A Bell and a Pomegranate

Teaching Halakhah in the Work of Rabbi Harold Bell

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The first time I examined a volume of Talmud, I was not quite twelve years old. Rabbi Harold Bell, of blessed memory, then Director of Connecticut Region, United Synagogue Youth (USY), was spending the weekend with my home congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts. On Shabbat afternoon, he opened a Talmudic tome and showed a group of young students the Aramaic text, demonstrating how to identify the tractate and chapter, and where to find the commentary of Rashi and Tosafot. He explained the Talmud's characteristic pagination.

He then pointed out small notations, handwritten in pencil, which appeared within the text and around its margins, and he asked us to guess what they might be. I theorized that the notes were his own, personal commentary on the Talmud. Flattered and bemused, Rabbi Bell smiled broadly at my innocent perception. He wistfully expressed hope that someday he would have the scholarly wherewithal to compose such a commentary. "No," he explained. "Those are translations of words I had to look up in the dictionary." The humble confession of this master pedagogue was a revelation! Even learned rabbis have more to learn! Jewish study is a lifelong process, challenging even for the accomplished scholar! It was one of the most transformative and freeing moments in my early Jewish education.

I had the profound privilege, over the next six years or so, to learn more from "Reb Tzvi" during my time as a member of Connecticut Region Kadimah and USY. While an undergraduate at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), I reconnected with him when I returned to a USY Summer Encampment as an aide in the Seminary's Recruitment Department. There I saw him pursuing his familiar, long-standing mission as a Jewish educator, and as an advocate and personal role model for committed halakhic observance in the context of the Conservative Movement.

Not long after our Summer camp reunion, Rabbi Bell left his USY post and joined the faculty of the Charles E. Smith Day School in Rockville, Maryland, one of the largest independent Jewish day schools in North America. There he chaired the rabbinics department and led the Prayer Program. He was also active in the Educators Assembly and a founding member of its Seaboard Region.

Rabbi Bell had earned his B.A. from Yeshiva University, a master's degree from New York University, and was ordained by JTS, where he later earned his D.H.L. in Jewish Education. His doctoral dissertation was titled "Oral Torah Education."

Alas, Rabbi Harold Bell, engaged to be married, died suddenly in 2005, at the age of fifty-nine. Both a comprehensive theoretical framework and a practical guide based on his fruitful (albeit too few) years of real-life, front line experience as a teacher of Rabbinics, Rabbi Bell's "Oral Torah Education" is an invaluable resource in our continuing analysis of "Teaching Halakhah in the Conservative Movement."

In Rabbi Bell's 321-page dissertation, he explores a broad array of curricular and pedagogical challenges, too numerous and thoroughly developed for detailed analysis in this essay. These include, inter alia, the need to tailor the content of rabbinics curricula based on students' personal levels of interest and religious commitment, the study of *dinim* versus the study of Talmud ("the apodictic versus the argumentative"), the effort to achieve balance in the study of halakhah and aggadah, "the possible counterproductivity of teaching *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*" (!), justification of rabbinics curricula in terms of theories of human development, the study of Oral Torah as a way of enriching one's life, and, critically, "Role Models as the Most Significant Influence on Religious Behavior." This final, essential aspect of "Oral Torah Education" merits careful examination in our current consideration of "Teaching Halakhah in the Conservative Movement."

Role Models

The teaching of halakhah in a day school setting—or congregation or camp or seminary—is generally not intended to be an entirely academic exercise. Unless one is studying an area of Jewish Law no longer practicable in the twenty-first century (*Hilkhot issurei hamizbeaḥ*, *ʿAvadim*, *Nezirut*, etc.), a defining objective of teaching halakhah is its translation into practice: its willing, principled, and loving adoption by the student as a guide and code for everyday life.

Rabbi Bell warns that formal instruction, even by the most gifted of teachers, is insufficient for achieving this goal.

> The classroom study of *dinim* and of the rationale for *halacha* and specific areas of *halacha* will, by themselves, have only a limited effect in encouraging greater religious observance. Indeed, the most significant role of classroom instruction is to reinforce existing behavior patterns, set by role models – e.g., parents, teachers, literary figures (such as rabbis), the school curriculum, peers, historical figures, etc. These role models are also found at school (both in and out of the classroom), at home, at youth group and camp settings, etc. As with any behavior, students are more likely to be inclined to observe *halacha* if their parents do so. Teachers who serve as accessible role models of observance of halacha can also influence students to do the same (though probably less so than their parents).[1]

It should be noted that teachers who, as a function of their own religious life and values, do not "serve as accessible role models of observance of *halacha*" nevertheless do indeed serve as "role models"—reinforcing and seemingly validating the all too common bifurcation between Jewish identity and religious observance.

It is particularly significant and instructive that Rabbi Bell includes among accessible role models the school curriculum itself. He explains:

> The school curriculum (both the explicit curriculum and the "hidden" curriculum) also has an effect on a student's commitment to *halacha*. The explicit curriculum can have an influence on the student's attitude toward *halacha* by giving the study of *halacha* a prominent place in it.... The hidden curriculum also can influence attitudes. For example, by not allowing other activities during time set aside for *t'fila*, the school sends the message to the students that daily *t'fila* is an important value.[2]

[1] Harold H. Bell, "Oral Torah Education," (D.H.L dissertation, Jewish Theological Seminary (1988), 90–91.
[2] Bell, "Oral Torah Education," 91–92.

The very act of elevating the place of halakhah in the school curriculum and culture serves the sacred goals of "Teaching Halakhah in the Conservative Movement"—and of influencing individual and communal behavior—even before classroom instruction begins. Analogous to the day school curriculum are the educational and programmatic priorities of the congregation, the culture of a summer camp, and the literary organs, rhetoric, standards, and activities of Conservative Movement affiliate organizations.

Also of special significance among the prospective role models identified by Rabbi Bell are peers. It is the responsibility of rabbis and educators to maximize the influence of peers by elevating their visibility and sense of mission.

> Opportunities should be sought whereby students in one grade can serve as role models for younger students. An intergrade *havruta* program is one way to accomplish this. Through such a program, students in one grade can be prepared to teach rabbinic texts to a small group of students (2–4 students per group) in a lower grade... For example, 9th grade Honors Rabbinics students at the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School taught *G'mara* from *B'rachot* which they had studied in grade 7 to *havrutot* of the current 7th graders.[3]

Rabbi Bell testifies to the direct benefits of such an arrangement:

> 1) The 9th graders, in preparing to teach the material, learned at least as much, if not more, than the 7th graders; 2) the students in both grades seemed to enjoy this interaction; and 3) the 7th graders gained an increased awareness of the commitment of a group of older students to serious study.[4]

The applications of this approach to camps and supplementary religious schools are obvious. In a congregational setting, cultivation of lay role models requires of the rabbi a measure of *tsimtsum* (humble self-contraction in action, privilege, and ego) that allows for others among her or his staff and laity to share in the role of teacher of halakhah. "Teaching Halakhah

[3] Bell, "Oral Torah Education," 281.
[4] Bell, "Oral Torah Education," 281–82.

in the Conservative Movement" may, in the congregational setting, be the ultimate responsibility—but surely not the exclusive purview—of the rabbi. Adult as well as youth education efforts lend themselves to this expansive approach to teaching halakhah, as do opportunities for *divrei Torah*, *tiqqun leil Shavuot*, board and ritual committee deliberations. Naturally, as suggested above, the expansive nature of such "power sharing" is wisely to be balanced with a prudent and informed (indeed, discriminating) approach to selection of instructors.

Bat/bar mitzvah education is also an area of congregational life in which "The Teaching of Halakhah in the Conservative Movement" might be lent enhanced emphasis, in what Rabbi Bell terms both the "explicit" and the "hidden" curriculum. Student *divrei Torah* might be focused on the halakhic content of the *parashah*, the halakhic demands of the season, the halakhic implications of one's newfound status as bar or bat mitzvah, or, indeed, on a reasoned analysis of the term "bar/bat mitzvah" itself.

"Mitzvah Projects" might not focus exclusively on philanthropy or social justice (as worthy as these causes surely are!), but include enhancing halakhic literacy and observance—by which I mean things like mastery of a body of halakhic literature, familiarization with responsa or the submission of a learned question to a rabbinic authority, examination and repair of congregational *tallitot*, or a campaign to increase observance of specific ritual mitzvot, whether mezuzah, Shabbat candle-lighting, Havdalah, *sukkah*, *tefillin*, daily prayer, or selected *berakhot*. Directing such bar/bat mitzvah student projects toward younger students (or involving them in the process) would, additionally, be perfectly in keeping with Rabbi Bell's proposed *ḥevruta* approach.

The mere fact of including (and encouraging) such possibilities in selecting bar/bat mitzvah projects elevates the visibility, status, and standing of halakhah in the experience and perception of students at a formative moment in their Jewish development, again, even before actually embarking on formal study. Such an arrangement allows us to make of our young educational charges effective role models in their own right: resources that rabbinic and congregational leaders can, in the moment or subsequently, deftly mobilize in pursuing their own religious and educational objectives.

The biblical allusion in this article's title, "A Bell and a Pomegranate," is to the vestments of the *kohen gadol* (see Exodus 28:33-35). In his aptly titled volume, "Lectures to My Students," celebrated Baptist leader and seminary educator Charles Spurgeon notes that "[t]he priest was to have in his robes bells and pomegranates; the one a figure of sound doctrine, and the other of

a fruitful life."[5] The aptly named Rabbi Harold H. Bell, of blessed memory, demonstrated throughout his career that the bell alone, which conveys information through classroom instruction (lecturing our students, campers, and congregants, however sound the doctrine), is insufficient. We must direct our efforts in "The Teaching of Halakhah in the Conservative Movement" toward inspiring fruitful, joyful, willing, eager, thoughtful lives of Jewish piety and commitment. Rabbi Bell repeatedly demonstrates that we can accomplish this only by providing accessible role models and admirable exemplars of that lifestyle.

Rabbi Bell was himself a devoted, principled, and effective role model of traditional halakhic observance in the context of the Conservative Movement. Furthermore, he consistently placed the critical task of cultivating and empowering accessible religious role models at the very core of his leadership in both informal and formal Jewish educational settings.

Of the bells adorning the *kohen gadol*, Scripture states "its sound (literally, 'his voice') shall be heard (*vayishama qolo*) when he goes into the Holy Place before the Lord and when he comes out" (Exodus 28:35). If we are to take the challenge of "Teaching Halakhah in the Conservative Movement" to heart, we as Jewish professionals would do well to direct our attention to the voice, the sound doctrine of a gifted Bell. May we demand much of ourselves as halakhic role models and exemplars, and gratefully perceive among our colleagues, coworkers, constituents, and students invaluable and cherished partners in that indispensable process, as we occupy that Holy Place.

Years after my early introduction to Talmud at his hands, it was my privilege to participate together with Rabbi Bell in a Rabbinical Assembly convention. In a *limmud* session he led, we sat and studied halakhic texts together at some length, and discussed the direction of the Conservative Movement. We had become colleagues. But I remain his grateful student still.

[5] Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London, 1875), 15.

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