses to challenge these cultural norms. For example, one could use Jewish texts to help teens make educated decisions about their bodies, combating Nord's condemnation of America's obsession with sex, or battle the growing tide of self-centered individualism by allowing children to interact with and serve the homeless within their communities. The role of Jewish adults in children's lives should be to capitalize on a child's inquisitive nature and yearning for spiritual engagement to help them to do what scholar of education Jerome Bruner asserts good

education must help all students do; namely, “find strategies for developing identity within [their local] cultures.” Uncovering these spiritual dispositions and cultivating identity takes more time than Jewish educators have. They need help. They need partners.

More precisely, they need parents. Luckily, many parents want to engage. One parent, when asked in a personal interview if he would like to engage with his child on a spiritual level, responded with excitement, declaring,

I would love it. It would be great. It would be interactive and a chance to share some values. I would love to have that experience. It would make me feel like a good parent. And like we're sharing something and that I'm helping him make a positive connection with me and with this mountain of understanding to be chiseled away at.

Another parent described it as, “the type of meaty conversations parents love to have with their kids.” A parent’s devotion to both her child's well-being and the rich, deep connection she wishes to forge with her child work as a perfect catalyst for engagement.

Still, despite this eagerness, a significant number of liberal Jewish parents remain both uncomfortable with their own thoughts and beliefs about spirituality and uncertain how to engage with their children. It's not their fault. They, too, grew up in a society that valued success at all costs, and saw weakness in mercy and compassion. Indeed, Jewish

12 Barney, Michael (Pseudonym). Personal Interview. 22 August 2014.
educators are missing an opportunity to transform the lives of two generations simultaneously. Parents need help unshackling the chains of spiritual poverty to which they have been shackled for too long, both for their sake and their children's. We need to help them discover what lies within themselves, so they can do the work that is so urgently needed of them.

The answer to this spiritual challenge remains the same for parents as it does for children: education. Engaging parents in their own spiritual identity formation is the first step to the multi-generational solution I am proposing. Specifically, I am arguing for adult education that strikes a delicate balance between left-brain theory based study and right-brain experiential moments. Rabbi Mike Comins, a spiritual educator, calls the latter “Burning Bush moments.”\textsuperscript{13} And the earlier parents engage in this growth process the better! Thanks to psychological research on detachment theory\textsuperscript{14}, we know that children around age ten begin to distance themselves from their parents in an attempt to form a sense of self. If parents are to help themselves and their children to develop spiritual identities and ways of expressing them, much like language development, the earlier one starts the more likely they are to find success.

A final caveat: do not confuse my proposal with an attempt to shape a family's belief in God or dictate a set of ritual practices. On the contrary, it is an attempt to give parents the knowledge to formulate their own beliefs about spirituality and spiritual practice, the language to express those beliefs to each other and their children, and the

\textsuperscript{13} Comins, Mike. “A Spiritual Dynamics Approach to Spiritual Education.” \textit{CCAR Journal: The Reform Jewish Quarterly.} (Spring 2014). 47.

confidence to do so in a culture which encourages them to do the opposite.

Spiritual education is not a panacea for all the world's ills. It is not likely to stop wars and mend the divides among humans. Moreover, it will not end risky behavior or answer every question about the unknown. Instead, good spiritual education leaves learners with more questions than answers. It can help a child see the humanity in others and empathize with his fellow. It can build self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, while simultaneously helping an individual see the beauty in what others consider mundane, and, if done effectively, it can reinforce the strong bond that links parent and child. Spiritual education may not be able to change the world, but it can transform the life of an individual. What more could one ask for?