

## REVIEW ESSAY

### **Life Values and Intimacy Education: Health Education for the Jewish School** *by Yocheved Debow; Anna Woloski- Wruble, contributing editor*

Jeffrey Kobrin

#### **Abstract:**

Yocheved Debow and Anna Woloski-Wruble's curriculum, *Life Values and Intimacy Education: Health Education for the Jewish School*, fills a vital and unique niche. They comprehensively approach the issues of sex and sexuality, in addition to the larger areas of both interpersonal behavior and self-referring behavior. Indeed, the goal of the course, as its title indicates, is to teach “life values,” only a portion of which relate to sexuality.

#### **Biography:**

Rabbi Jeffrey Kobrin is incoming Principal of the Northshore Hebrew Academy Middle School in Long Island. He previously served as headmaster of the Ramaz Middle School in New York City.



Meorot 7:2  
Tishrei 5770  
© 2009

A Publication of  
Yeshivat Chovevei Torah  
Rabbinical School

## REVIEW ESSAY

# ***Life Values and Intimacy Education: Health Education for the Jewish School* by Yocheved Debow; Anna Woloski-Wruble, contributing editor**

Jeffrey Kobrin

In compiling, *Life Values and Intimacy Education: Health Education for the Jewish School*, Yocheved Debow and Anna Woloski-Wruble have performed a remarkable service for Jewish educators and Jewish parents alike. The curriculum they have developed fills a vital niche: In an era of children's overexposure to various forms of media and their corresponding values, both *yeshivot* and parents must come up with antidotes to the barrage of images and ideas that envelop children of impressionable ages. Although one could argue when exactly a child stops being of "impressionable age," the target age range for this curriculum is one of specific physiological and psychological development, and is particularly ripe for addressing these issues.

To my knowledge, no such material exists in the Modern Orthodox curricular library. While various *yeshivot* and day schools have designed their own curricula for middle school-age or junior high school-age students, I am unaware of such a comprehensive approach not only to issues of sex and sexuality, but also to larger issues in both interpersonal behavior (*mitsvat ben adam le-havero*) and self-referring behavior (*ben adam le-atmo*). It is important to note that the scope of the course extends far beyond mere "sex education." The authors do not embed issues of sexuality amidst the rest of the curriculum in order to make them more palatable or easily taught: rather, the goal of

the course, as its title indicates, is to teach "life values," only a portion of which relate to sexuality. Indeed, we should note that Judaism places such issues firmly within the larger context of daily life and everyday values, rather than pigeonholing or stigmatizing them. The authors have therefore designed the course to begin in grade three, rather than waiting until the onset of puberty, which allows student and teacher to develop both a vocabulary and a comfort level with issues relating to interpersonal relationships, communication, and shared community values (among other topics) before the issues of sexuality even become apparently relevant to the student.

As presented in the current volume, the course has been field-tested at various schools in grade levels four through seven.<sup>1</sup> As such, the authors do not merely suggest a theoretical set of lessons; the presentations and organization of the curriculum has been refined since its initial introduction. As the authors note in their forward to the grade six lessons, changes were necessitated upon realizing that grade six boys and girls reacted differently to different lessons.<sup>2</sup> As such, the authors do not merely suggest a theoretical set of lessons; the presentations and organization of the curriculum has been refined since its initial introduction. As the authors note in their forward to the grade six lessons, changes were necessitated upon realizing that grade six boys

<sup>1</sup> p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> p. 6.2. Note that the book is paginated with new sections for each grade's curriculum.

and girls reacted differently to different lessons.<sup>2</sup> That the curriculum is based on actual classroom experience brings comfort to educators contemplating its introduction or attempting to present it to parents or teachers. While some topics will elicit less squeamishness than others in the eyes of potential stakeholders, the field testing improves both the quality of the instruction of each lesson as well as its marketability.

The topics covered in Life Values and Intimacy Education: Health Education for the Jewish School can be classified into three groups: topics directly related to sex and sexuality; topics relevant and related to—but not limited to—sex and sexuality; and those unrelated to sex and sexuality. A brief look at an example of each category will help the reader gain an appreciation of the scope of Debow and Woloski-Wruble’s work.

The topic of sexuality itself is dealt with in separate gender classes, and the curriculum introduces the topic in the sixth grade. The authors begin this unit, as with all units, with a list of lesson goals, which include students learning “that Judaism’s overall approach to sexuality is positive as long as it is expressed in the right context,” and “why Judaism sets a standard of sexual interaction so different from that of the modern Western world.”<sup>3</sup> The authors then give a brief suggested script for teachers to introduce the topic to their classes. The introduction asks students to draw on previously learned listening skills and to understand the importance and potential long-range impact of such a conversation. The lesson continues by asking students to define the term “sexuality” and to discuss the various definitions suggested. They are then provided with two “approaches” to pleasure, which are either distributed on paper or put up on the board: “Living by the Pleasure Principle” and “Pleasure is Bad.” Students are asked to respond—in writing—to the simple prompt of

whether either of these approaches reflects the Jewish view, and why or why not. Students then discuss their reactions for the remainder of the lesson. The authors provide both talking points as well as sources for the teacher facilitating this discussion. The lesson concludes with the teacher passing around a “question box” to allow students to anonymously comment upon or question issues that they did not feel comfortable addressing openly.

On paper, the authors have crafted a model lesson: students are addressed through a variety of modalities; the instructor fosters guided and goal-oriented discussion; and pacing is maintained by creating a balance between the introduction and the opportunities for follow-up through the “question box.” That follow-up on the part of the teacher is crucial, both for the students’ own edification as well as for emphasizing the seriousness with which this course must be taken. Indeed, Debow and Woloski-Wruble understand that lessons in this curriculum must be constructed and taught with as much rigor as those of any traditional subject. Even though topics such as sexuality will require less salesmanship on the part of the teacher, students will need the seriousness of the subject matter impressed upon them—perhaps through more traditional academic means, such as essays, tests or other forms of assessment—in order to insure that students understand that what they learn in their “life values” class is as important as what they learn in math or in *mishnah*.

The second topic category is those issues related to but not limited to sex and sexuality. Media awareness is one such topic. Since it is vitally important, it is scaffolded across several years of the Life Values curriculum. Debow and Woloski-Wruble introduce the topic to classes in both third and fifth grades. The goals of these lessons are, once again, straightforward: to “identify

<sup>3</sup> p. 647

strategies used by media to make things appear true,”<sup>4</sup> and to contrast the messages of the media with those of Torah. The teacher presents several products being sold in various television ads and asks students to identify strategies that advertisers employ in these commercials, such as humor, the use of fantasy, and sexuality. Students are presented with a number of classic optical illusions to demonstrate that what they see may not be what actually exists. Suggested sources for a conclusion range from the Midrash Tanhuma in Toledot (which discusses how one’s eyes are not always controllable and see things that are not good for one to see<sup>5</sup>) to Roald Dahl’s poem “The Oompa Loompas on Television.”<sup>6</sup> The authors offer as much leeway as possible in attaining the stated goals of each lesson, and offer a wide spectrum of both sources and techniques to arrive at those goals.

Another example of a topic related to but not directly connected to sexuality is introduced in fourth grade, and is called “Finding Help: Knowing When and How.” Students are asked to identify the “circles” in which they live and to identify adults who could help them should they need it. Role-playing ensues so that students can practice speaking out to others in situations that emulate life, such as a parent who dismisses a child’s opening discussion of encountering difficulties in life or the classroom.<sup>7</sup> The pedagogic technique is excellent: enacting the actual situations in front of the audience of the rest of the class enables students both to put themselves through the motions of such a difficult conversation in a safe environment, and also allows them the support and influx of ideas from others in the room when they are stuck.

The third category of lesson in the Life Values curriculum is one that has no direct bearing on issues of sexuality, but which is vital for adolescents and pre-adolescents. Educators nowadays often complain that many of the topics that they teach ought to be taught by parents to their own children at home. While some of the topics in this category may well be included on the list of such topics (we will look at an example below), some are beyond the ability of the average parent to discuss meaningfully with his or her child. For example, one unit in the seventh-grade curriculum addresses the issue of eating disorders, teaching students to “be able to identify warning signs of eating disorders” and “that while the media emphasizes the importance of how one looks, [students] should not let this be central to their identity.” The authors actually recommend that this lesson be presented by someone who suffered from an eating disorder, to better present the struggle. The authors also correctly emphasize that both boys and girls need to hear this presentation, if only to sensitize the boys “to the potentially dangerous power of their words and the extreme sensitivity of some girls to being teased about their bodies.”<sup>8</sup> Such a topic must be addressed in schools. Parents are often unaware of such issues in their own children until far too late. While many schools choose to cover such material in parenting evenings or in similar fora, the idea of including it as part of an overall approach to life choices and their underlying values makes the topic that much more relevant and powerful.<sup>9</sup>

While eating disorders may be an issue that needs to be covered by professionals, the curriculum also includes such social skills

<sup>4</sup> p. 568

<sup>5</sup> “*ro’eh hu she-lo le-tovato*”

<sup>6</sup> p. 5.71.

<sup>7</sup> pp. 4.48- 9.

<sup>8</sup> p.7.60.

<sup>9</sup> The authors do suggest the alternate possibility of conducting this lesson as a joint mother-daughter program, possible with a recovering anorexic and HER mother, which is a fascinating idea.

topics as “Learning to Listen,” which can be handled effectively by the school faculty. Life Values is a unique curriculum in that it manages to integrate the practical and Torah values. As an example, in the goals of this lesson, the authors write that not only will students “practice listening without interrupting or tuning out,” but they will also “understand that listening to another person is a way of appreciating the *Tselem Eloqim* (Image of God) in them.”<sup>10</sup> This integrated philosophy is followed through in the lesson. After viewing a clip from Disney’s animated Brother Bear, students are asked to discuss examples of improper or inadequate listening, both in the clip and then in their own experience. Students are taught the importance of communication through body language as well as through words, and are taught the fundamental principles of “active listening.” Students are then divided into triads and alternate as speakers, listeners and observers. This writer did not attempt such an exercise until attending a professional development program in 2008; to afford twelve-year olds such an opportunity is a wonderful experiment. The lesson concludes with a number of quotes relating to good listening that the instructor can utilize at his or her discretion.<sup>11</sup>

Although in the past such life skills were often taught or modeled in the home, this is no longer consistently the case. Schools need to supplant the roles formerly held by parents or grandparents in modeling such social skills—and what better way to do so than with the inclusion of Torah values? One wonders, though, if such lessons would not also make excellent material for “parenting evenings,” programs offered by schools or synagogues to their communities that offer theory and

practical tips for parents. Teachers could teach these lessons for parents for the parents’ own edification as well as for that of their children.

Indeed, acting in *loco parentis*, the Life Values curriculum instructor is as important as the material itself. As the authors note, it is of vital importance that these lessons be taught to students by teachers they know and trust—both to encourage comfort of discourse and to impress the importance of the subject matter upon the students. As the authors note,

The unspoken message is that religious educators are not only unafraid to talk about these issues, but they actually have significant messages that they are willing to share.<sup>13</sup>

Yet not every *rebbe* or *morah* is qualified to teach this course. Those teachers who are most comfortable when a lesson is grounded in a particular text, for example, may find the free-flowing facilitated discussion that many of these classes require (especially in the older grades) different from what they are comfortable doing in a classroom. When a teacher realizes, as the authors point out, that “[o]ften, this is the first opportunity students have had to talk about these kinds of topics in an adult-facilitated setting,”<sup>14</sup> the pressure to perform—and connect meaningfully with students—only increases. The authors therefore caution that not every teacher may be right to teach this curriculum, offer training for those designated to teach the class, and stress the preparation that they feel is invaluable.<sup>15</sup>

Teachers who undertake to teach the course will enjoy the accessibility of the material. Whenever possible, Debow and Woloski-Wruble use pop culture references that students will find familiar (such as characters

<sup>10</sup> p. 6.13.

<sup>11</sup> pp. 6.14-15.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Robert Evans, *Family Matters* (Jossey-Bass: San Francisco 2004), pp. 9 – 15.

<sup>13</sup> p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> p. 25.

from the Shrek films) as well as those their teachers will enjoy re-introducing to their classrooms (such as clips from Marlo Thomas's Free to Be You and Me). The trigger films that the authors recommend (although, as they wistfully note, are unable to provide inexpensively without violating copyright) allow the introduction of topics such as friendships and stereotypes in a lighthearted and open way. Teachers must then channel the openness fostered by these triggers into a meaningful discussion.

From a developmental perspective, many of these topics are immediately relevant and meaningful. The inclusion of such topics as "Becoming a Bar / Bat Mitzvah: New Responsibilities" in grade six is obvious, but the fact that discussions of accepting new challenges and rising to meet them is included in a curriculum that also addresses issues of sexuality makes an important point, one whose subtlety hopefully would not be lost on middle schoolers.

The authors cleverly and correctly bring all of the issues of this milestone into the discussion, asking not only "What does being a Bar / Bat Mitzvah mean to you?" but also "What aspects are you anticipating and what are you dreading?" as well as "Does this event in your life feel imposed upon you, welcomed, or both?"<sup>16</sup> At a point in their lives when many students want to feel invisible or unnoticed, the ritual of their *simḥah* pushes them forward into what is for many an unwanted moment in the spotlight. To acknowledge and openly discuss these issues is something that a teacher is uniquely qualified to do, as much of the pressure to succeed in the Bar or Bat Mitzvah "performance" that students feel comes from their parents. This is a vital piece in the

curriculum, as the celebration of their own and classmates' *semaḥot* takes some two years of their lives.

A young adolescent, in the throes of various emotional and physiological changes, lives in the moment, with little thought to or understanding of the long-term ramifications of thoughts, speech, or actions. What then does a concept such as *qabbalat ol mitsvot* mean to one in such a stage of life? Perhaps this stage of life, when a child cannot think beyond the next few days, hours, or minutes, was specifically chosen by *Hazal* as a time to focus on responsibilities beyond themselves, whether to others or to God. Such thinking, however, is beyond the scope of the current discussion.

Overall, what distinguishes the Life Values curriculum is its holistic approach to the material covered.<sup>17</sup> Like many more fully realized curricula, it is scaffolded in its construction: i.e., ideas and subjects introduced in an elementary fashion in early grades are returned to and expanded upon in older grades. Students who learn about "Being Good Friends" in fifth grade<sup>18</sup> learn about "Belonging and Not Belonging" in grade eight.<sup>19</sup> The challenge for teachers is getting students to recall earlier discussions of topics, although one would hope that the relevance of and interest level in the material would help students recall the earlier classes with greater ease than they would a grammar or mathematics skills lesson.

It will undoubtedly be interesting to watch the evolution of this curriculum as it is adopted by more schools and adapt it to their individual needs. All curricula evolve with time, further field testing, and the input of individual instructors as they fine-tune lessons to their

<sup>16</sup> p. 6. 26.

<sup>17</sup> See the authors' own citation of J.S. Hyde and J.D. Delamater's work *Understanding Human Sexuality* (University of Wisconsin: Madison 2003) in their article "Life Values and Intimacy Education: Methods and Messages" in *Gender Relationships in Marriage and Out*, Rivkah Blau, ed. (Yeshiva University Press: New York 2004), p. 245.

<sup>18</sup> pp. 5. 29 – 5. 31.

<sup>19</sup> pp. 8. 16 – 8. 19.

own needs and constituent groups: how this revolutionary new curriculum appears in ten or even five years' time will no doubt make for a fascinating discussion of its own. Perhaps the authors could maintain a website or blog for those instructors looking to post or query regarding their own modifications to the curriculum as presented. No doubt other teachers would benefit from alternate triggers, different ordering of lessons or lesson elements, and input on what succeeded and what did not, among other potential postings.

With every curriculum, teachers, administrators and parents alike must determine when and how to gauge success. Unlike a math or *misbnah* class, there are no standardized or even teacher-generated tests that will determine if values have been internalized after exposure to a values curriculum. One would also not wish to set up a control group of students who would not be taught the curriculum alongside a group that was and monitoring the behaviors and attitudes of each group for the years that followed. How many years would provide meaningful data? If one believes in the value of the curriculum, would one risk not exposing the control group to its merits, simply to obtain data over years of attitude assessment? Clearly, this curriculum must and will be further refined in the field. Determining its success, though, will prove more difficult. Readers are urged to consult the authors' article in the Orthodox Forum's volume, *Gender Relationships In Marriage and Out* (see note 17), for a summary of the reasons for and underlying theory beneath the course.

If adolescents and pre-adolescents can be brought to a level of self-awareness through exposure to the Life Values curriculum, the course will have attained its goals. The target age for the bulk of the key lessons (both those covering sexuality and those covering other topics) is not one generally known for self-

reflection and thinking beyond the immediate. This occurs for reasons both psychological and physiological.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, children of this age are faced with an overwhelming array of options and information. The authors directly address this issue, in such lessons as an eighth-grade lesson called "Who Am I?" which asks students to identify new aspects of their personalities heretofore unseen and to think about what they might want to change in themselves.<sup>21</sup> Such self-reflection is a key skill for students to develop as they look ahead to the teenage years and the further expansion of options and access to information that high school provides. If the course gives them a vocabulary to cope with the decisions they will make as teens (and beyond) and gives them human resources in the teacher who teaches them the material, then the curriculum will have proven successful.

Although the actual published curriculum is remarkably accessible to both teacher and parent, this reviewer found the pagination somewhat awkward to navigate. The authors clearly felt that restarting page numbers for each grade would make reference easier for teachers. If so, I suggest that the lessons be bound in a loose-leaf where individual lessons could be removed; in a single paperback book, some may find it jarring not to have straight pagination from start to finish.

Life Values and Intimacy Education is a much-needed, finely tuned and tested, comprehensive curriculum. As the needs of students and teachers change, Debow and Woloski-Wruble will no doubt feel the need to revise, rewrite and further improve this very impressive initial offering. Educators, parents and students all owe the authors, as well as those involved in the Tzelem Project at Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future who sponsored this publication, a great debt of gratitude.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, The National Institute of Mental Health Report "Teenage Brain: A Work in Progress (Fact Sheet)" at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/teenage-brain-a-work-in-progress-fact-sheet/index.shtml>.

<sup>21</sup> p. 8.8.