



Illustration by Caryl Herzfeld

The Happy, Well-Adjusted **ORTHODOX DROPOUT**

By Rabbi Heshy Grossman

Professionally involved in the realm of disillusioned teenagers, Rabbi Grossman expresses his views and offers suggestions to help prevent our children from rejecting Orthodoxy

Let's face the facts: across the board, in every sector of American Orthodoxy, our schools are losing a large number of our children. All too often, our young people don't want to be religious, nor do they see any reason why anyone should be.

Though statistics are unavailable, testimonies of educators across the Orthodox spectrum make it clear that a significant portion of our students, from some of our best Orthodox high schools, are graduating with massive negativity towards Torah study, observance of *mitzvot* and religion in general. Many do not *daven*, recite *berachot* or observe Shabbat. It may

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be shocking to hear, but some are familiar with drugs, and are not far behind the average American teenager in their sexual promiscuity. Obviously, such students have little interest in studying Talmud, or other Torah subjects. Even were they willing to do so, many are unable to handle simple texts of Gemara or Mishnah, and would even have difficulty reading a *Chumash*—basic skills which should have been acquired after 12 years of Orthodox day school.

These are not late-comers to Judaism. These are students raised in Orthodox homes, living in Orthodox communities, who have attended Orthodox schools all their lives. The day school movement was a major achievement in American Judaism, and it helped rescue Orthodoxy from oblivion. But we must not blind ourselves to the fact that something is terribly wrong if the only hope for many of our own students, after years of

yeshivah and day school education, is that perhaps a year or two in Israel will salvage their Jewish future.

This is not a report from an academic ivory tower. Having worked with Orthodox youth for the past 15 years, I write from the front lines, where a battle is raging for the souls of our youngsters. Orthodoxy dare not rest on its past laurels.

This article does not presume to be the final word on these important issues, nor will it cover every aspect of Jewish education. The problems outlined here affect both genders, but we will discuss only male teenage dropouts from Judaism, for the subject of disillusioned girls warrants an article of its own. Let us attempt to analyze the characteristics of this growing crisis, and propose several possible solutions.

THE subject of Orthodox teenage dropouts has received much

press of late. These youngsters actually fall into two separate categories. The first is the difficult and unresponsive child, and it is he who has received all the recent attention. The second type, who has attracted only scant notice, is the well-reasoned young man who has simply lost interest in religion. This type differs substantially from the first, and he will be the focus of our discussion.

Though both have strayed from the upbringing of their childhood, it is

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important to take particular note of what separates them, for parents and educators need to appreciate these differences and respond appropriately. For instance: drug use, promiscuity, and a general lack of observance may be common among both types of dropouts, but the motivation behind these activities often varies.

The young man who is stable and happy might use foreign substances as a form of experimentation or entertainment; but for the first type of individual, alcohol and drug abuse are not

merely recreational, but are a means to escape a life of frustration. This is a young man who is emotionally scarred, feeling out of place both at home and at school. Feeling unloved and unsuccessful, he rebels against the upbringing that has brought him nothing but pain.

He does not leave Judaism because he rejects its values — at times, he even recognizes that the Torah is right and true — but he is extremely unhappy, and a candidate for professional therapy. His bitterness may be rooted either in family tensions, learning disabilities, or dysfunctional social skills, but the common denominator of all these difficulties is his inability to find a place in the educational system, and a niche and identity in our community.

For better or worse, the Orthodox community today revolves around its schools, and for these students, school is an experience they have learned to despise. Add this factor to the breakdown in family life that has had such a devastating impact on the moral practices of teenagers everywhere — tensions that have become increasingly apparent in our communities as well — and we begin to understand the magnitude of the problem that confronts us.

There are no easy solutions to problems that have become deeply imbedded in the fabric of our homes and communities, and the difficulties of the rebellious child often defy definition. Instead, let us present a composite portrait of our second student, whom we will call “Michael,” a young man who is happy and well-adjusted, but intellectually disillusioned. The causes of his disinterest in Judaism can be defined, and their solutions readily available, if only we were to

face the issue squarely.

It is important to note here that the description below of Michael’s environment may be common among teens who leave Orthodoxy, but is not symptomatic of the average Orthodox home. Though unrepresentative of our youth on the whole, this young man will be recognized by anyone involved in contemporary Orthodox education.

Here is how Michael depicts his upbringing: He grew up in a heavily Orthodox community, attended a local day school, and then continued in a co-ed yeshivah high school. Michael’s parents are nominally Orthodox, but Michael has never noticed that the details of *halachah* are particularly important to them. He remembers, when he was young, seeing his father putting on *tefillin* every morning, then mumbling *Kriat Shema* and a very quick *Shemoneh Esrah* before dashing off to work. Recently, he hasn’t even seen that. Nobody ever washes before eating bread in his family, nor are blessings over food or anything else a common occurrence.

Sometimes, his father comes home from work late Friday night, about two hours after Shabbat has begun. He excuses himself by saying, “I got stuck in terrible traffic getting out of the city.” Michael knows that there is never traffic leaving the city on Friday evenings, and sees this as one more incident in a string of hypocrisies that characterize his religious upbringing. The synagogue that his family attends on Shabbat morning has done nothing to dispel this perception. Prayer seems to be the last thing on anyone’s mind, and Michael, when he comes to *shul* spends most of his time talking with his friends. The rabbi is a nice man, but powerless to stop the incessant

chattering. The daily *minyan* is made up mostly of elderly men, some “frummies,” and people who need to say *Kaddish*. (In fact, the last time Michael’s Dad attended daily *minyan* was when he was saying *Kaddish* seven years ago.) What is truly important in most people’s lives seems to be money. Those who have it are the talk of the town and the toast of the annual synagogue dinner.

Michael has always done exceedingly well at school. He is very bright, and has always been at the top of his class, just as his parents expected. Nevertheless, Michael’s experience at school has done nothing to improve his negative view of Orthodox Judaism and religion in general. Throughout his high school years, religious demands were imposed, but nobody seemed to take them too seriously, and the school administration seemed oblivious to the fact that some of the students were not particularly observant. From the very start of high school, things started going downhill. Michael vividly recalls his daily trips by private bus to school. Instead of coming on time for daily *minyan*, the students would direct the driver to take them to a local non-kosher bagel store, where they would spend the time designated for *Shacharit*. Nobody at school seemed to notice.

The principal always seemed to care more for the image of the school than the personal welfare of each student. Some of the rabbis were nice, but they had been teaching the same subject for many years, and Michael found them uniformly uninspiring. In fact, Michael considers himself more intelligent than some of his rabbis, who were either ill-equipped, or not concerned enough to answer his questions. In any case, it was always clear to Michael that the secular studies

department was valued more in the minds of both his parents and the administration. The students who were accepted to Ivy League colleges were placed on a pedestal, while the boys who went to Israel and got “brainwashed” were belittled throughout the community for their choice.

Michael had toyed with the idea of attending yeshivah in Israel after high school, as many of his friends were doing, but he had long ago decided that he didn’t want to be religious. College in Binghamton was his escape from the observant life that was just a burden to him. What could a post high school yeshivah offer him, anyhow?

Presently, he is a typical American college student. He has joined a fraternity, he parties hard every weekend and has dropped all semblance of Jewish observance. Deep in his heart, he feels guilty, but his anger and confusion at what he has seen portrayed as Orthodox life has left him cynical and embittered.

This picture, all too real, differs substantially from the more familiar scenario. While other dropouts from Orthodoxy are problem students with varied personal difficulties, who readily admit to their basic unhappiness, Michael has never been a problem of any sort. He is normal, well-balanced, articulate and intelligent. He has rejected Orthodoxy not out of despair, but rather because it means nothing to him.

WHAT makes Michael run? And why can’t our schools stop him and turn him around? Michael is no longer listening, but hundreds of our young people are standing right behind him, waiting

for their chance to escape. Watching our students go through the motions of a pro-forma observance, it is clear that we have failed to instill our youth with passion and inspiration, and their casual attitude towards religious ideals demands our attention.

Let us then focus on our American Jewish educational system, in an attempt to understand the dropout

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While many of our high schools compare structurally to a typical private school, where the institution is controlled by a board of directors who are served by a staff of professional educators, there are a number of day

schools and *yeshivot* that have found success with a different sort of approach. We would do well to consider their model.

In this model — with the approval of the board — the institution's goals and standards are set by the *rosh yeshivah* with the *menahel* overseeing daily affairs. Their primary concern is the development of a *makom Torah*, one that will produce students who actualize the Torah's values in their

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Teenagers are extremely perceptive and keenly aware of the subtleties motivating the policies of school administrations. In a yeshivah where the students sense that the primary concern of the administration is the development and welfare of each individual, the administration is loved and admired. However — and this is true of every yeshivah and day school — if the students sense a lack of sincere caring, and if they witness religious

inconsistency in the school's approach to Torah norms, they will inevitably reject the school and its philosophy, feeling betrayed by a system that is ultimately dishonest.

In an ideal yeshivah, the graduates would continue their studies in the school's own *beit medrash* program, providing both continuity and role models. But in the structure of today's high schools, short of going overseas, there is little opportunity for students to continue their own Torah learning after graduation.

It would seem obvious that when we choose to educate our youngsters to be citizens of the world, to be interested in secular culture and achievement, that we would accept as well the responsibility of preparing them to navigate that world as proud and knowledgeable Jews. But we often fall far short of this goal. Instead, some of our high school graduates rush off to the society that beckons, even though they are ill-equipped to fend off the temptations that await them. Without a guiding hand, and minus the continuum of some post high school learning that provides identity and anchor, one has to wonder how a teenager can handle himself in new, inviting situations. Has he been given the tools to remain intensively Jewish in an environment that is not conducive to Jewish learning and living? Does he have a *rebbe* with whom to discuss these issues?

Certainly, the Torah teaches us that man is required to sanctify the material world, and the engagement of the religious Jew with his physical surroundings is his only opportunity to do so. But, there is a crucial qualification: man must consecrate his world, but only after he has first sanctified himself, after he has learned to sepa-

rate right from wrong. But many of our schools assume that because a child is born into an observant family, he is born with a built-in ability to sanctify himself. We are sending our students out to confront the world without providing them with the tools for confrontation, chief of which is a sense of personal spirituality.

This is what is meant by the verse, "*Ki adam l'amal yulad* — For man was born to toil" (Job 5:7): a child is born, while a man must be made. It is only with exertion and diligent effort that man discovers the true inner self by which he connects to his Creator, actualizing the latent Godly image that conceals itself within every child. Man does not become religious or spiritual automatically.

One way to help a student sanctify himself is to subtly impart this message: The amoral lifestyle on the street is not your way. You are different; you are a child of the Torah.

A teenager seeks desperately for an identity of his own. In the absence of a strongly committed Orthodox home, his *rebbeim* can help him find this identity by giving him the spiritual nurturing and confidence that comes with exposure to genuine and committed Torah learning. Provided with these powerful models of Torah living, he will develop the self-assurance and courage to rise above the surrounding culture and forge his own unique Jewish personality. With this experience in his background, he can better succeed when he does eventually encounter the challenges of college and the world-at-large.

WHAT prevents our present educational system from

doing this job? For one thing, we must honestly recognize that though our communities and lifestyles may be observant, they are not necessarily paragons of religious fervor.

Inevitably, our schools' policies and values are functions of communal standards. An effective *rebbe* would challenge this status quo, guiding his students to reconsider their present mindset. But in the absence of a spiritual counterweight to the community's prevailing norms, our students have no reason to change. In short, they miss the opportunity for personal growth and self-realization that true choice, gained through experiencing a more intense Torah environment, would provide.

The teenage years are the most crucial in a person's development. In the struggle to develop an identity of his own, to crystallize his own beliefs and outlooks, a teenager does more than assimilate his studies. He also defines himself by contrasting himself with those who differ from him.

For example, when a youngster attempts to define his own relationship to Torah, he may be prone to the casual approach he sees around him. When he asks himself why he should not be devoted to more intensive Torah study, he easily rationalizes with the clichés he has often heard around the dinner table or in the back rows of *shul*: "That's for black hatters who sit around doing nothing all day." Whether or not Torah should be studied exclusively, or whether *kollel* should be pursued as a lifelong option are important questions, but relevant only to the diligent student who is already mature, religious, idealistic, and committed to Torah. But, the bottom line is that if we voice opinions that demean Torah scholars for their lifestyle, our own children —

who are not yet certain why Torah should be studied at all — will conclude that learning is not respected and is definitely not a goal.

A child must know that the Torah stands alone, infinite and binding, for without the insistent, inescapable demand of God's word, he succumbs to the equally insistent call of the materialistic society around him. If the Torah is to maintain its aura and appeal in the eyes of our youth, it must be viewed, not as a part of his life, but as the breath of life itself.

It is a lovely ideal to hold up Maimonides or Rav Soloveitchik, *zt"l*, as our models. But we should be careful not to dress our young people in ideological trappings that do not fit. Before one can be a citizen of the world, a personal connection with the Creator must be nurtured. The Rav, for one, did not simply go out and engage the outside world. First and foremost, when he was still a very young man, he was deeply engrossed and became learned in all facets of Torah. He was imbued with a love of God and Torah, devoting days and nights to its study. Rambam was a Jew far greater than we can imagine, sanctified and spiritual, whose prayer to God was awesome and who felt a closeness and attachment to his Creator that was physical, emotional, psychological and intellectual. To tell our young people that they should become like these giants is a fine and lofty sentiment; but not to provide them with the holiness and inspiration to achieve this — not to fortify them spiritually before they face an environment that is far more hostile to Torah's values than ever before — is to fail them and leave them twisting in the wind as they enter their struggle with the outside world.

For let us bear in mind an obvious truth that we have not imparted successfully to our students: the inculcation of religious values differs substantially from the standard educational process. While secular studies are a normal part of the physical world, and an intelligent and studious child feels an inherent connection to the subject matter, Torah can not be acquired in the same manner, for it addresses the otherworldly soul. An attachment to religious studies can flower and devel-

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op only with vision, sensitivity and care. For this reason, many of our students find Torah studies "so boring," for they cannot relate to a world that is higher than their own.

To be religious in the modern world demands enlightenment and inspiration, while to be an ordinary scholar, one needs only to excel at his studies. Unless we are keenly aware of this difference, and respond appropriately in the classroom, we will never succeed in motivating our students to grow beyond themselves. Religious studies alone will

not anchor our students to Judaism, nor will guilt hold them steady after they leave our environments.

Only an educational system that understands the needs of today's youth, sensitizing itself to the particular religious requirements of each child, can hope to be successful. Only a system that looks at each student as an individual soul, and teaches not only texts but also uplifts and inspires youngsters with the lofty vision of Torah can rescue our schools from the malaise in which they find themselves these days. Perhaps it is time to remove the blinders from our eyes, to look at the facts on the ground realistically, and to start again from the beginning.

Symptomatic of our all too common naiveté, in some institutions, teenage boys and girls spend much of their time in close proximity to each other. This constant exposure carries a danger that demands vigilance, but the administration appears oblivious to the fact that the average teenager is simply thinking about the opposite sex most of the day. It seems that while we aim to produce students with wholesome, religious lifestyles, we fail to take the needed measures that would ensure our success.

Understandably, the school curriculum is designed to provide students with a high level of textual abilities, along with the acquisition of information. But with this emphasis on book knowledge, and with the standardized methods of testing and grading, we have lost sight of the bottom line: our students are sometimes unaware of basic *hashkafah*, harboring doubts as to why they should remain observant. Without a deep understanding of Judaism, they are ashamed to be different, and unwilling to wean themselves

from the popular culture. We speak of Ravina and Rav Ashi, while they are listening to Metallica and Snoop Doggy Dogg. We are teaching our students beautiful words, but their hearts and minds are elsewhere. Should we be surprised when their commitment to Torah begins to unravel?

Certainly, every aspect of Torah study is eternally relevant, but our students will not understand why Talmud study, or *tefillin*, or *kashrut* are important, unless their questions are addressed in a comprehensive manner. If we shy away from their challenge, and if we ignore their true interests and desires, a golden opportunity is lost, and the most influential years in a child's life remain unfulfilled.

Let me not paint too bleak a picture. None of this is meant to deny that our communities are also filled with many outstanding young people who are dedicated to Torah learning and committed to *halachah* and *mitzvot*. They are a pleasure and a joy to behold. But, our many successes do not contradict the problems outlined here. Educators familiar with the scene know that without the year or two in Israel, when our students have the chance to remove themselves from the routine American lifestyle, even our best and brightest could sink as quickly as they reach the nearest college campus. This phenomenon should give us pause: rather than rely on *yeshivot* in Israel, why can't we inspire our own children, ourselves?

OUR challenge is to create a personal, caring atmosphere that conveys Torah study and *Yirat*

Shamayim as its prime objective; providing each school with teachers of stature who understand the challenges of youth and who can establish the relationships needed to help teenagers thrive religiously amidst a secular society.

We must encourage young, aspiring educators to focus on the problem of the disinterested teenager, and give these teachers the framework and opportunities to reach the children we are losing in the classroom.

We must not allow our students to slip away, unnoticed. We must establish a network of concerned educators who dedicate the time and effort to maintain contact with their former students, long after they leave our schools. Every student who has once attended a yeshivah should feel forever that he has a place of his own, where learning is important, and where his continued development as a religious Jew is somebody's concern.

We must face up to the fact that without religious fervor and excitement, and without the encouragement, admiration, and support of a community that sees Torah study as a badge of honor, our children see no overwhelming reason to devote their time to the tedious study of difficult texts.

We cannot expect to solve all the problems, but we can do this: we can learn to identify the things that are truly important to the transmission of our *mesorah* and employ teachers who view it as a genuine, fulfilling lifestyle. In this way, wherever they go, our children will remember with pride and joy the anchor of their youth, and when the rough times come, they will know where to turn. **JA**